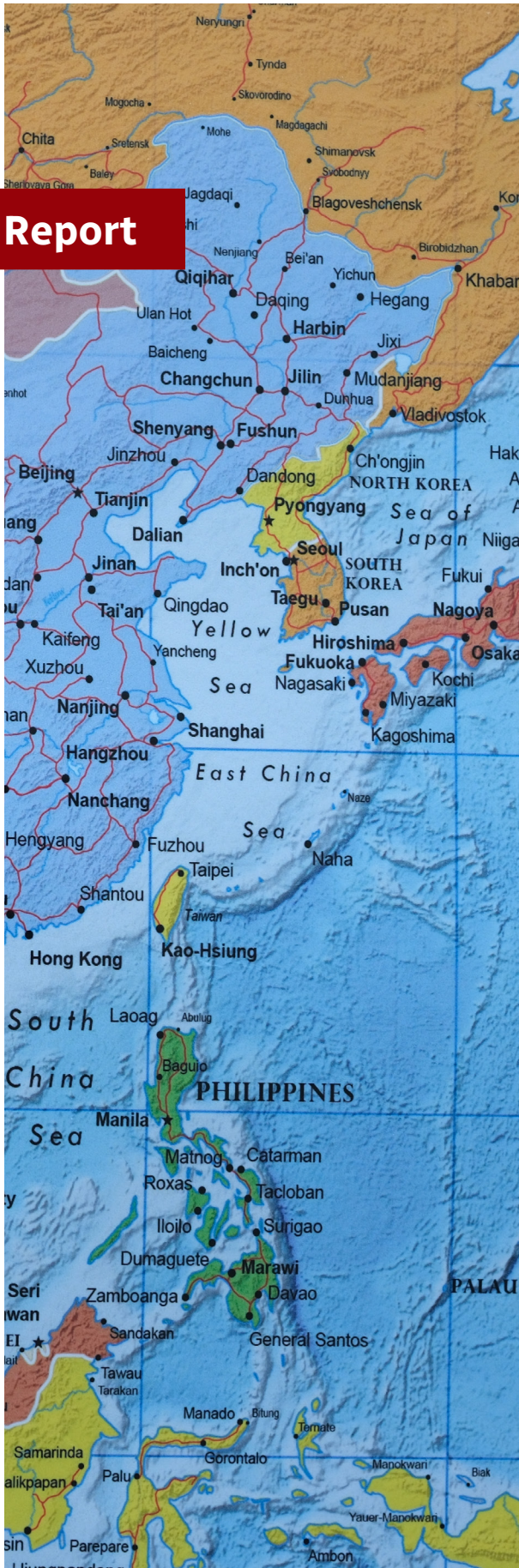


Report



Navigating China and the Indo-Pacific

Strategic Recalibration in Czechia and Lithuania

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Table of Contents

Summary	4
Introduction	5
Embracing the Indo-Pacific Framework	7
Czechia's Indo-Pacific Strategy	9
Lithuania's Indo-Pacific Strategy	12
Insights From Czechia and Lithuania	16
Conclusion	18
Recommendations	19
Endnotes	21

Summary

The EU's approach to China has evolved from engagement and economic cooperation toward greater strategic caution, diversification, and regional awareness. Growing concerns over supply-chain vulnerabilities, economic dependencies, and geopolitical risks have prompted a more nuanced European stance in ties with Beijing. The COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's war in Ukraine further accelerated these debates, highlighting the EU's exposure to external shocks and the need to balance economic engagement with security and resilience. This broader reflection has coincided with the EU's adoption of the Indo-Pacific framework, which situates China in a regional context and emphasizes partnerships, multilateralism, and strategic diversification.

Smaller member states in Central and Eastern Europe have played a distinctive role in this evolution. Notably, Czechia and Lithuania have developed and published respective Indo-Pacific strategies despite their limited historical ties to the region and capacities for engagement there. These strategies serve multiple purposes: signaling foreign policy agency and values, institutionalizing a recalibrated approach toward China, and aligning with broader EU and transatlantic priorities. Lithuania's approach has been assertive and values-driven, framing China as a systemic challenge and emphasizing alignment with democratic partners in the Indo-Pacific. Czechia's strategy is more pragmatic and measured, focusing on economic security, diversification, and selective engagement with partners such as India, Japan, and South Korea. The two countries face similar constraints on their ability to implement their strategies, including a limited diplomatic presence in the region and small institutional capacity, which have led them to prioritize among partners and thematic areas.

Czechia and Lithuania illustrate the diversity of approaches to China within the EU. Larger member states such as France and Germany have traditionally shaped EU policy through their economic weight and global influence, but these two cases highlight the capacity of smaller members for agency and contribution, even with their limited resources. Differences in tone, implementation, and strategic focus across member states underscore the challenges of coherence in EU policy, while demonstrating the value of national initiatives. National strategies enrich the EU's Indo-Pacific engagement by adding specificity and direction, even as they reveal disparities in ambition and capacity. When these are integrated thoughtfully with EU initiatives, the diverse resources and priorities of members can complement the EU's overall engagement and strengthen its collective influence in the Indo-Pacific.

An evaluation of the experience of Czechia and Lithuania with their Indo-Pacific strategies shows that they need to dedicate adequate funding to implementation, to develop follow-up mechanisms and plans, to strengthen their institutional expertise in the region, to pursue greater specialization in terms of themes and countries engaged, to mainstream the strategies in their diplomatic engagements, and to increase strategic communication and visibility around them. Beyond the national level, these two cases show the need to formalize EU coordination and information-sharing mechanisms on Indo-Pacific policy so as to strengthen EU-level coherence without limiting national flexibility, to include small member states' perspective in the Global Gateway initiative for infrastructure, and to develop the potential for coordination on the Indo-Pacific among countries in Central and Eastern Europe.

Introduction

The approach to China in the United States and the EU has evolved significantly over the past years. Under President Barack Obama, the United States' "pivot to Asia" sought to counterbalance China's rise through diplomacy, trade, and military presence. In his first term, President Donald Trump took a much more confrontational approach, launching a trade war with China by imposing tariffs on Chinese goods, restricting technology transfers, and labelling China a strategic rival. President Joe Biden took a tough approach but with a greater focus on alliances and strengthening ties with Indo-Pacific partners while managing tensions. Trump has again imposed tariffs on China at the start of his second term. As the Chinese-US rivalry deepens, the EU has been drawn into the strategic equation and increasingly aligned itself with Washington on economic security, supply-chain resilience, and reducing dependencies on China.

Although relations have deteriorated in recent years, the EU has been cautious in its dealings with China. Economic cooperation and diplomatic engagement once dominated, but increasing geopolitical tensions, security concerns, and growing awareness of economic dependencies have led to a reassessment. Developments such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine intensified and accelerated the discussion on European strategic autonomy and decoupling from China. They highlighted vulnerabilities in supply chains for Europe, prompting a more urgent debate on economic resilience. This has led to a stronger push for diversification in key industries and efforts to balance economic engagement with strategic safeguards. The EU's focus on economic security and competitiveness has grown. However, the current trade disputes sparked by the Trump administration's global tariff policy seem to be reopening space in the EU for discussions about re-engagement with China. In some member states, such as Spain, the debate started turning to a more favorable view of China quickly after the change in tariff policy in Washington. However, despite some initial signals about a possible warming, the EU-China summit in July did not indicate any closer cooperation and relations remain strained, mainly due to Beijing's partnership with Russia.

The EU's changing approach to China has gradually expanded into a broader discussion about the Indo-Pacific and shifted from bilateral engagement with Beijing to a more regional perspective. Rather than solely addressing China's influence, EU policymakers now recognize the Indo-Pacific as a key arena for economic security, supply-chain resilience, geopolitical influence, and strategic competition. The EU's shift of focus from confrontation with China to collaboration with other countries in the region is motivated by the need to find new partnerships and diversify supply chains to decrease dependency on China. As concerns over economic security and overreliance on China grow, diversifying economic ties and strengthening cooperation with like-minded regional actors, such as Japan, South Korea, and Southeast Asian countries, has become a priority. Furthermore, the EU adopting the Indo-Pacific concept, which originated in Japan and has been increasingly accepted by other actors such as the United States, helps highlight other regional powers, such as India, and turn the focus attention away from only China. The EU's recalibration allows for a more flexible and sustainable long-term strategy.

The shift in attitude toward relations with China by placing it in a broad regional context has in several cases been accompanied by the publication of an official strategic document. The EU did so in its Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific in 2021.¹ Germany published its Policy Guidelines for the Indo-Pacific in 2020² and its Strategy

on China in 2023,³ while France released its Indo-Pacific Strategy in 2021.⁴ Some smaller member states have also published an Indo-Pacific strategy. The Netherlands was the first in 2020,⁵ followed by Czechia in 2022,⁶ and Lithuania⁷ and Ireland⁸ in 2023.

Some EU members have used the publication of an Indo-Pacific strategy to signal their evolving stance and to institutionalize it within an official framework. However, these strategies reveal uneven and often fragmented approaches, much like the broader EU one to China. Although there has been a trend toward securitizing relations with China, achieving coherence among member states remains challenging⁹. Larger ones such as France and Germany have traditionally driven the EU debate, primarily due to their economic weight and global influence. In parallel, the Indo-Pacific strategies across the EU differ significantly in scope and ambition, reflecting divergences in approaches to China. While some members are seeking to reduce dependence on China and to deepen regional partnerships, others are more cautious, aiming to balance their economic interests with strategic considerations.

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Czechia and Lithuania have been pioneers in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) in recalibrating their relations with China, and they have used their strategies to signal this. Despite their limited historical ties or engagement capacities in the Indo-Pacific, their decision to publish such a strategic document is significant, more so as it is not a common practice for them to publish similar documents and guidelines¹⁰. Doing so allows them to align themselves with broader global trends and to assert their foreign policy agency in a space traditionally dominated by larger EU members. The fact that smaller member states published Indo-Pacific strategies shows that recognition of the geopolitical and economic significance of the region is not restricted to the EU's largest economies.

Czechia and Lithuania published their strategies under different circumstances, but the context in both cases was recalibrating relations with China. Examining how these two smaller states developed and implemented their strategies sheds light on the diversity of approaches within the EU. Understanding their motivations and methods, and the challenges they face is crucial for ensuring a unified EU policy that represents the interests of all member states. Particularly, the case of Lithuania shows that a bold foreign policy of a small country can significantly affect the broader EU-Chinese dynamic.

This paper starts by reviewing the evolution of China–CEE relations and the general advantages and risks of adopting a formal strategy for the only two CEE countries to have done so for the Indo-Pacific: Czechia and Lithuania. The subsequent sections focus on these two cases, looking first at the background of their bilateral relations with China, then analyzing their respective Indo-Pacific strategy, its strategic rationale, key pillars, and implementation, while situating both within a broader regional context. The paper concludes with comparative insights and policy recommendations.

Embracing the Indo-Pacific Framework

The relationship between China and the Central and Eastern European countries has undergone significant transformations over the past decade. In 2012, Beijing initiated the 16+1 cooperation framework to strengthen and expand cooperation with 16 post-communist countries in Central, Eastern, and Southeastern Europe, particularly in the investment and business sectors. (The name changed to 17+1 when Greece joined and then to 14+1 when the Baltic states left.) This was closely linked to its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which was introduced a year later to promote infrastructure development and economic integration globally.

Many CEE countries embraced the 16+1 framework and the BRI, anticipating economic benefits through increased Chinese investments and enhanced trade relations.¹¹ However, the anticipated influx of Chinese capital and the realization of large-scale infrastructure projects often did not materialize. Furthermore, the adverse reactions from the United States and the EU to the BRI increased over time, with an expectation that the ties with China could fuel democratic backsliding in the region. All this led to growing skepticisms in CEE countries about the tangible benefits of the cooperation. Over time, divergences emerged within the region regarding engagement with China. While some countries, such as Hungary, continued to pursue closer ties, growing suspicion toward Beijing prompted others to leave the 16+1 format. Lithuania withdrew in 2021, followed by Latvia and Estonia in 2022, citing dissatisfaction with outcomes and concerns over China's foreign policy. Other countries, such as Czechia, became less active participants. This fragmentation reflects the debates within the EU about balancing economic interests with security considerations in engagement with China. While several CEE countries have reassessed their relations with China and embraced a broader focus on the Indo-Pacific, only Czechia and Lithuania have chosen to articulate this shift in a formal strategic document. For two countries where issuing these is not standard practice, the publication of an Indo-Pacific strategy was a notable step.

While several CEE countries have reassessed their relations with China and embraced a broader focus on the Indo-Pacific, only Czechia and Lithuania have chosen to articulate this shift in a formal strategic document.

Developing and publishing a foreign policy strategy offers domestic and international advantages for a country. The drafting fosters a debate on the issue at hand and helps to build consensus. The process can include a broad range of stakeholders from civil society to the private sector, which can contribute to a more coherent result. It enhances transparency by outlining clear objectives, fostering greater trust among the public, businesses, and international partners. Furthermore, publishing a strategy enables knowledge development and a more nuanced understanding of complex geopolitical and economic issues. It promotes greater alignment among government institutions by providing a coherent framework that applies across different sectors. Moreover, publishing a strategy demonstrates the importance of the issue at hand, signaling to the public and international partners one's commitment to addressing the relevant challenges and opportunities. Public strategies also aim to forge alignment within the EU. There can also be negatives to publishing a foreign policy strategy. It risks losing relevance and effectiveness without regularly updating, which can be challenging in a fast-evolving

geopolitical environment. Furthermore, some countries prefer having a strategy that is kept confidential to allow for greater diplomatic flexibility. Publishing a strategy can also lead to diplomatic pushback, especially if it targets one or a group of countries. Many strategies lack concrete action plans or allocated budgets, making their practical execution uncertain. Examining their implementation is crucial for several reasons. First, it ensures that policies remain aligned with strategic interests and that decision-making avoids contradictions and inconsistencies. Second, it provides an opportunity to identify risks and weaknesses, allowing policymakers to refine their approach and adapt to evolving geopolitical realities. A failure to follow up on the strategy may lead to “promise fatigue,” where unfulfilled commitments erode trust and reduce the willingness to cooperate in the future. Ensuring that strategies are actionable, realistic, and consistently implemented is critical to maintaining credibility and fostering long-term engagement. In the case of policy toward China, one risk in adopting a formal strategy is that Beijing may perceive it as confrontational or interpret it as aligning with broader containment efforts, which can lead to a strain in relations. Furthermore, in an Indo-Pacific strategy it may be challenging to balance approaches to and relations with the various countries in the region.

By developing and publishing an Indo-Pacific strategy, Czechia and Lithuania aligned themselves with a broader international trend¹², signaled their evolving foreign policy priorities and asserted their agency within a space often shaped by larger EU members. These two small countries decided on this course of action despite the evident limitations to what they can meaningfully achieve in a distant region where neither has particular economic or military weight. This raises questions about long-term sustainability of their strategies. Without dedicated resources or a concrete action plan, there is a danger that these could remain largely symbolic, adding to the risk of “promise fatigue”. (Similarly, from China’s perspective, this has been evident in the implementation of the BRI in the EU, where in several cases ambitious promises and high expectations went unmet, leading to growing skepticism and a decline in trust.)

In both cases, the publication of the Indo-Pacific strategy was part of a broader foreign policy recalibration moving away from embracing economic cooperation with China.

In both cases, the publication of the Indo-Pacific strategy was part of a broader foreign policy recalibration moving away from embracing economic cooperation with China. In Czechia, the strategy was prepared in 2020–2021, under the previous government, and was finalized in the context of the country’s presidency of the Council of the EU in 2022. This timing helped create a sense of continuity with the preceding French presidency, which had placed considerable emphasis on the Indo-Pacific, embedding the Czech approach within a broader EU context. In Lithuania’s case, the strategy can be seen as the consolidation in one comprehensive document of a series of earlier steps that reflected an increasingly critical stance toward China. Although there are similarities in the two cases, the Czech and Lithuanian strategies were developed in somewhat different contexts through processes shaped by each country’s domestic political landscape and broader foreign policy priorities. There remains limited knowledge about the motivations behind their publication and even less clarity on government plans for implementation or evaluation mechanisms. Nevertheless, and even if it is too early to assess the implementation

of either strategy fully, the initial steps both countries have taken offer insight into the practical challenges and strategic advantages of having published these documents.

Czechia's Indo-Pacific Strategy

Czechia's approach to cooperation with China have undergone significant shifts over the past ten years. Compared to countries in Western Europe, it has relatively limited economic ties to China. However, it has an important, sometimes less visible, indirect connections through German industry's China ties, as Czech manufacturing is connected to German supply chains, providing critical intermediate goods (especially in automotive and machinery) that are assembled in Germany and re-exported as high-value finished products.¹³ Czechia joined the 16+1 cooperation framework and signed a memorandum of understanding with Beijing on the BRI in 2015. President Miloš Zeman (2013–2023) was a strong proponent of seeing China as a strategic partner. He strongly advocated closer ties, which culminated with President Xi Jinping visiting Prague in 2016. However, the Czech position was not unified as the government led by Prime Minister Andrej Babiš (2017–2021) took a pragmatic but not overly friendly approach toward China. At the other end of the spectrum, actors such as the president of the Senate, Jaroslav Kubera, or the mayor of Prague, Zdeněk Hřib, expressed clear values-based support for Taiwan. As the promises of economic benefits from engagement with China did not materialize and there were domestic political scandals connected with cooperation with Beijing, the relationship slowly deteriorated and received less attention. The COVID-19 pandemic further accelerated the shifting away from China.

The new center-right coalition government that took office in 2021, with Jan Lipavský as minister of foreign affairs, signaled it would take a more assertive stance on China. But although the rhetoric changed, significant matching policy steps did not follow, and a more balanced approach was taken. For example, Czechia did not follow suit when the Baltic states left the 16+1 format, calling it virtually nonexistent and opting for passive participation¹⁴. Still, the Czech discourse on China is one of the more assertive within the EU. While China became less identified as an isolated challenge, Prague has integrated its relations with it into a larger approach focused on the Indo-Pacific. At the time of writing, it was widely expected that the parliamentary elections in October 2025 would result in a change of government with Babiš and his party returning to office. Should this be the case, it is unlikely to change the course of foreign policy dramatically. While a second Babiš government might be more likely to engage with China on pragmatic terms than take a values-based approach, it is unlikely to go in the direction of, for example, Hungary under Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. Nevertheless, with increased economic cooperation between the EU and China seeming a possibility in the latest geopolitical context, the future of Czechia's relations with Beijing is unclear.

Strategic Rationale for Indo-Pacific Engagement

The development and adoption of Czechia's Strategy for Cooperation with the Indo-Pacific was marked by some degree of continuity in institutional leadership and the broader evolution of the country's foreign policy. The process initiated by the Babiš government built on earlier strategic thinking, notably a prior Asia-focused strategic

approach from 2015 to 2018.¹⁵ The strategy did not just redefine the geographic focus under the Indo-Pacific label; it also represented an updating and deepening of existing engagement with the region. Key figures involved in its formulation had long-standing regional experience. The preparation was tied to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' department and officials focused previously on China, including through previous diplomatic postings in Beijing and involvement in formats such as 16+1. Ministry officials see the strategy as embodying a higher political commitment to the region and the connected agendas. However, there is not much of a new agenda stemming from it. The ministry led a process based on its broad regional expertise, which included consultations with different stakeholders and external experts. However, it was the driving force and external input was limited. The main goal was to create a particular set of guidelines to keep up with global developments and the rising importance of the region.

One notable institutional development was transforming an inter-ministerial group focused on China into a broader Indo-Pacific working group. While the term Indo-Pacific has been adopted, it remains problematic in practice. For example, Central Asia is not included in the Indo-Pacific strategy but remains a part of the Indo-Pacific department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This omission is notable given that the ministry simultaneously proclaims importance of trade and economic relations with Central Asia, especially as a space where Chinese and Russian influence intersect, and where Czechia seeks to maintain a balanced approach.¹⁶

The strategy's publication was timed to coincide with Czechia's presidency of the Council of the EU in the second half of 2022 and reflected a continuation of priorities set by France during its preceding presidency. Paris had advanced the Indo-Pacific agenda at the EU level and Prague maintained this trajectory, contributing to a sense of strategic coherence for the EU. While the Indo-Pacific was not the primary focus of the Czech presidency, mainly due to the overriding urgency of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, it was one of its few clearly defined regional priorities. Publishing the strategy at this point thus allowed Czechia to reinforce its alignment with the EU and transatlantic partners, with Prague using the momentum created by its EU leadership role to amplify the visibility and relevance of its strategic positioning toward the Indo-Pacific.

Moreover, the Indo-Pacific strategy served a signaling purpose. While Czechia does not possess substantial capacity for hard-security engagement in the region, the strategy is intended as a diplomatic instrument to reinforce ties with like-minded partners in the region. When promoting and organizing events during its EU presidency, Czechia included Indo-Pacific countries as well as the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada. However, this inclusive approach was not universally welcomed across the EU.¹⁷

Key Pillars of the Indo-Pacific Strategy

According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Indo-Pacific strategy deliberately has a broad focus to enable flexibility when engaging with such a diverse region. It is structured around four overarching priorities: partnership, security, prosperity, and sustainability. In the security domain, particular attention is given to cybersecurity, underscored by the appointment of a special envoy for cybersecurity in the Indo-Pacific. Other priorities include economic cooperation, sustainable trade, energy security, and infrastructure connectivity.

While values-based partnerships and the promotion of human rights are central to the document, its overall tone is one of pragmatism, which is mentioned as one of the principles for achieving its goals. The strategy strongly emphasizes alignment with key international actors, including the United States, the EU, NATO, and the Visegrád Group. Although it treats China as part of the region, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has also been working on developing a separate strategic approach toward China, however, in shape of internal guidelines.¹⁸

Translating Strategy Into Action

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs primarily sees Czechia's Indo-Pacific strategy as a political commitment toward the region. Experts interviewed mainly perceive it as a set of guidelines that promotes activities toward the region and consolidates them on different levels. However, the strategy does not necessarily bring new elements to the conduct of foreign policy toward the region. Unlike that of other countries such as Canada, which have allocated specific funding streams to their Indo-Pacific engagement, the Czech approach relies on existing structures. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs is central to the coordination and monitoring process, overseeing the implementation through an inter-ministerial group. No specific action plan has been drawn up to accompany the strategy.

Implementation has focused mainly on diplomatic activity and convening platforms for engagement. Czechia has organized and participated in regional conferences and events, facilitating networking among EU and Indo-Pacific actors. These efforts are not necessarily resource-intensive and aim at maintaining the country's visibility and cultivating long-term relationships. Within the region, Czechia aims to act as a bridge between some Indo-Pacific actors and the EU, positioning itself as a neutral and constructive partner, which is appreciated on both sides. Nevertheless, some actors in the Czech public sphere see the current relations with the Indo-Pacific as "business as usual" and perceive the work done around the strategy to be a little stuck.

There is a generation of Czech diplomats with long-standing experience in the Indo-Pacific, often possessing valuable linguistic and cultural knowledge. This institutional capacity, built over years of engagement, provides a strong foundation for current policy. However, governmental and nongovernmental experts note a persistent need to further deepen regional expertise, particularly in light of the growing complexity of Indo-Pacific affairs.

The Visegrád Group Context

The Czech strategy mentions explicitly the Visegrád Group of Czechia, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia (V4) as one of the tools that can be used to achieve its goals in the Indo-Pacific. They can through the V4+ format engage in minilateral cooperation with other countries. For example, V4+Korea or V4+Japan formats offer a platform for regular dialogue and cooperation with different priority areas such as digitalization or security, although these exchanges are not always regular or significant in terms of returns on the investment in them. This format supports Czechia's approach to engaging with like-minded Indo-Pacific partners.

The other V4 countries have not published an Indo-Pacific strategy, and the level of strategic engagement with the region within the group is uneven. All four see the Indo-Pacific as an economic opportunity, and Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia have shown a growing interest in it. While none has formally exited the 16+1 format or the

BRI, their participation has become increasingly subdued in recent years. Hungary has maintained an openly cooperative relationship with China, actively engaging in the 16+1 and the BRI and continuing to welcome Chinese investments. It prioritizes bilateral economic ties with China, often diverging from the EU's positions. Poland has increasingly expressed a more critical perception of China, particularly in light of Beijing's growing ties with Russia and assertive behavior on the international stage. It has intensified political and security dialogues with key Indo-Pacific partners, particularly Japan and South Korea. Slovakia has participated in regional forums and signaled interest in deeper economic cooperation with Indo-Pacific countries. The change in government in 2024 has also led to a greater emphasis on China as a partner.

Lithuania's Indo-Pacific Strategy

Lithuania has relatively limited economic ties with China compared to Western European countries and thus a lower dependence on it. However, some of its high-value-added industrial sectors, such as laser manufacturing, depend heavily on trade with China. The case of Lithuania dramatically changing its approach to China shows that coercive measures taken by China can be impactful even for a country with a low economic dependence on it.

When China launched the 16+1 and the BRI, Lithuania initially engaged with it by signing an official memorandum of understanding on the BRI in 2017. However, the promised economic benefits failed to materialize, prompting growing skepticism in the country about the relationship. At the same time, security considerations became more prominent, particularly as concerns over Chinese investments in critical infrastructure, such as the Klaipeda port, were increasingly highlighted. Signs of a shifting approach began to emerge even before the election of a new center-right government in 2020. The change then became markedly pronounced with the new minister of foreign affairs, Gabrielius Landsbergis, proclaimed a values-based foreign policy agenda.

In 2021, the government took several steps that led to a serious rift in relations with China while starting to redirect the focus toward the Indo-Pacific, mainly on the diplomatic front. Between 2020 and 2022, Lithuania opened embassies in Australia, Singapore, and South Korea. Meanwhile, India opened an embassy in Lithuania and South Korea expressed the intention to do the same. At the beginning of this year, Australia opened a trade representative office in Vilnius.

In 2021, the government announced that a Taiwanese Representative Office would be opened in Vilnius that year, the choice of name for it being notable as Taiwan usually calls them Taipei Representative Offices or Taipei Economic and Cultural Offices. China reacted by taking several economic-coercion measures against Lithuania. Rather than imposing direct trade barriers, it opted for indirect tactics, such as the removal of Lithuania's name from its customs systems. China also downgraded diplomatic relations with the country. Vilnius received support from the EU, the United States, and other international partners, with the EU opening a case against Beijing at the World Trade Organization. This development in relations between Lithuania and China thus had a significant impact and repercussions even for EU-Chinese ties. Intensifying its policy pivot, Lithuania announced its exit from

the 16+1 format in 2021. This underscored its disillusionment with Beijing and made it a driving force behind the format's decline across Central and Eastern Europe.

Lithuania's Indo-Pacific Strategy is primarily a formalization and continuation of decisions and steps taken around these events regarding China and Taiwan. It was announced strategically shortly before the NATO summit in Vilnius in July 2023 and clearly signaled the government's commitment to a values-driven foreign policy. The new government that took office in 2024 proclaimed continuity in the values-based foreign policy, but there have been signs that it is willing to make a foreign policy shift. For example, in the context of the Trump administration's policies and their impact of considerations of increased economic cooperation with China in the EU, Prime Minister Gintautas Paluckas in April would seek to restore diplomatic relations with Beijing.¹⁹ Following his resignation in August amid a corruption scandal, a new coalition government was formed. It has already signaled a more pragmatic approach, expressing willingness to restore diplomatic relations, while stating that previous positions on Taiwan will not be abandoned and that China remains a challenge.²⁰ Overall, since the peak of the diplomatic spat, economic ties are, in practice, mostly back to normal. Trade has increased in certain areas, and some niche technology imports remain challenging to replace.

Strategic Rationale for Indo-Pacific Engagement

Lithuania's Indo-Pacific Strategy was championed by key individuals within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, whose leadership, institutional priorities, and commitment to a values-based foreign policy shaped its development and drove its adoption. As countries in Europe and beyond were beginning to reassess their approach to the Indo-Pacific, with several EU members, Canada, and the United States formulating new strategies, Lithuanian leaders saw an opportunity to align the country with these global trends.

As a small country with limited capacity for direct security cooperation in the region, Lithuania instead relies on diplomatic signaling. It has used the development of its Indo-Pacific Strategy to assert its positioning and commitment to values shared with countries in the region. The document also serves as a diplomatic tool to strengthen ties with key allies outside the region, particularly the United States. Its publication was, at least implicitly, a signal of Lithuania's alignment with Washington's approach, with public communication playing a crucial role. Vilnius reinforced its position within the transatlantic framework by making a clear statement on the Indo-Pacific. At the same time, the growing perception of China and Russia as posing intertwined threats has further driven Lithuania's push for closer alignment with the United States. Given geographic proximity to Russia and its concerns over security in the Baltic region, for Vilnius strengthening ties with Washington is not only about the Indo-Pacific but also about ensuring continued US support against security threats in its own region.

The Decision-Making Process

After the Ministry of Foreign Affairs initiated the development of the Indo-Pacific strategy in 2021 it took on the coordinating role, bringing together various domestic actors. That included representatives from the public and private sectors, academics, and other stakeholders. Since many of these had little prior engagement with the Indo-Pacific, integrating them into the process was challenging. Some institutions, particularly those without existing

activities in the region, did not initially see the necessity or benefits of their involvement. However, the drafting process fostered inter-institutional dialogue and gradually increased awareness of the region's growing importance outside the ministry. Despite difficulties securing engagement across institutions, the process ultimately contributed to institutional learning and a more profound recognition of the Indo-Pacific's relevance for different actors. New networks and lines of communication were established.

To guide the development of the strategy, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs engaged external experts as it did not have a significant capacity in Indo-Pacific matters. Workshops with experts and stakeholders were organized that allowed academics and policymakers to contribute their perspectives. A working group was set up to ensure that expert insights shaped the document, a process that included experts look back on positively.²¹

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs also studied and used as reference documents produced by other actors, particularly the strategies of the EU, Czechia, and Canada, rather than attempting to create an entirely new framework. Consultations with key partners, including the United States, Canada, NATO headquarters, and several Indo-Pacific countries. The United States played an important role in discussing the strategy and offering support for its implementation, as well as in helping Lithuania establish relations in the region.

During the process, the draft strategy evolved from a working document with a sharper tone and quite critical of China to a toned-down version to maintain diplomatic balance while still asserting the Lithuanian government's position based on its values-based approach to international affairs. Several Lithuanian officials see the strategy as a mostly cooperative document that take a strong position toward China.²² The strategy was positively received by Lithuania's partners, including in the Indo-Pacific. However, it has been primarily considered there as the opening of a conversation and a stepping stone for future cooperation and the gradual building of mutual trust.

Key Pillars of the Strategy

Lithuania's Indo-Pacific Strategy is structured around three pillars: security, economic cooperation, and soft-power networks. The security component emphasizes collaboration in defense and cybersecurity with Indo-Pacific partners, underscoring the importance of maritime security and freedom of navigation. The Klaipeda port is highlighted as a strategic entry point to EU markets for Indo-Pacific countries that uphold a rules-based order and the rule of law. Regarding economic cooperation, the document seeks strategic diversification by identifying sectors such as the laser industry, biotechnology, and artificial intelligence as natural areas for deeper engagement with Indo-Pacific partners. For example, the laser industry is one of Lithuania's leading sectors and one in which the country is a global leader, but is highly dependent on China for manufacturing inputs and exports.²³ The soft-power pillar aims to establish people-to-people networks and to enhance cultural and academic exchanges to bolster Lithuania's presence and influence in the Indo-Pacific. A substantial part of this pillar focuses on academic cooperation and education, which is vital for the future development of collaboration, as there is a lack of capacity for Indo-Pacific regional and country experts in Lithuania.

The strategy leverages Lithuania's membership in the EU and NATO to promote a unified European approach to the Indo-Pacific while maintaining close cooperation with the United States. It explicitly aligns Lithuania with the

EU strategy, seeking to strengthen the country's role within EU initiatives in the region and to deepen engagement with democratic partners. Taiwan has a significant position within the strategy. Cooperation with it is particularly encouraged in high-tech sectors, where its expertise aligns with Lithuania's interests. While many perceive the strategy as cooperative and non-confrontational, it implicitly challenges the ambitions of China and Russia. It states that Beijing's military support for Moscow's war against Ukraine or using force or coercion to change the status quo in the Taiwan Strait are red lines.²⁴

The language used regarding China in Lithuania's strategy is harsher than that found in the strategies of other EU members, the United States, or Canada. China is described as a challenge to the country's interests, security, and values, with the strategy asserting that it seeks to undermine the rules-based international order. It also draws a clear red line on Taiwan's status. Although any military role for Lithuania in a potential Taiwan conflict would be negligible, the strategy signals a strong political stance.

Translating Strategy into Action

The implementation of Lithuania's Indo-Pacific Strategy is still in its early stages, making it too soon to assess its full impact. However, the initial steps provide insight into how the process is unfolding. Lithuania had begun shaping its regional engagement before the publication of the strategy. It established a strategic partnership with Japan in 2022 and diplomatic ties with key Indo-Pacific states were already being developed. Nevertheless, the adoption of the strategy has reinforced the political will to engage with the region and provided greater structure to outreach efforts. One of the most tangible developments has been increased diplomatic representation and high-level visits in the region. Lithuania's diplomatic presence remains small, however, limiting its ability to expand engagement. The next planned step on the diplomatic front is appointing a new cultural attaché covering the region.

The strategy is implemented through an action plan that has not been made public. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs leads an inter-institutional working group of more than 40 institutions, ensuring broad engagement across government agencies. The initial action plan covered only one year to assess and map the activities of the stakeholders involved. The next iteration has a three-year timeframe (2025–2027). Since the first-year plan was primarily focused on assessment rather than introducing new initiatives, much of what occurred since the strategy was published would have happened regardless of whether there was one or not. However, a monitoring process is in place to ensure that progress is tracked and that the findings from the initial phase shape the direction of the current plan. Most assessments show that the initial action plan has largely been completed, with some actors estimating an 80% success rate. This is partly due to its relatively modest ambitions, though. A key challenge has been linking specific actions to broader strategic objectives. This lack of coherence between individual measures and overarching goals remains a point of discussion as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs moves toward a more structured approach to implementation.

One of the main problems regarding the implementation of the strategy is that no specific funding has been allocated to this. The different domestic actors, ministries, and agencies therefore need to act independently. Thematic and regional specialization is the likely way forward to allocate available resources to engagement in the Indo-Pacific strategically. As a result, the focus is on deepening cooperation with select partners rather

than attempting a widespread regional presence. Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and South Korea have been the priority, with Japan and South Korea as key economic and diplomatic partners. While Tokyo and Vilnius have had a strategic partnership since 2022, the interest from Seoul has been more moderate. Closer cooperation with India and Vietnam is also under consideration, but this is more complicated by the fact that the political regimes in both countries do not fit in with a values-based foreign policy.

There has been some movement in economic engagement, though the extent to which this is attributable to the strategy is unclear. Exports to the Indo-Pacific have grown but comprehensive trade diversification will take time. Direct economic ties remain limited, and market entry in the Indo-Pacific countries is challenging, requiring sustained effort and relationship-building. In this regard, the transatlantic partnership was vital as the United States was willing to support Lithuania's efforts to diversify its markets in the region, though things may be more uncertain with the Trump administration.

The Baltic States and the Indo-Pacific

Lithuania has taken a significantly stronger stance on relations with China than its Baltic neighbors Estonia and Latvia, which some explain as relating to the country's national identity, which strongly emphasizes historical memory, sovereignty,²⁵ and resistance to authoritarian influence, usually connected to the experience of being the first republic to proclaim its independence from the Soviet Union. The other two countries have maintained a more moderate and pragmatic approach, compared to Lithuania's pursuit of a values-based foreign policy. They have been more cautious, avoiding overt confrontation with China while aligning themselves with EU policies. Like Lithuania, though, Estonia and Latvia support the EU's definition of China as a cooperation and negotiating partner, an economic competitor, and a systemic rival, and continue to prioritize EU-led engagement with Beijing, ensuring that relations are conducted within the framework of EU interests and values.

While Estonia and Latvia have not adopted an official strategy on Indo-Pacific or China, representatives of both were included in Lithuania's consultation process. Latvia has considered producing one, but nothing regarding this has been announced yet.

Although there was a divergence in their approach, the three Baltic states decided to withdraw from the 16+1 cooperation framework with China. Lithuania led by exiting in 2021, citing a lack of economic benefits and growing concerns over China's geopolitical ambitions. Latvia and Estonia followed suit in 2022, citing similar reasons but particularly concerns over China's alignment with Russia. Their exit from the initiative marked a decisive shift from direct engagement with China and was in contrast with the stand of other CEE countries.

Insights From Czechia and Lithuania

Czechia and Lithuania have used the Indo-Pacific framework to recalibrate their China policy and to reposition themselves within EU and transatlantic strategic debates. While both present their Indo-Pacific strategies as

expressions of their foreign policy agency, their differing approaches reflect contrasting strategic cultures and domestic political drivers. Lithuania pursued a more assertive, values-driven pivot under a center-right government that explicitly framed China as a systemic challenge. This normative posture is visible in the tone and language of the strategy, which is closely aligned with that of broader democratic alliances and emphasizes rule-based order. Czechia, though increasingly skeptical of China, has adopted a more measured and pragmatic position. While values-based diplomacy remains a component of its foreign policy identity, its Indo-Pacific strategy is shaped primarily by economic-security concerns, diversification imperatives, and signaling to EU and NATO allies.

Both strategies face similar operational challenges that threaten to undermine their diplomatic utility.

Regarding the definition of what constitutes the Indo-Pacific as a region, Czechia's strategy includes 40 countries and divides them into sub-regions, and the definition in Lithuania's is mostly the same. In contrast, the EU does not list countries but refers to the region broadly and includes the overseas territories of the member states. While the United States refer to itself as an Indo-Pacific country, Czechia and Lithuania do not include it in their definition, similarly to the EU and Canada.

Despite these distinctions, both strategies face similar operational challenges that threaten to undermine their diplomatic utility. Limited financial resources and narrow pools of Indo-Pacific expertise hinder effective implementation. Lithuania's limitations are particularly acute, with a smaller foreign service presence in the region and less institutional experience of it. Czechia benefits from a generation of diplomats with regional knowledge, yet the strategy does not adequately reflect the need for more varied expertise. Both countries have adopted selective engagement in response to the challenges of implementation. Lithuania has prioritized ties with Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and South Korea, and it has been discussing engagement with India, Taiwan, and Vietnam. However, in some cases, this interest is not reciprocated, as there may be limited demand from these countries for bilateral cooperation with a much smaller country. Czechia similarly concentrates on India, Japan, and South Korea, with which existing economic and diplomatic relationships offer a foundation for deeper ties. This raises a critical question: is targeted specialization a suitable model for smaller states, or does it risk over-dependence on a limited set of partners?

Lithuania has taken a more structured approach to implementing its Indo-Pacific Strategy, initiating a confidential one-year action plan with modest goals, and reportedly achieving around 80% of its targets. Czechia's implementation is mostly a continuation of its earlier policy, and its strategy and the measurement of success are less tied to a specific plan. While failure to operationalize the strategies may carry some reputational and strategic costs, particularly given that building ties in the Indo-Pacific tends to be a lengthy process, the risk is limited, as these strategies are largely declarative. Czechia and Lithuania participate in an informal coordination structure at the EU level. Several diplomats and officials dealing with the Indo-Pacific from the member states more focused on the region meet periodically informally to discuss their agendas. However, there is limited institutionalization, and participation in such discussions is based more on a network or ad hoc basis. This raises the broader issue of whether member states should continue pursuing individual Indo-Pacific strategies or whether using more integrated mechanisms would foster more coherence. The Indo-Pacific strategy the EU adopted in 2021 was

prepared by the European Commission after limited consultation with member states. While Czechia and Lithuania present their strategies as complementary to the EU's, there are significant differences in them in tone, emphasis, and implementation capacity. The EU strategy takes a broad approach focused on multilateralism, resilience, and economic diversification. In contrast, member-state Indo-Pacific strategies in several instances project distinct priorities or signal alignment with specific partners or alliances. These differences are not necessarily problematic as member-state strategies can enhance the EU's overall visibility and adaptability in the Indo-Pacific, but they do highlight disparities in resources, expertise, and political will across the union.

Fostering EU coherence does not require every member state to publish an Indo-Pacific strategy. Instead, formalizing the existing informal coordination group into a structured platform that facilitates information exchange, joint planning, and strategic alignment would be a more sustainable approach. Such a mechanism could help bridge gaps between EU and national initiatives, while preserving the flexibility for member states to tailor their engagement based on their priorities and capacities. It would also offer a space for smaller member states to pool their expertise and to identify synergies, thereby enhancing the collective weight of EU actors in the Indo-Pacific. Strengthening this and other coordination structures could improve strategic coherence without undermining the foreign policy agency of member states.

Fostering EU coherence does not require every member state to publish an Indo-Pacific strategy.

The adoption of Indo-Pacific strategies has generally reflected a wider recalibration of China policy across the EU, as member states and the EU institutions have gradually shifted from engagement to greater skepticism, albeit at different paces. Lithuania has been among the more assertive actors in this recalibration, particularly after 2020. However, China is less important for the economy of Czechia and Lithuania than for that of the larger EU countries, leaving Beijing with less direct leverage over them, which makes it somewhat less risky and easier for them to pursue a values-driven policy toward it.

However, the geopolitical context has evolved since the start of the second Trump presidency in January. Washington's new tariffs and a more unpredictable transatlantic trade climate have triggered a new debate in several EU capitals about the strategic value of economic ties with China. Expressions of interest in restoring or expanding diplomatic and commercial engagement with Beijing have re-emerged. This has happened even in Lithuania, while Czechia is maintaining a relatively stable posture. Foreign Ministry officials in Prague say the intention is to preserve flexibility and to avoid overcommitment in any direction.²⁶ This reflects an underlying preference for continuity, shaped by considering potential future shifts in government or global alignments.

Conclusion

The Indo-Pacific strategies of Czechia and Lithuania reflect a broader shift in the EU's external engagement and highlight how smaller member states are stepping into more assertive roles that can shape the union's approach to

China and the region. While both strategies stem from a recalibration of bilateral ties with China and a recognition of the Indo-Pacific's growing geopolitical importance, they take distinct approaches, rooted in different domestic traditions, strategic priorities, and institutional capacities. Analyzing these differences contributes to a more layered understanding of how the different member states navigate the region's complexities. The Czech and Lithuanian strategies reflect a move away from viewing China as an isolated issue and embed the China debate in the broader context of the Indo-Pacific, thus reframing it less in terms of confrontation with Beijing and more in terms of collaboration with other countries in the region. However, comparing these two cases reveals this shift's potential and limitations. Lithuania's bolder and more values-driven strategy signals a pronounced reorientation rooted in its broader security concerns, particularly related to its proximity to Russia. Czechia's strategy is more cautious and pragmatic. While similarly recognizing the relevance of the Indo-Pacific and the need to rethink relations with China, it is less assertive in tone and more limited in institutional implementation. Both strategies are more about political signaling than fully operational blueprints. They reflect smaller states' internal constraints, including limited administrative capacity, constrained budgets, and underdeveloped regional diplomatic networks. Yet, their very existence is significant. Both strategies respond to the increasingly complex global context and manifest an effort by small member states to assert themselves in a policy space shaped mainly by the EU more powerful ones.

The Indo-Pacific strategies of Czechia and Lithuania can be understood also within the broader context of the EU's external engagement. They largely complement the EU's one, adding depth and direction to a framework that remains general by design. However, not all member states need to develop national strategies for the EU to have a coherent approach to the region. Instead, the EU could embrace a strategic division of labor, allowing member states to focus on regions where they have particular interests, capacities, or diplomatic leverage. Just as some prioritize the Mediterranean or the Eastern Partnership, others can contribute by leading Indo-Pacific engagement. This differentiated approach would strengthen the EU's global reach while respecting the diversity of its member states' foreign policy orientations.

Recommendations

Dedicate Funding to Implementation: The successful implementation of any strategic initiative requires dedicated resources. The governments of Czechia and Lithuania should allocate targeted funding for the implementation of their strategy, including support for diplomatic missions, public diplomacy, academic exchange programs, and sectoral cooperation. As an example to follow, Canada allocated a budget for its Indo-Pacific strategy.

Develop Follow-Up Mechanisms and Implementation Plans: To avoid the risk of stagnation, both governments should include measurable goals and a clear roadmap for implementation of their strategies.

Strengthen Institutional Expertise: Both governments should invest in building domestic analytical capacity within their foreign ministry, think tanks, and academic institutions. This includes funding research, training Indo-Pacific specialists, and establishing dedicated regional desks to ensure informed and consistent policy engagement.

Pursue Thematic and Country Specialization: Given limited resources, strategic specialization is essential. Czechia and Lithuania should focus their efforts on a select group of Indo-Pacific partners and thematic areas where they have comparative advantages—such as high-tech industries, cybersecurity, or education—and where mutual interest exists.

Mainstream the Strategy in Diplomatic Engagements: The governments of Czechia and Lithuania should mainstream their Indo-Pacific strategy across their foreign policy institutions and different diplomatic engagements with key partners, including through their permanent representations to the EU and NATO. This would enable better alignment with European and transatlantic initiatives, and it would ensure that their Indo-Pacific priorities are reflected in multilateral forums.

Increase Strategic Communication and Visibility: To strengthen their international position, both governments should invest in communicating their Indo-Pacific strategy more actively to internal and external audiences. The research for this paper suggests that their domestic audience (even at the expert level) is largely not informed about the strategies.

Formalize Coordination Mechanisms: EU-level coordination formats on the Indo-Pacific should be systematized. Rather than relying on informal structures, the member states should advocate for more structured coordination, potentially through a formal working group. Coordination could be strengthened through position papers or thematic policy briefs that reflect priorities and encourage alignment. This would promote a more coherent understanding of the purpose of the EU's Indo-Pacific strategy and reduce duplication, while still allowing space for member states to highlight their specific interests or strengths within a collective framework.

Include the perspective of small member states in the Global Gateway: Smaller member states often perceive the EU's Global Gateway initiative for infrastructure around the world as a potential way to secure additional funding for their priorities in the Indo-Pacific. However, several actors in Czechia and Lithuania reported either hurdles in participating or that they were yet to receive more information about ways to do so. By facilitating access to funding, technical assistance, and strategic planning mechanisms through this initiative, the EU can enable the smaller member states to overcome their resource and capacity constraints.

Potential for Regional Coordination: Although their individual approaches differ, there is scope for coordination among the CEE countries on Indo-Pacific issues, either through the Visegrád Group (in which Czechia, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia have already cooperated in formats such as V4+Korea or V4+Japan), the Three Seas Initiative, or ad hoc thematic coalitions (for example, on digital, security, or climate). Shared challenges could be addressed through joint declarations, diplomatic visits, or pooled expertise.

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