



# LIKE-MINDEDNESS: HOW THE WEST SHAPES THE GEOSTRATEGIC LANDSCAPE IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

Andreas Bøje Forsby

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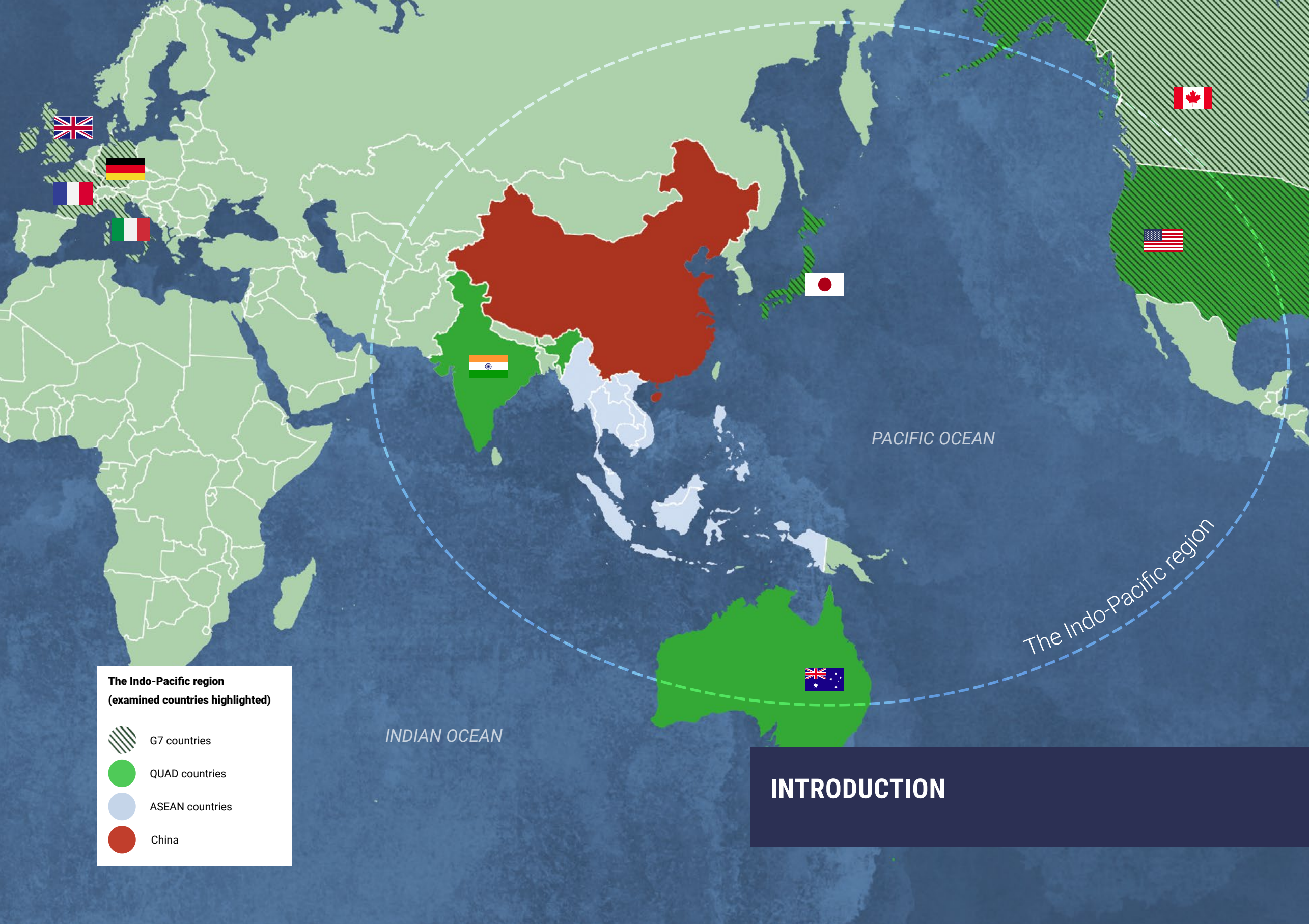
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## SUMMARY





With the Indo-Pacific emerging as a pivotal geostrategic arena against the backdrop of intensified US-China great power competition, IR scholars and regional experts have rushed to explore the military, economic, infrastructural, technological and other key dynamics of this new regional landscape. What has received far less attention, however, is how the Indo-Pacific is being actively shaped by collective identity-constructing practices of coalition-building and boundary-drawing. Indeed, like-mindedness – the idea of sharing basic political values and principles – seems to have become an important criterion for Western countries as they rapidly expand their strategic engagement with, and coalition-building in, the Indo-Pacific region, while also distancing themselves from China, some even depicting it as an outsider.

This report maps and examines not only how and to what extent Western governments, both individually and collectively, employ such identity-based geostrategic practices, but also how China and the ASEAN countries have responded. Notwithstanding considerable diversity among the Western countries, the report demonstrates that they, as a US-led group, have adopted a remarkably strong common stance in the past two years, collectively portraying themselves as a coalition of like-minded states, sharing a broad set of liberal values and principles beyond a commitment to a rules-based order. Moreover, they have consolidated their common stance by promoting a narrative about safeguarding a 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' in the face of China's coercive and assertive behaviour.

Pushing back against this, the Chinese Government has itself adopted a two-pronged identity-based strategy, consisting not merely of a counter-narrative about American hegemony and Cold War mentality, but also of China's own vision for a regional 'community with a shared future' in the Asia-Pacific. Meanwhile, navigating these competing coalition-building practices, the ASEAN countries seem at risk of being increasingly divided as the regional geostrategic landscape is reshaped: if regional identity dynamics further intensify, ASEAN and other countries could be forced to look either to China or to the US-led Western coalition for security assistance, geoeconomic partnership and infrastructural development.



**The Indo-Pacific region  
(examined countries highlighted)**

-  G7 countries
-  QUAD countries
-  ASEAN countries
-  China

**INTRODUCTION**

When the Danish Government published its foreign and security policy strategy in early 2022 it was not surprising to find the Indo-Pacific region singled out as a specific focus area for the first time in an official Danish strategy paper (Regeringen 2022: 17). After all, the United States – by far Denmark’s most important treaty ally – had already designated the Indo-Pacific as a key strategic priority (WH 2022), while several European states, alongside the EU Commission, had also started engaging with the region more explicitly (Grare & Reuter 2021). Nor was it surprising to find the Danish strategy declaring that Copenhagen will ‘strengthen cooperation with the Indo-Pacific countries that share our values and stand firm with regard to multilateralism, free trade, democracy and a world order based on rules’ (Regeringen 2022: 17, italics added). In fact, this emphasis on a values-based approach runs through the entire strategy as encapsulated in the opening lines: ‘We are setting a course that promotes our interests by fighting for our values’ (ibid: 5). However, as the Indo-Pacific comprises several important countries that do not share these values – in particular China according to the strategy (ibid.: 16) – Copenhagen is in reality applying an identity-filtered strategic lens to the region centred on ‘like-mindedness’ as a key criterion for engagement and cooperation.

Other Western countries are similarly adopting ‘like-mindedness’ as a guiding principle for their strategic engagement with the Indo-Pacific region. Chief among them the United States with its multipronged network of alliances and partnerships with like-minded countries in the region, reflecting a deep-seated American tradition of championing liberal democracy as a model to be emulated by others. In the Biden administration’s recent strategy paper on the Indo-Pacific these missionary instincts are on full display (WH 2022: 8), and both the Trump and Obama administrations also previously framed US engagement in the region in terms of bolstering relations with ‘like-minded’ countries (DoS 2019; WH 2015). In fact, right from the outset of his term in the Oval Office Joe Biden has invoked an overarching ideological struggle between democracies and autocracies. In the preface to the new US National Security Strategy Biden argues that ‘Autocrats are working overtime to undermine democracy and export a model of governance marked by repression at home and coercion abroad’ (NSS 2022: 3). As such, the idea of sharing political values and principles – or ‘like-mindedness’ as it will be referred to here – is likely to play an increasingly central role amid ongoing coalition-building practices that will shape the geostrategic landscape of the Indo-Pacific in the coming years.

Among the authoritarian states, the People’s Republic of China (henceforth China) has been singled out by Washington as ‘America’s most consequential geopolitical challenge’ (NSS 2022: 11), notably in the Indo-Pacific where Beijing ‘pursues a sphere of influence’ and its ‘coercion and aggression [is] most acute’ (WH 2022: 5). For its part, the Chinese government has dismissed the US Indo-Pacific strategy as an ‘outdated Cold War script’ aimed at ‘creating various sorts of small cliques by ganging up on others under the banner of “freedom and openness”’ (MFAPRC 2022a). But the stakes are high for Beijing as it risks being confronted with an increasingly united coalition of Western countries that strive to draw Indo-Pacific countries into their own sphere of influence. Meanwhile, most observers are directing their attention towards the Southeast Asian ASEAN countries that, collectively, have always aspired to assume a central position in the region. One of the most prominent representatives of this group Lee Hsien Loong, Singapore’s prime minister, has on several occasions warned that ‘We don’t want to be forced to choose sides’ (The Straits Times 2021).

**Like-mindedness is likely to play an increasingly central role amid ongoing coalition-building practices that will shape the geostrategic landscape of the Indo-Pacific in the coming years.**

This report examines the role played by collective identity-constructing practices and coalition-building measures in the Indo-Pacific region as manifested in the Western-promoted notion of ‘like-mindedness’. The idea of sharing political values and principles, it is argued, has become a central component of a coalition-building identity narrative that seeks to create and mobilize an in-group of like-minded, Western-affiliated states in opposition to an out-group of authoritarian states associated with China. Although the United States stands out as the main protagonist of this narrative, the report shows how it resonates among a broader group of Western states that are currently positioning themselves as strategic actors in the Indo-Pacific. If sufficiently strong and far-reaching, such identity-constituting practices can significantly affect patterns of strategic cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, threatening to potentially sideline China, despite its strong economic and infrastructural links to most countries in the region. The report also investigates how non-Western countries in the Indo-Pacific region are responding to this strategy, notably the Chinese government’s ongoing effort to counter Western narratives and promote its own vision of an Asia-Pacific ‘community with a shared future’.

## THE INDO-PACIFIC AS A GEOSTRATEGIC ARENA

While the term 'Indo-Pacific' was coined back in 2007 by then Japanese prime minister Shinzo Abe, the Indo-Pacific did not really emerge as a central geostrategic arena until late 2017 when Australia, India, Japan and the United States, after a decade-long hiatus, revived their Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (the so-called Quad) to discuss how to safeguard a 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific region' in the face of an increasingly assertive China (Buchan & Rimland 2020). Since then, the Indo-Pacific has attracted much attention as an arena of growing geopolitical and geoeconomic competition, notably against the backdrop of the deepening great power rivalry between the United States and China. Given its particular origin and its links to the Quad, the Indo-Pacific remains a contested geostrategic concept, openly denounced by the Chinese government (MFAPRC 2022a) and without any clearcut consensus on its definition among its proponents with respect to its geographical scope. In its widest sense the Indo-Pacific region can be said to encompass the waters of, and the countries bordering, the Indian and Pacific Oceans. For present purposes, Map 1 provides an overview of the region and highlights those countries that are directly examined here (including some external European powers that are not Indo-Pacific countries).

A voluminous body of scholarship on the Indo-Pacific already exists. A large part of it examines the intensified security dynamics and the role played by new geostrategic groupings such as the Quad and AUKUS (Australia, UK and US), while another part focuses on the changing geoeconomic landscape amid the formation of new free trade blocs such as CPTPP and RCEP as well the US-led IPEF framework for economic cooperation. Competing infrastructural connectivity projects in the region (China's BRI and the B3W initiative proposed by the G7 countries) have also been studied closely, as has the widening technological rivalry and the deepening decoupling agenda, in particular with respect to the supply chain politics of advanced semiconductors. What has received far less attention, however, is how the Indo-Pacific – as a geostrategic arena in the making – is being actively shaped by identity-constructing practices of boundary-drawing and coalition-building between in- and out-groups. The report maps these processes to assess the relative significance of emerging dividing lines in the Indo-Pacific.

## ROADMAP, KEY CONCEPTS AND METHODS

The report is structured as follows. Analysing a range of Indo-Pacific strategy documents and official statements, the main part of the report empirically maps and examines how and to what extent Western governments, both individually and

collectively, employ identity-constructing practices centred on the notion of like-mindedness and the identity narrative of a 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' in order to shape the geostrategic landscape of the Indo-Pacific region. Also based on such sources, the second part of the report explores how China and ASEAN countries have responded to these endeavours by the West. While the central arguments and assumptions in the report are not explicitly derived from an underlying theoretical framework, some initial observations about key concepts and methods are in order.

First, in analysing the notion of 'like-mindedness' as well as the distinction between 'in-groups' and 'out-groups', the report draws on the identity concept as it has been employed by mainstream constructivist scholars within International Relations (IR). Without going into any detail here, it means that states can share collective identity conceptions about belonging to an in-group community defined in relation to certain out-groups, and that these collective identity conceptions shape their behavioural practices in important ways (Cronin 1999; Wendt 1999). Moreover, identity narratives serve the role of discursively constructing and linking together certain community-defining elements on which shared identity conceptions are based (Forsby 2016). For instance, as the first chapter of this report will demonstrate, Western governments have formulated a partially overlapping identity narrative about a 'free, open and rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific' which is implicitly – and sometimes explicitly – defined in contrast to authoritarian China's coercive practices in the region.

Second, given the public and strategic nature of these identity-constituting practices, the examination only draws on government sources derived from official statements or strategy papers on the Indo-Pacific. The empirical mapping and analysis of Western identity narratives and Chinese counter-narratives is based on conventional methods as described in the mainstream constructivist literature (see e.g. Abdelal et al. 2009). Third, the term 'Western countries' refers here to the members of the G7 (Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the United Kingdom, the United States and the EU) as well as Australia (member of the Quad). Although Japan's affiliation to the 'West' is not entirely self-evident, there are good reasons for treating Japan as part of the Western camp, especially in the context of the Indo-Pacific. Finally, leaving aside a longstanding IR debate, the concept of 'geostrategy' is used here to refer to strategic planning for how to influence or exercise control over critical spaces of geography such as the Indo-Pacific. In the words of James Rogers & Luis Simón (2010), geostrategy is 'about shaping rather than being shaped'.

Council of the European Union

Brussels, 16 April 2021  
(OR\_en)

7914/21

COASI 58  
ASIE 19  
CFSP/PESC 379  
WFO 169  
TRANS 215  
ENER 121  
ENV 223

COMPET 255  
EDUC 124  
RECH 196  
CULT 25  
RELEX 326  
OCDE 8  
CCO 23

# Canada's Indo-Pacific Strategy

Department of Canada / Le gouvernement du Canada

The Federal Government

## Policy guidelines for the Indo-Pacific

GERMANY – EUROPE – ASIA

SHAPING THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY TOGETHER

### Indo-Pacific strategies of G7 countries, 2022

**OUTCOME**

From: 16 April 2021  
 On: Delegations  
 No. prev. doc.: 7956/21 + CORR1  
 Subject: EU Strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific – Council conclusions (16 April 2021)

Delegations will find in the annex the Council conclusions on an EU Strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, approved by written procedure on 16 April 2021.

7914/21 RELEX 1.B FCA/mg 1 EN

### THE ITALIAN CONTRIBUTION TO THE EU STRATEGY FOR THE INDO-PACIFIC

On 16 September 2021, the Commission and the High Representative adopted a Joint Communication on the EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, a macro-area spanning from the east coast of Africa to the Pacific island states. Italy strongly supports the Strategy as the optimal framework for conducting its foreign policy in the Indo-Pacific, a region where our engagement has been increasing in light of its geopolitical and economic centrality.

Italy – in line with the Joint Communication – is determined to work closely with regional partners in each of the Strategy's components. We have already been carrying out activities in all seven priority areas, as identified by the Strategy: sustainable and inclusive prosperity; green transition; ocean governance; digital growth; connectivity – in tandem with the recently established Global Gateway tool – security and defence; human security. We intend to continue promoting our action in the Indo-Pacific within the framework of adherence to the fundamental values underpinning the European Union – multilateralism and regionalism; the safeguard of human rights, democratic processes and the rule of law; the international rules-based order; the fight against climate change; free and fair trade based on a genuine level playing field; social, environmental, fiscal and financial sustainability; transparency; inclusiveness.

Cooperation with regional bodies is at the core of our action in the region. In the last few years, we have acquired partner status to the main regional organizations. We have been IDIA (Indian Ocean Rim Association) Dialogue Partner since 2019 and ASEAN (Association of South East Asian Nations) Development Partner since 2020. Italy has been a Dialogue Partner of PIF (Pacific Islands Forum) since 2007. For many years now, Italy has been carrying out several cooperation activities with these regional bodies and their Member States in a large number of sectors, ranging from sustainable development to the maritime economy, from the fight against climate change to the areas of security and defence.

Our 2021 G20 Presidency and COP26 Co-Presidency have allowed us to place themes that are pivotal to global governance and of overriding interest for many Indo-Pacific states at the top of the international agenda, thereby strengthening our action in the Strategy's seven priority areas, as outlined in what follows.

- 1. SUSTAINABLE AND INCLUSIVE PROSPERITY**
- To diversify supply chains, strengthen their resilience and deepen economic and trade relations with the Indo-Pacific, Italy is:
- Supporting the development of an architecture of agreements between the EU and regional partners to promote free trade according to high EU standards (including in the field of IPR protection), namely:
    - the full implementation of Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) with South Korea, Vietnam and Singapore and of Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) with Japan, Papua New Guinea, Fiji, Samoa and the Solomon Islands;
    - the relaunch of the negotiation process with India, Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand, Australia and New Zealand for economic and trade cooperation agreements (e.g.

# INDO-PACIFIC STRATEGY

OF THE UNITED STATES

FEBRUARY 2022

THE WHITE HOUSE

GOUVERNEMENT

## France's Indo-Pacific Strategy

## A WESTERN COALITION OF LIKE-MINDED PARTNERS IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

When the foreign ministers of the G7 countries met in Schleswig-Holstein in May 2022, they expressed their 'intention to work together with like-minded countries in the region' [i.e. the Indo-Pacific] in a joint communiqué. They also made sure to specify the values shared with these like-minded countries by stressing 'the importance of maintaining a Free and Open Indo-Pacific that is inclusive and based on the rule of law, the protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms, democratic principles, transparency, territorial integrity, and the peaceful and inclusive resolution of disputes' (G7 2022). Far from being extraordinary, this quoted statement can be regarded as part of a broader, systematic and collective effort by the Western countries to actively shape the geostrategic environment in the Indo-Pacific region. Envisioning their engagement and cooperation in the region as being guided by shared values and principles, the Western countries seem to employ identity-building discursive practices to create a coalition of like-minded states that can serve as a counterweight to China's increasingly dominant position in the region.

While the G7 countries have issued several joint statements along similar lines, there is substantial diversity with respect to the way each country formulates its own position. This chapter first takes a closer look at the G7 countries' individual approaches by examining their respective Indo-Pacific strategies. The aim is not only to tease out the identity-related discursive elements, but also to assess the extent to which these countries adopt overlapping approaches. Subsequently, the chapter examines the collective Western position on how to engage with the Indo-Pacific region as it is jointly formulated by the G7 countries. Joint statements by the Quad countries are also included as India's membership of the Quad can offer some insights into the relative strength and broader appeal of the Western countries' coalition-building agenda.

HM Government

### Global Britain in a competitive age

The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy

Japan's effort for a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific"

Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan

## COUNTRY-SPECIFIC APPROACHES TO THE INDO-PACIFIC

Among the G7 countries, Canada, France, Germany and the United States have all published an official Indo-Pacific strategy, while Japan, Italy and the UK have outlined their strategic priorities in the region in comparable ways (see Table 1). In these documents, Western governments first of all offer a number of rational, interest-based reasons for expanding their focus and activities in the region, with the pursuit of economic opportunities being a particularly strong driver given the widely shared perception that the Indo-Pacific will be the main growth engine of the global economy in the coming years. Plans for investing in the infrastructural development of the region also figure prominently in the strategies, as do various types of sustainability and climate-related initiatives. Moreover, several countries address security concerns in the Indo-Pacific, notably unresolved territorial disputes and freedom of navigation in the maritime domain. However, these strategy documents also contain formulations, in some cases entire sections, aimed at defining an in-group community in the Indo-Pacific and, in some cases, even target China as the out-group. Specifying the extent to which each Western government adopts such identity-related discourse will enable us to determine how widespread and deeply rooted the idea of building a coalition of like-minded Indo-Pacific states is.

### Like-mindedness: defining the cognitive horizon

Like-mindedness – the idea of sharing a set of basic political values and principles – can be regarded as a sort of cognitive categorization marker to identify a coalition of in-group states and thereby differentiate it from out-group states. Although all the examined Indo-Pacific strategy papers refer to shared values, there are notable differences in how much importance each G7 country attaches to the notion of like-mindedness. The US, the UK and Canada all explicitly refer to like-mindedness as a central consideration for forging partnerships in the region. After outlining a set of Western liberal values that it will promote in the Indo-Pacific, the US strategy states that ‘Beyond individual countries’ borders, the United States will also work closely with like-minded partners to ensure that the region remains open and accessible, and that the region’s seas and skies are governed and used according to international law’ (WH 2022: 8). The British strategy declares that ‘We will sit at the heart of a network of like-minded countries’ (GUK 2021a: 6). It later notes ‘the growing importance of the Indo-Pacific region’, adding that, ‘our ability to cooperate more effectively with others, particularly like-minded partners, will become increasingly important to our prosperity and security in the decade ahead’ (ibid: 11). According to Ottawa, ‘Canada’s overarching priority is to be an active, engaged and reliable partner in the Indo-Pacific. Canada will build influence among our partners and allies in the region by increasing our diplomatic engagement, forging connections between like-minded countries and collaborating in common causes’ (GC 2022: 22).

Without explicitly using the term ‘like-minded’, other countries nevertheless convey the same message. The Japanese position paper proposes to: ‘Ensure peace and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific region and beyond through establishing a free and open order based on the shared values and principles’ (JMFA 2021: 1), while the German strategy argues that ‘closing ranks with democracies and partners with shared values in the [Indo-Pacific] region is particularly important in this regard’ (FGG 2020: 9). Similarly, the French strategy observes that ‘As a fully-fledged Indo-Pacific country, France also wants to be a stabilizing force, promoting the values of freedom and rule of law’ (GRF 2022: 3). Only Italy seems to harbour some reservations in this regard, as its position paper merely promises to pursue ‘our action in the Indo-Pacific within the framework of adherence to the fundamental values underpinning the European Union’ (IG 2022: 1).

### Shared values and principles: a rules-based regional order

Claiming to be a group of like-minded countries is one thing, agreeing on a specific set of shared values and principles is another. Lack of specificity can serve to hide potential internal disagreements about what those values and principles are, which is why the notion of like-mindedness may not necessarily provide much in terms of substantive-normative content, but rather function primarily as a cognitive categorization marker to identify and differentiate the in-group, as noted above.

**Which is why the notion of like-mindedness may not necessarily offer much in terms of substantive-normative content, but rather function primarily as a cognitive categorization marker to identify and differentiate the in-group.**

However, as can be gleaned from Table 2, the G7 countries do actually form a group of like-minded countries in more than a cognitive sense since all of them emphasize ‘rule of law’ as a foundational principle when engaging with the Indo-Pacific region. As a core pillar of Western liberal democracy, rule of law in the context of the Indo-Pacific region implies a ‘rules-based international order’ and, in particular, a ‘rules-based maritime order’ derived from the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). For instance, the French strategy states that ‘it is essential to ensure freedom of navigation and overflight in full compliance with UNCLOS’ (GRF 2022: 3), and the German strategy similarly stresses how UNCLOS ‘provides the comprehensive, globally valid legal framework for a rules-based maritime order’ (FGG 2020: 24). In a similar vein, the British Government announces its ‘absolute commitment to upholding the



UNCLOS' (GUK 2021a: 92), while the Japanese strategy paper devotes an entire section to outlining how 'Japan proactively promotes the importance of maritime order in the Indo-Pacific region' based on 'UNCLOS and other international law' (JMFA 2021: 5). Without referring explicitly to UNCLOS – which the US Government largely complies with but has never ratified – the US strategy maintains that 'we will build support for rules-based approaches to the maritime domain, including in the South China Sea and the East China Sea' (WH 2022: 8). In its strategy, the Canadian Government similarly emphasizes 'international law, including UNCLOS' (GC 2022: 14), and observes that 'Shared values and interests are the foundation of our broader partnership [...] on strengthening the rules-based international order' (ibid: 11).

Apart from rule of law, human rights also seem to be actively advocated by most of the G7 countries in their Indo-Pacific strategies. The German Government in particular attaches great importance to human rights promotion, declaring in the introductory section that although it 'respects the history and culture of each of the Indo-Pacific countries [...] it is also committed to the enforcement of universal and indivisible human rights' (FGG 2020: 11). The British Government's 'Global Britain' strategy prioritizes human rights as well, yet barely mentions them in its 'Indo-Pacific tilt' section. Meanwhile, the French Government relegates human rights considerations to the fringes, in a section on sustainable development, focusing mostly on how to ensure that its development initiatives 'do not infringe on human rights' (GRF 2022: 14). Perhaps somewhat surprisingly, the US Indo-Pacific strategy merely contains three references to human rights, two of which target Chinese and North Korean human rights violations with a third reference vaguely mentioning a US commitment to 'uphold[ing] international law and norms, from human rights to freedom of navigation' (WH 2022: 4). However, the US strategy does put emphasis on a specific dimension of liberal human rights, namely freedom of expression by, among other things, 'supporting investigative journalism, promoting media literacy and pluralistic and independent media' in the region (ibid: 8).

None of the other foundational Western values and principles such as democratic governance, religious tolerance or pluralistic civil societies hold a prominent position across all the Indo-Pacific strategies. The main reason seems to be that these values, including liberal human rights, are controversial, even directly opposed, in many parts of the Indo-Pacific region. It thus leaves rule of law as the primary normative pillar around which to build a coalition of like-minded states in a region that, in the words of the German Government, is still 'a fairly blank spot in institutional and normative terms' (FGG 2020: 2).

### **Categorizing China as the primary out-group**

The process of identifying an in-group of like-minded countries and differentiating it from an out-group is facilitated when an out-group can be cast in adversarial, or even threatening, terms (Gries 2005; Rousseau 2006). Against the backdrop of deepening US-China great power competition, Washington has already singled out China as a major national security concern (NSS 2022), while the other G7 countries' threat perceptions of China vary quite substantially. These differences are also reflected in the way the challenge posed by China is addressed in their Indo-Pacific strategies.

The American, Canadian and British strategies stand out by quite explicitly framing China as a challenger to the existing order in the Indo-Pacific. In the first section of the US strategy an entire paragraph is devoted to making the argument that the 'PRC's coercion and aggression spans the globe, but it is most acute in the Indo-Pacific' (WH 2022: 5). Specifically, it points out that China is pursuing a 'sphere of influence in the Indo-Pacific' and describes how Beijing resorts to 'bullying of neighbours' and is 'undermining human rights and international law' (ibid.) in the region. The Canadian strategy also contains an extensive China section, the opening lines of which declare that 'China is an increasingly disruptive global power'. It then proceeds to meticulously describe China's assertive and coercive behaviour in the Indo-Pacific region in order to make the broader point that 'behaviours and policies that erode the existing rules-based international order [...] are especially challenging when pursued by rising powers with divergent national values' (GC 2022: 7). Although the 'Indo-Pacific tilt' section of 'Global Britain' refrains from directly addressing the challenge posed by China, other parts of the strategy contain strongly worded statements on China, including in the context of the Indo-Pacific region. For instance, 'The significant impact of China's military modernization and growing international assertiveness within the Indo-Pacific region and beyond will pose an increasing risk to UK interests' (GUK 2021a: 29). Moreover, upon identifying Britain's strategic partners in the Indo-Pacific, the next paragraph depicts China as a destabilizing geopolitical factor in the region and claims that 'The fact that China is an authoritarian state, with different values to ours, presents challenges for the UK and our allies' (GUK 2021a: 62).

The other G7 countries largely avoid referring directly to China as an adversary or outsider in the Indo-Pacific, but they do address problems and challenges that are implicitly associated with China. Such implicit messaging is conveyed in the Japanese strategy paper, which argues that 'The international community as a whole will benefit from establishing in the region an order based on the rule of law, rather than force or coercion' (JMFA 2021: 1). While observing in the opening lines that 'China's power is increasing, and its territorial claims are expressed with greater

and greater strength' (GRF 2022: 9), the French strategy contains little else that presents China as an adversary or outsider in the region. The German Government states that 'China's involvement as a regional and emerging world power, to some extent, calls the rules of the international order into question' (FGG 2020: 8), but only to subsequently add that Berlin 'supports inclusive regional cooperation initiatives [and] does not consider containment and decoupling strategies to be conducive' (ibid: 11). Again, the Italian strategy paper adopts an outlier position by only referring to China as a cooperation partner (IG 2022: 5) in the Indo-Pacific region.

### **Advancing a 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific': a shared identity narrative?**

One final aspect to consider is the specific discursive framing and underlying narrative employed in (some of) the strategy papers to help envision a coalition of like-minded states in the Indo-Pacific region. In other words, how do the G7 countries refer to these coalition-building endeavours and to what extent do they adopt a common terminology that may serve to strengthen the impression of a shared identity narrative?

**The catchphrase 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' remains the primary discursive frame for envisioning a coalition of like-minded states in the Indo-Pacific.**

So far, the catchphrase 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' (i.e. FOIP) – introduced by the Shinzo Abe Government in 2016 (JMoD 2016) – remains the primary discursive frame for envisioning a coalition of like-minded states in the Indo-Pacific. In its original context, FOIP referred to 'the confluence of the Pacific and Indian Oceans [...] into a place that values freedom, the rule of law, and the market economy, free from force or coercion' (Abe 2016). Since then, the term 'FOIP' has percolated into all official Japanese statements about the Indo-Pacific, including its strategy paper which contains no fewer than 37 references to a 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' (JMFA 2021). The Trump administration was quick to adopt FOIP as a key concept, even putting it front and centre in the title of its 2019 strategy: 'A Free and Open Indo-Pacific: Advancing a Shared Vision' (DoS 2019). Although not immersing itself quite as deeply in the FOIP terminology, the Biden administration has maintained the term in its 2022 strategy with 12 references and an entire section on how to 'Advance a Free and Open Indo-Pacific' (WH 2022). As such, the alignment of Japanese and American Government parlance has significantly bolstered FOIP and granted it a central role in the Indo-Pacific identity narrative.

Although the other G7 governments do not explicitly use the term FOIP in their strategy papers, they seem to indirectly endorse it by using similar phrasing. The French strategy, for instance, 'seeks to maintain a space that is open and inclusive, free of all forms of coercion and governed in accordance with international law [...] promoting a rules-based international order to make the Indo-Pacific a free, open region' (GRF 2022: 70). And both the British and German strategies contain many separate references to either 'free' or 'open', without explicitly making the FOIP connection. More importantly, all the G7 countries have signed up to FOIP in their joint statements, as will be shown in the next section.

Taken together, the previous sub-sections have demonstrated that despite significant diversity, the Indo-Pacific strategy papers of the G7 countries do provide some common ground for constructing a shared identity narrative about a coalition of like-minded states in the Indo-Pacific region. With the partial exception of Italy, all the G7 governments subscribe, implicitly or explicitly, to the notion of like-mindedness as central to Western efforts to engage and build strategic partnerships in the Indo-Pacific region. There is also broad consensus that a coalition of like-minded states should be founded on a shared commitment to the rule of law and a rules-based regional order, while no other Western values and principles enjoy a similar degree of explicit support in the strategy papers. Moreover, FOIP offers a useful discursive frame for envisioning a coalition of like-minded states because the vision of a 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' resonates among most of the G7 countries. There are notable differences, however, concerning how they refer to China and whether they depict the Chinese as an out-group in the Indo-Pacific, with only the United States and Britain directly categorizing China as an adversary/outsider.



Britains Prime Minister Boris Johnson, Japans Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, US President Joe Biden, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, European Council President Charles Michel, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, Italys Prime Minister Mario Draghi, Canadas Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and Frances President Emmanuel Macron attend the last working session of the G7 Summit at Elmau Castle, southern Germany, on 28 June 2022.

Photo: John Macdougall/AFP/Ritzau Scanpix

## JOINT WESTERN STATEMENTS ON THE INDO-PACIFIC

Having found, in the individual strategy papers of the G7 countries, key elements of an emerging shared identity narrative about an Indo-Pacific coalition of like-minded states, this section examines whether such an identity narrative is sufficiently strong and broad in its appeal to manifest itself in joint statements by the Western countries. The section first analyses statements by the G7, then turns to the Quad to further assess the potency of the narrative and finally considers the EU's Indo-Pacific strategy.

### The G7

Established in 1975 by six leading Western industrialized nations (Canada joined a year later) in response to a global economic recession, today the G7 can be regarded as the principal meeting forum of the Western countries. Russia's membership (1997-2014) seemed to put the forum on a more inclusive (i.e. non-Western) trajectory, with China also being invited to attend several meetings in the 2000s and early 2010s as a non-member during Hu Jintao's reign (Weitz 2012). However, following Russia's expulsion from the forum in 2014 (due to its annexation of Crimea), the G7 has reconsolidated its Western character and become a vocal critic of both Russia and China in recent years. While being an informal bloc with no permanent secretariat, the G7 countries nevertheless meet regularly – not just at annual summits but also increasingly on the sidelines of other international summits – to coordinate their policies and approaches to a range of international issues. Moreover, from the outset, the G7 countries 'came together because of shared beliefs and shared responsibilities. We are each responsible for the government of an open, democratic society, dedicated to individual liberty and social advancement. Our success will strengthen [...] democratic societies everywhere' (G6 1975). Indeed, in addition to jointly addressing macro-economic issues, global threats and challenges etc., this commitment to the promotion of shared values has been a hallmark of the G7 over the years.

With respect to the Indo-Pacific, the foreign ministers of the G7 countries made their first joint statement on the Indo-Pacific in April 2018 in order to emphasize 'the importance of maintaining a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" region based on the rule of law and express our intention to work together with ASEAN and other countries in this endeavour' (G7 2018: 4). An almost identical statement was published the following year in the foreign ministers' communiqué (G7 2019). Following comprehensive Covid-19 lockdown measures in 2020 as well as growing disunity among the G7 during the Trump administration's last year in

office, the next in-person G7 foreign ministers' meeting took place in May 2021 in Britain, where a significantly stronger statement on the Indo-Pacific was adopted: 'We reiterate the importance of maintaining a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" which is inclusive and based on the rule of law, democratic values, territorial integrity, transparency, the protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms, and the peaceful resolution of disputes, and underscore our intention to work together with ASEAN and other countries on these endeavours through a wide range of activities' (G7 2021: 5) In the course of 2022, even more remarkably, the G7 countries have issued no less than four joint statements on the Indo-Pacific that are largely similar in their wording to the 2021 statement.

**While China may not be directly singled out as an 'out-group' in the joint foreign ministers communiqués, they still contain some very strongly worded paragraphs on China's assertive, revisionist and coercive practices.**

Based on these joint statements, we can make the following observations. First of all, the baseline consensus position among the G7 countries has expanded from the original narrower emphasis on rule of law/a rules-based order to include a broader set of shared values and principles such as democratic governance, human rights and fundamental freedoms that are now openly promoted by the G7 countries as central to building a coalition of like-minded states in the Indo-Pacific. Second, despite being originally associated with Japanese and American approaches to the Indo-Pacific, the term FOIP has been accepted by the entire G7 group as a useful discursive frame for referring to their coalition-building aspirations in the region. Third, while China may not be directly singled out as an 'out-group' in the Indo-Pacific sections of the joint foreign ministers communiqués, they nevertheless contain some very strongly worded paragraphs on China's assertive, revisionist and coercive practices. In fact, the past two communiqués include specific sections on China, the most recent of which states: 'We stress that there is no legal basis for China's expansive maritime claims in the South China Sea [...] We remind China of the need to uphold the principle of the UN Charter on peaceful settlement of disputes and to abstain from threats, coercion, intimidation measures or use of force [...] We remain deeply concerned by the human rights situation in China, particularly in Xinjiang and Tibet. In line with China's obligations under international and national law, we urge China to fully respect human rights (G7 2022: paragraph 5).

## The Quad

When, in late 2017, Australia, Japan, India and the United States resumed their Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, they reinvigorated a strategic partnership between ‘a flexible group of like-minded partners dedicated to advancing a common vision [namely] an Indo-Pacific region that is free, open, secure and prosperous’ (Biden, Modi, Morrison & Suga 2021). It was not until the Biden administration took office that they held a leaders summit in March 2021, accompanied by their first joint statement. Apart from facilitating security cooperation (including joint military exercises) and styling themselves as staunch defenders of a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific, the Quad has, among other things, initiated strategic cooperation on critical and emerging technologies, launched ambitious investment plans for building new infrastructure to enhance regional connectivity and assumed a leading role in the distribution of Covid-19 vaccines in the region. What all these initiatives and priorities have in common, most observers agree, is that they seek to address and counter China’s growing power and influence in the region (e.g. Hakata & Cannon 2021; Iwanek 2022). What makes joint Quad statements particularly interesting is not only the Quad’s critical position in the emerging geostrategic landscape of the Indo-Pacific, but also India’s membership as a non-Western country (and no treaty ally of the United States).

Comparing the joint Quad statements (five so far) to those published by the G7 offers a supplementary perspective on Western coalition-building practices in the Indo-Pacific. To begin with, both Australia and India have also embraced the FOIP terminology with, for instance, the first joint statement (Quad 2021) in March 2021 declaring that, ‘We bring diverse perspectives and are united in a shared vision for the “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” (all later statements also refer to FOIP). Moreover, the values and principles shared by the Quad countries and actively promoted as part of their coalition-building engagement in the region are roughly comparable to those emphasized by the G7 countries. At the Tokyo summit in May 2022, the four countries announced that, ‘We strongly support the principles of freedom, rule of law, democratic values, sovereignty and territorial integrity, peaceful settlement of disputes without resorting to threat or use of force, any unilateral attempt to change the status quo, and freedom of navigation and overflight, all of which are essential to the peace, stability and prosperity of the Indo-Pacific region and to the world. We will continue to act decisively together to advance these principles in the region and beyond’ (Quad 2022). Again as in the G7 statements, the Quad countries place particular emphasis on rule of law and a rules-based international order, but they also consistently refer to a broader set of values and principles. Finally, the Quad statements refrain from targeting China directly, preferring instead to make more

indirect references such as ‘We strongly oppose any coercive, provocative or unilateral actions that seek to change the status quo and increase tensions in the area, such as the militarization of disputed features, the dangerous use of coast guard vessels and maritime militia, and efforts to disrupt other countries’ offshore resource exploitation activities’ (Quad 2022).

## The EU

In April 2021 the EU launched an Indo-Pacific strategy on behalf of its 27 member states, some of which have their own strategies (i.e. France, Germany and the Netherlands). Often portrayed as a ‘normative power’, it is unsurprising that in the opening lines of the strategy the EU emphasizes ‘the promotion of democracy, rule of law, human rights and international law’ in its engagement with the region (EUC 2021: 2). At the same time, however, the EU points out that its ‘Indo-Pacific strategy is pragmatic, flexible and multi-faceted, allowing the EU to adapt and build its cooperation according to specific policy areas where partners can find common ground based on shared principles, values or mutual interest’ (ibid: 3). Such pragmatic cooperation and engagement includes green partnerships and joint climate-related initiatives, ocean governance and maritime capacity building as well as investments in high quality and sustainable connectivity projects. Tellingly, the EU strategy contains no references to FOIP, nor does it practice any ‘naming and shaming’ directed at China, noting merely that ‘the universality of human rights is [...] being challenged’ (ibid: 2). The vagueness of the EU strategy from an identity-constitutional angle not only reflects the inherent heterogeneity of the European Union itself, but also cautiousness among some member states about antagonizing China and leaning too heavily on the United States in the US-China great power rivalry.

### **Taking stock: a Western-led coalition of like-minded states in the Indo-Pacific**

As the Indo-Pacific region has become a new geostrategic arena, encompassing some of the most vibrant growth economies in the world, Western countries are strategically positioning themselves to engage the region against the backdrop of growing Chinese power and influence. While the Western countries have proposed a number of rational, interest-based initiatives to strengthen their position in the Indo-Pacific (security assistance, economic incentives, infrastructural investments, technological cooperation, green partnerships etc.), they have also sought to shape the geostrategic landscape in the region by means of identity-building practices. That is, they have promoted an identity narrative about a Western-led coalition of like-minded states that will safeguard a free, open and rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific in the face of coercive and other destabilizing practices associated with China.

Some of the Western countries examined here – notably Italy, but to some extent also France and Germany – seem less eager to embrace this identity narrative or to directly depict China as an outsider/adversary in the Indo-Pacific. Yet, they have signed joint G7 statements that adopt a rather unequivocal stance on these identity-related issues. Even more importantly, their joint stance has expanded from a relatively narrow focus on rule of law/a rules-based order to a broader set of shared values and principles such as democratic governance, human rights and fundamental freedoms that are now openly advocated as part of building a coalition of like-minded states to safeguard a ‘Free and Open Indo-Pacific’. Meanwhile, the Quad countries have adopted a largely similar stance that also goes beyond a shared commitment to a rules-based regional order, thereby mobilizing Australia, and more importantly India, behind Western coalition-building efforts, even if they target China less explicitly than the G7 countries do.

Furthermore, the pace and scope of these joint Western identity-building practices has increased over the past two years as the Biden administration has not only managed to mobilize its allies and partners in a far more effective way than the Trump administration but has also launched its own ideological agenda revolving around the struggle between democracies and autocracies. Indeed, the strength and wider resonance of this ideological agenda was showcased by the ‘2021 Open Societies Statement’ (published by the G7 countries together with Australia, India, South Korea and South Africa), which states that ‘We are at a critical juncture, facing threats to freedom and democracy from rising authoritarianism [...] In the midst of these threats we will work together to create an open and inclusive rules-based international order for the future that promotes universal human rights and equal opportunities for all. [...] We resolve to collaborate with partners around the world, including in the Indo-Pacific and Africa, to actively promote these shared values for the good of all. We call on all like-minded partners to support this statement’ (GUK 2021b).

## MAPPING REACTIONS FROM NON-WESTERN COUNTRIES IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

The geostrategic landscape of the Indo-Pacific is being remoulded as Western coalition-building efforts, revolving around an identity narrative about a free, open and rules-based regional order, have intensified in the past few years. Geostrategic dividing lines and patterns of cooperation are, of course, determined by various strategic interests as well (security, economy, infrastructure, technology etc.), but what makes identity-based practices of coalition-building particularly interesting is the way they can shape and structure those strategic interests. Although China’s power and influence in the Indo-Pacific is growing, other countries may not want to be drawn deeper into its orbit if a Western coalition of countries offers a more attractive vision for the Indo-Pacific. Moreover, insofar as like-minded countries in the region are favoured as strategic cooperation partners – or if strategic cooperation even becomes restricted to such like-minded partners – the US-led coalition of Western countries may ultimately force third countries to choose sides in the deepening great power rivalry. The geostrategic stakes are therefore high from a Chinese perspective, which is why Beijing has already targeted these Western coalition-building efforts on multiple occasions and offered its own vision of an Asia-Pacific community.

This chapter provides an overview of how China and the regional group of ASEAN countries have responded to Western coalition-building efforts in the Indo-Pacific, focusing primarily on China’s counter-narrative and its own vision of a ‘community of shared future/common destiny’ in the Asia-Pacific. After examining how the ten Southeast Asian ASEAN countries, jointly as well as individually, are navigating Western and Chinese identity-building practices, the chapter finally discusses the wider geostrategic rivalry in the region in light of these developments.



China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi addresses the 77th session of the United Nations General Assembly at UN headquarters in New York City on 24 September 2022.  
Photo: Yuki Iwamura/AFP/Ritzau Scanpix

## HOW CHINA HAS RESPONDED

China is the only non-Western country in the Indo-Pacific with the capacity to build a regional order of its own. In addition to being the most important trade partner of the vast majority of countries in the region, China has emerged as a technology hub in several areas, as well as a key source of investment for regional infrastructural connectivity through its Belt & Road Initiative. Furthermore, China's military modernization and rapidly growing force projection capacity enable it to pursue its security interests and sovereignty claims far more assertively. Given all the above, Beijing has plenty of opportunities to assume a pivotal role in shaping the geostrategic landscape of the Indo-Pacific (Kim 2021). At the same time, however, Chinese soft power in the region remains weak, and the particularistic (i.e. Sino-centric) nature of its official identity narratives finds little regional resonance, even among those East Asian countries that for centuries were directly exposed to Chinese civilization (Forsby 2022). Many Indo-Pacific countries also harbour deep-seated concerns about the implications of China's growing influence and hard power as Beijing has not just resorted to coercive diplomacy against several countries in the region to safeguard its core interests, but also asserted its territorial and maritime claims in a more forceful manner (Patey 2021: 236-38). Hence, there is widespread wariness of China's rise among countries in the Indo-Pacific, which paves the ground for Western coalition-building efforts in the region.

### **China's counter-narrative: American hegemony and Cold War mentality**

When the Quad was revived in late 2017, the Chinese Government seemed to pay it little attention. In March 2018, Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi dismissed both the Quad and the Indo-Pacific as 'headline-grabbing ideas [that] will dissipate like sea foam' (ToI 2018). But as Western strategic engagement and coalition-building efforts in the region have deepened, Beijing has sharpened its rhetoric. In October 2020, during a visit to Malaysia, Wang likened the Quad to an 'Indo-Pacific NATO' orchestrated by Washington (Jaipragas 2020). At a press conference in March 2022 Wang elaborated on this, stating that 'The real goal of the US Indo-Pacific strategy is to establish an Indo-Pacific version of NATO. It seeks to maintain the US-led system of hegemony' (Wang 2022a). By the same token, the Chinese have pushed back against the term 'Indo-Pacific' itself, viewing it as part of a Western geostrategic scheme to contain China. Referring to the newly published US Indo-Pacific strategy, Wang stated in May 2022 that the 'so-called "strategy" [...] aims to erase the name of "Asia-Pacific" and the effective regional cooperation framework in the Asia-Pacific region' (Wang 2022b). As such, the Chinese Government seeks to counter the Western countries' framing of the regional geostrategic landscape by promoting their own, less comprehensive, view of the region, which leaves out the Indian Ocean and thus excludes India, a major rival of China and partner of the West.

Meanwhile, in order to push back against US-led coalition-building in the Indo-Pacific, the Chinese Government has created its own counter-narrative that harks back to the Cold War era. During his aforementioned visit to Malaysia, Wang declared that the United States and its Quad partners seek 'to trumpet the Cold War mentality, to stir up confrontation among different groups and blocs and to stoke geopolitical competition' (Krishnan 2020). At the press conference in March 2022, Wang repeatedly accused the US and its partners of having a 'Cold War mentality' and conducting 'bloc politics' in the Indo-Pacific: '...from strengthening the Five Eyes to peddling the Quad, from piecing together AUKUS to tightening bilateral military alliances' (Wang 2022a). A couple of months later, when depicting the US Indo-Pacific strategy as part of an 'outdated Cold War script', China's foreign minister argued that 'the United States is keen on creating various sorts of small cliques by ganging up on others under the banner of "freedom and openness"'. Taking the analogy further, he added that 'the strategy aims to contain China and attempts to make Asia-Pacific countries "pawns" of US hegemony' (Wang 2022b).

While the Cold War analogy has long been part of its boilerplate language, the Chinese Government seems particularly alarmed about the ideological dimension of recent Western coalition-building efforts in the Indo-Pacific. Insofar as the United States and its key Western partners succeed in mobilizing Indo-Pacific countries around shared values and principles as envisioned in the narrative of a 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific', this will exacerbate existing ideological dividing lines and may ultimately generate polarizing geostrategic dynamics in the region. Chinese grievances about this ideological agenda have also been conveyed alongside Russia on several occasions, most notably in their joint statement on 4 February 2022: 'Certain States' attempts to impose their own "democratic standards" on other countries, to monopolize the right to assess the level of compliance with democratic criteria, to draw dividing lines based on the grounds of ideology, including by establishing exclusive blocs and alliances of convenience, prove to be nothing but flouting of democracy' (RCJS 2022).

#### **An alternative Chinese vision: an Asia-Pacific community with a shared future**

Apart from its counter-narrative against Western coalition-building in the Indo-Pacific, Beijing is offering an alternative, allegedly more inclusive, vision for the region, even if the region itself is conceived of in narrower geographic terms: 'The Asia-Pacific is a promising land for cooperation and development, not a chessboard for geopolitical contest. With its roots struck deep in the Asia-Pacific, China is committed to the region's stability and prosperity. [...] Together, we will reject attempts to create small, divisive circles in the Indo-Pacific and, instead,

foster a broad, inclusive platform for Asia-Pacific cooperation leading to an Asia-Pacific community with a shared future' (Wang 2022a). The much-touted Chinese notion of a 'community with a shared future/common destiny' (i.e. CSF/CCD) has been closely related to the Asia-Pacific. It was coined in 2013 during a speech by Xi Jinping in the Indonesian Parliament (Xi 2013) and, at the following year's Central Conference on Work Relating to Foreign Affairs in Beijing, Xi stated that 'we should turn China's neighbourhood areas into a community of common destiny' (Xi 2014). However, not until it was highlighted in a separate section in Xi Jinping's work report at the 19th National Party Congress in 2017 did the CSF/CCD assume a prominent discursive position in Chinese identity narratives about the international community (Xi 2017: XII). Since then, the CSF/CCD has become the Chinese equivalent in the Asia-Pacific to the Western FOIP sloganeering in the Indo-Pacific.

**Apart from its counter-narrative against Western coalition-building in the Indo-Pacific, Beijing is offering an alternative, allegedly more inclusive, vision for a regional community.**

Several core elements of China's vision for the Asia-Pacific have already been presented in a white paper on the security structure of the region published by the Chinese Government in early 2017 (SCIO 2017). The first section of the white paper provides some overall observations about how the Chinese view the region: 'Asia-Pacific countries have unique diversities. Countries may become partners when they have the same values and ideals, but they can also be partners if they seek common ground while reserving differences' (ibid: I). Such differences can, according to the white paper, be managed within the overarching Chinese vision of a CSF/CCD: 'Chinese leaders have repeatedly elaborated on the concept of a community of shared future on many different occasions. China is working to construct a community of shared future for countries [...] in Asia and the Asia-Pacific area as a whole' (ibid). As several scholars have pointed out (e.g. Jaknanihan 2022; Zhang 2018), the Chinese have never really clarified what such a community entails, instead referring to it in vague, abstract terms along the lines of an 'Asia-Pacific partnership featuring mutual trust, inclusiveness and mutually beneficial cooperation' (ibid). Filling out the blanks in the CSF/CDD, however, is extremely difficult, because the Chinese – given the particularistic nature of their national identity (Forsby 2022) – cannot invoke a set of universalist values and principles that would appeal to countries across the region and bring them together in a regional community.



Even so, the Chinese Government has continued to promote the CSF/CDD as a framework for envisioning an Asia-Pacific community. Whereas Western countries have made like-mindedness a central feature of coalition-building in the region, the Chinese have repeatedly distanced themselves from any such ideologically informed criteria for regional patterns of cooperation. For instance, the 2017 white paper cautioned that, 'Small and medium-sized countries need not and should not take sides among big countries. All countries should make joint efforts to pursue a new path of dialogue instead of confrontation and pursue partnerships rather than alliances, and build an Asia-Pacific partnership' (SCIO 2017: 1). Conveying the same message in May 2022, Wang Yi argued that 'Asia-Pacific countries are generally reluctant to take sides, and the mainstream voice is that they hope that all countries can live in harmony and engage in win-win cooperation. The trend of the times in the Asia-Pacific region is to promote regional integration and build an Asia-Pacific community with a shared future' (Wang 2022b). This raises the question of how other non-Western countries in the Indo-Pacific have responded both to Western coalition-building in the region and Chinese overtures for a Sino-centric community.

Washington, United States. 12 May 2022. US President Joe Biden welcomed leaders of ASEAN countries and the ASEAN Secretary General to the White House as the US-ASEAN Special Summit convenes, the second Special Summit since 2016.

Photo: Michael Reynolds/UPI/Alamy Stock Photo



## HOW ASEAN HAS RESPONDED

Given the still unsettled geography of the Indo-Pacific (see Introduction) and its contested geostrategic landscape, it is not entirely straightforward to identify and delimit the group of non-Western ‘third countries’ with which both China and the US-led coalition of Western countries want to forge stronger bonds. Some Indo-Pacific countries not discussed above already find themselves firmly within the Western camp (notably New Zealand, South Korea and Taiwan), while a regional great power such as India, despite its historically ambivalent relationship with the West, has recently moved closer to the Western coalition as part of its participation in the Quad. Leaving aside Russia, North Korea and the South Pacific Island states – all of which play a minor role in shaping the geostrategic landscape of the Indo-Pacific – the most important non-Western, Indo-Pacific countries are the ten member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN): Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam. Whether seen through China’s Asia-Pacific lens or the Western countries’ Indo-Pacific lens, the ASEAN countries constitute a key set of regional cooperation partners in a strategic sense. Indeed, while the geostrategic clout of ASEAN itself is notoriously limited, the oft-heard mantra about ‘ASEAN centrality’ reflects the fact that the institution has managed to place itself at the centre of the regional architecture (Maude 2022). This section examines how the ASEAN countries, collectively as well as individually, have responded to the intensification of Western coalition-building in the region.

### ASEAN as a group

On the face of it, ASEAN may not seem especially susceptible to Western endeavours to build a coalition of like-minded countries and promote a ‘Free and Open Indo-Pacific’. In recent years, Southeast Asia has witnessed some democratic backsliding with all ASEAN countries ranked as either ‘flawed democracies’ or outright ‘authoritarian regimes’, according to the most recent global Democracy Index (The Economist 2022). The ASEAN bloc has also developed a comprehensive economic relationship with China as part of their Free Trade Area Agreement (signed in 2002) as well as their Strategic Partnership (signed in 2003), which is slated to be upgraded to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (ASEAN 2021: 22-28). At the same time, however, ASEAN enjoys strong trade and investment ties with the Western countries, in particular the US, Japan and the EU. Moreover, ASEAN has long welcomed Western countries as institutionalized cooperation partners via specialized diplomatic forums such as the East Asia Summit (EAS), the Asia Regional Forum (ARF); at the recent ASEAN-US summit in November 2022 the two parties even announced the establishment of a Comprehensive

Strategic Partnership (ASEAN 2022). As such, having developed a complex set of relationships with external powers, ASEAN’s position in the regional geostrategic landscape is far from settled (Lin 2021).

In June 2019 ASEAN adopted the ‘ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific’ (AOIP) at its ARF meeting in Bangkok (ASEAN 2019). Not quite a strategy per se, the AOIP document offers some insights into how ASEAN views the evolving geostrategic landscape in the region, how it envisions its own role in this process, and how receptive it is to Western coalition-building efforts (Acharya 2019). First, by embracing the term ‘Indo-Pacific’ and thereby viewing the ‘Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean regions, not as contiguous territorial spaces but as a closely integrated and interconnected region’ (ASEAN 2019: 2), ASEAN seems to have endorsed the reshaping of the regional geostrategic landscape in line with Western preferences. Second, the AOIP seeks to depict the Indo-Pacific as revolving around ASEAN itself. That is, the AOIP intends to ‘to enhance ASEAN’s community building process’ and ‘envisages ASEAN centrality as the underlying principle for promoting cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region, with ASEAN-led mechanisms [...] as platforms for dialogue’ (ibid: 1). Importantly, ASEAN’s desire to be closely involved in shaping the Indo-Pacific has so far been recognized by the Western countries in joint statements by the G7 and Quad countries.

**On the face of it, ASEAN may not seem especially susceptible to Western endeavours to build a coalition of like-minded countries and promote a ‘Free and Open Indo-Pacific’.**

Furthermore, some have argued that by stressing ‘inclusivity’ as one of its guiding principles (ibid: 2), the AOIP attempts to strike some sort of balance between China and the Western countries (Acharya 2019). However, the AOIP contains no references at all to China’s CSF/CCD vision, and even the recently published joint action plan (2021-25) for the ASEAN-China Strategic Partnership only once mentions ‘China’s vision to build an ASEAN-China community with a shared future’ (ASEAN 2021: 1). Even worse from Beijing’s perspective, the AOIP adopts some of the same core principles that are found in the Western strategy papers, notably upholding ‘the rules-based regional architecture’ (ASEAN 2019: 2), including ‘universally recognized principles of international law [UNCLOS]’, and promoting ‘freedom of navigation and overflight’ (ibid: 3). ASEAN’s emphasis on these principles of course reflects widespread concern among some of its members about China’s assertiveness in longstanding territorial and maritime

disputes in the South China Sea (Simões 2022). Hence, although ASEAN has not endorsed 'FOIP', nor the notion of 'like-mindedness' (Lin 2021), the Southeast Asian bloc does seem to welcome Western coalition-building efforts in the region.

### **Specific ASEAN countries**

Individually, the ASEAN countries appear to position themselves closer to China and have rejected Western attempts to divide the region into separate camps of like-minded countries along ideological lines. While most ASEAN countries prefer to keep a low profile in the US-China rivalry, some have publicly cautioned against the potential implications of US-led coalition-building efforts in the region. The prime minister of Singapore, Lee Hsien Loong, one of the most outspoken stakeholders in the debate, recently stated that 'The US-China rivalry is inevitably affecting all countries in Asia. It is natural for some countries to be closer to one side or the other, but most countries would prefer not to be forced to choose between the US and China. There will be no good outcome if Asian countries are split between two camps, each siding with one or the other' (Lee 2022). The Indonesian foreign minister Retno Masudi conveyed the same message ahead of a series of ASEAN meetings in September 2020: 'ASEAN, Indonesia, wants to show to all that we are ready to be a partner [...] We don't want to get trapped by this rivalry' (Allard & Widiyanto 2020). Similarly, the highly influential former Malaysian prime minister Mahathir Mohamad recently said, 'When you have a grouping that excludes China [in the Indo-Pacific region], it is political and not [about] the economy [...] So that is a problem with the groupings that are formed by the US. They are always political' (Kumar 2022).

Turning to their bilateral relations with China, most ASEAN countries (i.e. Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar and Thailand) have established Comprehensive Strategic Partnerships (CSP) and all of them have signed Memorandums of Understanding on the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Moreover, those ASEAN countries with a CSP seem increasingly willing to endorse China's vision for an 'Asia-Pacific with a shared future', as five of them have signed joint statements that include the CSF/CCD terminology (albeit not Malaysia). Indeed, China's recent diplomatic offensive around the G20 Summit in Indonesia in November 2022 saw Cambodia (SCPRC 2022), Laos (LNA 2022), Thailand (MFAKT 2022) and Indonesia itself (MFAPRC 2022b) pledging to enhance their respective CSPs with China in order to realize a 'community of/with shared future'. Meanwhile, Singapore and particularly the Philippines and Vietnam take pains to maintain some distance to China given their security concerns about China's increasingly powerful position in the region, notably in the context of ongoing territorial and maritime disputes in the South China Sea. Such reservations may help explain why ASEAN as a whole has not endorsed China's vision for the Asia-Pacific.

## **THE WIDER GEOSTRATEGIC RIVALRY IN THE INDO-PACIFIC**

As the Indo-Pacific region has risen to prominence, its geostrategic landscape is being remoulded against the backdrop of intensified great power rivalry and the decline of economic globalization. A variety of actors, chief among them China and the United States, are therefore positioning themselves to play a role in this process. One way to do so is to employ identity practices as witnessed in the past couple of years in the shape of the intensified coalition-building efforts in the Indo-Pacific jointly undertaken by the Western countries. However, a range of other factors are also critical in forming the geostrategic landscape, and this section will briefly discuss some of them in order to put these identity-constructing practices in a wider context. Insofar as geostrategy refers to strategic planning for how to influence or exercise control over critical spaces of geography such as the Indo-Pacific (cf. Introduction), we may turn to at least three other highly relevant geostrategic factors, namely military power, geoeconomics and infrastructural connectivity.

### **Beyond identity: military power, geoeconomics and infrastructural connectivity**

First, military power and security-related concerns constitute a key driver of geostrategic positioning throughout the Indo-Pacific region. China's rise and its rapid military modernization has been widely seen as the single most transformative development trend, having disruptive effects on the regional security architecture in general and a number of territorial and maritime disputes in particular. In addition, North Korea's nuclear weapons programme continues to figure prominently as a security threat in some parts of the region. In order to contain or at least balance these potential threats, the United States has maintained its position as the principal security provider in the regional 'hub-and-spokes system', centred on a wide range of bilateral security alliances and partnerships that have recently been supplemented by more informal security arrangements such as the Quad and AUKUS. Conversely, apart from its defence treaty with North Korea, China does not have any military allies and partners in the region, and its relations with central actors such as India, Japan, Vietnam, the Philippines and Taiwan are plagued by security-related conflicts. Hence, while the expansion of China's force projection capacity has disruptive effects in the Indo-Pacific, it has not really enhanced Beijing's geostrategic leverage.

Second, tectonic geoeconomic development trends are restructuring the Indo-Pacific region. Most importantly, as China has emerged as the leading industrial/manufacturing hub as well as one of the most important consumer markets in the world, Beijing has overtaken Washington to become the most important

trading partner of nearly all the countries in the Indo-Pacific. Consequently, today's China exerts a strong gravitational pull on its Indo-Pacific neighbours because of its massive economic clout. Meanwhile, the geoeconomic topography of the region is being reshaped by means of various bilateral as well as regional free trade zones such as the RCEP (including China) and CPTPP (excluding China). Standing outside both the RCEP and CPTPP, the United States is currently promoting its own Indo-Pacific Economic Framework, and Washington remains the most important source of foreign direct investment in the region. These more or less comprehensive and exclusive economic initiatives are rendering the geostrategic landscape of the Indo-Pacific increasingly complex, even if China maintains a pivotal regional position.

**If regional identity dynamics further intensify, they could force ASEAN and other countries to look either to China or to the US-led Western coalition for security assistance, geoeconomic partnership and infrastructural development.**

Third, infrastructural connectivity also shapes the geostrategic landscape of the Indo-Pacific in significant ways. The provision and construction of basic infrastructure such as roads, railways, airports, harbours, pipelines, dams, power plants, electricity grids etc. can pave the way for forging closer bonds between countries in terms of increased physical connectivity as well as economic and technical dependencies. Moreover, digital connectivity via IT and telecommunications technologies such as 5G wireless networks, transoceanic fibreoptic cables, cloud computing data storage centres and, not least, social/professional software application platforms will increasingly determine new patterns of connectivity between key providers and users. In this geostrategic domain, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) stands out as the most comprehensive and systematic attempt to establish closer ties to countries throughout the Indo-Pacific (and other) regions, notably via its Maritime Silk Road initiative. However, the G7 countries have recently stepped up their own efforts to provide infrastructural development as well, with the 'Build Back Better World' (rebranded this year as the 'Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment') and 'Blue Dot Network' widely seen as indirect countermeasures in response to China's BRI. Infrastructural connectivity has thus become another critical means of shaping the geostrategic landscape in the Indo-Pacific.

Overall, there are many factors that affect the Indo-Pacific as a geostrategic arena. As suggested here, traditional geostrategic focus areas such as military power, geoeconomics and infrastructural connectivity play a significant, but far from clear-cut or conclusive, part in the current transformation process. This is why identity-constructing practices, which have become increasingly prominent in the past couple of years, could prove to have a critical role in shaping the geostrategic landscape of the Indo-Pacific. By seeking to build a coalition of like-minded states, the Western countries are not only committing themselves to the region and offering an alternative vision to that of a Sino-centric order, but also affecting those other geostrategic factors at play. That is, insofar as regional identity dynamics further intensify, they could force Indo-Pacific countries to look either to China or to the US-led Western coalition for security assistance, geoeconomic partnership, infrastructural development etc.

## CONCLUSION

The Indo-Pacific region has emerged as a crucial new geostrategic arena, characterized not only by economic dynamism, but also by China's rise as the most powerful non-Western actor in the region. As a result, the United States and its Western allies and partners have stepped up their endeavours to strategically engage the region by means of various military, economic, infrastructural, diplomatic and other initiatives, which at the same time can serve to balance or even contain growing Chinese power and influence. While all these measures are already being meticulously studied by regional experts and IR scholars, this report has provided a different perspective, focusing on a set of identity-constructing practices that will also shape the geostrategic landscape of the Indo-Pacific. That is, by drawing the dividing lines between in- and out-groups, these identity-constructing practices have the potential to determine regional patterns of cooperation in a geostrategic sense.

The report has conducted a systematic empirical mapping of the relative scope and depth of current Western coalition-building endeavours in the Indo-Pacific. Based on official government statements and strategy papers, the analysis has shed light on the diversity of approaches among the G7 countries in terms of their understandings of like-mindedness, commitment to shared values/principles, perceptions of China and discursive framing of their own strategic engagement in the Indo-Pacific. The examination identified sufficient common ground to enable the formulation of a Western identity narrative about a coalition of like-minded states in the Indo-Pacific, sharing a commitment to the rule of law and a rules-based regional order amid growing concern about increased Chinese coercion and assertiveness (albeit not all G7 countries directly single out China as an outsider/challenger). As a group, however, the G7 countries – spurred by

the Biden administration's renewed coordination with its Western allies and its ideologically informed view of relations between democracies and autocracies – have in the past two years signed up to a series of joint statements that go significantly further in an identity-constituting sense. Indeed, their common stance has widened from a narrow focus on a rules-based order to a much broader set of values and principles – such as democratic governance, human rights and fundamental freedoms – shared by a coalition of like-minded states that will strive to safeguard a 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' in the face of China's coercive and assertive behaviour. Moreover, the Quad countries have jointly promoted a largely similar identity narrative during the same period, thereby also mobilizing Australia and, more importantly, India, behind Western coalition-building efforts. Taken together, a US-led group of Western countries are increasingly framing their engagement with the Indo-Pacific region in identity-laden terms, which enables them to shape geostrategic dividing lines in the region and to depict China as an outsider or outright adversary.

The second part of the report has examined how China and the Southeast Asian ASEAN countries have responded. Although China today seems poised to assume a leading role in shaping the geostrategic landscape of the Indo-Pacific, Beijing has limited soft power appeal and finds itself confronted with widespread concern about the implications of its growing hard power, which paves the ground for Western coalition-building efforts in the region. Consequently, the Chinese Government has embarked on a two-pronged identity-based strategy of its own. First, in order to push back against Western coalition-building narratives, the Chinese Government has created its own counter-narrative that castigates the US and its allies for their 'Cold War mentality' and 'bloc politics' and for 'creating various sorts of small cliques by ganging up on others under the banner of "freedom and openness"'. Second, Beijing is offering an alternative, allegedly more inclusive, narrative for its own coalition-building efforts in the Asia- (rather than Indo-) Pacific region, whereby existing differences are to be subsumed under an overarching Chinese vision of a 'community with a shared future/ common destiny'. Meanwhile, navigating these competing coalition-building practices, the ASEAN countries seem at risk of being increasingly divided as the regional geostrategic landscape is being reshaped. While collectively ASEAN has welcomed and accommodated Western coalition-building endeavours, individually many ASEAN countries endorse Beijing's vision of a community with a shared future for the Asia-Pacific.

Finally, the report has pointed to several other factors that are important in shaping the geostrategic landscape of the Indo-Pacific region such as military power, geoeconomics and infrastructural connectivity. However, as they play a far from clear-cut, let alone conclusive, part in the current transformation of the region, the increasingly salient identity-constructing practices could prove to be all the more significant. By seeking to build a coalition of like-minded states, the Western countries are not only committing themselves to the region and offering an alternative vision to that of a Sino-centric order, but also affecting the other geostrategic factors at play. Hence, insofar as regional in-group/out-group dynamics intensify, they could force Indo-Pacific countries to look either to China or to the US-led Western coalition for security assistance, geoeconomic partnership and infrastructural development.

# TABLES

**Table 1. Indo-Pacific strategies of the G7 countries**

|                       | YEAR OF PUBLICATION (UPDATE [REFERENCE]) | TYPE OF DOCUMENT            | TITLE OF STRATEGY  | SCOPE (APPR. NUMBER OF WORDS) |
|-----------------------|--|-----------------------------|--|-------------------------------|
| <b>Canada</b>         | 2022 [GC 2022]                           | Strategy                    | 'The Indo-Pacific: A New Horizon of Opportunity'                   | 9,000                         |
| <b>France</b>         | 2018 (2022) [GRF 2022]                   | Strategy                    | 'France's Indo-Pacific Strategy'                                   | 16,000                        |
| <b>Germany</b>        | 2020 [FGG 2020]                          | Strategy                    | 'Policy Guidelines for the Indo-Pacific'                           | 22,000                        |
| <b>Italy</b>          | 2022 [IG 2022]                           | Position paper              | 'The Italian Contribution to the EU Strategy for the Indo-Pacific' | 3,000                         |
| <b>Japan</b>          | 2018 (2021) [JMFA 2021]                  | Position paper              | 'Japan's Effort for a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific"'                | 4,000                         |
| <b>United Kingdom</b> | 2021 [GUK 2021a]                         | Section in overall strategy | 'The Indo-Pacific Tilt' [in 'Global Britain in a Competitive Age'] | 1,000                         |
| <b>United States</b>  | 2022 [WH 2022]                           | Strategy                    | 'Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States'                       | 6,000                         |
| <b>The EU</b>         | 2021 [EUC 2021]                          | Strategy                    | 'EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific'                  | 3,000                         |

Sources: See list of references.

**Table 2. Overview of shared values and principles among the G7 countries**

|                              | CANADA | FRANCE | GERMANY | ITALY | JAPAN | UNITED KINGDOM | UNITED STATES | THE EU |
|------------------------------|--------|--------|---------|-------|-------|----------------|---------------|--------|
| <b>Rule of law</b>           | X      | X      | X       | X     | X     | X              | X             | X      |
| <b>Human rights</b>          | X      | X      | X       | X     |       | X              |               | X      |
| <b>Multilateralism</b>       | X      | X      | X       | X     |       |                |               |        |
| <b>Freedom of speech</b>     |        | X      | X       |       |       | X              | X             |        |
| <b>Freedom of religion</b>   |        | X      | X       |       |       |                |               |        |
| <b>Democratic governance</b> |        |        |         | X     |       |                | X             | X      |
| <b>Open civil societies</b>  |        |        | X       |       |       | X              | X             |        |
| <b>Gender equality</b>       | X      |        |         |       |       | X              |               | X      |

Sources: Indo-Pacific strategies of G7 countries, see Table 1/list of references.



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