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# **Beyond the Blocs:** Asia's take on the conflict in Ukraine

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## Executive Summary

The war in Ukraine continues to reshape strategic alignments across Asia. Far from a unified bloc, the region displays a spectrum of postures, from open alignment with Russia to strategic ambiguity and calibrated distancing.

Countries such as North Korea, Myanmar, and Laos have intensified military or logistical ties with Moscow. Others, including India, Vietnam, and Indonesia, pursue a hedging strategy informed by economic pragmatism, multipolar aspirations, and long-standing defence dependencies. Meanwhile, rule-based actors like Japan, South Korea, and Singapore have expressed support for Ukraine through diplomatic channels and targeted sanctions, albeit with differing levels of engagement.

This diversity of responses reflects structural drivers: concerns over energy and food security, normative ambivalence, and scepticism toward the long-term consistency of Western commitments. It also underscores the role of regional platforms such as ASEAN and BRICS+, which, despite internal diversity, tend to avoid ideological alignment and favour sovereignty-based dialogue and diplomatic flexibility over confrontation. These forums provide alternative avenues for engagement that contrast with the normative framing promoted by the Euro-Atlantic order.

For Europe and for France in particular this evolving landscape calls for a shift from prescriptive diplomacy to differentiated partnerships grounded in mutual interests and strategic credibility. In a world increasingly defined by fluid alliances and transactional pragmatism, Europe's relevance will rest on its capacity to provide long-term reliability where others offer volatility, and trust where others seek leverage.

## Résumé exécutif

La guerre en Ukraine continue de remodeler les équilibres stratégiques en Asie. Loin de constituer un bloc homogène, la région exprime une diversité de postures allant de l'alignement ouvert avec la Russie à l'ambiguïté stratégique, voire à la prise de distance calculée.

Certains pays comme la Corée du Nord, le Myanmar ou le Laos ont renforcé leurs liens militaires ou logistiques avec Moscou. D'autres, tels que l'Inde, le Vietnam ou l'Indonésie, adoptent une stratégie de contournement ou d'équilibrisme, motivée par le pragmatisme économique, la quête d'autonomie stratégique et des dépendances anciennes en matière de défense. Parallèlement, des acteurs respectueux du multilatéralisme comme le Japon, la Corée du Sud ou Singapour ont exprimé leur soutien à l'Ukraine via la diplomatie ou des sanctions ciblées, avec des degrés d'engagement variables.

Cette fragmentation reflète des facteurs structurels profonds : préoccupations énergétiques et alimentaires, ambivalence normative, et scepticisme croissant vis-à-vis de la constance des engagements occidentaux. Elle souligne aussi le rôle croissant de plateformes régionales telles que l'ASEAN ou les BRICS+, qui – malgré leurs divisions internes – privilégient le dialogue souverainiste et la flexibilité diplomatique aux alignements idéologiques. Ces forums offrent des voies alternatives d'engagement, distinctes du cadre normatif euro-atlantique.

Pour l'Europe – et pour la France en particulier – ce paysage mouvant appelle à dépasser la diplomatie prescriptive au profit de partenariats différenciés, fondés sur des intérêts partagés et une crédibilité stratégique. Dans un monde marqué par la fluidité des alliances et le pragmatisme transactionnel, l'atout principal de l'Europe pourrait résider dans sa capacité à offrir de la stabilité là où d'autres suscitent l'incertitude, et de la confiance là où d'autres recherchent l'influence.

## Beyond the Blocs: Asia's take on the conflict in Ukraine

Dr. Arnaud Leveau, President of Asia Centre  
*July 17<sup>th</sup>, 2025*

### Introduction

As the war in Ukraine persists, its strategic consequences are being felt far beyond Europe, particularly across Asia, where responses remain strikingly varied and complex. While Europe<sup>1</sup> and most of liberal democracies remain largely united in their support for Kyiv, the position of the US has become an increasingly complex variable in global perceptions of the conflict. Although the US has been the largest provider of military and economic assistance to Ukraine since 2022, that support has not been linear. In early 2025, deliveries of critical equipment were temporarily suspended due to internal political divisions and debates over strategic prioritisation. A growing segment of the political establishment led by figures such as Vice President J.D. Vance argued for a pivot toward the Indo-Pacific, casting doubt on the sustainability of American engagement in Europe<sup>2</sup>. Although aid was later resumed, this interruption raised concerns among partners and observers, particularly in Asia, about the reliability and long-term consistency of United States (US) posture. At the same time, President Donald Trump, once perceived as sympathetic to Russia, has publicly voiced disappointment with Vladimir Putin, suggesting a more transactional and unpredictable stance. These evolving signals, ranging from temporary halts in aid to conflicting elite discourses, have introduced a degree of ambiguity that shapes how Asia interprets the Western response.

The US remains the primary security provider for much of Asia, yet its internal political volatility has reinforced the perception of strategic uncertainty. Against this backdrop, Asian responses have emerged as diverse, strategic, and deeply shaped by historical ties, economic interdependence, and sovereign priorities. From open support to calibrated caution, and from cautious engagement to tactical ambiguity, the region's approach illustrates a departure from rigid bloc politics and a turn toward pragmatic hedging. Rather than aligning along ideological lines, most governments pursue flexible diplomacy that reflects their national interests in a fragmented and uncertain international environment.

Recent developments illustrate the extent of this strategic dispersion. North Korea has intensified its military partnership with Russia<sup>3</sup>. Myanmar has formalised its intention to become an observer within the Eurasian Economic Union<sup>4</sup>. Reports of Lao involvement in providing humanitarian and logistical support to Russian forces have drawn regional and international attention. China, while officially advocating dialogue and a political settlement, has expanded its energy imports and dual-use exports to Russia<sup>5</sup>. Its diplomatic engagement has remained deliberately opaque, often perceived in Europe as enabling Moscow without overtly breaching international norms. These dynamics reflect a broader erosion of the liberal consensus and the emergence of a fluid, multipolar strategic geometry in which traditional alignments are increasingly challenged by pragmatic, interest-based diplomacy.

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<sup>1</sup>European Council : EU response to Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, February 2025

<sup>2</sup> LEVEAU A., *An unpredictable US could inspire Europe and Asia's democracies to unite*, South China Morning Post, 27 March 2025

<sup>3</sup> HOWELL E., *North Korea and Russia's dangerous partnership . The threat to global security from the Kim–Putin axis and how to respond* , Chatham House, December 2024

<sup>4</sup> Myanmar Office of the State Administration Council, *Myanmar eager to join EAEU as member state*, 26 June 2025

<sup>5</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China, "China's Position on the Political Settlement of the Ukraine Crisis," 2023.

## I. From alignment to ambiguity: an Asian spectrum

### a. Countries closely aligned with Russia

**Laos** as a landlocked country structurally constrained by a crushing debt burden, particularly vis-à-vis China, Laos primarily seeks to expand its diplomatic and economic room for manoeuvre in a context of acute vulnerability. Its discreet posture toward Russia may thus reflect a broader strategy aimed at diversifying partnerships and reducing overdependence on any single power, rather than a firm geopolitical alignment. In June 2025, Russia's foreign minister publicly thanked Laos for its "balanced position" and acknowledged humanitarian and medical cooperation<sup>6</sup>. Meanwhile, multiple unconfirmed reports, corroborated across various open-source channels indicates that Laos may have deployed around 50 military engineers and medics to support operations in Kursk via a bilateral understanding signed in 2024. While Laos has officially denied these allegations<sup>7</sup>, the recurrence of similar reports from multiple international sources indicates the need for cautious analytical consideration.

**Myanmar** has pursued a distinct path of alignment since the 2021 coup, expanding defence and energy cooperation with Russia. According to a 2023 United Nations report, Russian-affiliated entities have delivered at least US\$ 406 million worth of military supplies, aircraft, helicopters, air defence systems, to Myanmar, surpassing China as the leading provider<sup>8</sup>. In March 2025, the military regime signed an intergovernmental agreement to build a 110 MW small modular reactor under the aegis of Rosatom alongside plans for a major port and energy complex near Naypyidaw<sup>9</sup>. This initiative reflects a broader strategic partnership, and at the same time, Russia secured a deal for offshore oil and gas exploration and port development in Myanmar's Dawei special economic zone. On 26 June 2025, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing reiterated Myanmar's formal interest in joining the Eurasian Economic Union as an observer<sup>10</sup> embedding the country deeper into Moscow-led economic and political frameworks. Bilateral ties extend to naval cooperation and direct calls for Russia-backed ties to help cushion the blow of Western sanctions.

**North Korea** has become Russia's most conspicuous Asian military partner in the Ukraine conflict. Following the signing of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Treaty in mid-2024, which enshrined mutual defence commitments, North Korea has supplied artillery, ballistic missiles, and other weaponry to Russia. South Korean and Western intelligence report that approximately 12,000 North Korean combat troops and engineers have been deployed to Russia's Kursk region to support frontline operations and reconstruction efforts. Many have paid a high price: one source estimates from 3,000 to 6,000 casualties among North Korean forces<sup>11</sup>. Russian officials have added another layer, noting an additional deployment of 6,000 technical staff, deminers, sappers, and construction personnel, for demining and infrastructure rehabilitation. More alarmingly, multiple intelligence reports, suggest plans to expand this presence dramatically, to support a large-scale Russian offensive<sup>12</sup>. Although North Korean media have offered no confirmation, South Korea's intelligence community also warns of a possible 30,000 troop deployment, albeit with mixed assessments on exact numbers. In turn, Moscow

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<sup>6</sup> MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION, [Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's statement and answers to media questions at a joint news conference following talks with Lao Foreign Minister Thongsavanh Phomvihane](#), Moscow, June 26, 2025

<sup>7</sup> LAOTIAN TIMES, [Laos Debunks Rumors of Sending Troops to Fight in Ukraine](#), 10 July 2025

<sup>8</sup> STOREY I., [Myanmar-Russia Relations Since the Coup: An Ever Tighter Embrace](#), ISEAS, 21 November 2023

<sup>9</sup> The Irrawaddy, [Russia Approves Moves to Build Nuclear Plant in Myanmar](#), 7 June 2025

<sup>10</sup> TASS, [Myanmar seeks to join EAEU as observer](#), 26 June 2025

<sup>11</sup> YANCHIK O., [North Korea is playing a key role in Russia's war against Ukraine](#), Atlantic Council, 24 June 2025

<sup>12</sup> LOH M., [Kim Jong Un says he'll 'unconditionally support' Russia's war amid a report he's sending 30,000 more troops against Ukraine](#), Business Insider, 14 July 2025

appears to be transferring advanced military technologies, including satellite guidance systems, to Pyongyang, a deeply concerning development for regional security<sup>13</sup>.

### b. Countries hedging toward Russia

**Bangladesh** continues its strategic nuclear cooperation with Russia through the Rooppur Nuclear Power Plant project, which is being constructed by Rosatom. In late 2024, assembly of the first reactor's core was completed, and Russia has again extended financing for the project through 2026, an ongoing commitment amid Western sanctions<sup>14</sup>. This long-term collaboration underscores Bangladesh's priority of enhancing energy security through diversification and infrastructure development.

At the same time, Bangladesh has consistently chosen not to condemn Russia in key UN motions<sup>15</sup>. It abstained from the 2 March 2022 UN General Assembly resolution demanding Russia's withdrawal from Ukraine as well as from later votes in 2023 and 2025. This recurring abstention suggests a foreign policy carefully calibrated to avoid alienating Moscow while maintaining ties with Western partners.

**Brunei** has adopted a highly cautious and restrained diplomatic posture throughout the Ukraine war. The country has refrained from casting votes against Ukraine in General Assembly resolutions, opting instead for abstention or ambiguity<sup>16</sup>. Official communiqués from the Bruneian foreign ministry described the situation in Ukraine as cause for "serious concern," calling for peaceful resolution in line with the United Nations Charter, though without naming Russia directly. Its priority remains regional security and economic resilience, with little direct involvement in global conflicts.

**Cambodia** has adopted a diplomatic posture that blends humanitarian action with geopolitical caution, without committing to a firm stance for or against Russia. On one hand, the country has partnered with Japan to train Ukrainian deminers. In early 2023, Cambodian experts began training a group of Ukrainian personnel in ordnance removal techniques at the Cambodian Mine Action Center, supported by the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA)<sup>17</sup>. Cambodia also deployed demining dogs and machinery in cooperation with Japan, reinforcing its role in civilian mine-clearance efforts<sup>18</sup>.

At the same time, Cambodia has opted not to name Russia or endorse punitive measures against Russia. The country abstained from key ASEAN and UN statements that directly criticized Russia's invasion reflecting a desire to preserve ties with both great and regional powers<sup>19</sup>. However, in March 2022 Cambodia did co-sponsor a UN General Assembly resolution condemning Russian aggression before reverting to a more measured tone in subsequent multilateral forums<sup>20</sup>. This balanced posture allows Cambodia to signal its commitment to humanitarian norms, especially given its own history with landmines, while avoiding political entanglement that might jeopardize broader ties with Russia and China. In practice, Cambodia aligns itself with both normative international values and a multipolar diplomatic play, characteristic of Southeast Asian "hedging."

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<sup>13</sup> JUNG M.-K., [North Korean leader pledges 'unconditional' support in meeting with Russian envoy](#), Korea Herald, 13 July 2025

<sup>14</sup> World Nuclear News, [Reactor assembly completed for Bangladesh's first nuclear unit](#), 22 October 2024

<sup>15</sup> TIEZZI S., [How Did Asian Countries Vote on the UN's Ukraine Resolution?](#), The Diplomat 03 March 2022

<sup>16</sup> KOH W.C., [Brunei must refine and regionalise its economic approaches](#), East Asia Forum, 19 March 2025

<sup>17</sup> The Asahi Shimbun, [Cambodian experts begin training Ukrainian deminers](#), 17 January 2023

<sup>18</sup> SOTHEARY S., [CMAC trains 14 more Ukrainians on using demining equipment](#), Khmers Times, 8 August 2024

<sup>19</sup> SHOJI T., [Southeast Asia and the Russian Invasion of Ukraine — Diverse Relations, Mixed Reactions](#), Sasakawa Peace Foundation, International Information Network, 1st November 2022

<sup>20</sup> MEN K., [Cambodian Leader Defends UN Vote on Ukraine Invasion](#), VOA 3 March 2022

**Indonesia** has pursued a strategy of calibrated diplomacy since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. While refraining from directly condemning Russia in multilateral forums, the country has consistently emphasised global food and energy security, supply chain resilience, and the importance of diplomatic dialogue to mitigate broader geopolitical risks.

In June 2025, President Prabowo Subianto conducted an official visit to Russia, where several bilateral agreements were concluded in the fields of energy cooperation, defence procurement, and technological partnership<sup>21</sup>. The visit also reaffirmed Indonesia's full integration into the BRICS grouping, following its accession in 2024. In July, President Prabowo was honoured as guest of honour at France's Bastille Day celebrations, an unprecedented recognition for a Southeast Asian leader and a reflection of strengthening ties between Jakarta and Paris<sup>22</sup>. Immediately after the celebrations in Paris, he travelled to Minsk for a meeting with President Lukashenko, further signalling Jakarta's active engagement with a diverse range of international partners. Indonesia is also reportedly in negotiations to purchase Chinese J-10 fighter jets, underscoring its multi-vector approach to defence procurement.

Simultaneously, Indonesia has accelerated efforts to attract Western investment, particularly in green technologies and critical minerals essential to its energy transition. The country is actively seeking deeper economic integration with Europe, as illustrated by its ongoing negotiations for a free trade agreement with the European Union and its official candidacy for membership in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)<sup>23</sup>. These parallel initiatives underscore Indonesia's broader strategy of diversified partnerships and strategic autonomy in a shifting global order.

**Malaysia** has notably intensified engagement with Russia, particularly in trade, energy, and technology cooperation. Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim's state visits, including a four-day stay in May 2025 at the invitation of President Vladimir Putin, resulted in multiple memoranda of understanding focused on energy, agriculture, aerospace, and nuclear technology. During discussions, Anwar also raised the issue of accountability for the MH17 tragedy, emphasizing Malaysia's commitment to an impartial investigation<sup>24</sup>. Russia has become one of Malaysia's top-ten trading partners in Europe, with bilateral trade reaching approximately US\$ 2.5 billion in 2024.<sup>25</sup>

At the same time, Malaysia continues to signal its interest in a stable, rules-based international order and equitable trade relations with Europe and the US. Anwar has actively engaged with European leaders and US representatives, such as during meetings at the ASEAN Regional Forum, emphasizing openness to Western investment and dialogue on technology and energy initiatives. His government has also sought to alleviate US tariff concerns through ongoing negotiations, exhibiting flexibility in its global trade policy. In essence, Malaysia is also navigating a dual-track strategy: strengthening economic cooperation with Russia while maintaining constructive relationships with Western partners.

**Mongolia** pursues a nuanced path, balancing energy cooperation with Russia and strategic partnerships beyond its immediate neighbours. While it maintains logistical and infrastructure ties, such as ongoing discussions around the Power of Siberia II pipeline, Mongolia is also building robust relations with Europe. A major milestone came in January 2025, when Mongolia signed a US\$1.6 billion agreement with France's Orano to develop the Zuuvch-Ovoo uranium mine. This joint venture, projected to

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<sup>21</sup> STRANGIO S., *In St. Petersburg, Prabowo and Putin Pledge to Deepen Relations*, The Diplomat 20 June 2025

<sup>22</sup> LAROCHE C., *L'Indonésie, un partenaire stratégique pour la France en Indo-Pacifique ?*, IRIS, 28 May 2025

<sup>23</sup> OECD, *Indonesia reaches key milestones in OECD accession process*, 3 June 2025

<sup>24</sup> STRANGIO S., *Malaysia's PM Anwar Winds Up Second State Visit to Russia*, The Diplomat 16 May 2025

<sup>25</sup> Russia Pivot to Asia, *Russia, Malaysia Bilateral Relations*, July 2025 Update

produce 2,500 tonnes annually over 30 years, reinforces Mongolia's role as a critical supplier of low-carbon energy materials<sup>26</sup>.

At the same time, Mongolia has leveraged the Ulaanbaatar Dialogue on Northeast Asian Security as a diplomatic platform to broaden its regional engagement. The June 2025 conference included representatives from Central Asia and Europe, signalling Ulaanbaatar's aspirations to act as a bridge between Northeast and Central Asia<sup>27</sup>. Mongolian officials continue to promote this "third neighbour" outreach model through increasing cooperation with European and Central Asian partners. In sum, Mongolia's diplomacy exemplifies sovereign balance: retaining cooperation with Russia where necessary, while forging diversified economic and security links with the West and beyond<sup>28</sup>.

**Sri Lanka** has prioritized its economic recovery by focusing on restoring access to essential imports, including energy and agricultural inputs. Under an International Monetary Fund Extended Fund Facility agreed in mid-2023, foreign exchange reserves have rebounded, from roughly US\$ 2.2 billion in early 2023 to about US\$ 4.5 billion by February 2024, enabling the renewal of fertilizer and fuel imports essential for agriculture and energy needs<sup>29</sup>.

Trade data confirms reliance on Russian-origin fertilizers, with Sri Lanka importing approximately US\$ 21.8 million, mostly fertilizers, from Russia in 2024, Russian crude has similarly played a significant role in stabilizing domestic fuel supplies, though specific value figures are less visible<sup>30</sup>. Importantly, Sri Lanka chose to abstain from key United Nations resolutions condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine, signalling a deliberate avoidance of geopolitical positioning. This stance appears driven by pragmatic considerations: as the country grapples with recovery from its 2022 economic crisis, urgent economic imperatives, food security, affordable energy, and foreign currency management, take precedence over ideological alignment. Sri Lanka's restrained diplomatic posture thus reflects a broader pattern typical of economically stressed nations: neutrality is not an expression of political affinity, but a strategic choice made under the constraints of immediate national needs.

**Thailand** has adopted a cautious and discreet diplomatic stance since the beginning of the war in Ukraine. It has abstained from key United Nations resolutions and has refrained from joining Western-led sanctions or issuing direct condemnation of Russia<sup>31</sup>. This calibrated position reflects Thailand's prioritisation of domestic economic interests, particularly the recovery of its tourism sector and the security of energy supplies<sup>32</sup>. At the same time, Thailand is seeking to expand its global economic and diplomatic footprint through its concurrent candidacies for both the BRICS grouping and accession to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). These dual-track ambitions signal a deliberate strategy to operate within both emerging and established multilateral frameworks, underscoring a commitment to strategic hedging and pragmatic diplomacy.

**Vietnam** continues to pursue a carefully calibrated foreign policy rooted in diversification and strategic autonomy. It maintains longstanding defence and energy cooperation with Russia, notably through civil nuclear collaboration and military-technical assistance. The state visit of President Vladimir Putin to

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<sup>26</sup> LKHAAJAV B., [Mongolia Signs Uranium Deal With French Nuclear Giant](#), *The Diplomat* 06 February 2025

<sup>27</sup> Institute for Strategic Studies, [Ulaanbaatar Dialogue, 6 June 2025](#)

<sup>28</sup> BATCHIMEG D., [Mongolian game on the geopolitical chessboard or the comprehensive national power of Mongolia](#), *Asia Centre*, 3 June 2024

<sup>29</sup> IMF, [Sri Lanka: IMF Reaches Staff-Level Agreement on the Second Review of Sri Lanka's Extended](#), 21 May 2024

<sup>30</sup> Economy Next, [Sri Lanka EC shoots down President's fertilizer, fuel subsidies ahead of Nov 14 general elections](#), 30 September 2024

<sup>31</sup> SANGLEE T., [Dissecting Thailand's Peculiar Maneuver at the Ukraine Peace Summit](#), *The Diplomat* 25 June 2024

<sup>32</sup> IDE-JETRO, [Trade Effects of the Russia-Ukraine Conflict in Thailand: The Impacts of Sanctions on Trade from a Neutral Country](#), June 2025

Vietnam on 20 June 2024 underscored the enduring nature of this relationship<sup>33</sup>. During the visit, both countries reaffirmed their commitment to a multipolar world order and signed agreements aimed at expanding bilateral cooperation in energy, infrastructure, and security<sup>34</sup>. Notably, the joint communiqué emphasised the importance of an inclusive “regional security architecture,” implicitly positioning Russia as a continued actor in Southeast Asia.

Simultaneously, Vietnam has broadened its diplomatic and economic engagements with a wide array of partners. It has intensified defence<sup>35</sup> and technology collaboration with India<sup>36</sup>, Israel<sup>37</sup> and South Korea<sup>38</sup> and has emerged as a key regional hub for European trade and investment. The implementation of the EU–Vietnam Free Trade Agreement (EVFTA) has facilitated closer economic alignment with the European Union<sup>39</sup>. This trend was further reinforced by the state visit of French President Emmanuel Macron to Vietnam in April 2025, during which both governments highlighted cooperation in energy transition, higher education, and maritime security<sup>40</sup>. The visit marked a significant step in strengthening France–Vietnam ties and, more broadly, Europe’s Indo-Pacific engagement.

Vietnam’s dual-track diplomacy, anchored in historical ties with Russia but increasingly integrated with Western and Indo-Pacific partners, reflects a doctrine of sovereign resilience. It seeks to preserve flexibility in an increasingly polarised geopolitical environment without overcommitting to any single axis of alignment.

### c. Countries with mixed or ambiguous positions

**China** continues to call for peace and dialogue while abstaining from key United Nations votes<sup>41</sup>. However, this posture masks a deeper alignment with Moscow. Since early 2022, China has significantly increased its purchases of Russian energy products, benefiting from discounted prices while simultaneously shielding Russia from the full effects of Western sanctions. Dual-use equipment and high-end components, including electronics and machine tools, have also flowed into Russia via Chinese exporters, sustaining its defense-industrial base.

While China refrains from overt military support, the scale and composition of its trade relationship with Russia reveal a form of indirect backing. Chinese companies continue to supply key inputs for vehicle manufacturing, drone components, and semiconductors that have found their way into Russian military systems<sup>42</sup>. At the same time, Beijing has maintained its strategic narrative of neutrality, portraying itself as a responsible stakeholder and potential mediator. This dual posture allows China to cultivate diplomatic capital among non-Western and emerging economies, while quietly reinforcing its strategic partnership with Russia<sup>43</sup>.

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<sup>33</sup> STOREY I., [Russian President Putin’s Visit to Hanoi: Vietnam’s ‘Bamboo Diplomacy’ In Action](#), ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute, Articles & Commentary 2024/56

<sup>34</sup> TASS, [Russia and Vietnam agree to expand cooperation during Putin’s Hanoi visit](#), 20 June 2024.

<sup>35</sup> LEVEAU A., [Vietnam : Diversification des approvisionnements d’armements](#), Asie21 N°184/2024-06

<sup>36</sup> KUMAR A., [India’s Defence Diplomacy: A Strategic Response to China in the Modi Years](#), Observer Research Foundation, 23 September 2024

<sup>37</sup> AZULAI Y., [Israel Aerospace Industries closes \\$160m drone deal with Vietnam](#), The Jerusalem Post, 18 December 2018

<sup>38</sup> SANG HT., [What to Expect from the Vietnam–South Korea Comprehensive Strategic Partnership](#), Fulcrum 10 february 2023

<sup>39</sup> Commission européenne, [“Implementation report of the EVFTA”](#), mars 2025

<sup>40</sup> *Ambassade de France au Vietnam*, [Déclaration conjointe entre la France et le Vietnam, adoptée à l’occasion de la visite d’Etat du Président de la République française au Vietnam](#) (25-27 mai 2025)

<sup>41</sup> European Union External Actions, [UN General Assembly demands Russian Federation withdraw all military forces from the territory of Ukraine](#), 02 March 2022

<sup>42</sup> IISS, [The EU’s approach to tariffs on Chinese electric vehicles](#), Vol 30, Comment 27

<sup>43</sup> TOMOFEEV I., [Russia and China in the era of trade wars and sanctions](#), Russian International Affairs Council, 4 July 2025

Negotiations with Europe, particularly in the economic domain, reflect this ambiguity. Chinese leaders have sought to defuse tensions over electric vehicle tariffs and maintain access to European markets, while simultaneously retaliating through anti-dumping measures on European agricultural and luxury exports. These economic levers are wielded in a calibrated manner to divide European unity and pressure individual member states into more accommodating positions<sup>44</sup>.

Compounding this is the institutional fragmentation within the European Union. While the Directorate-General for Trade (DG Trade) negotiates trade agreements and secures market access, it lacks a mandate over industrial partnerships or defense cooperation. These domains are often managed by separate directorates, such as DG GROW (Internal Market, Industry, Entrepreneurship and SMEs) or DG DEFIS (Defence Industry and Space), or handled directly at the level of the European Council or the European External Action Service (EEAS). The result is a disjointed European response to China's integrated strategic-economic agenda.

This structural gap has contributed to a perception of Europe as a regulatory actor rather than a full-spectrum strategic partner. In Asia, where governments increasingly expect cohesive industrial, technological, and diplomatic engagement, Europe's segmented approach undermines its influence. For many Asian governments, Brussels appears less as a unitary actor and more as a complex system whose internal divergences can be exploited.

As competition intensifies across supply chains, digital infrastructure, and energy transitions, China will likely continue to exploit these asymmetries. The EU's ability to respond coherently will depend on its capacity to integrate economic, security, and geopolitical instruments, and to resist the centrifugal forces of national interest that Beijing so skilfully navigates.

**India** exemplifies a policy of strategic autonomy in the context of the war in Ukraine. Since the onset of the conflict, India has refrained from directly condemning Russia or joining Western-led sanctions. Instead, it has significantly expanded its purchases of discounted Russian crude oil and maintained longstanding defense ties with Moscow, including joint ventures and arms deliveries. These ties are rooted in decades of strategic cooperation and reflect the enduring role Russia plays in India's military readiness<sup>45</sup>.

At the same time, India has rapidly strengthened its partnerships with the US, Europe, and key Indo-Pacific allies. Technology transfer agreements, defense co-development initiatives such as the iCET (India–US Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technology), and deepening cybersecurity and semiconductor cooperation all reflect India's bid to diversify its strategic options<sup>46</sup>. India also plays an increasingly central role in the Quad and has emerged as a key interlocutor for the European Union's Indo-Pacific strategy.

This dual-track diplomacy allows India to preserve room for maneuverer while avoiding entanglement in bloc politics. Rather than aligning itself with one side, India positions itself as a globally engaged actor pursuing strategic self-reliance, regional leadership, and multipolarity. For Europe, India's stance poses both opportunities and limits: it is a vital partner in supply chain resilience, digital regulation, and

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<sup>44</sup> LEVEAU A., *From Cognac to Electric Vehicles: Strategic Disenchantment in the Europe–China Trade Relationship*. Asia Centre, Analysis 2025-14, 7 July 2024

<sup>45</sup> MARKET D. & BROSTOO D., *Friends with limits. : the future of Russo-India defense ties*, War on the Rocks, 25 April 2025

<sup>46</sup> CHAUDHURI R. & BHANDARI K., *The U.S.–India Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technology (iCET) from 2022 to 2025: Assessment, Learnings, and the Way Forward*, Carnegie India, 23 October 2024

maritime security, but unlikely to endorse normative approaches that frame the Ukraine conflict as a universal legal and moral test.

#### **d. Countries supportive of Ukraine and critical of Russia**

**Australia** has adopted a proactive and supportive stance toward Ukraine since the outset of the conflict, aligning closely with its traditional allies in Europe and North America. Canberra has provided substantial military aid to Ukraine, including the delivery of Bushmaster Protected Mobility Vehicles, ammunition, and other non-lethal support. This material assistance has been accompanied by diplomatic statements condemning Russia's invasion and reaffirming Australia's commitment to upholding the principles of sovereignty and international law.

Beyond direct assistance, Australia has played an increasingly important role in multilateral forums, reinforcing transregional cooperation frameworks that link Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific security. In the wake of the war in Ukraine, Australia has intensified its strategic dialogue with NATO, participating in high-level meetings and contributing to discussions on global deterrence, resilience, and hybrid threats. Australian officials frequently underline the interconnectedness of security in Europe and Asia, suggesting that the response to Russian aggression sets a precedent for confronting coercion in the Indo-Pacific<sup>47</sup>.

Australia's defense industry is also emerging as a complementary asset to NATO supply chains. Amid heightened demand for munitions, armoured vehicles, and drone technologies, Australian defense manufacturers are exploring production alignments with European counterparts, particularly in the context of shared technology and industrial resilience.

This posture is underpinned by Australia's broader strategic recalibration. The 2023 Defence Strategic Review<sup>48</sup> explicitly linked the stability of the Indo-Pacific to developments in Europe and emphasized the importance of maintaining a rules-based order. While the review prioritized regional deterrence, it also underscored Australia's global role in supporting collective responses to authoritarian assertiveness. In this regard, Australia sees the Ukraine conflict not as a distant war, but as a case study in the defense of international norms that resonate with its own regional challenges<sup>49</sup>.

Overall, Australia's engagement with the Ukraine crisis is part of a larger strategy to strengthen democratic coalitions, reinforce international rules, and prepare its own defense ecosystem for a more contested strategic environment.

**Japan** has emerged as one of the most consistent and active Asian supporters of Ukraine, aligning itself closely with the transatlantic position while also leveraging the war to reinforce its own regional security priorities<sup>50</sup>. Since the beginning of the conflict in 2022, Japan has imposed multiple rounds of sanctions on Russia, including restrictions on banking, export controls on semiconductors and other dual-use technologies, and asset freezes targeting Russian individuals and entities<sup>51</sup>. Tokyo suspended energy cooperation projects such as Arctic LNG 2 and Sakhalin-1 while maintaining a pragmatic share in

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<sup>47</sup> GRGIC G., *Australia Strategic Thinking on the War in Ukraine and Indo-Pacific Security*, US Institute of Peace, 12 November 2024

<sup>48</sup> Available on: <https://www.defence.gov.au/about/reviews-inquiries/defence-strategic-review>

<sup>49</sup> Australian Army Research Centre, *Supporting the Government's efforts in the Indo-Pacific's Grey Zone*, Vol.21 Number 1

<sup>50</sup> COLIN J.Y., *Ukrainian crisis: Japan in line with NATO and the EU*, Asia Centre, 5 April 2022

<sup>51</sup> Kyodo News, *Japan PM throws support behind Ukraine to achieve lasting peace*, 18 June 2025

Sakhalin-2 to safeguard energy stability, particularly liquefied natural gas imports critical to domestic consumption<sup>52</sup>.

By mid-2024, Japan had committed over US\$ 600 million in financial and humanitarian aid to Ukraine, including support for refugee assistance, critical infrastructure repair, and demining operations<sup>53</sup>. Japan's Self-Defense Forces have refrained from direct military involvement, but Tokyo has eased restrictions on arms export policy, allowing for equipment support through third countries. This recalibration, aligned with Japan's broader national security strategy, strengthens its cooperation with NATO, particularly in areas of cybersecurity, defense industry standards, and joint exercises.

The war in Ukraine has also accelerated Japan's strategic shift toward bolstering deterrence against regional threats, especially those posed by North Korea and China. In the 2022 National Security Strategy, Japan announced a major increase in defense spending, aiming to reach 2% of GDP by 2027, and prioritized the acquisition of counterstrike capabilities, integrated air and missile defense systems, and cooperation with the US, Australia, and Europe

Under Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba, who took office in October 2024, Japan's approach to the conflict has become more explicit and assertive. Ishiba has linked the war in Ukraine to East Asia's own security environment, warning that what is happening in Ukraine today could occur in East Asia tomorrow. At the G7 Summit in Canada in June 2025, he reaffirmed Japan's commitment to a just and lasting peace, met directly with President Volodymyr Zelensky, and pledged to host a Ukraine Mine Action Conference in October 2025<sup>54</sup>. He also condemned the growing military cooperation between Russia and North Korea, underlining the conflict's implications for regional security.

Ishiba's leadership reflects a combination of normative clarity and strategic recalibration. His government has expanded Japan's defense posture, deepening ties with NATO and promoting joint capabilities in space, cyber, and maritime defense. Japan's 2022 national security strategy had already committed to raising defense spending to two percent of GDP by 2027 and acquiring counterstrike capabilities, a trajectory that Ishiba has continued.

At the same time, Ishiba has maintained a careful diplomatic tone. In response to internal debates in the US, particularly the suspension of aid in early 2025 and public tensions between President Donald Trump and President Zelensky, he urged continued American engagement and G7 unity without direct criticism. This diplomacy signals Japan's ambition to act as both a reliable ally and an autonomous strategic actor in a rapidly evolving global order.

While this posture has been largely well-received in Europe and North America, it has also placed Japan at odds with parts of the emerging countries, including several ASEAN members. Tokyo has responded by expanding development assistance and regional diplomacy to counterbalance any perception of alignment with Western bloc politics.

**New Zealand** has taken a principled yet modest approach to the war in Ukraine, grounded in its longstanding commitment to international law and the protection of small and medium-sized states. While not a major military power, New Zealand has provided non-lethal assistance to Ukraine, including financial aid for humanitarian efforts, support for refugee resettlement, and the deployment of military

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<sup>52</sup> Japan Times, [Three years into Ukraine war, Japan struggles to ensure steady LNG supply](#), 24 February 2025

<sup>53</sup> Japan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, [Japan-Ukraine Summit Meeting](#), 17 June 2025

<sup>54</sup> Japan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, [G7 Kananaskis Summit Overview of Session 5 "A strong and sovereign Ukraine"](#), 17 June 2025

personnel for training missions in Europe, notably in the United Kingdom. this assistance aligns with New Zealand's foreign policy emphasis on peacekeeping, conflict resolution, and the integrity of international institutions<sup>55</sup>.

New Zealand officials have consistently condemned the Russian invasion in multilateral forums, framing their statements in terms of sovereignty, the United Nations charter, and the rules-based international order<sup>56</sup>. however, unlike some of its traditional allies, New Zealand has refrained from sending weapons or imposing extensive sanctions beyond those mandated multilaterally. this restrained posture reflects both the country's limited strategic reach and a deliberate choice to maintain a consistent legalistic foreign policy.

The country continues to promote regional stability through multilateral diplomacy and participation in security dialogues. while the war in Ukraine is geographically distant, policymakers view it as a critical test of global governance mechanisms and a reminder of the fragility of peace. For New Zealand, the conflict reinforces the importance of a strong international legal framework that can safeguard smaller states from coercion or aggression.

**The Philippines** has taken a nuanced position on the war in Ukraine, blending normative alignment with strategic pragmatism. Since the beginning of the conflict, Manila has joined international statements at the United Nations condemning the Russian invasion and affirming the principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity<sup>57</sup>. Philippine diplomats have echoed concerns about the erosion of international law and the dangers posed by unchecked aggression, aligning in tone with Western positions on core legal norms.

However, this diplomatic posture has not translated into direct sanctions or economic measures against Russia. The Philippines has refrained from unilateral penalties, reflecting both its economic priorities and a broader regional caution about provoking major powers. With considerable energy and agricultural imports to manage, the Philippines has opted for a policy that signals support for international norms while avoiding actions that could jeopardize economic resilience or bilateral ties.

This balanced approach is also shaped by the Philippines' broader geopolitical context. As a key strategic partner of the US in the Indo-Pacific, and amid rising tensions with China in the South China Sea, the Philippines has sought to reinforce its international standing without overextending its commitments. The country continues to diversify its foreign policy engagements, participating in regional forums such as the ASEAN Regional Forum, while strengthening bilateral ties with Japan, Australia, and the European Union.

Looking ahead, the Philippines' ASEAN chairmanship in 2026 may elevate its diplomatic profile and provide an opportunity to influence regional consensus on global issues, including the Ukraine conflict. Whether Manila will use this platform to push for stronger collective positions or maintain ASEAN's cautious tone remains to be seen. What is clear is that the Philippines will play an increasingly important role in navigating the intersection of regional stability, multilateralism, and global power competition.

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<sup>55</sup> NZ Defence Force : [Support to Ukraine](#) (regular updates)

<sup>56</sup> NZ Foreign Affairs & Trade, [Russian invasion of Ukraine](#)

<sup>57</sup> GMA News, [Ukraine thanks Philippines for 'yes' vote on UN resolution calling for peace](#), 3 mars 2025

**Singapore** is the only ASEAN member state to have imposed unilateral sanctions on Russia in response to its invasion of Ukraine<sup>58</sup>. These measures, enacted in early 2022, included export controls on items that could be used for military purposes and restrictions on financial transactions with designated Russian entities. In explaining this decision, Singaporean leaders emphasized that it was not about siding with any particular bloc, but rather about upholding foundational principles of international law, specifically, the sovereignty and territorial integrity of states.

Singapore's Foreign Minister and Prime Minister have repeatedly underscored that the sanctions reflect the city-state's longstanding commitment to a rules-based international order. They have drawn parallels between Ukraine's plight and the potential vulnerabilities of small, trade-dependent states that rely on the stability of global norms and multilateral institutions. As such, Singapore's position is framed as a defense of its own national security interests and the credibility of the United Nations Charter.

Despite this principled stance, Singapore continues to maintain open diplomatic and economic channels with Russia. It has not closed its embassy in Moscow nor severed high-level diplomatic engagement. Similarly, Singapore remains actively engaged with ASEAN counterparts and global partners, consistently advocating for peaceful resolution, dialogue, and the avoidance of escalatory actions<sup>59</sup>.

This carefully calibrated policy illustrates Singapore's broader strategic posture: a small but influential state leveraging its normative credibility to promote multilateralism, while maintaining flexibility and access across geopolitical divides. For Europe, Singapore is viewed as a likeminded partner in upholding legal norms, digital governance, and maritime security. However, its policy also highlights the limits of regional unity within ASEAN, where member states diverge significantly in their approaches to the war in Ukraine.

**South Korea** under President Lee Jae-myung has maintained its humanitarian and industrial support for Ukraine while adopting a more cautious diplomatic posture. Although constitutional constraints prohibit South Korea from sending weapons directly to countries engaged in active conflict, it has provided military equipment and ammunition to NATO member states, particularly Poland, with the understanding that these could indirectly support Ukraine's defense efforts<sup>60</sup>. This approach allows South Korea to navigate its legal and political commitments while signalling solidarity with its Western partners.

At the same time, Lee Jae-myung has introduced a more ambivalent tone in diplomatic discourse. His administration emphasizes "balanced diplomacy," expressing concerns over escalatory narratives and advocating for renewed dialogue<sup>61</sup>. While such rhetoric is consistent with South Korea's longstanding preference for stability in international affairs, it has drawn scrutiny in Europe, where any signs of ambiguity on Ukraine are closely watched. This shift may raise questions about South Korea's strategic alignment and could affect future cooperation with European partners, particularly in the areas of defense industry collaboration and security partnerships.

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<sup>58</sup> Singapore Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Minister for Foreign Affairs Dr Vivian Balakrishnan's Written Reply to Parliamentary Question on the scope of Singapore's sanctions on Russia, 9 May 2022

<sup>59</sup> PITAKDUMRONGKIT K. & KLUGE J., The War in Ukraine: Economic Consequences for Europe and Southeast Asia, RSIS CO23155, 24 October 2023

<sup>60</sup> Asan Institute, Managing Decline? NATO's Uneasy Future After the 2025 Summit.

<sup>61</sup> COLIN J.Y., Crise de régime en Corée du Sud : l'élection du 3 juin clôt une période chaotique de 6 mois, Asia Centre, 2025-12, 10 Juin 2025

Growing concerns have also emerged over North Korea's deepening military collaboration with Russia. Reports of North Korean troops and engineering personnel deployed to Russian-occupied territories, alongside suspected transfers of missile and space technologies, have raised alarms in South Korea. These developments not only heighten risks on the Korean Peninsula but also reinforce the strategic linkage between the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific theatres. For South Korea and its partners, Russia's war in Ukraine is no longer viewed as a distant conflict but as a test of international resolve with direct security implications for East Asia.

South Korea's position reflects a broader pattern in Asia, where many countries prefer pragmatic diplomacy over binary choices. However, as security competition intensifies in both Europe and Asia, sustained clarity and coordination will be critical to maintaining trust and advancing joint strategic interests.

**Taiwan**, while not a formal party to the conflict, views the war in Ukraine through a deeply existential lens. The parallels drawn between Russia's invasion of Ukraine and a potential Chinese assault on Taiwan have intensified public and political focus on national defense<sup>62</sup>. Taiwan has accelerated domestic military reforms, invested in asymmetric defense capabilities, and strengthened ties with Western partners, particularly the US, Japan, and select European nations<sup>63</sup>.

Public discourse in Taiwan often treats Ukraine's experience as both a cautionary tale and a rallying call for deterrence. Policymakers emphasize the need for societal resilience, technological sovereignty, and enhanced international visibility. Though Taiwan does not directly support Ukraine militarily, it has engaged in symbolic gestures of solidarity and has used the crisis to advocate for stronger multilateral commitments to peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific. The war has thus become a prism through which Taiwan articulates its case for international support and security assurance.

### Asian States' Responses to the War in Ukraine: Typology and Strategic Implications

*The following table summarises the positions adopted by key Asian countries, highlighting their diplomatic postures and the corresponding implications for European engagement.*

Country	Position on Ukraine War	Impact on Europe	Category
<b>Australia</b>	Strong support to Ukraine; military aid	Strong partner	Supportive of Ukraine
<b>Bangladesh</b>	Nuclear cooperation with Russia; abstains at UN	Strategic energy cooperation; long-term ties	Neutral
<b>Brunei</b>	Highly cautious and abstaining	Minimal	Neutral
<b>Cambodia</b>	Hedging; humanitarian demining for Ukraine	Humanitarian cooperation channel; abstains from criticism	Hedging
<b>China</b>	Pro-Russian in trade; abstains from votes	Major trade competitor; divides EU unity	Ambiguous
<b>India</b>	Strategic autonomy; expands oil imports from Russia	Key Indo-Pacific partner; balancing act	Ambiguous

<sup>62</sup> Centre for Strategic & International Studies, [Ukraine and Taiwan: parallels and early lessons learned](#), 22 March 2022

<sup>63</sup> WANG, A.H-E., [The war in Ukraine is influencing how Taiwanese think about conflict](#), Brookings, 13 March 2025

<b>Indonesia</b>	Dual-track diplomacy; BRICS member	BRICS membership, OECD candidate,	Hedging
<b>Japan</b>	Firmly supportive of Ukraine; sanctions on Russia	Security-industrial partner of NATO	Supportive of Ukraine
<b>Laos</b>	Humanitarian/logistical support to Russia (alleged)	Challenges EU normative diplomacy	Aligned with Russia (low profile)
<b>Malaysia</b>	Engaged with both Russia and West	Economic partner; manages East-West ties	Hedging
<b>Mongolia</b>	Neutral; economic diversification	EU mining partner; green energy relevance	Neutral
<b>Myanmar</b>	Strategic cooperation with Russia	Erosion of Western influence in Southeast Asia	Aligned with Russia
<b>New Zealand</b>	Principled support to Ukraine; humanitarian aid	Moral support; limited strategic weight	Supportive of Ukraine
<b>North Korea</b>	Military alignment with Russia	Security risk via Russia-North Korea ties	Aligned with Russia
<b>Philippines</b>	Normative support to Ukraine; no sanctions	EU-aligned on norms, cautious on sanctions	Supportive of Ukraine
<b>Singapore</b>	Unilateral sanctions on Russia	Rules-based ally; limited weight in ASEAN	Supportive of Ukraine
<b>South Korea</b>	Balanced diplomacy; indirect military aid	Strategic partner in tech/industry	Supportive of Ukraine
<b>Sri Lanka</b>	Neutral; prioritises economic recovery	Low direct impact; showcases fragility of norms	Neutral
<b>Taiwan</b>	Views Ukraine as precedent; reinforces deterrence	Symbolic linkage with Europe	Supportive of Ukraine
<b>Thailand</b>	Cautious; avoids condemnation	Limited cooperation; OECD candidate	Hedging
<b>Vietnam</b>	Balanced; maintains ties with both West and Russia	Partner in energy and FTA; delicate balance for Europe	Hedging

## II. Institutional responses

ASEAN as an institution has struggled to reach consensus. Internal divisions, ranging from Singapore's clear stance to Myanmar and Laos' cautious positioning, have prevented a unified voice. ASEAN's institutional limitations in moments of geopolitical polarization reflect broader challenges in asserting collective strategic agency.

ASEAN's response to the war in Ukraine has highlighted the limitations of the organization as a unified strategic actor in times of geopolitical polarization. While the Association has issued general calls for peace, respect for international law, and adherence to the UN Charter, it has refrained from naming Russia explicitly or adopting any binding position. The absence of a cohesive stance stems from deep

internal divergences among member states, both in terms of foreign policy orientation and levels of economic and military engagement with external powers<sup>64</sup>.

This diversity of positions has rendered ASEAN consensus elusive<sup>65</sup>. The organization's principle of non-interference, coupled with decision-making by consensus, limits its capacity to respond decisively to international crises. As a result, ASEAN has often defaulted to lowest-common-denominator statements that emphasize peace and dialogue without assigning responsibility. While this helps preserve internal cohesion, it dilutes ASEAN's credibility as a geopolitical actor and highlights its institutional fragility in navigating great power competition.

Despite these challenges, ASEAN remains a central platform for regional diplomacy. Its multilateral architecture, including the East Asia Summit and the ASEAN Regional Forum, continues to serve as key venues for dialogue among major powers. Looking ahead to the Philippines' chairmanship in 2026, there is an opportunity to revisit ASEAN's role in upholding international norms and reinforcing regional security architecture. Whether ASEAN will evolve to meet these expectations, or remain constrained by internal heterogeneity, remains an open question with implications well beyond Southeast Asia.

Beyond ASEAN, other regional and multilateral organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and BRICS have also responded to the war in Ukraine, albeit with equally cautious and non-confrontational tones. Both platforms reflect the preferences of their members to avoid direct condemnation of Russia while maintaining space for diplomatic ambiguity<sup>66</sup>.

The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, which includes China, Russia, India, Pakistan, and several Central Asian states, has refrained from issuing any formal statement condemning the invasion of Ukraine. In recent SCO summit communiqués, the war has been either omitted entirely or referred to obliquely in language promoting multilateral dialogue, non-interference, and respect for territorial integrity without attributing responsibility. This silence stems from the membership composition: several members have deep economic and security ties with Russia, while others, like India and China, see little strategic gain in alienating Russia. The SCO thus functions more as a security coordination forum than as a normative actor in global governance.

BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa and also Egypt, Ethiopia, Indonesia, Iran, and United Arab Emirates) has similarly maintained a posture of guarded neutrality. While member states have diverging interpretations of the conflict, joint declarations have focused on calls for peace, avoidance of escalation, and critiques of Western-led sanctions. In BRICS economic and development forums, Russia continues to participate actively, and there is no evidence of diplomatic isolation within this grouping. The expansion of BRICS in 2024 and 2025, with new members from the so-call *Global South*, has further reinforced the group's emphasis on sovereignty, multipolarity, and non-alignment with traditional Western blocs.

Both SCO and BRICS illustrate the emergence of parallel diplomatic ecosystems that resist binary alignments. These groupings prioritize developmental agendas, economic sovereignty, and alternative narratives of global governance. Their cautious positioning on Ukraine reflects not only deference to Russia's internal legitimacy within the groups but also broader skepticism toward Western foreign policy

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<sup>64</sup> BOMASSI L. (eds), *Reimagining EU-ASEAN relations : challenges and opportunities*, Carnegie Europe, 4 July 2023,

<sup>65</sup> ASEAN, *Joint Statement of The ASEAN Economic Ministers on The Introduction of Unilateral tariffs of The United States*, 10 April 2025

<sup>66</sup> BOGUSZ M. & RODKIEWICZ W., *Three years of war in Ukraine: the Chinese-Russian alliance passes the test*, OSW Center for Eastern Studies, 20 January 2025

frameworks. While they offer little normative leadership, they serve as important indicators of the shifting global diplomatic landscape.

### III. Geoeconomic Reverberations and Trade Realignments

Since the onset of the war in Ukraine, the Indo-Pacific region has faced significant economic ripple effects. Dependency on Russian fertilizer imports was particularly pronounced in 2023<sup>67</sup>, with Indonesia sourcing 15 percent of its fertilizer from Russia, Malaysia 12.4 percent, and Vietnam nearly 10 percent<sup>68</sup>. These figures<sup>69</sup> prompted urgent diversification strategies, including increased domestic production and sourcing alternatives from the Gulf and Latin America<sup>70</sup>.

Supply chains have been increasingly restructured as part of broader de-risking strategies by European and US companies. Vietnam and Indonesia have emerged as leading alternative hubs for production relocation, especially in textiles, electronics, and semiconductors. Vietnamese exports to the US continued to rise in the first half of 2025, although the situation was complicated in July 2025 by new US tariffs on industrial goods imported from China, Vietnam, Indonesia, Thailand, and Malaysia<sup>71</sup>. These measures were introduced amid rising bipartisan concerns in Washington over industrial dependency and trade imbalances.

In response, Vietnam formally requested partial exemptions, invoking its strategic role in global supply chains and its deepening defense and energy ties with the West. Indonesia and Malaysia also expressed concern, calling for greater predictability and transparency in the application of trade measures. While Cambodia and Laos did not issue official statements, business chambers in both countries raised alarms about potential downstream impacts on investment and cross-border trade.

Despite tensions, ASEAN countries continue to attract significant Chinese investment, particularly in infrastructure and green technologies. However, many governments are simultaneously pursuing deeper engagement with Western partners. Thailand, Indonesia, and Malaysia have relaunched or advanced negotiations with the European Union on free trade agreements. Thailand and Indonesia have also submitted roadmaps toward accession to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), aiming to align more closely with global regulatory and governance norms.

These trends illustrate a broader pattern: Southeast Asian countries are not decoupling from China or Russia but rather diversifying their partnerships to reduce strategic exposure. Europe and the US are viewed as important, but not exclusive, economic anchors. The ongoing realignment of trade and investment flows suggests that regional governments are hedging not only against geopolitical risks but also against policy volatility in major economies.

### IV. European Strategic Implications

European diplomacy, often framed around legal norms and the rules-based order, has encountered limited traction across much of Asia. For many regional governments, the war in Ukraine is viewed less as a global normative crisis and more as a European security dilemma.

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<sup>67</sup> IFPRI, [Global fertilizer trade 2021-2023: What happened after war-related price spikes](#), 5 April 2024

<sup>68</sup> Agri Vietnam, [Vietnam's fertilizer import trends](#), 2023

<sup>69</sup> Site: [trade Economics](#) (per country)

<sup>70</sup> KAUR LUDHER E., [Fertiliser Security for Food Security in Southeast Asia: Going Local and Circular](#), Fulcrum, 14 April 2023

<sup>71</sup> White House, [Extending the modification of the reciprocal tariff rates](#), 7 July 2025

Asia's preference for strategic autonomy has fostered the rise of minilateralism. Flexible partnerships, such as the Quad, BRICS, or bilateral security arrangements, are favoured over bloc affiliations. The inability of ASEAN to form consensus has further catalysed this fragmentation.

France and other European countries have responded by offering sectoral engagement<sup>72</sup>. French President signed over €18 billion in agreements across Vietnam, Indonesia, and Singapore. His speech at the Shangri-La Dialogue emphasized a coalition of independent actors grounded in sovereignty, reciprocity, and concrete cooperation.

In parallel, the European Union's *Critical Raw Materials Act (CRMA)*<sup>73</sup>, adopted in 2023, and enacted in May 2024, has significantly intensified outreach efforts toward ASEAN countries, particularly those with rich deposits of rare earths and other critical inputs essential to the green and digital transitions. The Act aims to reduce the EU's dependency on a limited number of suppliers, especially China, by diversifying its sources of lithium, nickel, cobalt, rare earth elements, and other strategically vital minerals. This legislative framework has elevated the geopolitical relevance of countries like Vietnam and Indonesia, which possess substantial reserves of nickel, bauxite, and rare earths.

Vietnam has become a key partner through both its resource endowment and its growing role in downstream industries such as battery manufacturing and electronics. The EU–Vietnam Free Trade Agreement (EVFTA), in force since 2020, provides an institutional foundation for expanding cooperation in critical minerals, renewable energy, and circular economy technologies. European companies are increasingly investing in Vietnamese processing facilities to secure greener and more resilient supply chains.

Indonesia, for its part, holds the world's largest nickel reserves and has enacted export restrictions on raw ore to encourage local value addition, a policy that aligns with the EU's ambition to support sustainable, transparent, and traceable supply chains. The EU and Indonesia have launched a high-level dialogue on sustainable mineral value chains, with pilot projects in green hydrogen, electric vehicles, and battery recycling under discussion. These initiatives are also linked to the broader negotiations for an EU–Indonesia free trade agreement, which has taken on new urgency in light of CRMA imperatives.

More broadly, the CRMA has catalysed a shift in European diplomacy toward resource diplomacy and economic statecraft, in which ASEAN is viewed not merely as a market but as a critical partner in securing Europe's strategic autonomy. While challenges remain, such as governance, environmental standards, and competition with Chinese and American firms, the EU's engagement with Vietnam and Indonesia exemplifies a pragmatic and forward-looking approach to supply chain resilience, strategic partnerships, and climate-aligned development.

While the EU's Critical Raw Materials Act (CRMA) has strengthened economic outreach to ASEAN it however remains constrained by fragmented institutional capacities and limited operational leverage in the region. In contrast, France has combined regulatory diplomacy with a tangible presence, maintaining over 7,000 troops across its Indo-Pacific territories, regular naval deployments (such and strategic defence dialogues with several countries). This dual approach positions France as a potential facilitator of a more coherent European engagement.

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<sup>72</sup> European Commission, [EU-ASEAN Trade Relations: 2025 Update](#), June 2025

<sup>73</sup> Overview available on the European Commission website : [Critical Raw Materials Act](#)

## Conclusion

Asia is neither monolithic nor passive. The diversity of its responses to the war in Ukraine from overt alignment to strategic ambiguity reflects a mosaic of national interests, historical memories, and regional dynamics. These postures are shaped by energy security, defense dependencies, multipolar aspirations, and concerns over the sustainability of Western engagement.

For Europe, engaging with Asia in this context demands a shift in approach, one based on differentiated partnerships, sustained dialogue, and mutual respect<sup>74</sup>. The war in Ukraine is not merely a litmus test for global solidarity; it is a mirror reflecting the evolving distribution of strategic agency.

This reality invites not just adaptation, but innovation. In a multipolar world defined by strategic hedging and transactional diplomacy, Europe's best asset may lie in its ability to offer consistency where others offer volatility, and trust where others seek leverage.

The future of the global order will not be shaped solely in Washington or Brussels. Jakarta, Hanoi, New Delhi, Bangkok, Seoul, Tokyo Ulaanbaatar are equally relevant. If Europe seeks to engage this emerging order, it must move beyond prescriptive diplomacy and embrace coalitions of purpose, grounded in shared interest, strategic imagination, and institutional credibility.

Institutional fragmentation within the European Union continues to undermine the coherence of its Indo-Pacific engagement. Bridging the divide between DG Trade, DG DEFIS, DG GROW, and the EEAS is essential to presenting Asia with a credible, integrated strategic offer. Likewise, the ambiguity surrounding US leadership reinforces regional hedging behaviours and invites greater European clarity. Going forward, Europe must accept that global influence is no longer inherited, it must be earned. Strategic humility, operational partnerships, and sustained engagement are the foundations of future relevance. Countries such as France, Germany, and the United Kingdom can and should act as facilitators of this evolution, but their efforts must be coordinated, not competitive.

France, in particular, has a distinct role to play. As the only EU member with a permanent seat on the UN Security Council and military deployments across the Indo-Pacific, France combines normative credibility with operational presence. Its long-standing ties with countries like Vietnam, India, and Indonesia, reinforced by recent presidential visits and industrial cooperation in energy, defence, and infrastructure, position it as a natural bridge between Europe and Asia. Through initiatives such as the Indo-Pacific Strategy, and defence-industrial cooperation with India, Indonesia, South Korea and Japan, France can lead by example in promoting a pragmatic, sovereign, and inclusive strategic agenda in the region.

European and Asian like-minded countries have a unique role to play, not as substitutes for fading US engagement, but as conveners of a renewed transregional architecture. This architecture would bring together liberal democracies from both Asia and Europe to better coordinate responses to shared challenges: strategic competition, supply chain resilience, climate governance, and the regulation of emerging technologies.

Rather than passive spectators in a US-China binary, these nations can shape a third path rooted in autonomy, cooperation, and credibility. The alternative is fragmentation and irrelevance. As in the

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<sup>74</sup> European External Action Service, *EU Indo-Pacific Strategy Implementation Progress Report*, May 2025

Chinese “Three Kingdoms” period, those who do not act strategically risk becoming pawns in a larger game.

**Methodological Disclaimer**

Some of the information used in this paper, including reports of Lao and North Korean support to Russian operations, derives from open-source intelligence or unconfirmed diplomatic channels. While consistent across several sources, these elements should be treated with caution. Their inclusion reflects the analytical need to capture regional perceptions and ambiguity, not to assert definitive fact.