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DIVERSIFICATION OPPORTUNITIES FOR LITHUANIA'S FOREIGN POLICY IN ASIA-PACIFIC: HOW THE NEW PARTNERS VIEW RUSSIA

Analytical review

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Summary

- In light of Lithuania's foreign policy diversification efforts in the Asia-Pacific region, kick-started in 2021, we need to assess not only the economic prospects of the country's relatively new partners, but also where they stand on the security and political issues of importance to us.
- All four countries in which Lithuania has decided to establish representation – namely, Australia, South Korea, Singapore, and Taiwan – share not only significant political, economic, and values-based similarities with each other, but also a delicate geo-strategic position between China, their largest economic partner, and the US, their key security guarantor.



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- With that said, a comparative analysis of recent key doctrine-setting and review-style foreign policy documents in each of the four countries shows significant differences with respect to their perception of Russia, Lithuania's main external threat.
- As one would expect, Russia features prominently in documents of both middle powers, Australia and South Korea; however, despite both of them being key US allies, Seoul views Moscow in noticeably more favourable terms than Canberra does, which is mostly attributable to different geo-strategic considerations.
- Although no foreign policy documents comparable in size and depth to those of Australia and South Korea have been published by Singapore and Taiwan, one may reasonably infer that they view Russia in clearly pragmatic terms (though Taipei does appear concerned by the deepening strategic partnership between Moscow and Beijing, especially its military component).
- When communicating about 'the problem with Russia' to representatives from these countries, Lithuania's foreign policy makers should be cognizant of the existing differences in attitudes towards it, while also emphasising the issues relevant to each and those shared between all. Special attention should be paid to the nature of threats to the global order posed by Moscow and, in particular, its role in the military modernisation and increasing power projection capabilities of Beijing.

Introduction

The new Government of the Republic of Lithuania, sworn in at the close of 2020, declared that the freedom and democracy agenda was going to become one of its main foreign policy priorities¹, which kick-started, among other things, an effective overhaul of its relations to countries in the Asia-Pacific region. Having withdrawn from the cooperation format between China and Central and Eastern European countries (also known as 16/17+1) in the spring of 2021, the Government focused even more on its declared foreign policy diversification in the direction of Australia, the Republic of Korea (South Korea), Singapore, and the Re-

public of China (Taiwan). Decision makers in Vilnius did not exactly make a secret of their rationale for establishing a diplomatic – or, in Taiwan's case, an economic – representation in each of the aforementioned countries by way of deepening of relations with them: it was, to a large extent, an effort to diversify the country's foreign policy away from the increasingly authoritarian and assertive (both domestically and abroad) People's Republic of China.

Although these diversification efforts appear to be driven primarily by the pragmatic need to counterbalance the economic challenge due

to losing Asia's largest market, it is also worth taking a closer look, in this context of the newly opened diplomatic horizons, at security and political issues Lithuania is the most sensitive to. This concise analytical review employs a comparative analysis of recent key doctrine-setting and review-style foreign policy documents of Australia, South Korea, Singapore, and Taiwan to this very end, namely to identify how each of the countries view Russia, Lithuania's largest external threat. Before that, however, it seems worth discussing, at least briefly, the general context of these relatively new partners of ours (relations with each of them in one form or another date back three decades), especially in relation to the US and China.

General context of the quartet

Lithuania's decision to establish representation in these countries specifically seems rational and consistent – with respect to both the aforementioned political and economic motives and the new partners' respective general characteristics. All four of them have post-modern, developed, open, and, in many cases, high-tech driven economies, ranking highly with respect to ease of doing business², economic freedom³, and corruption perception⁴ in highly recognised international rankings, which place them among the top 15, 25, and 35 countries respectively in said areas. Thanks to the economic achievements, South Korea, Singapore, and Taiwan are still seen as three of the Four Asian Tigers or Dragons (in Hong Kong's case, China's persistent efforts to suppress the city's autonomy makes increasingly difficult to ascribe this status to it), while Australia may take pride in its continuing status of a 'lucky country'.

Given the strong emphasis on values in Lithuania's foreign policy diversification efforts, it is worth noting that Singapore, unlike the other

three, is not universally recognised as a free democracy⁵. With that said, all the four countries play their important roles in the US-led and currently reviewed overall security architecture in the Indo-Pacific region, whether as *de jure* (Australia and South Korea) or *de facto* (Taiwan) allies or strategic partners (Singapore) of Washington. Australia and South Korea are internationally recognised as full-blown middle powers⁶; thanks to the size and development of their economies, they have secured membership in the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (which Lithuania joined in 2018) and the G20, while also boasting the 12th and 10th largest military expenditures in the world respectively and a close security alliance with the US (dating back to 1951 and 1953 respectively). Taiwan, which continues to have vague assurances to defend it from the US, is on the threshold of the world's top 20⁷ economic and military powers. With China as the largest economic partner of all of the four countries and the US as their guarantor of security, the steadily escalating rivalry between the two superpowers is posing some very serious dilemmas for them. Although the factor of China is also gaining new relevance for Lithuania, due to the limited scope of this analytical review, the focus here will be on a great power that features far less prominently in public documents of the quartet but is exceedingly relevant for us, i.e. Russia.

Russia in foreign policy review documents of the quartet

In publicly available review documents or at least their official government websites, the four relatively new partners of Lithuania pay close-enough attention to describing the goals of their respective foreign policies, the instruments to achieve them, and the broader international context. For the sake of consistency,

the remainder of this review will be limited to statements in their currently valid form from the four ministries of foreign affairs that are available in English. Naturally, the reviewed documents do not always manage to take into account the latest developments in international affairs.

As one would expect, the two middle powers, Australia and South Korea, provide the most comprehensive descriptions of the context of their foreign policy implementation. The main resources for analysis are the foreign policy white papers with their relatively more flexible style of review. However, compared with South Korea's annual foreign policy white paper, Australia's is a far less frequently revised document, which is why in its case the analysis will be limited to the 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper, described as the first comprehensive review of Australian international engagement for 14 years. In its more than 100 pages, the document does not pay very much attention to Russia, but its assessment of this country is unequivocal and rather similar to Lithuania's. Russia is accused of violating international law, especially with respect to its abusive and aggressive actions against Ukraine and cyber attacks during the 2016 US presidential election. The document admits that Russia's 'destabilising activities' already have a more or less direct impact on Australia and promises to work with its partners and NATO in particular to counteract them. Understandably, Canberra is particularly concerned by Russia's role in the downing of flight MH17⁸ and, by the same token, the crisis in Ukraine⁹.

South Korea's 2020 Diplomatic White Paper is described as a summary of the country's foreign policy and diplomatic activities of 2019, marking a starting point for its continued existence in the coming century.¹⁰ This revision of significantly higher importance pays sufficiently close attention to Russia. Despite not having a border with this country, it is empha-

sised that Russia is one of South Korea's 'four neighbours' (alongside North Korea, China and Japan). The document views Lithuania's and South Korea's common 'neighbour' from two different vantage points. On the one hand, the White Paper states the fact of intensified economic, military, and diplomatic cooperation between Russia and North Korea as of 2019, which was particularly evident during their first summit since 2011. Similarly as in the case of China, Seoul urges Moscow to play a 'constructive role' in the peace process in the Korean Peninsula. On the other, Russia is named as a key partner in South Korea's own New Northern Policy, with a special emphasis on their shared so-called 9-Bridge Strategy, which is an ambitious cooperation package encompassing everything from energy to tourism¹¹. With both of these projects, the current administration of President Moon Jae-in hopes to further its more general goal of foreign policy diversification. Bearing in mind that South Korea's current head of state has surpassed all his predecessors in his efforts to deepen relations with the Kremlin, there is some doubt about the continuity of this proactive trend once he leaves office in 2022, as the country's constitution requires.

No public documents comparable in size and depth to those of Australia and South Korea have been published by the two smaller countries, Singapore and Taiwan. On the website of its Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Singapore describes itself, similarly with Lithuania, as a small state. A review of external relations, available on the same website, regards Russia as a far-away European country, which is potentially important due to its economic prospects and the role it plays in the post-Soviet space and the Arctic, emphasising, respectively, Singapore's ongoing negotiations for a Free Trade Agreement with the Eurasian Economic Union, considered an instrument at Moscow's disposal, and the fact of the city-state having been admitted as an observer to the Arctic Council in 2013¹².

Lastly, the clearest statements on the issue at hand in the case of Taiwan are to be found in the usually biannual foreign policy reports to the Legislative Yuan, Taiwan's *de facto* parliament¹³. However, in light of the fact that recent reports do not mention Russia at all, it was decided to review all publicly available documents in this respect from 2006 onwards. This comparative analysis identified three topics of importance to Taiwan, namely Russia's role in global economic and security crises (primarily, Ukraine and Syria), the existing bilateral

relations (visa issues and the potential for economic and scientific cooperation), and the deepening strategic partnership between Beijing and Moscow. Despite the fact that Taiwan, much like South Korea and Singapore, takes a clearly pragmatic position with respect to Russia, the latter's military cooperation with China is a cause of serious and justified concern for Taiwan. Australia aside, it is Taiwan's perception of Russia that resembles Lithuania's the most closely.

Conclusions and recommendations

Despite the fact that all the four Asia-Pacific countries in which Lithuania decided to establish its representation actually share significant political, economic, values-based, and strategic similarities with each other, their review-style and doctrine-setting foreign policy documents delineate rather contrasting views on Russia. The three countries in closer geographical proximity to Russia regard it in clearly pragmatic terms, though South Korea and, especially, Taiwan do have their concerns about Russian closeness with North Korea and China respectively. The faraway Australia, on the other hand, takes a far more uncompromising stance on Russia, which is only to be expected given the still recent MH17 tragedy. By comparison, another key US ally and middle power, South Korea, sees Russia as a key partner in implementing its own diplomatic diversification.

When communicating about 'the problem with Russia' to representatives from these four countries, Lithuania's foreign policy makers should be cognizant of the existing differences in attitudes towards it, while also emphasising the issues relevant to each and those shared between all. At the moment, special attention should be paid to the nature of threats to the global order posed by the authoritarian Russia and, in particular, Moscow's vital role in the military modernisation and increasing power projection capabilities of Beijing. In view of the points presented above, the chances of success with respect to this goal appear to be highest in Australia and Taiwan, with South Korea, it would seem, posing the greatest challenges; the latter should be given special attention after the election in March of 2022, which may provide more favourable ground for Lithuania to disseminate its own views there.

Endnotes

- ¹ Programme of the 18th Government of the Republic of Lithuania, 11 December 2020. Accessed on 1 November 2021, <https://e-seimas.lrs.lt/portal/legalAct/lt/TAD/973c87403bc311eb8c97e01ffe050e1c>.
- ² The World Bank, 'Ease of Doing Business Rank 2020'. Accessed on 1 November 2021, <https://www.doingbusiness.org/en/rankings>.
- ³ Heritage Foundation, '2021 Index of Economic Freedom'. Accessed on 3 November 2021, <https://www.heritage.org/index/ranking>.
- ⁴ Transparency International, 'Corruption Perception Index 2020'. Accessed on 5 November 2021, <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2020/index/nzl>.
- ⁵ Freedom House, 'Freedom in the World 2021'. Accessed on 6 November 2021, <https://freedomhouse.org/explore-the-map?type=fotn&year=2021>.
- ⁶ Australia and South Korea recognise each other's status as a middle power through participating in MIKTA, a multi-lateral partnership format (along with Mexico, Indonesia and Turkey); accessed on 6 November 2021, <http://mikta.org/>.
- ⁷ Diego Lopes da Silva, Nan Tian and Alexandra Marksteiner, 'Trends in World Military Expenditure, 2020', *SIPRI Fact Sheet*, April 2020. Accessed on 6 November 2021, https://sipri.org/sites/default/files/2021-04/fs_2104_milex_0.pdf.
- ⁸ In terms of casualties of the tragedy, Australia is behind only the Netherlands and Malaysia.
- ⁹ Government of Australia, '2017 Foreign Policy White Paper', Canberra, 2017. Accessed on 8 November 2021, <https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/2017-foreign-policy-white-paper.pdf>.
- ¹⁰ That year, Korea celebrated its 100th anniversary of the March 1st Movement, which started decades-long resistance against Japanese occupation.
- ¹¹ Presidential Committee on Northern Economic Cooperation, '9-Bridge Strategy'. Accessed on 8 November 2021, https://www.bukbang.go.kr/bukbang_en/vision_policy/9-bridge/.
- ¹² Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Singapore, 'Europe: overview'. Accessed on 8 November 2021, <https://www.mfa.gov.sg/SINGAPORES-FOREIGN-POLICY/Countries-and-Regions/Europe>.
- ¹³ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of China (Taiwan), 'Reports'. Accessed on 10 November 2021, https://en.mofa.gov.tw/News_Mid.aspx?n=1303&sms=268.

