



Bridging Alliances: Values, Interests and Strategy in Asia and Europe

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Key Issues

- Competition with China and Russia means that the United States and its allies need to identify core interests and values they share.
- As material power shifts toward Asia, the United States focuses on security in that region. Yet competition with both China and Russia is also global, and events in one “theatre” affect others. The breadth of geography, interests and values represented by the array of allies, partners and unaligned states with whom the United States engages means that core principles become more, not less important.
- Frontiers can be violent. During the recent “vacation from history”, concerns about such violent frontiers have been mitigated. As rivalry between great powers (re) emerges, careful and humble management of both allies and adversaries becomes increasingly important.

Distribution of material power around the globe is constantly shifting, and it is currently shifting toward Asia. Two powerful states – China and Russia – are also seeking to challenge the current international order. How can the United States (US) and its allies respond to simultaneous challenges in the Euro-Atlantic and the Indo-Pacific?

In this Policy Brief, we argue that the current (re)ordering will result in the (re)establishment of geographic (i.e. which countries are members of which orders) and ideological (i.e. what ideas and values are essential to membership) boundaries. While such boundaries are shifting globally, this Brief focuses on two regions: the Euro-Atlantic and the Indo-Pacific. While the US and its allies should not stumble into a false sense of permanency of boundaries in these regions or elsewhere, they should be conscious of their emergence and seek to influence it in ways that mitigate risks of violent

miscalculations, while maintaining the ideal of openness in the current order.

Geographic boundaries are already coming into sight. Hopes of a harmonious “[new world order](#)” have faded. Any order that the US and its allies may construct, reconstruct or maintain will likely exclude China and Russia for a time – this exclusion must be firm but not permanent. The door to a harmonious world order must remain open, even as we acknowledge the physical boundaries of the current order.

Similarly, the period in which the US felt free to ‘[defend civilised values around the world](#)’ at will appears to have ended for now. The current situation demands that the US hew tightly to very basic values at the international level – like the right of states to make sovereign choices within their boundaries with the consent of their body politic. Inclusion of allies and partners who

share this basic commitment is critical but must remain contingent upon the recognition of such rights, as in the case of the Russo-Ukrainian war.

Below, we examine the formation of and management of geographical and ideological boundaries in the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific from each of our geographic perspectives in succession – US, European and Asian.

Challenges across “theatres”

Shared values and interests underpin the transatlantic and transpacific bridges – metaphorical and naval – that are likely to be crucial to international security in the coming decades. Just as Asia and Europe are two distinct but interlinked strategic theatres, interests and values are inextricably intertwined.

Challenges from Russia and China are part of a wider adjustment of international order. While there is a risk of a presentist bias-driven view that current challenges to that order are historically unique, strategists must nonetheless prepare for the worst. As [US hegemony wanes](#), and actors contend with shifts to the patterns of interaction that characterised the Cold War and post-Cold War periods, frontier regions whose “membership” in a particular order is contested are likely to be very dangerous. Order-making is risky business – while orders mitigate conflict within their borders, the contestation of those borders can be [extremely violent](#). The Russo-Ukrainian war is a prime example of this phenomenon and may, in fact, be a war to establish borders between an open-access democratic order centred on the US and its allies and an autocratic, limited-access order being constructed by Putinist Russia.

Recent [research](#) predicts that the US will respond to shifts in material power to the East by organising the international order against China, and more specifically *against* China’s ideological model, ‘[authoritarian capitalism](#)’. Likewise, China will seek to engage in order-building that excludes *its* rival – the United States – weakening the latter by constructing an alternative order. China’s revisionism may also use the architecture of the current order (i.e. its rules, norms, and values), as well as its infrastructure (i.e. the relationships, practices and interactions that maintain it), to undermine the order’s ecosystem – the combination of its [architecture and infrastructure](#). The ideological underpinnings of these efforts at order-building – and order-sapping – are as important as their geostrategic ones.

A key dilemma facing strategists in liberal democracies is thus how to [\(re\)construct](#) an order in which their constituents are comfortable existing – an order that is at once [open](#), but acknowledges limits to its expanse. This dilemma does not only relate to geography but to the extent to which an order can accommodate differing value systems. Doing so requires identifying foundational principles that are broad enough to be inclusive, but also establish limits – both geostrategically and ideologically.

Boundaries, exclusion and inclusion from a US perspective

The notion of bridging two simultaneous strategic challenges is not new. From the Second World War to engagement with China during the Nixon presidency, to the Obama administration’s “pivot” to Asia, the US has been both an Atlantic and a Pacific power. While the pivot generated some confusion and consternation when it was announced, President Obama’s basketball analogy, wherein one plants one foot to move the other, was apt then and remains so now: while global material power has shifted Eastward, for the US to increase its focus on Asia, it must be confident in its European allies.

North American and European strategists would be wise to consider Asia and Europe as two geographically separate but strategically interlinked theatres. The Russo-Ukrainian war has helped bring this dynamic into sharper relief – while the US clearly continues to lead allied responses to Russia’s aggression in areas ranging from logistics to diplomatic and military coordination, it is equally clear that it is well within NATO allies’ and partners’ ability to deter and defend against Russian territorial aggression. Careful attention to a division of labour that retains unity of effort will enable the US to take the lead in the Indo-Pacific, while keeping its “pivot foot” in Europe, as Europeans take increasing responsibility for European security.

While it remains a menace capable of disrupting regional and global security and economic stability, Russia is severely weakened by its disastrous war in Ukraine. It is down, but not out. Because of this relative military weakness, Russia may focus more on asymmetric tools like cyber-attacks, disruption of critical infrastructure, misinformation, disinformation and meddling with electoral processes. Because of this focus, any drift on the part of democracies from the principles that unite them is a vulnerability *vis-à-vis* Russia – and of course the same is true about China. Attention to these principles is, in fact,

enshrined in the North Atlantic Treaty, Article 2 of which enjoins signatories to [‘strengthen \[\] their free institutions, by bringing about a better understanding of the principles upon which these institutions are founded’](#).

Boundaries, exclusion and inclusion from a European perspective

In many ways, such democratic principles are precisely what is at stake in the Russo-Ukrainian war. Platitudes about the fight for democracy come easily, but exploring the European political landscape reveals a complex situation regarding democratic principles. Authoritarian populist strands in domestic and EU-level politics leave open questions about precisely what values US allies in Europe and Asia share. Is Poland, for example, central to a strategy for securing Europe because it is a committed democracy, because of its geographic situation, or some mixture of both? The same question applies to Ukraine. If the US desires to focus its energy in Asia, can it afford to

criteria, which, in the case of the EU [‘include a stable democracy and the rule of law’](#) is a straightforward way to establish values-based boundaries while remaining inclusive. If Europe remains grounded in the principles embodied in the Copenhagen Criteria by holding fast to liberal democratic institutions, while building its military capabilities and capacity to ensure mutually supporting defence, it can indeed serve as a solid pivot from which democracies can base their strategies toward Asia – without excluding European engagement *in* Asia.

Boundaries, exclusion and inclusion from an Asian perspective

Asian allies and partners themselves are coequal partners in not just regional, but global security. While responsibility-sharing practices have been highly, and increasingly institutionalised in Europe, they are dealt with less formally in Asia.

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accept some democratic backsliding among allies who nonetheless hold the line against Russia? To what extent does the US’ own commitment to democratic and liberal principles at home affect its allies’ commitments, and vice versa?

Because they retain sovereignty at the national level, allies are unlikely to share precisely the same interests or values. A commitment to some very basic principles, such as those outlined in the North Atlantic Treaty (i.e. peaceful resolution of disputes, support for free institutions, economic collaboration, capacity to resist armed attack and solidarity in case of such attack), may be the best we can hope for – and it is probably good enough. Of course, the European Union’s (EU) institutions play a critical role here – states like Hungary face legal and funding incentives to return to such [democratic principles](#). Although it appears increasingly distant, the prospect of EU membership may someday again shape Turkish incentives, as it [remains a candidate](#). Maintaining an open door to institutional membership in principle, while adhering to the principles embodied in its membership

While Asian allies’ preoccupation with China is easy to understand, Russia also poses challenges – we may consider it something of a “two headed bear” that, in a contingency like a Chinese effort to absorb Taiwan, would seek to exploit opportunities in spaces like the Sea of Japan. In such a contingency, even within alliances, competition for limited resources is likely to be the order of the day. Repetitive engagements, institutionalised relationships and commitments to the most basic of shared principles can help allies mitigate the effects of such competition through prior planning and shared expectations.

Asian allies and China alike are watching the Russo-Ukrainian war carefully. While that war represents a [failure of deterrence](#) at one level, it also represents a near-term success of deterrence’s close relative, defence. Future deterrence in both Europe and Asia rests on successful defence – it supports both deterrence by denial and deterrence by resilience, key components of the US’ [integrated deterrence approach](#). By clearly communicating to adversaries that the US and its allies

have both the will and the capacity to impose costly defeats and withstand disruptions, they reduce the likelihood of having to fight for similarly costly victories. As costly as it has been, the Russo-Ukrainian war has certainly sent such a message thus far, and the attraction of the alliance is evident in Finland and Sweden's requests to join.

Prioritising partnerships in Asia and the wider Indo-Pacific is key to both communicating and building capacity. Three key partners are Indonesia, the Philippines and India. It is crucial to coordinate and control expectations with each partner in a bespoke manner, since they are all different, ranging from joint exercises and the provision of weapon systems to the prepositioning of equipment in the region. Moreover, European engagement with those partners, in the context of bridging alliances, will surely shape Chinese risk calculations.

Because of the diversity of Asia's institutional architecture, national governance approaches and experiences with the US, the roots of shared values may at times be less deep than in Europe. Democratic institutions are similarly fluid – while India has a long democratic tradition, its institutions are challenged by authoritarian populism in ways akin to Europe and the US. Furthermore, the Philippines has a chequered relationship with liberal democracy, and Indonesia continues to steadily progress after the fall of an authoritarian regime in 1998.

Values, interests and allies – nothing is permanent, but some things are less impermanent than others

Strategic rivalry with China demands that the US and its allies coordinate closely with countries with whom they differ on many issues but agree on core values like the inviolability of sovereign borders. A prime example is Vietnam, which remains a one-party state but is

committed to its own sovereignty and is willing and able to defend itself against China. While Vietnamese domestic politics may not be liberalising to the satisfaction of friends in Washington or Tokyo, Vietnam remains a crucial partner in any strategy of balancing in Asia.

Likewise, both the US and its transatlantic allies are rightfully seeking a powerful Europe as a key pivot in an era of global competition – Poland, for example, is critical to ensuring that Europe does not become a [dominant preoccupation](#) for the US, at the [expense of the Indo-Pacific](#).

Clearly, gaps between values related to domestic ordering in countries like Vietnam and Poland and those of the US are not so wide as to preclude cooperation. Similarly, questions about the stability of democratic institutions even in the US have not created lasting ruptures in transatlantic or transpacific strategic cooperation.

Recent survey experiment research indicates, however, that public views of democracy have important foreign policy implications specific to great power competition in the Indo-Pacific and Europe: Russian [electoral interference](#) affected the Japanese public's confidence in the US as an ally, more [nationalist Filipinos](#) were more inclined to a hedging strategy *vis-à-vis* China and the US and American public support for sanctions on Russia may depend on [media framing](#) of Russian behaviour in the US.

We can thus expect the present (re)ordering to take place along both geographic and ideological frontiers. Both risk being violent, and the US and its allies must focus on arriving at a consensus about defensible borders on both dimensions.

This article reflects the authors' views and should not be considered an official position of any government.



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