



FOREIGN POLICY RESEARCH INSTITUTE

EURASIA PROGRAM

RUSSIA AND CHINA IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

China's Use of the Instruments of Power

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Eurasia Program

The Eurasia Program at the Foreign Policy Research Institute was founded in 2015 with the aim of examining the political, security, economic, and social trends shaping Europe and Eurasia. Our research agenda covers the increasingly tense competition roiling the region from several angles. It has a multi-year focus on the Baltic Sea, the Black Sea, and Central Asia, emphasizing how geography, economics, ideology, and history continue to shape politics and security in these regions. The program also publishes analyses of Russian foreign policy, including Russia's role in Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. The Russia Political Economy Project, along with the Bear Market Brief, analyzes the linkages between Russia's economy, society, and its political system. The Eurasia Program's thematic initiatives also include the Democracy at Risk rubric, which examines the trends of democratization and authoritarian pushback in the region.

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Introduction

The first report in this series examined Chinese and Russian influence and interests in the Indo-Pacific region. This report, the second of five in the series, analyzes China's use of the instruments of power to build its influence and advance its interests in a region it sees as vital to its future. We use a modified version of the DIME framework (diplomatic, informational, military, and economic instruments) here, with the modification being that we do not analyze the information instruments separately. Even in an information environment as controlled as China's, the state has multiple ways to shape the information space—some official and some unofficial, some acknowledged and others unacknowledged. Given these facts, a separate examination of the information instrument is beyond the scope of this report. Although it does not explicitly analyze the information instrument, the report weaves Beijing's use of information throughout the narrative.

The report analyzes Beijing's use of diplomatic, military, and economic instruments in the Indo-Pacific region, and then examines how Russia perceives China's activity in the region. As with all reports in this series, this one defines the Indo-Pacific region as the Area of Responsibility (AOR) of US Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM). Within the AOR, the report examines Chinese activity in the following subregions: Taiwan, the Korean Peninsula, Japan/East China Sea, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)/South China Sea, and India.

The Diplomatic Instrument

The Chinese government frames its actions—in the Indo-Pacific as elsewhere—as more beneficial for the world than the US with phrases such as “win-win” to describe its actions.¹ In doing so, Beijing seeks to advance the narrative that it offers something better for the world than the US. China's diplomatic activity in the Indo-Pacific follows this pattern.

Taiwan

Since the Republic of China, hereafter Taiwan, was established in 1949 by the defeated Nationalist Party (the Guomindang) that fled the mainland at the end of China's civil war, there have been tensions between Beijing and Taipei. According to China, Taiwan is a renegade province that it possesses sole control over. In Beijing's quest to bring Taiwan back under Chinese rule, it promotes a one China policy, arguing that Taiwan is not an independent country. To this end, China seeks to isolate Taiwan diplomatically by refusing it membership and access to international organizations. Moreover, China seeks to buy off countries to end diplomatic ties with Taiwan and switch to China.² This policy has been largely successful: as of 2024, only twelve countries have diplomatic relations with Taiwan.



A TV screen shows a news report on a story about North Korea's deployment of its troops to Russia in the war against Ukraine, at a train station in Seoul, South Korea, October 28, 2024. (Photo by Lee Jae-Won/AFLO)

Korean Peninsula

China's support for North Korea, which is China's sole security treaty ally, has been manifested since the Korean War. Given that South Korea is a major security treaty ally of the United States and hosts more than 28,000 American troops, it is unlikely that Beijing will achieve strong relations with South Korea.³ America's military presence on the Korean Peninsula has long been an issue of concern for the Chinese government, as it does not want a unified Korea under Seoul's rule in which American troops are on its border. Reflecting such concern, on May 24, 2021, China's foreign ministry spokesperson stated that China is "concerned" about how the US and South Korea are advancing their alliance, viewing it as destabilizing the region. The spokesperson stated that the US-

South Korea alliance should not focus on the South China Sea or Taiwan, as those are China's sole affairs. In addition, the spokesperson stated that China is opposed to the Quad (the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, a security alliance of Australia, India, Japan, and the United States), classifying it as a group of countries seeking to hinder others, i.e., China.⁴

In November 2021, China and Russia wanted the UN Security Council to end sanctions on North Korea, thereby allowing Pyongyang to export certain products. Beijing and Moscow opined that lifting such sanctions would benefit the people of North Korea. Two years prior, in 2019, China and Russia wanted to end the sanctions but did not push for a vote at the Security Council. Thus, we see China and Russia willing to do so in 2021.⁵

Japan/East China Sea

China and Japan have had tense ties for decades, with territorial disputes playing an essential role. In addition, as a way of shoring up domestic support for the Chinese government in the post-Mao years, Beijing stressed the harm that Japan inflicted upon China during the Century of Humiliation.⁶ These factors, along with how Japan is a major US security treaty ally with approximately 54,000 US troops stationed there, make it difficult to achieve a Sino-Japanese breakthrough in diplomatic relations.⁷ Reflecting how Japan is concerned about China's military ascendancy, Japan has been building up its military. Since the PRC was established, China has been discontented with the US security system and presence in East Asia. In 2020, then-Foreign Minister Wang Yi stated that the Quad sought to establish "an Indo-Pacific version of NATO," thus portraying the organization as a threat to China.⁸ Indeed, the Quad seeks to balance China.

ASEAN/South China Sea

There is much competition for influence between the US and China in Southeast Asia. In 2022, Wang Yi stated that the US is not playing a peaceful role in the Indo-Pacific; instead, the US wants conflict with its "Indo-Pacific Strategy."⁹ According to Wang, "We cannot let the Cold War mentality return to the region and the tragedy of Ukraine be repeated around us."¹⁰ Therefore, according to China, the US and NATO must assume a large part of the blame for Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Continuing with the theme of viewing the US as an instigator in Southeast Asia, at the ASEAN summit

in Laos in July 2024, Wang Yi and Sergei Lavrov stated that China and Russia would seek to hinder "extra-regional forces" in Southeast Asia. Beijing and Moscow pledged to cooperate in dealing with external states seeking to, in their view, harm the region.¹¹

Numerous countries in Southeast Asia have maritime disputes with China and that explains diplomatic tensions and the lack of Chinese security gains in the region.

Because China views itself as having exclusive rights to the South China Sea, this is a source of much conflict for Southeast Asian countries that also claim such rights. Numerous countries in Southeast Asia have maritime disputes with China and that explains diplomatic tensions and the lack of Chinese security gains in the region.¹² Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia all want to engage China in economic linkages but are all concerned about China's actions in the South China Sea. In short, such states do not want to exclusively side with any one state, especially China.

Vietnam, due to its military power, is regarded as a significant country in Southeast Asia and various external states engage it for security purposes. Reflecting that, China, the US, and Japan have high-level ties with Hanoi. In terms of its economic relations,

China is Vietnam's main trade partner and its fourth largest source of foreign direct investment (FDI).¹³ However, such economic linkages are unlikely to result in strong military ties between the two. Vietnam and China had a war in 1979 and naval conflict in 1988 regarding the Spratly Islands. The two countries still have territorial disputes in the South China Sea. Instead of siding exclusively with one country, Vietnam is engaging all or hedging.

For Indonesia, China is a central economic player. But for security issues, it is Western states that have been the main source of weapons.

A similar situation is playing out in the Philippines where conflict in the South China Sea is causing much concern in Manila. The Philippines is a treaty ally of the US. When campaigning for president in 2022, Fernando Marcos Jr. gave the appearance that he would continue in the direction of his predecessor, Rodrigo Duterte, on ties with China. But after China began asserting its territorial claims more aggressively by occupying the West Philippine Sea and using lasers on the Philippines Coast Guard in February 2023, Marcos shifted away from China and advanced ties with the US, the country's long-time security partner.¹⁴

In November 2022, Anwar Ibrahim became prime minister of Malaysia and has advanced ties with China, as

he wants to capitalize on economic opportunities that China can offer. For many years, Malaysia has been engaging as many states as possible to advance economically and diplomatically. Since Malaysia and China have maritime disputes, this impedes Kuala Lumpur's ties with China. However, Malaysia does not want to side exclusively with the US; instead, it also engages all or hedges.¹⁵

For Indonesia, China is a central economic player. But for security issues, it is Western states that have been the main source of weapons.¹⁶ Thus, having good ties with both China and Western states is key for Indonesia.

India

China and India have a 2,100-mile border that is not demarcated, and that issue has led to distrust and conflict between the two sides.¹⁷ It also means that security ties are unlikely to advance. In 2020, China and India had a border crisis when clashes broke out in Galwan Valley, resulting in the deaths of twenty Indian and four Chinese soldiers. After that, tensions increased between Beijing and New Delhi. India placed restrictions on Chinese FDI, banned TikTok and other apps, and canceled direct flights to China.¹⁸ In addition, because New Delhi viewed China's actions as Beijing seeking to change the situation in the Himalaya region, New Delhi advanced security ties with the US.¹⁹

After the border clash, the leaders of India and China did not have a formal meeting for four years.²⁰ Then, in October 2024, Xi and Modi met in Kazan, Russia during the BRICS summit. The next month, China and India addressed the



From left: President of China Xi Jinping, President of Russia Vladimir Putin, and Prime Minister of India Narendra Modi during a concert ahead of an informal lunch for the heads of BRICS delegations held as part of the 16th BRICS summit in Kazan. (Alexandr Kryazhev/brics-russia2024.ru)

border dispute by agreeing to patrol the border, seeking to bring stability to the tense standoff. In December 2024, China and India stated that the two sides will cooperate to resolve the border disputes in the Himalayas.²¹

It is very early to determine what the impact of this border resolution will be. Both China and India have their reasons to settle it. For China, the uncertainty about the incoming US administration's statements on tariffs is a central factor.²² Regarding India, it is concerned about China's power in Asia. As of June 2024, China was not making significant inroads in India. For example, Modi used X to engage Taiwan's president. Also in June 2024, Modi disregarded China's preferences and met with the US

members of Congress who had met with the Dalai Lama.²³ In short, Modi did not heed China's preferences on two highly salient issues or what China regards as its "core interests"—Taiwan and Tibet. In addition, Modi has different views of the BRICS than China and Russia, as Modi stated that the organization is not about revisionism or changing the international system.²⁴ Putin and Xi, however, view BRICS as a platform to contest the current international order. Because of the gaps between India and China in terms of their foreign policy goals, it is unlikely that China will achieve diplomatic gains in India.

The Military Instrument

In terms of China's military engagement or security gains in the stated countries or regions, it would be difficult to make the case that China has achieved security progress regarding Taiwan, Japan, or South Korea. The aforementioned countries have become very concerned about China's military spending and have increased their military spending as a result. Given how India joined the Quad, strengthened ties with the US, and is concerned about Chinese security overall, it is also tough to make a case that China has achieved security ties with New Delhi. However, the very recent breakthroughs in trying to deal with the border dispute need future attention.

In contrast to its lack of security gains in East Asia, China has increased its security engagement with countries in Southeast Asia but is not making dramatic progress regarding security issues, other than in Cambodia, the Solomon Islands, and building artificial islands in the South China Sea for military purposes.²⁵ Southeast Asian states are hedging (i.e., seeking to maximize what they can from all)—not bandwagoning or siding exclusively with China on security matters.

Taiwan

In recent years, the Chinese military has dramatically increased its encroachment into Taiwan's air space and territory, signaling a combative position that is marked by Xi Jinping's stated claim to reunify Taiwan with China. China has carried out live fire drills off Taiwan and has had exercises to encircle the island. If China were to invade Taiwan, it would

jeopardize China's international economic engagement with the West. Thus, the invasion would have a very negative impact on China's economy.²⁶ Bloomberg Economics suspects that a Chinese invasion of Taiwan would cause a 16.7% drop in China's GDP.²⁷ With such an invasion, MNCs would likely leave China and thus foreign capital, technology, and jobs would all be at risk. However, it is most likely ideational factors that explain China's desire to achieve this objective.²⁸ While there is the chance that the Chinese government could gain control of Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company (TSMC), there is the chance that the US will bomb the factory if it appears China would be successful in capturing the island.²⁹ Instead of a full-out invasion, another option is that China imposes a blockade on Taiwan, thereby cutting off Taiwan from the world. China could impose a blockade with sea, air, and possibly space power and prevent commercial engagement.³⁰

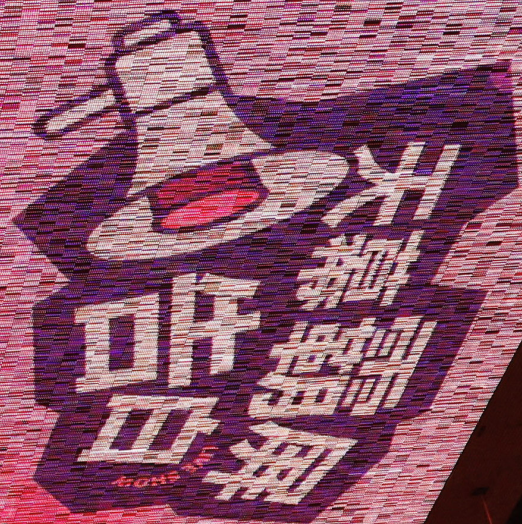
Korean Peninsula

China is cautious about recent ties between Russia and North Korea, as it does not want to risk its position in world politics over this.³¹ Russia and North Korea are aligning on security matters, with North Korean soldiers assisting Russia's effort in Ukraine. North Korea is the only country that China has a security treaty alliance with, but China's relationship with Russia is one of ostensibly "no limits." Based on a RAND report from 2022 that examined military aid from 2013 to 2018, it appears that China did not provide any military aid to North Korea.³²

TV 1
综合

新闻联播
XINWEN LIANBO

歌华户外传媒



A giant screen shows news footage of military drills conducted in the Taiwan Strait and areas to the north, south and east of Taiwan, by the Eastern Theatre Command of the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA), in Beijing, China October 14, 2024.
REUTERS/Tingshu Wang

Japan/East China Sea

In May 2022, China and Russia conducted military flights, with bombers, in the vicinity of Japan when President Biden and other leaders were in Tokyo.³³ In July 2023, China and Russia had another joint military drill in the Sea of Japan. Additionally, the two countries have conducted numerous military exercises in East Asia. After the Japanese Prime Minister and President Biden stated that Russia should not use nuclear weapons in Ukraine in January 2023, Medvedev stated that the Japanese Prime Minister should disembowel himself.³⁴

ASEAN/South China Sea

In 2023, China had fourteen joint, usually bilateral, exercises with Southeast Asian states, its largest number of military exercises in Southeast Asia in a single year. In 2019, before COVID-19, China had seven. Owing to its actions in the South China Sea and with Taiwan, the Chinese military is viewed in a very negative way in the region. By engaging other states' militaries with joint exercises, however, Beijing seeks to boost its image as a cooperative and responsible neighbor.³⁵

China is seeking to compete with the US in Southeast Asia. In contrast to Chinese military drills and engagement in Southeast Asia, the US has more troops involved in such drills and is usually on a multilateral level—not bilateral. Moreover, the types of exercises vary considerably, with American-led military exercises usually having warfighting themes. China's exercises have focused

on noncombat areas, such as piracy, disaster relief, and humanitarian issues.³⁶ America's exercises have also focused on developing the capabilities of Southeast Asian militaries, which the US is keen on due to China's military ascendancy.

From 2013 to 2018, China provided \$560 million in military aid to other countries and the US provided more than \$35 billion.³⁷ Of the \$35 billion, the US provided \$1 billion to its five leading recipients in the Indo-Pacific region—more than the total amount that China spent. In short, China is not a main source of military aid in Southeast Asia or globally.³⁸ Based on the findings from the RAND report, “The United States and its allies enjoy a significant competitive advantage.”

**Among ASEAN states,
Vietnam is most concerned
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Among ASEAN states, Vietnam is most concerned about China's actions in the South China Sea and the maritime disputes that it has with China. Such issues have played a key role in advancing US-Vietnamese relations.³⁹ Likewise, Vietnam's relations with the other Quad states have also improved.⁴⁰ But Vietnam is cautious about offending China on security matters. In its defense white paper of 2019, Vietnam issued

various grievances it has with China regarding the South China Sea. Owing to its concerns about Chinese military power, Hanoi has spent much on its Navy and air power, buying fighter jets and submarines from Russia.⁴¹ Because Vietnam has close ties with Russia on purchasing military weapons, it should not be viewed as firmly in the pro-Western camp.

India

Due to tensions between China and India over the border dispute, it is unlikely that China could make progress with India on security matters, especially security gains in India. Similar to Taiwan, South Korea, Japan, and some other states, India is very concerned about China's ascendancy. While India is a member of the BRICS and in some ways seeks a more multipolar world, India does not favor a China-led world order, especially on security matters.

The Economic Instrument

The Berlin-based Mercator Institute for China Studies stated that China used economic coercion 123 times from February 2010 through March 2022. We provide examples below. Due to its economic slowdown and the long-term issues that face China, its future economic power is unlikely to ascend in Asia.⁴² Thus, China may engage the Asian region less economically and with less FDI. Patton et al. argue that China's power in Asia "is neither surging nor collapsing."⁴³ Instead, "it is plateauing at a level below

that of the United States." While China is not ascending in the region economically, no other Asian country is close to China in terms of economic power.⁴⁴

Taiwan

Despite their diplomatic enmity and escalating security tensions, China and Taiwan have close economic links. Taiwan's economy is highly dependent on the Chinese market. Indeed, Taiwan exports nearly as much to China as it does to the rest of the world combined.⁴⁵ Taiwan is the leading producer of semiconductor chips in the world with TSMC as the main company.⁴⁶ In the semiconductor market, Taipei's dependence on China is even more stark: exports to China are more than three times as valuable as those to ASEAN, its next largest market. Overall, Taiwan's semiconductor exports to China are roughly equal to its exports to the rest of the world combined.⁴⁷ If push comes to shove, Beijing will not hesitate to use its economic leverage over Taiwan.

Korean Peninsula

South Korea's main trade partner is China, but South Korea is working closely with the US and other developed countries in standing up to China's economic coercion.⁴⁸ In May 2023, South Korea's Foreign Minister Park Jin stated that Seoul is "reducing our reliance on China" and that South Korea's "diversifying our trading partners will help our economy."⁴⁹

South Korea's concern regarding China has caused it to make several decisions that angered Beijing but that Seoul saw as critical to its interests. China



Pusan Newport Terminal in Busan, South Korea, July 1, 2021. REUTERS/Kim Hong-Ji

wanted South Korea to end its Terminal High Altitude Area Defense System (THAAD), a US missile defense system, and used economic coercion to force this outcome.⁵⁰ Due to THAAD, in 2017, Beijing prohibited South Korean tourists from entering China.⁵¹ In May 2023, Japan invited South Korea to the G7 summit. During that summit, the G7 issued a joint communiqué stating that the members act to stifle China's "economic coercion" by decoupling trade links with China.⁵² Thus, with the South Korean government attending the G7 in Japan and being involved in the means to address China's economic coercion, this demonstrates that South Korea is siding with the US on security issues and challenging China. Despite being geographically very close to China, South Korea is strengthening its security ties with the US.⁵³

Japan/East China Sea

Despite mutual suspicion between China and Japan, and the latter's security partnership with the US, Beijing and Tokyo have close economic ties. China is Japan's top trade partner and Japan is China's number two bilateral trade partner.⁵⁴ The two countries are increasingly competitors when it comes to providing economic aid to the less developed countries of the region, and Japan is rising in this area long dominated by China. Between 2015 and 2021, China's share of aid to these states fell from 24% to 14%, with increased aid from Japan (and South Korea) as the primary cause. Japanese aid is attractive for several reasons. First, it lacks the "Taiwan strings" that Chinese aid comes with. Next, most Japanese loans are at concessional rates and come with "world-class Japanese expertise for advice and

training."⁵⁵

ASEAN/South China Sea

All ASEAN states want to engage China economically, viewing China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as a potential platform to advance connectivity with Chinese FDI, and thus improve GDP growth.⁵⁶ Demonstrating the significant economic role that it plays, China is the main trade destination of Southeast Asian states.⁵⁷ However, such strong economic links have not translated into security gains for China in Southeast Asia; instead, we see a lack of Chinese economic fungibility in the region.⁵⁸ Reflecting that, various Southeast Asian states demonstrate an unclear position regarding China, as they want to engage China economically but also want to keep China out in terms of security issues, preferring the US as a security partner. In short, hedging is the strategy, as states in the region do not want to exclusively side with either the US or China; instead, each seeks to maximize the benefits and minimize the risks of the US-China competition in the region.⁵⁹

It is common to view Laos and Cambodia as the two Southeast Asian countries that have the strongest ties with China in terms of heeding China's preferences.⁶⁰ Both countries receive much Chinese FDI for infrastructure. Cambodia has the Ream Naval base for Chinese ships. The Lao–PDR–China Railway—started in 2016 and finished in 2021—cost around \$6 billion and goes from Kunming to Vientiane.⁶¹

India

While China and India have disputes regarding the Himalayan border, as mentioned above, the two countries have advanced economic links. Owing to tensions between China and India with the Himalayan border dispute, Nepal is a main place of competition between the two powers. Modi imposed bans on Nepalese energy sources that are funded or built by China. China is a key source of FDI in Nepal's infrastructure.⁶² While India is a member of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), it is not a member of the BRI, viewing AIIB as more multilateral and BRI as more of an instrument to advance China's interests.

move China closer to Russia's view of the US as an outright adversary, ending Beijing's attempts to balance its support for Russia with its desire to maintain its economic connections with the US. The Kremlin also hopes that rising tensions with China will cause the US to shift its focus from confronting Russia's aggression in Ukraine to preparing for a showdown with Beijing in the Indo-Pacific.

In Moscow's perfect world, a sustained period of rising US-Chinese tension in the Indo-Pacific would divert US attention from Ukraine, allowing Russia to achieve its goals there.

The View from Moscow

Like all states, China uses instruments of power to advance or defend its interests. In the Indo-Pacific, this has translated into efforts to reestablish what it defines as its territorial integrity and preserve its regional freedom of action. Russia views China's interests in the region and its use of instruments of power to serve them in a neutral to favorable manner. Two factors drive an increasing convergence of Russian and Chinese interests in the region: the rising tension between the US and China and the war in Ukraine.

In Moscow, any enemy of the US is perceived as a friend, and while China may not wish for conflict with the US, the Kremlin relishes rising tensions between the two as an opportunity for itself. At a minimum, rising US-China tensions may

In Moscow's perfect world, a sustained period of rising US-Chinese tension in the Indo-Pacific would divert US attention from Ukraine, allowing Russia to achieve its goals there. But a US-China war is not necessarily in Russia's interest. First, it would reduce Russia's freedom of action in the Indo-Pacific, since China would almost certainly request Russian support. Next, neither a clear US nor a clear Chinese victory in such a war would benefit Moscow. The first would do grave damage to Russia's only true great power partner. And the second would ensconce China as the regional hegemon, an outcome Russia also prefers to avoid.

The next factor causing a convergence of Russian and Chinese interests in the Indo-Pacific is the impact of the war in



U.S. Air Force loadmasters assigned to the 353rd Special Operations Wing look out at a fleet of MC-130J Commando II aircraft flying in formation near the Ryukyu Islands, Oct. 6, 2023. (U.S. Air Force photo by Staff Sgt. Jessi Roth)

Ukraine. The war has damaged Russia's relationship with many other regional states, leaving Moscow few other options for regional partners. Even though Russia's 2023 Foreign Policy concept describes the country as a "Eurasian and Euro-Pacific power" and two-thirds of its territory lies in Asia, the war has diverted Russia's attention away from the region, with a commensurate fall in its influence there.⁶³ As Patton et al. note, "Russian resources remain committed to the European theater, not to Asia."⁶⁴ Given these two factors, the Kremlin does not have the luxury of a multi-vector regional policy. Instead, its latest "turn to the east," which has been underway since 2014 but accelerated in 2022, will be a turn toward China.

Taiwan

After decades of what China considered frustratingly lukewarm support for its position on Taiwan, Russia recently moved toward more open support for Beijing. Russia's historical approach had adhered to a "one China" policy and opposed Taiwanese independence, but it had been silent on how it would react to a Chinese attempt to forcibly reincorporate Taiwan. In March 2023, after hosting Xi in Russia, Putin signaled a change. In the joint statement from their summit, Russia recognized Taiwan as "an inalienable part of China's territory." The statement continued by clarifying that Russia "firmly supports" any measures China might take to safeguard its sovereignty and territorial integrity.⁶⁵

Korean Peninsula

In the early 2000s, Russia and China had heeded US preferences regarding the Korean Peninsula by engaging in multilateralism with the Six-Party Talks to deal with North Korea. More recently, China and Russia have admonished Western states or the US-aligned states for their approach to North Korea. Both have stated that sanctions against North Korea do more harm than good. To support its war in Ukraine, Russia has strengthened its ties to North Korea, to include signing a strategic partnership agreement and accepting North Korean weapons and soldiers to fight against Ukraine.

Russia's engagement with North Korea helps North Korea's regime stability, which lessens a burden that China has shouldered alone for years.

Some analysts believe that China is cautious or concerned about Russia advancing ties with North Korea, as Beijing does not want the two countries to do anything that might destabilize a very dangerous region. However, Russia's engagement with North Korea helps North Korea's regime stability, which lessens a burden that China has shouldered alone for years. From this perspective then, Russia's closer

engagement with the DPRK is not a major irritant in the relationship. China does not want a united Korea under South Korean rule, and it does not want Western or US military bases on its border. Russia's ties with South Korea have worsened, owing to Russia invading Ukraine and how Russia is engaging North Korea. Thus, regarding the Korean Peninsula, there is much common ground between China and Russia.

Japan/East China Sea

Reflecting their disdain for Japan and its security partnership with the US, China and Russia have carried out several air and naval exercises near the US treaty ally. China and Russia did their first joint air patrol near Japan in July 2019. In 2021, a joint Chinese-Russian naval patrol circumnavigated Japan's main island, causing alarm in Tokyo. In May 2022, they engaged in military exercises during the Quad meeting in Tokyo.⁶⁶

This increasingly assertive and increasingly joint approach toward Japan comes on the heels of a period when Moscow had been trying to cultivate a pragmatic partnership with Tokyo. Concerned about the threat from China, Japan responded largely positively to Russia's outreach. Even the 2014 Russian seizure of Crimea did not derail their rapprochement. By 2017, things looked optimistic enough that a Russian scholar argued that the "trend toward warming Russian-Japanese relations is increasingly manifesting itself as an independent factor in international politics."⁶⁷

The 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine stopped this warming trend cold. "Deeply shocked" by Russia's actions,



The Secretary-General of ASEAN, Dr. Kao Kim Hourn, January 20234 (ASEAN/X)

Tokyo condemned them and joined the sanctions regime against Russia.⁶⁸ Russia responded by cutting off negotiations over the Kuril Islands and announcing that it was suspending talks to forge a formal World War II peace treaty between them. Moscow also began more openly supporting China's position in its East China Sea territorial disputes with Japan, a position it still maintains.

ASEAN/South China Sea

Relations with ASEAN are a rare area where Russia seems dubious about China's positions and policies. Moscow formally maintains a neutral stance on China's territorial disputes with ASEAN members in the South China Sea, but it also cooperates with several ASEAN members, most notably Vietnam. Vietnam

is a major export market for Russian weapons, something that certainly does not sit well in Beijing given the historic animosity between Vietnam and China. Russia and Vietnam have had a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership agreement in place since 2012, making it the oldest one Hanoi has signed with major powers. Russia and Vietnam are also involved in joint energy exploration activities in the South China Sea, including in areas China claims. Russia has been an ASEAN dialogue partner since 1996, but Moscow's engagement with the organization only took off after 2014, when its estrangement from the West over its first invasion of Ukraine caused Russia to look for other partners to decrease its diplomatic and economic isolation.



A flag-raising ceremony is held during the launching ceremony to unveil China's first Type 076 new-generation amphibious assault ship, the Sichuan, at Hudong-Zhonghua Shipbuilding, on December 27, 2024 in Shanghai, China. REUTERS/Pu Haiyang/VCG

India

China's attitude toward India had historically been a sensitive topic for Russia, which has a long history of partnership with New Delhi. In the wake of its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russia has attempted to bolster ties with India. The move is not an attempt to undermine China by cooperating more closely with one of its historical adversaries, but it is more a reflection of Russia's isolation from the West and search for partnership and legitimacy. The move is also intended to signal that Russia refuses to be relegated to the role of China's junior partner in the Indo-Pacific. By strengthening its already close ties with India, Russia is communicating to China—and others—that it has options. Moscow hopes that it will be able to preserve pragmatic and productive partnerships with two powers that are themselves often at odds. So far, it looks to have succeeded.

Conclusion

China's use of the instruments of power to advance its interests in the Indo-Pacific does not portend a rift with Russia. On the contrary, there is an increasing convergence of interests between the two, especially in the security sphere, driven by escalating US-China tensions and Russia's isolation after its full-scale invasion of Ukraine. On the issues of Taiwan, the Korean Peninsula, and Japan/ East China Sea, Russian and Chinese policies are largely aligned. There is daylight between them on the issues of ASEAN/South China Sea and India due to Russia's partnership with historical Chinese adversaries there. But to this point, China and Russia have been able to compartmentalize these differences and prevent them from damaging their cooperation elsewhere in the region. Absent an unexpected shock to their relationship, this looks likely to continue.



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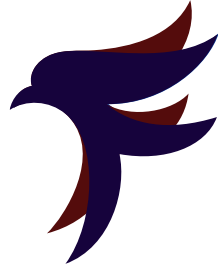
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