

Foreign Policy

Is Ukraine the Future of Asia? Washington's switch to accommodating Moscow's geopolitical goals sends an ominous signal.

By C. Raja Mohan

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When Russian forces invaded Ukraine in February 2022, then-Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida [warned](#) that the war and its outcome would be a harbinger of Asia's future. His message was clear: Just as Europe faced Russian territorial expansionism, Asia was confronting the challenge of China's growing assertiveness—each with potentially profound consequences for the respective continent.

Three years later, Kishida's warning has acquired a more ominous meaning. U.S. President Donald Trump is pressing Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky to cede territory in exchange for peace of an uncertain duration, while demanding that European allies fall in line. For Asia, Trump's high-handed diplomacy raises troubling questions about whether America will remain a reliable security guarantor in the Indo-Pacific. At the Shangri-La Dialogue in June 2022, [Kishida argued](#) that "Ukraine today may be East Asia tomorrow." This was consistent with Tokyo's long-standing emphasis on a "[rules-based international order](#)" and its regional adaptation—the quest for a "[Free and Open Indo-Pacific](#)." Japanese leaders, especially former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, had worked for years to mobilize international support for such a framework in response to China's rise.

Japan did more than endorse Western resistance to Moscow; it became an active participant. Responding to Washington's call, Tokyo—along with Australia, New Zealand, and South Korea—joined NATO's 2022 Madrid summit, signaling a willingness to integrate trans-Atlantic security into Asian concerns. Yet for these four Asia-Pacific powers—the so-called AP4—that decision now looks misguided. Trump's reversal of former President Joe Biden's Ukraine policy leaves them exposed and highlights the fragility of America's geostrategic fancies.

Much of Asia took a different path. China, India, and most of Southeast Asia avoided directly condemning Russia's invasion. Their reluctance reflected caution, but today also looks prescient. With Washington reversing course and seeking accommodation with Moscow at Ukraine's expense, these states can claim vindication for resisting Western pressure.

Meanwhile, Asia's own security dilemmas have only deepened. China's power in its

region dwarfs Russia's in Europe. Unlike Russia, situated on Europe's edge, China sits at Asia's core, sharing long land borders and strategic waters with many states. While Beijing has resolved most land disputes, including against Russia, it continues to press claims against Bhutan and India. There, the question looms: Will China be tempted to assert itself more aggressively in the Himalayas?

The maritime domain poses even sharper concerns. China's disputes in the East and South China seas have persisted for decades, and the erosion, in Ukraine, of the norm proscribing the use of force to change borders could embolden Beijing. If Moscow is allowed to use force to secure territorial gains without consequences—and is even gifted with additional territories, as Trump and his envoy to Putin, [Steve Witkoff](#), seem to be proposing—then China's neighbors will fear similar tactics at sea. Taiwan, already under mounting pressure after Beijing's unilateral absorption of Hong Kong, faces particular danger.

A peace settlement in Ukraine that rewards Russian annexation will likely encourage Chinese assertiveness. Yet Beijing has reason to worry as well. Trump has described Russia and China as “[natural enemies](#)” and accused Biden of driving them closer together. His hope is to separate Moscow from Beijing. Although the “[no-limits](#)” partnership between Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping is unlikely to collapse, Trump's maneuvering could give both Moscow and Washington greater room to deal with Beijing on their own terms.

For New Delhi, however, Trump's diplomacy offers little comfort. India has long argued that Western pressure was pushing Russia into China's arms. But a U.S.-Russia rapprochement provides no strategic relief for India. Washington is simultaneously [targeting India's oil imports](#) from Russia while sparing China, the other major buyer. Worse still, Trump is courting Xi with the same gusto he displays with Putin. Convinced he can work out a productive relationship with Xi, Trump risks devaluing allies and partners across Asia as he prioritizes reordering ties with the two great powers.

This approach sets troubling precedents. In Europe, Trump has chosen to negotiate Ukraine's fate over the heads of America's allies, compelling them not only to accept the settlement but also to underwrite it. For Asia, where security rests on bilateral rather than multilateral alliances, the implications are even starker. Unlike Europe, which benefits from institutional cushions such as NATO and the EU, Asian allies operating in bilateral or informal minilateral formats are far more exposed to shifts in Washington's policies.

There is also the danger of miscalculation. Trump appears to [underestimate China's strengths](#) and overestimate Washington's ability to manage Beijing unilaterally. That leaves Asian allies—Japan, South Korea, Australia, and others—in an even more

precarious position.

Ultimately, Trump's Ukraine strategy underscores the essence of his "America First" worldview. In his second term's opening months, Asia has already seen the hard edge of this approach in the realm of trade, with alliances and security interests set aside in favor of economic nationalism. His diplomacy with Putin on Ukraine now suggests that even the security concerns of allies may be sacrificed if they clash with Trump's vision of stable ties with China and Russia.

Kishida's warning that Ukraine is the future of Asia was originally meant to highlight the importance of defending international norms against aggression. Under Trump, the phrase has acquired a different meaning: It signals the risks of relying on the U.S. in a world where America's strategic choices are increasingly transactional. For Asia's allies, the lesson is sobering. They may need to prepare for a future where American commitments are uncertain and transient, and the burden of securing the region rests more heavily on their own shoulders.

C. Raja Mohan is a columnist at *Foreign Policy*, a visiting professor at the National University of Singapore's Institute of South Asian Studies, a non-resident distinguished fellow at the Asia Society Policy Institute, and a former member of India's National Security Advisory Board.