Regional security and alliances in the Middle East and the Indo-Pacific: implications for European security

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January 2022

IISS
The International Institute for Strategic Studies

Hanns Seidel Foundation

Regional security dynamics and European security

Regional security dynamics and the constructs to manage them – be they bilateral, minilateral or multilateral – are in flux around the world. Governments are attempting to address a multitude of simultaneous security challenges; determine the depth and scope of achievable and desirable security autonomy versus the unavoidable interdependencies with friends and opponents alike; and maintain a focus on their specific regional hotspots, whilst also positioning themselves for the era of systemic competition between an assertive China and the United States. As the 2021 IISS *Strategic Survey* argued, 'the world swings perilously between an old rules-based order that seems poorly maintained for contemporary purposes, and a new order yet to be well designed and strategically engineered'.[1]

Against this background, both the European Union and NATO are revising their strategic guidance to produce in 2022 – in the case of the EU – the so-called Strategic Compass, a document to give further shape and substance to the Union's international security role, and – in the case of NATO – a new Strategic Concept to replace an earlier version developed in 2010. Aspects of international order, geopolitics and regional stability will inform these documents as both organisations will need to tackle their respective global role and decide on an achievable level of ambition for dealing with partners and challengers.

NATO's 2021 Brussels Summit Communiqué suggested that NATO would work to improve its 'ability to contribute to preserve and shape the rules-based international order in areas that are important to Allied security… [and] increase… dialogue and practical cooperation with existing partners'. In addition, NATO heads of state and government decided to 'strengthen NATO's ability to provide training and capacity building support to partners'.[2] The draft Strategic Compass document debated by EU ministers in November 2021 stated that the EU would 'bolster partnerships where they are mutually beneficial and serve EU values and interests, particularly when there is a shared commitment to an integrated approach to crises and capacity building', and proposed a range of multilateral, regional and bilateral initiatives to deepen and strengthen partnership formats.[3]

The security dynamics in the Middle East and the Indo-Pacific regions have and will continue to have a direct impact on European and Euro-Atlantic security. The Middle East has been a challenging environment for engagement by EU and NATO member states. The region's complex mix of state-level rivalries, increasingly extrovert powers and failing states, transnational non-state actors, weak and autocratic governance, and muted economic prospects is hard to understand and navigate, let alone address. European governments cannot hope to reap gains quickly in the Middle East and European security ambitions should be defined in the knowledge that partnerships with countries in the region can often be frustrating.

In the United States, the government led by President Joe Biden, while unable to extract itself completely, seems determined to reduce US exposure to the Middle East. Its challenge is to achieve this ambition without worsening regional security dynamics. The 2011 withdrawal from Iraq and the 2015 nuclear deal with Iran both ended up aggravating regional conditions because of faulty policy assumptions and flawed diplomacy. The fact that the US chose not to respond visibly to the 2019 Iranian attacks on Saudi Arabia's Abqaiq and Khurais oil facilities had a psychological impact on leaders in the Middle East and led some to consider ways to diversify their security partnerships. Europe's exposure to the region is significant given geographic proximity, political legacies and demographic flows. More than the US, Europe directly perceives the main externalities of Middle Eastern instability – migration of refugees and economic migrants, and international terrorism. Both the US and Europe will continue to struggle with policy responses to the unique blend of missiles, militias and non-proliferation challenges in the Middle East.

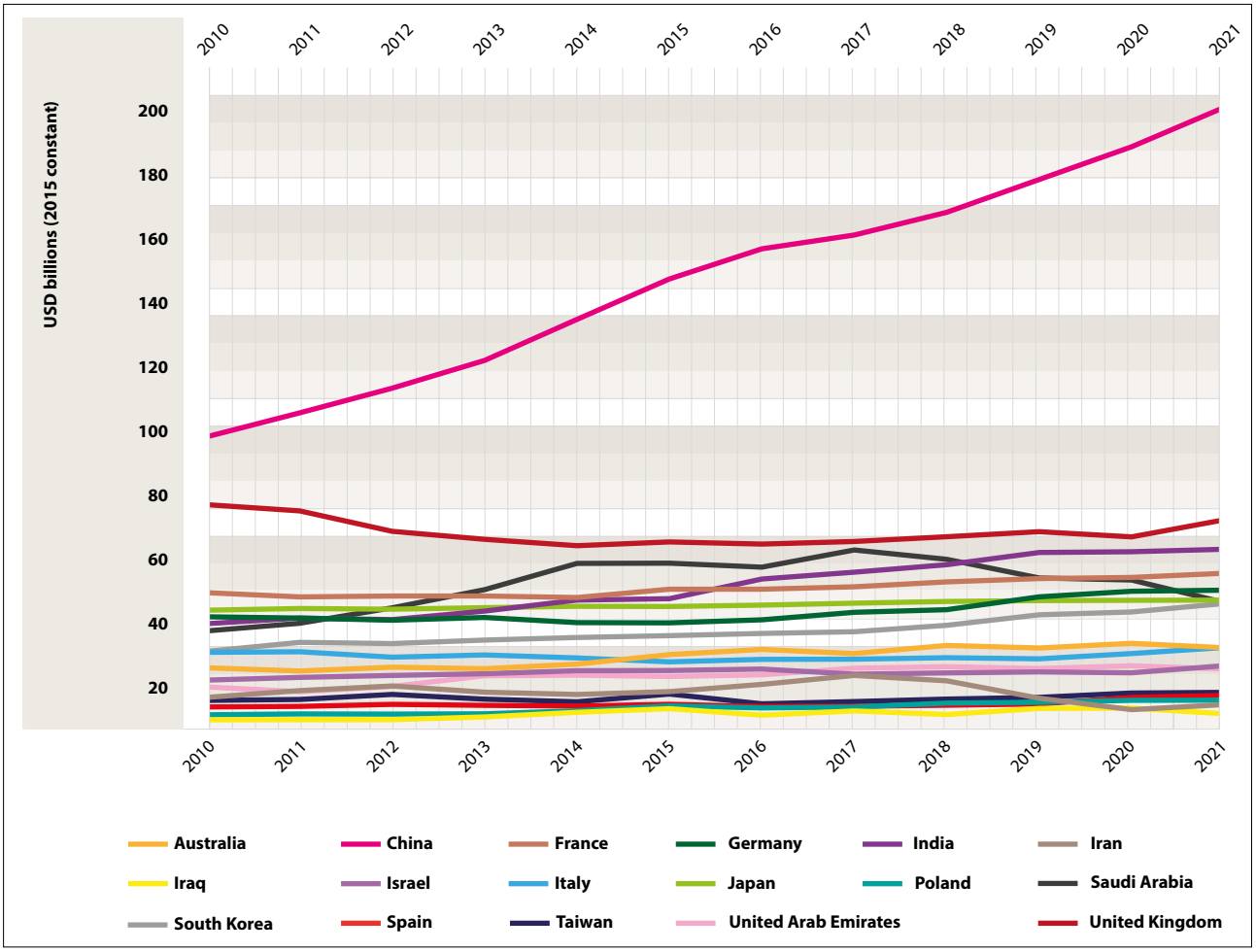
As a geographical term of reference, 'Indo-Pacific' has been incorporated in strategic and diplomatic

nomenclature only in recent years.[4] But the Indo-Pacific has already emerged as a key site for great-power competition, primarily because of lingering doubts about the solidity of the US security commitment amongst its regional partners, and because China's rise has led to a resurgence of traditional security concerns in the region. Together, these overarching trends have disrupted the regional security strategies that states within the region have pursued hitherto, which has in turn sparked new security-policy alignments and cooperation initiatives.

In part, the strategic value of the region stems from its economic importance. It contains major economies such as China, India and Japan, which depend on sea routes in the Indo-Pacific for their trade and energy supply. Whilst 80% of global trade by volume and 70% by value is transported by sea,[5] 60% of that maritime trade passes through the Indo-Pacific.[6] Security in the Indo-Pacific has therefore become a vital concern for all those whose prosperity depends on these flows, including Europe. For the US, however, the strategic importance of the Indo-Pacific is further amplified by the fact that it is home to what the US considers to be its pacing threat: China. China – unlike Russia today – has the capacity to challenge US predominance regionally and globally in a comprehensive way. Militarily, the Indo-Pacific has already been the United States' priority theatre for a number of years.

The EU, and several countries including France, Germany and the Netherlands, have produced Indo-Pacific strategy documents in recent years, acknowledging the inescapable link between their security and prosperity and the dynamics unfolding in that region. Germany has explicitly formulated what it considers to be an inclusive policy for its Indo-Pacific engagement, which seeks to strengthen engagement with like-minded partners in the region, without being directed against China. The United Kingdom formally announced its own Indo-Pacific tilt in the spring of 2021. The decision to deploy a carrier strike group to the region and the defence agreement between

Figure 1: **Defence spending 2010–21 of selected countries (constant 2015 USD)**



Australia, the UK and the US in September – known as AUKUS – gave that tilt a more military appearance than perhaps originally intended. Nevertheless, in a speech to the IISS in November 2021, the head of the UK's Secret Intelligence Service (SIS), Richard Moore, suggested that 'the tectonic plates are shifting as China's power, and its willingness to assert it, grows. A large part of the UK's security and prosperity is increasingly tied up with China's actions and policies.' He further stated that 'adapting to a world affected by the rise of China is the single greatest priority for [SIS]'.[7]

To debate the challenges and implications of regional security dynamics in the Middle East and the Indo-Pacific for European security, the IISS and the Hanns Seidel Foundation (HSF) convened a workshop in October 2021, which brought together a group of government officials and international experts. This paper is informed by food-for-thought papers that were prepared for that occasion and the deliberations at the workshop. It was produced by IISS research staff and does not represent an agreed position of the participants at the meeting.[8]

The Middle East

The Middle East lacks an inclusive regional security architecture. Instead, ambitious powers vie for influence by projecting force, subverting enemies, supporting local non-state partners, and leveraging their international relationships, doing so with little deference for political and diplomatic customs or international law. In this overall picture of fragmentation, three axes have formed that segment the region into different power centres. Firstly, a theocratic front led by Iran and its government and militia allies in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria and Yemen. Secondly, a conservative-authoritarian axis led by Gulf powerhouses Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), backed by other states, notably an inward-focused Egypt. And thirdly, an Islamist-populist front led by Turkey and Qatar, seeking to support Islamist parties across the region.

In varying constellations, these axes have clashed ferociously across the region in Iraq, Libya, Palestine, Syria and Yemen, but also in Egypt, Somalia, Sudan and Tunisia. The 2017–21 crisis between Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt on the one hand and Qatar on the other was another spectacular expression of this damaging divide. And yet, at times, these constellations change, and the players cooperate for specific purposes. Turkey and Saudi Arabia allied in Syria against the Assad regime. Qatar and Turkey maintain cordial relations with Iran, notably to counter Saudi and Emirati pressure. This multi-actor, multidimensional competition has taken a variety of forms short of direct conflict: from blockades, cyber and media campaigns to active support for local militias. An important undercurrent or perhaps side effect of this intense competition has been the indifference and even complacency toward gathering transnational threats such as jihadism on the part of some of the governments in the region.

Non-Arab countries have positioned themselves as the region's primary shapers, in large part due to the relative weakness of Arab states. Regardless of the respective setbacks to their agendas, Iran, Israel and Turkey have more competent and integrated security structures, and greater strategic resolve and patience. Their ability to apply levels of coercion in line with their capabilities and objectives compares favourably with that of Arab countries. Israel has secured its borders through superior technology and intelligence. Turkey has achieved military successes that make it a pivotal actor where it is engaged, although it struggles to turn these engagements into lasting strategic advantage.

Iran remains the most complex challenge in the region. It has achieved credible deterrence against the US and Israel, and has established its influence where it could, putting its Arab rivals on the back foot. Its resilience, ideological commitment, revisionism and strategic posture differentiate it from other regional actors. The combination of its nuclear programme, its growing stock of missiles and uninhabited aerial vehicles (UAVs), its operations in the maritime domain and its region-wide network of militia partners poses the most potent threat to regional security.

No other country possesses, let alone deploys, such an arsenal and the question of how to deal with Iran remains a thorny matter. The ripple effects of Iran becoming a nuclear-armed power or continuing its regional expansion could be very damaging. If the deployment and use of non-state partners and new technologies is normalised, regional competition is likely to worsen in very destabilising ways. US president Barack Obama hoped that nuclear diplomacy would soften the Iranian regime. His successor Donald Trump believed that Tehran would cave under maximum pressure. Both failed, leaving current diplomats with a dearth of options and a bleak outlook.[9]

European countries have focused on nuclear diplomacy for understandable reasons and continue to see the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) – the nuclear deal with Iran – as a success of that diplomacy. This perspective has contributed to preventing them from having a clear-eyed view of other aspects of Iranian behaviour that have now become

more pronounced and more pressing problems. For example, European governments have only recently articulated an interest in regional security and in containing the missile threat, and the strategic advantage that Iran has gained from its influence networks in the region has likewise only recently become a point of debate. It also seems as if European observers tend to place too much emphasis on the costs of Iran's strategy, focusing primarily on Tehran's desire to rebuild and generate prosperity at home, when the dominant motivation might in fact be to seek influence in the region. From that latter perspective, the costs of Iran's approach will most likely continue to appear justifiable to leaders in Tehran.[10]

After a decade of intense, multidimensional competition, the Middle East appears to have entered a period of relative de-escalation. Battlefield fatigue and frustration at the inability to achieve decisive victories (Saudi Arabia in Yemen; Turkey or the UAE in Libya; Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey in Syria; the Gulf crisis), but also high political and reputational costs have compelled leaders to consolidate on 'good enough' or even unsatisfactory terms. The escalation of 2019–20 between the US and Iran magnified the risks and costs of an all-out war. The Abraham Accords, brokered by the US with European governments claiming at least a supporting role, broke Israel's regional isolation but it is not at all clear what strategic effect they will have.

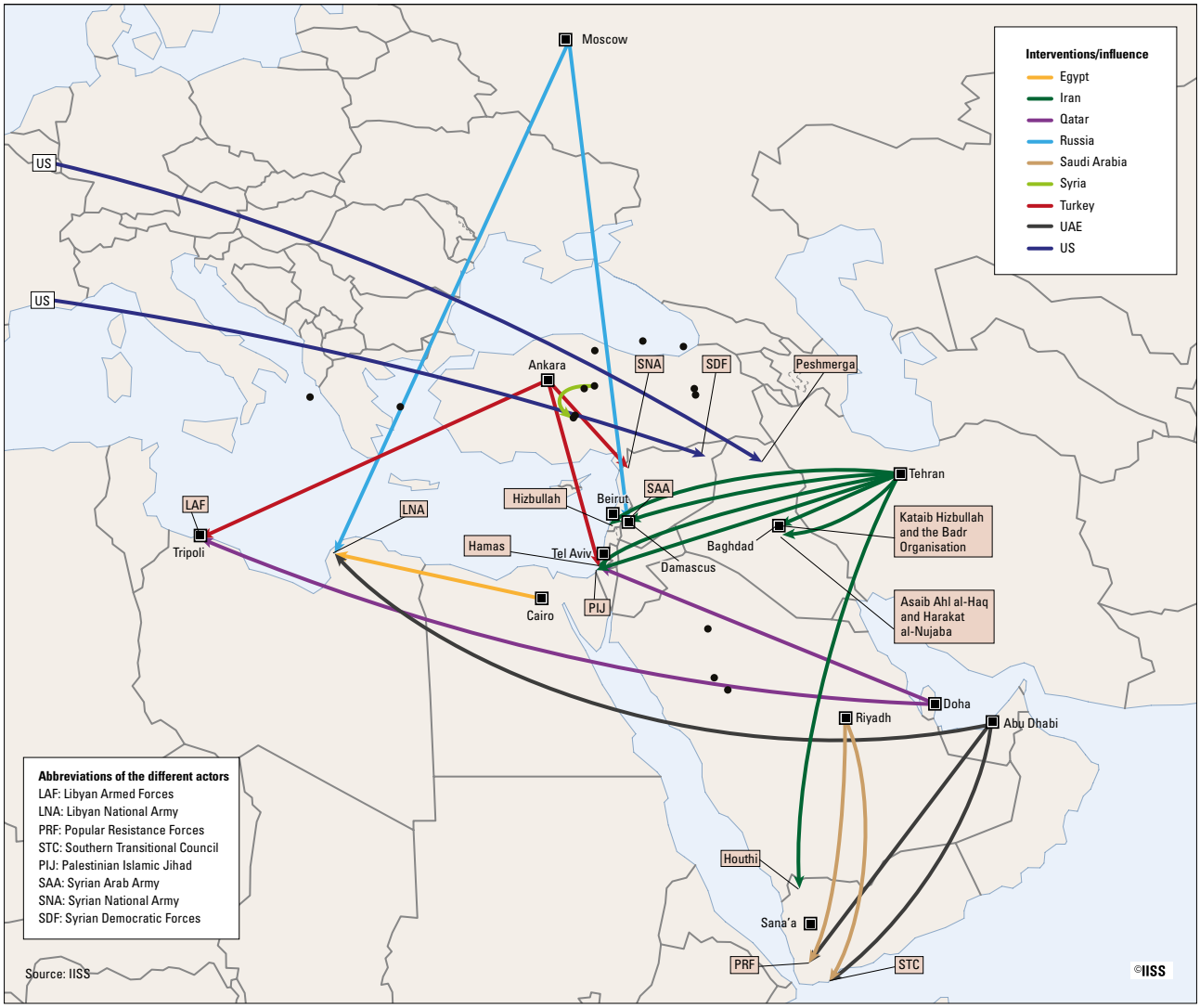
Saudi Arabia has exhausted itself in Yemen, unable to change the balance of power on the ground or organise a cohesive front. The political and reputational costs for Riyadh have been high, and the conflict has been a costly distraction from domestic modernisation. The UAE has fared better in Yemen but suffered setbacks in Libya. However active and wealthy, and regardless of competent military performance, its small size and vulnerabilities limit its power. Both Saudi Arabia and the UAE will be keenly aware of their political exposure in the US. The 2019 Iranian attacks on the Abqaiq and Khurais oil facilities were revealing: an attack of this nature and magnitude would have likely precipitated a major US military response in previous years. Instead, the attacks revealed Iranian military prowess and implausible though convenient deniability; Gulf vulnerabilities; and American restraint and disinterest. In terms of its impact on leaders in the region, this episode was a turning point in Gulf security.

However, looking forward it remains difficult to see the rise of a coordinated or institutionalised security order in the region. De-escalation is not detente. The drivers of conflict and competition are still present and potent. The August 2021 Baghdad Summit, at which France was the lone Western participant, was an attempt at imagining how the Middle Eastern order could evolve against the background of a disinterested US. Tellingly, few concrete conclusions emerged from this conference. Although, arguably the attempts by Iraq to play a coordinating role and to facilitate talks and provide channels for dialogue between Saudi Arabia and Iran can be seen to signify at least the prospect of further steps in the future. Middle Eastern powers are embracing minilateralism, seeking security partnerships to achieve limited objectives rather than attempting to formalise their security relations or to build a security architecture. This generates a dizzying array of combinations of players and interests for outside powers to navigate.

The fragmented landscape of conflict and contestation in the Middle East has drawn in external players. While for the previous 25 years the US was the uncontested external power in the region, much has changed in the past decade. Since its resurgence in 2015 and its successful entry into the Syrian conflict, Russia is now a feature of the regional landscape: Cairo has privileged military relations with Moscow; Tehran cooperates tactically with the Russians; and Saudi Arabia and the UAE are increasing their military cooperation and arms purchases from Russia. Russian mercenaries have fought in Syria and Libya and are now present across the Sahel. Russia has deployed nuclear-capable aircraft at the Hmeimim base in Syria. Moscow is the de facto arbiter of the regional competition over Syria, a reality that even Israel recognises.

Russia is, however, by no means a challenger or an alternative to the US. Moscow does not have the will, imagination, appeal or resources to displace Washington, and is more of a beneficiary of an already shattering order than the architect of a new one. Instead, it seeks to be everyone's interlocutor (and therefore no one's friend) in a highly transactional game. Frustrating

Map 1: **International involvement in civil wars in the Middle East**



Note: as of 2021

the US is a major goal. Any erosion of the US standing in the Middle East and any Western security setback is a net gain for Russia.

The more potent medium-term challenge comes from China, whose profile is rising quickly. China is already active in the region through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), technology deals, provision of labour, political relationships and, increasingly, arms sales. China's only foreign military base is in Djibouti, at the entrance to the Red Sea. It has reportedly examined the possibility of opening a military facility in the UAE, but initial work seemed to have halted at the end of 2021 after political interventions in the UAE by the US administration.[11] Yet China benefits from the US role in the MENA region, and is on balance unlikely to let itself be distracted from more pressing strategic concerns in its own immediate vicinity.

For Middle Eastern states, China and Russia are easier to deal with than Western actors. Beijing and Moscow are uninterested in the domestic politics of regional governments and hence mostly accommodating of their behaviour. That said, neither has the will or capabilities to be a security provider, or to take sides in any significant regional confrontation. This means that Gulf countries, while seeking to diversify their relations to maximise economic and political returns, will for the time being remain dependent on the US security commitment.

The Indo-Pacific

Close to a year into the Biden administration, relations between the US and China have continued to deteriorate. In his first foreign policy address, President Biden described China as the 'most serious competitor' to the US.[12] The language of power politics used by both Beijing and Washington underlines the competitive dynamic between the two powers and relations that are characterised by diminished trade, investment and strategic mistrust.[13] While greater power tensions are never deterministic, there is a sense among some observers of and in the region that war might be coming, especially as China progresses with its military modernisation programme.

A key manifestation of the great-power competition is the contesting visions of regional order that each country is sponsoring: the BRI in the case of China and the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) in the case of the US. China's BRI incorporates a vast collection of development and investment initiatives that stretch from East Asia to Europe.[14] The maritime dimension of the BRI seems to overlap with the United States' vision for FOIP, premised on free, fair and reciprocal trade, open investment environments and freedom of navigation. These competing top-down visions of regional order challenge the existing bottom-up strategies that regional states have employed to entangle both the US and China in the region, as well as their strategic preference to hedge between the great powers. This is particularly the case for countries belonging to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) that have worked to maintain a regional order that preserved a broad hierarchical system dominated by the US as the region's key security actor and to integrate China as its chief economic actor.[15] On the other hand, these dynamics have created a space for middle powers in the region, beyond those in ASEAN, for example Australia and India.

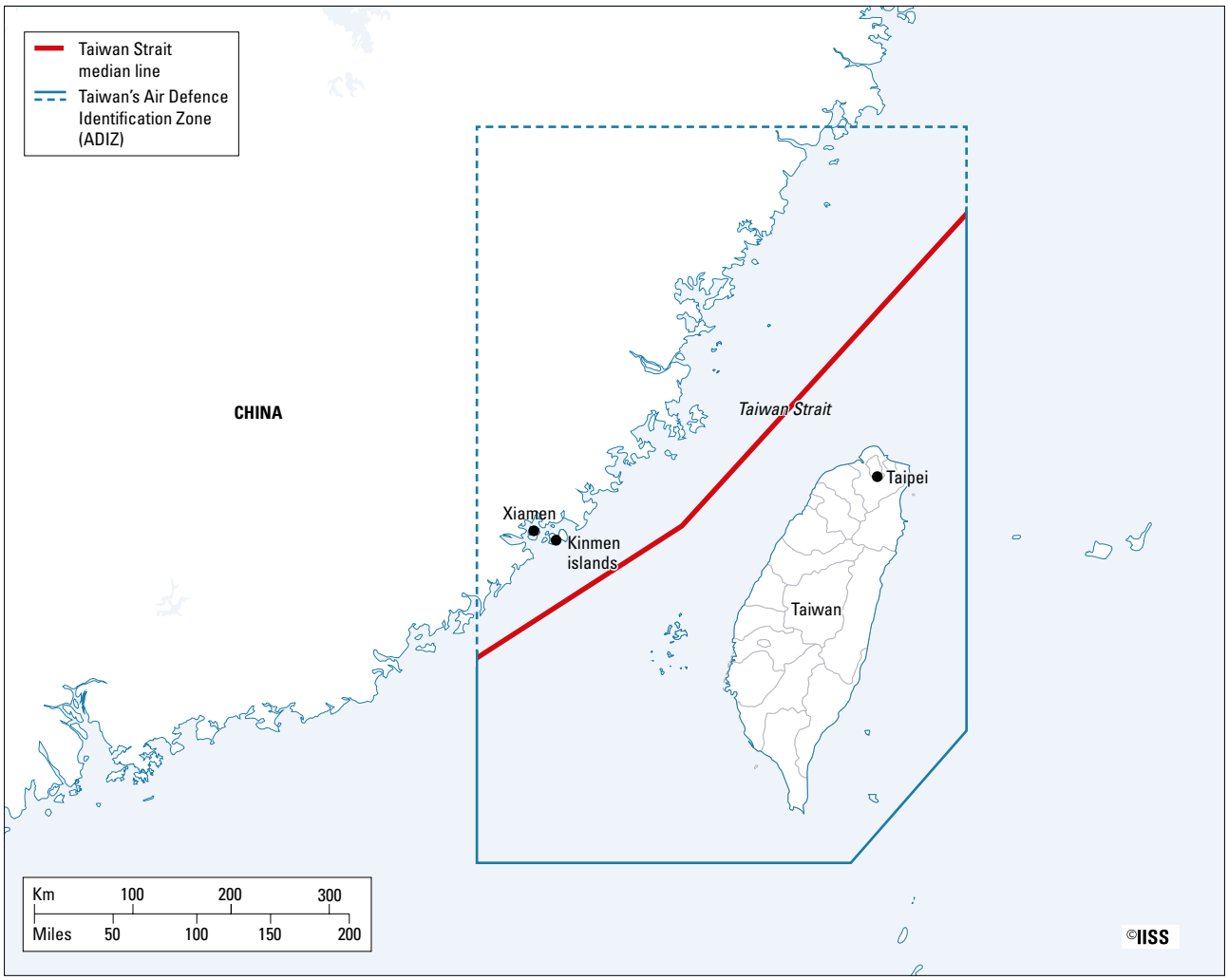
Singapore's prime minister has commented that 'many U.S. friends and allies wish to preserve their extensive ties with both powers. No good outcome can arise from a conflict.'[16] In contrast, India, which has had a historical aversion to aligning with great powers, appears to be tilting toward Washington, and has elevated its relations with the US to that of a Comprehensive Global Strategic Partnership.[17] Likewise, Australia's interest in the AUKUS arrangement seems to have been driven not just by expanding and modernising Chinese military capabilities, but also by an explicit desire to create stronger defence ties with the United States. While many US allies and partners have been reassured of the former's commitment to the region and have made it a point to disassociate Washington's alliance policy from its chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan,[18] there is an awareness and reflection amid the small and middle powers of the region that they need to engage in greater levels of burden-sharing to secure the Indo-Pacific. A key push factor in this direction has been China's increasing use of economic coercion toward many in the region (e.g., Australia over its investigation of the origins of COVID-19 or Taiwan over its choice to rename its representative office in Washington).

Thus, while Germany – and also the EU more widely – continue to pursue a policy stance that seeks to engage China where possible, there is evidence to suggest that several countries which Europeans consider like-minded, including Australia, but also India and Japan, are no longer hedging. Rather, despite decision-makers' hesitancy, they are beginning to make policy decisions in line with a framework that is at least compatible with the US view of strategic competition with China. ASEAN nations are divided on this matter because of their strong economic dependencies on China. Interestingly, the continued desire of some regional states to hedge is matched by the position of major European companies who appear unwilling to reduce their dependencies on the Chinese market because they do not see potential for growth elsewhere that would offset their lost opportunities in China. Governments in Europe that are arguing for a diversification approach (which is different from decoupling) will thus need to redouble their efforts to set incentives for their companies by lowering trade barriers and generating investment opportunities.

With fresh impetus given to minilateral initiatives – ranging from 'the Quad' (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue), to trilateral groupings such as India–Australia–Japan, to security pacts such as AUKUS – there is increasing evidence to suggest that the regional security architecture is transforming away from the US-centred bilateralism and ASEAN-led multilateralism of the past.[19] After the Second World War, the US established a web of bilateral treaty alliances with countries in the region as a means of aggregating power to counter the Soviet threat, but also to stabilise and manage relations among the region's newly decolonising states. Defence accords were signed with Australia, Japan, New Zealand, the Philippines, South Korea, Taiwan and Thailand, marking the beginning of the US role as a key security provider in the region. This arrangement was reinforced through ASEAN-centred multilateralism in the region, which expanded in the late 1990s to include non-ASEAN powers. The new forms of security partnerships are based on alignment and cooperation, not formal alliances.[20] The key advantage of this minilateralism is that it can facilitate the creation of issue-specific partnerships between 'like-minded' countries.

With the US hub-and-spokes alliance system morphing into a less hierarchical structure and a more flexible basis for security cooperation, minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific does not necessarily undermine the existing regional order and security architecture. It can instead be seen as expanded and potentially more effective 'spoke-to-spoke' relations amongst US allies.[21] Of course the greater flexibility of minilateralism might streamline decision-making, but it is important to note that this does not automatically guarantee success in managing any given security issue.[22]

Map 2: **The Taiwan Strait**



Between the Taiwan Strait, the South and the East China Sea, North Korea, the China–India border and tensions between Pakistan and India, the Indo-Pacific region is not short of simmering hotspots and potential flashpoints. In November 2021, Taiwan reported 159 Chinese aircraft incursions in its air defence identification zone (ADIZ), which followed a peak of 196 incursions in October.[23] Controlling Taiwan would facilitate China's operations in the South China Sea and enable it to assert its territorial and maritime claims even more aggressively against Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines and Vietnam.[24] The likelihood of a military clash between China and the US has increased, and for the time being it remains questionable whether the US, its regional allies and also European governments are doing enough to raise the cost of any designs China might have for a forceful unification with Taiwan.

The South China Sea is one of the world's busiest commercial waterways. US warships now routinely conduct what Washington calls freedom of navigation operations there. China, for its part, has spent years building military fortifications on artificially enlarged islands. Tensions in the South China Sea rose particularly in 2020 following reports of China sinking a Vietnamese fishing vessel; a standoff between a Chinese survey ship and a Malaysian oil exploration vessel; and Beijing's announcement of new research stations on disputed reefs and establishment of administrative districts in the region. During her visit to Singapore in August 2021, US Vice President Kamala Harris criticised Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea, stating that its actions amounted to 'coercion' and 'intimidation', and affirmed that the US would support its allies in the region against Beijing's advances.[25] Tensions in the East China Sea are often overshadowed by those in the South China Sea, but they constitute a potent flashpoint for conflict between China and Japan and pose a unique challenge for the US, which is treaty-bound to assist Japan in an armed conflict. Both China and Japan claim overlapping exclusive economic zones and ADIZs, and they have a long-running dispute over the Senkaku islands (known as the Diaoyu islands in China). Whilst economic benefits from the rich fishing grounds and the potential for oil are factors in this, sovereignty of the Senkaku islands is an issue of great national pride for both countries, making the possibility of outright conflict a heightened concern.

North Korean provocations and threats continue to create an unstable environment on the Korean Peninsula. North Korea has invested in asymmetric capabilities, particularly the development of nuclear weapons and ballistic-missile delivery systems. While the self-imposed 2018 moratorium covering nuclear- and long-range missile tests technically remains, the testing of systems below such thresholds resumed from 2019 and North Korea has demonstrated several new tactical missiles and guided rockets, as well as a new medium-range and possibly nuclear-capable submarine-launched ballistic missile.[26] North Korea's growing suite of capabilities reflect a strategy premised on asymmetrically escalating in a conflict. South Korea has been cautious about fully endorsing Washington's Indo-Pacific strategy but, following the Moon–Biden summit earlier this year, the leaders' joint statement recognised 'a vision of a region governed by democratic norms, human rights and the rule of law at home and abroad', and stated that 'the significance of the U.S.-ROK relationship extends far beyond the Korean Peninsula'.[27] This means that flare-ups on the Korean Peninsula, previously seen as contained within the peninsula, are now considered by both Washington and Seoul to be part of the wider Indo-Pacific.

China and India – whose border runs for 3,500 kilometres – fought a full-scale war in 1962 and have long accused each other of trying to seize territory along their unofficial border, known as the Line of Actual Control (LAC). Despite frequent border skirmishes and antagonistic foreign policy postures, both countries have largely maintained peaceful bilateral relations. In the past year, political strains increased and in June 2020, the strategically important Galwan river valley between Tibet and India's Ladakh region became a high-altitude flashpoint with one of the deadliest troop clashes between the two Asian powers in decades. The incident was the fifth flare-up since President Xi Jinping's ascendance to power in 2012. The rise of Chinese assertiveness is pushing India closer to the US.

Considerations for NATO and the EU

NATO and the EU will struggle to define roles and ambitions for themselves vis-à-vis the unfolding security dynamics in the Middle East and Indo-Pacific. In both these regions, the military presence of Europeans, be it through NATO, the EU or in some other form, will remain limited. Persistent European capability shortfalls and continued dependencies on the US – as painfully illustrated once more during the Afghanistan withdrawal – paired with weak political support for more demanding tasks among European electorates will set boundaries.

As the US role in the Middle East recedes, will there be an expectation that NATO – often seen as an extension of the US – and the EU will fill (some) of the gaps and take on new missions or responsibilities? How will NATO and the EU navigate the divergence within the Indo-Pacific and among their own member states on questions of regional order and worsening great-power tensions, with some pursuing an obvious preference to hedge and others willing to adopt a position that China views as confrontational?

In the face of the continued fragmentation of the security landscape in the Middle East, limited options might lead to the view among European leaders that it is time to restrict liabilities in the region as well. But sitting on the sidelines will open space for others. Turkey's regional ambitions, assertiveness, manipulation of refugee flows and weakening democratic credentials have turned what was a reliable partner into a problematic one for many NATO countries. Ankara's complex relations with Moscow are difficult to decipher but are considered increasingly provocative. In turn, Turkey believes that many NATO partners have been at the very least

Table 1: **Selected deployments by France, Germany and the United Kingdom in the Middle East and Asia-Pacific in 2021**

France		Germany		United Kingdom	
Deploying to	**Personnel or assets**	**Deploying to**	**Personnel or assets**	**Deploying to**	**Personnel or assets**
		Asia-Pacific			
Djibouti	1450 troops			Brunei	2000 troops
French Polynesia	900 troops				
New Caledonia	1450 troops				
		Middle East			
Jordan	300 troops	Djibouti	1 AP-3C *Orion*	Arabian Sea, Persian Gulf	2 mine countermeasure (ocean) vessels 2 mine hunter (coastal) vessels 1 landing ship, dock
Lebanon	653 troops	Iraq	159 troops	Bahrain	160 troops
Qatar	70 troops	Jordan	280 troops	Iraq	400 troops
Saudi Arabia	50 troops	Lebanon	120 troops	Kuwait	1 uninhabited aerial vehicle squadron with 8 MQ-9A
Syria	1 special forces unit			Oman	90 troops
United Arab Emirates	800 troops			Saudi Arabia	50 troops
				United Arab Emirates	200 troops
				Cyprus*	3016 troops

* UK assets deployed to Cyprus that are supporting operations in the Middle East
Note: Data includes permanent bases and operational deployments. Figures do not include short-term deployments.
Source: IISS Military Balance+

dismissive of its security concerns, notably in the Eastern Mediterranean and along its borders with Syria and Iraq. Russia's bases in Tartous and Hmeimim in Syria; its presence in Libya; its arms deals and defence agreements with Turkey, Egypt and Algeria; and its more sustained naval presence in the region are all indicators that Moscow sees the region as a space where it can pressure and divide Western countries.

It is unlikely that NATO will play a stronger role in counter-terrorism, in part because such a role is not endorsed by several NATO members and in part because NATO does not have the right capabilities to do so. Training and capacity-building activities can contribute to stabilisation efforts, but again such efforts would need to be linked to wide stabilisation tools outside of NATO's remit, such as deradicalisation projects or attempts to reintegrate former fighters. Afghanistan will likely serve as a reminder that there are no clear success stories in this field. An open question is whether Russia's increasing presence on NATO's southern flank will at some point galvanise NATO members to support a stronger NATO role for the Middle East. If it does, NATO will need to take care that regional players, including Gulf states, do not misinterpret such efforts as the gradual extension of NATO security guarantees to the region, a misjudgement that affected NATO's Istanbul Cooperation Initiative after its launch in 2004.

The EU has struggled to operate as a political and security player in the Middle East. Its approach for now has subordinated hard security considerations to the hope that economic prosperity and dependency will stabilise the neighbourhood and stem migration. The EU facilitates nuclear diplomacy with Iran and attempts to orchestrate EU migration policy. But the Union is often marginalised by its most powerful members when expedient.

In the Indo-Pacific, Asian leaders have perceived a lack of interest in the region on the part of European heads of state and a reluctance to participate in summit meetings of regional organisations, like ASEAN. Many in the region, therefore, consider European nations to be defence mercantilists, but not necessarily security partners. However, the presence of the EU is compatible with Indo-Pacific security positions and indeed should help consolidate the preference of a rules-based order and freedom of navigation that has been articulated by, for example, the Quad. A complicating factor is that great-power tensions are affecting the strategic choices of Indo-Pacific nations and might push them toward other key security partners – as illustrated in Australia's move toward AUKUS.

For NATO, a key concern is how to manage and respond to China's developing international footprint and influence.[28] Unlike Russia, however, China does not pose a classic military threat to NATO, and the aim is not to shift focus to China but to include it among the Alliance's strategic considerations. In December 2020, NATO's four Asia-Pacific partners (Australia, Japan, South Korea and New Zealand) participated for the first time in a NATO Foreign Ministers Meeting. At the meeting, leaders discussed the shift in the global balance of power and the rise of China. While this can be seen as a step in the direction of enhancing its engagement with the Indo-Pacific, NATO needs to manage its presence carefully. Two tangible ways of engaging could include increasing intelligence-sharing with partners and better monitoring Chinese military activities closer to home, in the area of responsibility of the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR).[29]

Finally, there is a wider trend toward security minilateralism in both the Middle East and the Indo-Pacific, and arguably in Europe as well, that is of relevance to both NATO and the EU. For several countries, using 'small international groups assembled to achieve limited if significant strategic objectives'[30] has become a viable option in order to be more agile than existing larger and more formal international organisations might otherwise allow. Such minilateral approaches might have made engaging in regions such as the Middle East and the Indo-Pacific – which lack strong and effective multilateral security institutions – more attractive for European governments. This minilateral dynamic, if it continues and expands further, will be unsettling for policymakers in NATO and the EU, who will worry about policy coherence and also about demonstrating the problem-solving capacity of the multilateral institutions they represent. However, the option to 'go minilateral' can produce security gains alongside the multilateral EU and NATO formats. As the IISS has recently argued, 'the challenge for European powers will be to bolster NATO and the EU while also allowing minilateralism to flourish in order to strengthen European defence and security'.[31]

Notes

1 IISS, *Strategic Survey 2021* (Abingdon: Routledge for the IISS, 2021), p. 26.

2 NATO, 'Brussels Summit Communiqué: Issued by the Heads of State and Government Participating in the Meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Brussels 14 June 2021', 14 June 2021, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_185000.htm.

3 Council of the European Union, 'A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence - For a European Union that Protects its Citizens, Values and Interests and Contributes to International Peace and Security', EEAS working document 1169, 8 November 2021, p. 23.

4 For the purposes of this paper, the Indo-Pacific includes the countries associated within the 'Asia-Pacific' along with the littoral countries of the Indian Ocean. It contains over 30 countries, around 16 time zones, more than half of the world's megacities, seven of the eight fastest-growing markets, 25,000 islands, and 60% of the world's population. See Nirupama Rao, 'The Indo-Pacific Regional Order: Elusive Equilibrium', National Security College Futures Hub, ANU National Security College Future Insights Series, 2020, https://futureshub.anu.edu.au/the-indo-pacific-regional-order-elusive-equilibrium/.

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