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Europe and Ukraine: No Quiet on the Western Front



The invasion of Ukraine has jolted the European Union into greater unity, but the regional organization must convert this momentum into stronger long term strategic autonomy. Photo by Max Kukurudziak on Unsplash.

FEATURED COMMENTARY

Invasion of Ukraine – Shaking Europe Out Of Complacency

By Frederick Kliem



The horrors of the Ukraine invasion have yielded some opportunities for the European Union to establish a functioning migration regime and for Germany to justify increased military defence expenditure, both of which could serve the European regional integration project. Photo by the Ukrainian Ministry of Internal Affairs on Wikimedia Commons.

Europe's reaction to Russia's invasion of Ukraine is something Europe is usually not: united, determined and re-energised. The Ukrainian tragedy marks a watershed moment for EU integration and European defence. But as previously unshakable taboos suddenly fall, Europeans must plan long-term

Commentary

IT IS futile to debate whether Russian President Vladimir Putin had anticipated the determination and unity of Europe or was surprised by it. But as a matter of fact, the European Union (EU) and its

member states are currently untying several “Gordian Knots” at once.

Take Germany as an example: Russian aggression has achieved what decades of US diplomacy could not: Berlin is finally realising that Germany must take care of its own, and by extension European, security. For decades, Germany's European neighbours, from France to Poland, as well as successive US administrations have tried – and failed – to put an end to German free-riding on the NATO and US security umbrella. Berlin had long been lacking to both equip its armed forces, the Bundeswehr,

adequately and to think strategically about the defence of and challenges for Germany and Europe.

The Historic German Volte-face

Despite being the second largest NATO economy, hitherto, it was hopeless to expect Germany to meet its NATO defence budget obligations of 2% of GDP. Berlin's strategic culture, domestic politics and an entrenched public pacifism made raising the defence budget as difficult as developing a realistic security strategy appropriate for a country so prone to geopolitical challenges.

Likewise, the “special relationship” with Moscow was long a “holy cow” of Berlin's diplomacy, preventing both the export of arms to Ukraine as well as unambiguously joining its NATO allies in hard-balancing Russian influence. For example, the much-discussed gas pipeline Nordstream 2 was, despite its obvious geo-strategic nature, long described as a “commercial project” by successive German governments.

In a series of dramatic moves within just a few days, Chancellor Olaf Scholz announced a his-

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toric volte-face that seemed to take even members of his own government by surprise. Upending decades-old fundamental principles of German foreign and security policy, Berlin is now delivering lethal weapons to Ukraine, announced a one-off tripling of the defence budget as well as the intent to henceforth meet NATO's spending target.

Likewise, to reduce Germany's significant dependency on Russian energy imports (every fourth household relies on Russian gas for heating), even Green party leaders agree that Berlin will now likely have to postpone its exit from both coal and nuclear energy, and Nordstream 2 is now all but finished.

New EU Unity

The President of the European Commission announced a series of measures that denoted a similarly remarkable shift in EU Common Security and Defence Policy. Most astonishing for an organisation that self-identifies as a "normative actor", the EU will now for the first time finance lethal weapons. To that end, €450 million will go towards Ukrainian armament – a country that is not even a member.

Beyond defence, member states demonstrated unusual unity in agreeing to substantial sanctions against Russia, including

the long-resisted removal of Russia's leading banks from SWIFT. Not only will this come at significant costs for European economies themselves, but this agreement also bridges the traditionally significant divergence in European perspectives on economic and diplomatic relations with Moscow.

No less remarkable, only six years after the so-called refugee crisis brought the EU close to breaking point, even those member states that long resisted EU-wide refugee distribution, indeed were opposed to receiving any migrants at all, are now welcoming Ukrainian refugees with open arms.

Never Waste A Crisis: Europe's Moment of Truth

"Europe will be forged in crisis", Jean Monnet, one of the EU's founding fathers, famously asserted. Indeed, there seems to be nothing quite like a geopolitical crisis to remind member states of the mutual security imperative of regional integration, to galvanise and unify Europe. Indeed even Boris Johnson shows a renewed interest in cooperation with the EU. This momentum should not be squandered.

In the medium-term, there might be a welcomed spillover effect, possibly solving one of Europe's most intractable problems: creating a functioning migration

regime. If the rest of the EU shows now this forthcoming solidarity with its Eastern member states that these states lacked during the 2015 refugee crisis, Europe might once again find the cooperative spirit to progress with deeper integration and policy reform, strengthening Europe's collective capacity.

Similarly, substantial German investment in defence can significantly enhance Europe's defence capacity and work towards Europe's ability to implement own strategic objectives. Mindful that a shortage of money was never the Bundeswehr's primary problem, greater defence spending must be accompanied by structural reforms and strategic embedding of German capabilities in a European framework.

A Re-energised Europe?

Lastly, part of the truth about Europe's new unity is the fact that for the first time in decades, Washington very closely cooperated with both NATO allies and the EU institutions on a collective response to a security crisis.

This cooperative spirit is, however, highly dependent on personalities rather than permanent structural change of US foreign policy. It is indeed likely that a second Trump administration had reacted very differently, side-lining rather than galvanising European co-

operation, which would likely have led to political inertia rather than resolve in Europe.

It is time to seriously consider advancing Europe's "strategic autonomy". This does not mean competition with NATO. Rather, strategic autonomy should be a European capacity to determine own strategic interests with the means to achieve them – complementary with but independent from NATO.

Putin has unwittingly shaken Europe out of complacency. The previously unimaginable is suddenly reality, and the EU is already stronger and more effective and attractive than before Putin's war against Ukraine. A second "Brexit-like" scenario seems unlikely now, and if there is only one good thing that may come out of this tragedy, it might be a re-energised Europe. ■

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COVID-19 and Regional Multilateralism in the Asia-Pacific



Dr Sinderpal Singh, Coordinator of the South Asia Programme at RSIS, takes stock of the state of South Asian regionalism.

On 18 February 2022, the Centre for Multilateralism Studies hosted the RSIS Webinar Series on Post-pandemic Recovery Across Regions. The panel webinar on “COVID-19 and Regional Multilateralism in the Asia-Pacific” saw the panellists deliberate on the regional multilateral response to the pandemic and assess how the region has been affected by nearly two years of pandemic amid geopolitical uncertainties.

Addressing ASEAN’s handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, Dr Fitriani, Senior Researcher at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies, noted that regional multilateral platforms have helped ASEAN member states create collective strategies to tackle the pandemic amid intensifying competition between China and the United States. She emphasised the need for ASEAN to ensure that markets remain open, trade

flow continues and supply chain connectivity persists.

Leading with a perspective on green finance and investment, Dr Tomoo Kikuchi, Associate Professor, Graduate School of Asia-Pacific Studies at Waseda University, noted the biggest challenge in Asia will be the trend towards increasing energy consumption until 2050. He argued that green finance and investment will reinforce the asymmetries in global capital flows and disproportionately increase costs of production in Asia. Governments in the region must invest more in infrastructure while companies must invest more in R&D.

Taking stock of the state of South Asian regionalism, Dr Sinderpal Singh, Coordinator of the South Asia Programme at RSIS, highlighted the debate being played

out in New Delhi that economic liberalisation at the multilateral level has not helped India. This might have prompted India’s decision to not join RCEP. New Delhi had decided around 2014 that SAARC was going nowhere, and poured time and resources into the sub-regional grouping BIM-STEAC instead.

The webinar concluded with Dr Tess Newton Cain, Project Leader for the Griffith Asia Institute’s Pacific Hub, giving her assessment of how the Pacific regional architecture has responded to the pandemic. Whilst the Pacific island countries have been able to avoid the worst impacts of COVID-19, economic contraction across the region was significant – 4.3 per cent in 2020. The silver lining being the COVID-19 pandemic has started a regional conversation on the need to diversify economies. ■

COVID-19 and Regional Multilateralism across the Globe



Dr Kathryn Nash, Chancellor's Fellow, University of Edinburgh, discusses the African Union (AU) and Africa Centre for Disease Control's (CDC) Joint Continental Strategy.

The final session of the RSIS Webinar Series on Post-Pandemic Recovery Across Regions was organised by the Centre for Multilateralism Studies on 25 February 2022. At the start of the event, Ambassador Igor Driesmans, European Union (EU) Ambassador to ASEAN, spoke on the multi-pronged EU Vaccines Strategy to support the recovery of its member states. This centred on ramping up vaccine manufacturing capacity, using advance purchase agreements to ensure the sufficient supply of vaccines, and expediting the vaccine development and authorisation process. To alleviate the economic crisis, the EU further introduced an economic recovery package and maintained the free cross-border movement of goods, services, and people, where possible, throughout the pandemic.

Meanwhile, pandemic re-

covery rates varied across different sub-regions in Latin America, according to Dr Giovanni Agostinis, Assistant Professor at the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile. Weaker regionalism in Latin America owing to a lack of regional leadership, intergovernmental conflict, and the disintegration of the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR)—a regional organisation active in public health policy—had led to slower recovery in South America. In contrast, the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) and Central American Integration System (SICA) demonstrated more comprehensive regional coordination. In Dr Agostinis' view, their success in managing the pandemic could be attributed to creating links between members states and external donors, as well as drawing upon those links to gain financing, build technical capacity, implement best practices, and facili-

tate expert and information exchange.

Dr Kathryn Nash, Chancellor's Fellow, University of Edinburgh, discussed the African Union (AU) and Africa Centre for Disease Control's (CDC) Joint Continental Strategy, a set of pandemic management guidelines covering public health support and socio-economic recovery. Similar to Latin America, the CDC worked with external donors such as the World Health Organisation and the private sector to improve medical training and deliver critical supplies. These efforts were complemented by the AU's political advocacy in international forums to highlight vaccine equality and pandemic-related socioeconomic issues, such as protectionism in medical goods and debt relief. COVID-19 thus provided regional organisations, such as the AU, the opportunity to enhance

their technical capacity in public health policy as well as advance their wider diplomatic agenda and enhance their global stature.

On best practices in pandemic management across regions, panellists pointed to the need for regional organisations to support member states, because countries would want the control of their national responses to the pandemic. To that end, regional organisations should provide, for instance, medical guidance and informational materials for public health campaigns. Regions could also work on pooling informational resources to combat disinformation, endorse member countries' COVID-19 certificates and implement travel corridors. In the long term, regions should work towards building up medical procurement and vaccine manufacturing capacities. ■

Multilateral Matters: News Roundup

Putin's war in Ukraine has deepened ASEAN disunity

Nikkei Asian Review | 5 April 2022 | [Full Report](#)

Ukraine's war has already changed the global economy

Foreign Policy | 5 April 2022 | [Full Report](#)

The Digital Silk Road and China's influence on standard setting

Centre for International Governance Innovation | 4 April 2022 | [Full Report](#)

China is striving to become a leader in international standard setting, and the Digital Silk Road, part of China's Belt and Road Initiative to expand its global infrastructure and markets, is key to realizing this goal. However,

China faces strong competition to gain more influence in international standard-setting bodies, which are dominated by the European Union and the United States.

China's Omicron lockdowns mean more supply chain pain

Foreign Policy | 22 March 2022 | [Full Report](#)

Biden's Indo-Pacific Strategy flips the switch on geopolitical rivalry

East Asia Forum | 15 March 2022 | [Full Report](#)

Tourism in Southeast Asia: Building forward better

Fulcrum | 14 March 2022 | [Full Report](#)

Countries need to mutually recognize each other's vaccination certificates, harmonize rules on travel procedures, and safeguard public health to manage the pandemic. This will enable the countries to capture new source markets, thus compensating for the revenue loss due to the decrease in Chinese tourists.

Climate finance in Southeast Asia: trends and opportunities

ISEAS Perspective | 9 February 2022 | [Full Report](#)

Noncommunicable diseases and foreign policy on global health

Think Global Health | 2 February 2022 | [Full Report](#)

SELECTED PUBLICATIONS

Ukraine's Refugee Relief Lessons for Asia

Alan Chong & Tamara Nair | *East Asia Forum* | 30 March 2022

Joining EU, NATO: Between a Rock and a Hard Place

Fredrick Kliem | *RSIS Commentaries* | 15 March 2022

Invasion of Ukraine – Consent and Trust in the World Order

Joel Ng | *RSIS Commentaries* | 11 March 2022

Economic Security in Southeast Asia: An Introduction

Alan Chong | *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics* | 1 March 2022

ASEAN's Economic Security and Regional Economic Cooperation: Past, Present, and Future

Su-Hyun Lee | *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics* | 1 March 2022

Financialised Ethics, Economic Security and the Promise of Islamic Finance

Jikon Lai | *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics* | 1 March 2022

The Quad and Regional Health Security: Implications and Prospects for the Indo-Pacific

Amalina Anuar & Nazia Hussain | *RSIS Policy Reports* | 25 February 2022

European Strategic Approaches in the Indo-Pacific: A View from Southeast Asia

Nazia Hussain | *Panorama: Insights into Asian and European Affairs* | 16 February 2022

The EU Strategy on Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific: A Meaningful Regional Complement?

Fredrick Kliem | *Panorama: Insights into Asian and European Affairs* | 16 February 2022

Recapping ASEAN's Year of Pandemic Recovery and Political Challenges

Kaewkamol Pitakdumrongkit | *East Asia Forum* | 14 February 2022

30 Years of ASEAN-India Relations: Taking Stock

Nazia Hussain & Tan Ming Hui | *Fulcrum* | 14 February 2022

A German Warship in Asia: Debunking Myths and Misconceptions

Fredrick Kliem | *IDSS Papers* | 9 February 2022

Russia, NATO and Ukraine: The Return of Spheres of Influence

Fredrick Kliem | *RSIS Commentaries* | 9 February 2022

RCEP: What to Expect in 2022

Su-Hyun Lee & Kaewkamol Pitakdumrongkit | *RSIS Commentaries* | 28 January 2022

The **Centre for Multilateralism Studies (CMS)** is a research entity within the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies at Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. The CMS team conducts cutting-edge research, teaching/training and networking on cooperative multilateralism in the Asia Pacific region. The Centre aims to contribute to international academic and public discourses on regional architecture and order in the Asia Pacific. It aspires to be an international knowledge hub for multilateral cooperation and regional integration.

Multilateral Matters is the quarterly publication of the Centre for Multilateralism Studies (CMS), analysing the most recent developments regarding multilateralism by our team. It covers articles on relevant economic and political issues as well as programmes and latest publications from the research centre. The objective of the newsletter is to promote the research being done by our centre, raising awareness of the many events that we hold on a regular basis.

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