

Opinion **The FT View**

## China's Indo-Pacific fears show need for diplomacy

War in Ukraine has lessons for the world's most populous region

**THE EDITORIAL BOARD**



US Marines take part in military exercises in the Philippines. China said the 'Indo-Pacific strategy is as dangerous as the Nato strategy of eastward expansion in Europe' © Ezra Acayan/Getty Images

#### The editorial board YESTERDAY

[Russia's invasion of Ukraine](#) has exposed a rift between where [China's](#) geopolitical heart resides and where its economic interests lie. Europe and the US rank as Beijing's most crucial economic partners in terms of trade, investment and capital market linkages. And yet China has been broadly supportive of Russia during the Ukraine war, refusing to condemn its invasion or step away from its ["strategic partnership" with Moscow](#).

Last week, Beijing reinforced this position and [issued a fresh warning to the west](#). Le Yucheng, China's vice-foreign minister, drew parallels between what it sees as the causes of the war in Ukraine and the assertiveness of the west in the Indo-Pacific.

"Nato has kept strengthening and expanding and intervened militarily in countries like Yugoslavia, Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan," Le said a day after Presidents Xi Jinping and Joe Biden held a two-hour phone call.

"The Indo-Pacific strategy is as dangerous as the Nato strategy of eastward expansion in Europe," he added. "If allowed to go unchecked, it would bring unimaginable consequences and ultimately push the Asia-Pacific [region] over the edge of an abyss."

Raising the spectre of an "Indo-Pacific Nato" is revealing of China's world view.

But it is also revealing that there are lessons from the Ukraine conflict to be learned...

Beijing is implying that there are lessons from the Ukraine conflict to be applied to tensions in the Indo-Pacific. When Xi and Vladimir Putin met in early February — just weeks before Russia launched its invasion — they warned Nato against any further expansion in eastern Europe.

Western leaders should take China's warning seriously but also point out the flaws in its articulation. A key to understanding the volatility in play is an international relations concept called “security dilemma” — the dynamic by which an increase in one state's security leads other states to fear for their own security.

Thus, the eastward expansion of Nato in Europe — which Putin had railed against for years before his invasion — was motivated by fears of Russian expansionism. And why are some countries in the Indo-Pacific showing signs of banding with the US? Because they are troubled by a rising China.

China, for its part, is perturbed by western overtures in a region that it increasingly sees as within its sphere of influence. Late last year, the US spelt out what it means by its advocacy of a “free and open Indo-Pacific”, a region that Antony Blinken, US secretary of state, defined as home to two-thirds of the world's economic growth and more than half of its people.

Blinken said the meaning of a “free and open Indo-Pacific” was that people should be free in their daily lives and live in open societies. Countries should be able to choose their own path and partners, while goods, ideas and people flow freely across land, cyber space and the open seas, Blinken said.

Such a vision is partly at odds with how China organises its own authoritarian system. Adding to Beijing's concerns is a stiffening of western-led military groupings in the region. The Quad, which includes the US, India, Australia and Japan, is widely seen as a counterbalance to Chinese power. Aukus — a trilateral security pact between Australia, the UK and the US — has a similar but more hazy remit.

The brutal war in Ukraine should focus the minds of Chinese leaders and those in the US-led west. If diplomacy fails to prevail, the Indo-Pacific could prove just as combustible as Ukraine today. A concerted effort by China and the US to establish the ground rules and a modus vivendi for a patchwork of regional security groupings is urgently required.

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