



Security, Sovereignty, and Partnership in the Indo-Pacific



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Edited by Andreas Klein and Anish Mishra



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Edited by

Andreas Klein and Anish Mishra

Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung
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Security, Sovereignty, and Partnership in the Indo-Pacific

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Foreword

The Indo-Pacific has become one of the central arenas in which the future of the international order will be shaped. Developments across the region affect global trade, technological innovation, supply-chain resilience, freedom of navigation and the security of societies in both Asia and Europe. At the same time, the region faces intensifying strategic rivalry, military modernisation, economic coercion, contested maritime spaces and mounting pressure on the rules and institutions that have supported decades of growth and stability.

These developments formed the backdrop to the seminar ***“Security, Sovereignty, and Partnership in the Indo-Pacific”***, hosted by the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung’s Regional Programme Political Dialogue Asia in Singapore on 3 December 2025. The event brought together policymakers, diplomats, scholars and security practitioners from Europe and the Indo-Pacific to discuss the region’s changing security environment and its implications for both regions.

One tension recurred throughout our discussions: states increasingly recognise the need for stronger cooperation, but they also want to preserve their sovereignty, strategic autonomy and freedom of choice. Security, sovereignty and partnership are therefore not separate questions. They are closely connected. Security partnerships are most valuable when they strengthen national agency rather than restrict it, while sovereignty is most sustainable when it is supported by credible cooperation rather than pursued through isolation.

This tension provides the connecting thread for the 2026 edition of *Panorama: Security, Sovereignty, and Partnership in the Indo-Pacific*, which carries the same title as the seminar. The contributions in this volume develop the questions raised during our discussions and approach them from different geographical, institutional and strategic perspectives.

Security Beyond Presence

Security in the Indo-Pacific is often discussed primarily in terms of military capabilities and deterrence. These remain essential, but the contributions in this volume demonstrate that security has become much broader. It includes maritime trade routes, critical infrastructure, supply chains, defence-industrial capacity, digital networks and the ability of states and institutions to respond effectively during periods of crisis.

Jared Mondschein addresses the hard-security dimension directly in his examination of AUKUS. He presents the partnership between Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States as a response to a deteriorating regional

security environment and assesses its potential contribution to deterrence. At the same time, he engages with concerns about militarisation, nuclear proliferation, Australian sovereignty, American reliability and the practical difficulties of implementing a multi-generational defence project. His contribution shows that the credibility of AUKUS will depend not only on acquiring advanced capabilities, but also on maintaining political support and explaining its strategic purpose to regional and domestic audiences.

Hugues Canuel focuses on another dimension of credibility: the distinction between presence and persistence. Canada and European countries have expanded their diplomatic, naval and security engagement in the Indo-Pacific, but occasional deployments and political declarations do not necessarily create lasting confidence. Canuel argues that regional partners judge external actors by whether they return, whether they can sustain their commitments and whether their engagement survives political change and competing crises elsewhere. Credibility ultimately rests on logistics, access arrangements, defence diplomacy, institutional relationships and political continuity.

Lizza Bomassi similarly examines the gap between ambition and operational effect in the European Union's maritime engagement. The EU has developed an extensive portfolio of programmes supporting maritime domain awareness, information-sharing, institutional capacity and critical-infrastructure protection. Yet these initiatives operate within a complex environment shaped by sovereignty sensitivities, strategic hedging, fragmented governance and differing national priorities. Bomassi's analysis underlines that awareness alone is insufficient. The real test is whether information can be translated into timely action and whether European initiatives address the priorities of regional partners.

Jean-Loup Samaan widens the geographical lens by examining how wars in the Middle East affect the Indo-Pacific. The conflict in Gaza, attacks on commercial shipping in the Red Sea and subsequent regional escalation have influenced Asian public opinion, disrupted trade routes, redirected military resources and reshaped diplomatic calculations. His contribution reminds us that Indo-Pacific security cannot be considered in isolation. A crisis in one region can rapidly affect economic resilience, political alignments and strategic priorities in another.

Sovereignty as Strategic Agency

Sovereignty is sometimes understood narrowly as territorial control or freedom from external interference. In practice, it also concerns the ability of states to preserve political agency, diversify their relationships and make decisions without excessive dependence or coercion. The contributions in this volume

show that this agency is important but never unlimited. Geography, economic vulnerability, defence capabilities and domestic politics all shape the options available to governments.

Christian E. Rieck provides the broader conceptual framework for understanding these choices. He examines how Europe could act as a soft balancer between the United States and China by supporting what he calls active multi-alignment. Rather than asking regional states to join rigid blocs, Europe can widen their strategic options through economic cooperation, regulatory influence, diplomacy, technology partnerships and selective security engagement. His argument highlights a distinctive potential role for Europe: helping preserve the autonomy of Indo-Pacific states without seeking to reproduce the military power of the region's major actors.

Jan Asmussen explores how these dynamics operate in Vietnam. Drawing on interviews with Vietnamese officials, experts and military representatives, he examines the evolution of the country's "Four Nos" policy. Vietnam remains committed to avoiding formal alliances and excessive alignment with any major power, but it is also strengthening its national capabilities and diversifying its defence relationships in response to pressure in the South China Sea. Asmussen's concept of "Active Nos" captures this more proactive interpretation of non-alignment. Sovereignty, in this case, depends not on passivity but on stronger capabilities, active diplomacy and carefully calibrated cooperation.

Eva Abdulla offers a complementary small-state perspective through her analysis of the Maldives. The country has sought to use its location at the heart of the Indian Ocean and its growing network of partnerships to expand its room for manoeuvre. Yet its experience also exposes the limits of hedging. Debt, fiscal pressures, domestic political narratives and the enduring importance of established relationships continue to constrain its choices. Abdulla demonstrates that diversification can create options, but it cannot eliminate the realities of geography, history and dependency. She also shows how domestic politics can shape the reception of external assistance: different partners may make substantial contributions, but those contributions are not always interpreted or discussed in the same way.

Taken together, these contributions suggest that sovereignty should not be understood as distance from partnership. Well-designed partnerships can strengthen sovereignty by building capacity, widening national choices and reducing overdependence on any single actor. The central question is whether such cooperation respects local priorities and reinforces domestic institutions rather than creating new vulnerabilities.

Partnerships That Deliver

The Indo-Pacific does not lack partnerships. Some are based on formal alliances and military deterrence; others focus on trade, technology, development, capacity-building or maritime governance. The more important question is whether these partnerships are reliable, mutually beneficial and capable of producing practical results.

Mahima Duggal examines this issue through the EU-India Free Trade Agreement and the wider EU-India Security and Defence Partnership. She argues that the FTA should be understood not only as a commercial agreement, but also as an instrument of economic security, strategic autonomy and geopolitical signalling. It could support more resilient supply chains, deeper technology cooperation and stronger defence-industrial links. At the same time, she acknowledges continuing differences over Russia, constraints on sensitive technology transfers and the limitations imposed by both actors' preference for strategic autonomy. Her conclusion is particularly important: the agreement's long-term value will depend less on the initial political announcement than on sustained implementation and political commitment.

This lesson applies to the volume as a whole. Partnerships become credible when they move beyond declarations and respond to clearly identified needs. For Europe, this means aligning ambition with capability and listening carefully to regional perspectives. Europe cannot and should not seek to replicate the military presence of the United States or China. Its comparative advantage lies in combining the economic, regulatory and diplomatic instruments of the European Union with the political, industrial and security capabilities of its Member States.

For the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, dialogue between Europe and Asia remains essential. Germany and Europe have a direct interest in a peaceful, open and stable Indo-Pacific in which international law is respected, disputes are managed without coercion and states retain the freedom to determine their own political and strategic choices. European engagement must therefore be realistic, reliable and attentive to the interests of regional partners.

These contributions do not offer identical assessments, nor should they. *Panorama* seeks to provide a platform for informed debate and policy-oriented reflection. What unites these authors is the recognition that security cannot be achieved through military power alone, sovereignty cannot be protected through isolation, and partnership cannot remain credible without consistency, practical delivery and mutual respect.

I would like to thank the speakers and participants of our December 2025 seminar for the valuable discussions that helped shape this publication. I also

extend my sincere appreciation to all eight authors for developing these debates further through their thoughtful contributions.

We hope that this edition of *Panorama* will contribute to a practical conversation about how security partnerships can reinforce, rather than constrain, the sovereignty and strategic agency of Indo-Pacific states.



Andreas Michael Klein

Director

Regional Programme Political Dialogue Asia

Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung

Singapore, 20 August 2026

The Strategic Case for AUKUS in Australia and the Indo-Pacific

Jared Mondschein

Director of Research at the United States Studies Centre

Introduction

When AUKUS was first announced by UK, US and Australian political leaders in September 2021, it was portrayed in some media as a diplomatic insult to France,¹ a nuclear proliferation concern,² and a worryingly destabilising decision that increased the likelihood of war.³ Nearly half a decade later, AUKUS continues to progress while criticisms of the trilateral pact in the Indo-Pacific have largely become more muted. This article details the genesis, status and perception of AUKUS, the continued rationale for it, and the challenges still facing it.

What AUKUS Is and Where It Came from

AUKUS is a trilateral security partnership between Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States. Expected to last into the 2060s, the A\$268–368 billion programme features two pillars. Pillar One is the most well-known aspect of the pact. It entails Australia's acquisition of conventionally armed nuclear-powered submarines – firstly, three second-hand Virginia-class submarines from the United States, beginning in the early 2030s⁴ and then the development of an entirely new class of nuclear-powered submarines built in Australia and the United Kingdom (SSN-AUKUS). Integral to Pillar One is not only the SSN fleet but also the build-up of Australia's defence industrial capabilities, including the building of naval facilities capable of hosting US and UK nuclear-powered submarines in Perth by 2027. Pillar Two entails the trilateral development of

¹ "French Rage Triggered by Exclusion from Indo-Pacific Deal." *Australian Financial Review*. 20 September 2021. <https://www.afr.com/world/europe/french-rage-triggered-by-exclusion-from-indo-pacific-deal-20210920-p58t4q>.

² "Australian Nuclear Submarine Plan 'Wrong Direction at the Wrong Time', Nobel Prize-Winning Group Says." *The Guardian*. 16 September 2021. <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2021/sep/16/australian-nuclear-submarine-plan-wrong-direction-at-the-wrong-time-nobel-prize-winning-group-says>.

³ "The Submarine, the Ridiculous." *The Saturday Paper*. 18 September 2021. <https://www.thesaturdaypaper.com.au/2021/09/18/the-submarine-the-ridiculous/163188720012499>.

⁴ Australian Submarine Agency, "Australia's Nuclear-Powered Submarines", <https://www.asa.gov.au/aukus/australias-nuclear-powered-submarines>; United States Studies Centre, "By the Numbers: AUKUS Revised Timeline Comparison", 10 June 2026, <https://www.ussc.edu.au/aukus-revised-timeline-comparison>.

advanced military capabilities across six areas: artificial intelligence, hypersonics, cyber, electronic warfare, undersea capabilities and quantum technologies.

What Is AUKUS Expected to Do?

Fundamentally, the Australian, UK and US governments have repeatedly said that AUKUS is about deterrence. In the face of a revisionist and systemic challenge from China, it is a multilateral effort that seeks to maintain a favourable balance of power in the Indo-Pacific.

Nuclear-powered submarines (SSNs) contribute to deterrence through greater endurance, range, survivability and stealth than conventionally powered submarines. In other words, SSNs can stay hidden better and stay hidden longer than Australia's current conventionally powered submarines. The plans of any adversary considering a sneak attack to unilaterally seize territory are complicated by the presence of nuclear-powered submarines, whose stealth allows them to threaten the adversary's own assets more capably and for longer periods of time. The building of naval facilities capable of hosting US and UK SSNs in Perth – thereby allowing the SSNs to stay longer in the region, if necessary – only adds to the deterrent effect of AUKUS.

But beyond the nuclear-powered submarines and industrial base expansion of Pillar One, AUKUS also enables increased technology collaboration and interoperability between three allies already linked together by close economic, military, intelligence, and strategic ties.

From a UK perspective in a post-Brexit period prioritising “Global Britain”, AUKUS is expected to allow the UK to gain much-needed jobs as well as a more favourable balance of power in a region with UK territories and interests. From a US perspective, AUKUS is expected to see Australia do exactly what Washington has long wanted from US allies – increase defence spending, deepen strategic interoperability with the US, and invest in more effective deterrence all the while paying for the United States to expand its defence industrial capacity.

What AUKUS Is Not

A key point of confusion about AUKUS is the role of nuclear energy. The Chinese government and media have called AUKUS a “nuclear proliferation risk” and a

violation of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) while the AUKUS partners have vehemently denied such accusations.⁵

The UN's International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) has thus far remained "satisfied"⁶ with its discussions on AUKUS and not objected to the pact.⁷ A critical but sometimes overlooked distinction is that the SSNs will be nuclear-powered but not be nuclear-armed. The United States and United Kingdom will provide the nuclear material necessary for the submarines in sealed reactors as Australia has committed to not producing its own nuclear fuel, not enriching uranium, and not reprocessing spent fuel. Nuclear weapons would require chemical processing facilities that Australia does not have and has pledged not to seek.⁸ At the same time, Australia benefits from more than 70 years of experience managing nuclear waste and will take responsibility for the waste generated by the submarines for the entirety of the SSN life cycles, including their decommissioning.⁹

It is important to note that, from its inception, AUKUS was an Australian proposal and has remained a primarily Australian undertaking – not a US notion forced upon reluctant or hesitant Australians. On the contrary, the pact is the outcome of Australians engaging in deft diplomacy to convince initially reluctant US leadership.¹⁰

Did Australia Always Want Nuclear-Powered Submarines?

To most Australians, including many of the country's foreign policy experts, the AUKUS announcement in September 2021 came as a major surprise.¹¹ After all, the United States has only shared the "crown jewel" of its navy once before –

⁵ "China and AUKUS: Growing Tensions Ahead." *Australian Outlook*. Australian Institute of International Affairs. <https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/china-and-aukus-growing-tensions-ahead/>.

⁶ "IAEA Satisfied with AUKUS Engagement on Submarine Plan, Report Says." *Reuters*. 9 September 2022. <https://www.reuters.com/world/iaea-satisfied-with-aukus-engagement-submarine-plan-report-says-2022-09-09/>.

⁷ International Atomic Energy Agency. "Director General Statement in Relation to AUKUS Announcement." 17 September 2021. <https://www.iaea.org/newscenter/pressreleases/director-general-statement-in-relation-to-aukus-announcement>.

⁸ "China Calls IAEA Report on AUKUS Nuclear Submarines 'Lopsided'." *ABC News*. 14 September 2022. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-09-14/china-iaea-lopsided-aukus-nuclear-submarines-report/101441254>.

⁹ Australian Submarine Agency. "Stewardship and Waste Fact Sheet." October 2025. https://www.asa.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/2025-10/Stewardship_Waste_Fact_Sheet.pdf.

¹⁰ "How the U.S. Agreed to Provide Nuclear-Sub Technology to Australia." *Wall Street Journal*. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/how-the-u-s-agreed-to-provide-nuclear-sub-technology-to-australia-2b631d8f>.

¹¹ Roggeveen, Sam. "Changing My Mind About AUKUS." *The Interpreter*. Lowy Institute, 13 December 2021. <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/changing-my-mind-about-aukus>.

with the British in the 1950s. While questions about Australia acquiring nuclear-powered submarines had sporadically been raised in government, defence and foreign policy circles since 1959,¹² discussions by Australian officials in recent years had routinely dismissed the prospect.

The Australian government's 2009 Defence White Paper definitively said "The Government has ruled out nuclear propulsion" for its submarines.¹³ A decade later in October 2019, when Australian Chief of Navy Michael Noonan floated the possibility that future Australian submarines could be nuclear-powered, the idea was labelled both "politically risky" and costly.¹⁴ In November 2020, Peter Jennings, a leading Australian defence expert said "there doesn't appear to be a strong constituency for nuclear propulsion inside the navy" and "in the short term, there's no prospect for bipartisan cooperation on this issue" but the "strategic ground is changing quickly under our feet, and those developments might, in future, force a more urgent government consideration of the submarine capability Australia needs."¹⁵

In March 2021 – mere months before AUKUS was announced – former Liberal Party Defence Minister Christopher Pyne all but ruled nuclear-powered submarines out entirely, saying "Australia does not have a nuclear industry. One cannot be created overnight. Even if there was the political will to create one, which there isn't, what political party is going to waste its political capital on creating a legislative framework for a nuclear industry that can sustain nuclear submarines, that has zero chance of passing any Upper House in any jurisdiction in Australia."¹⁶

¹² Sea Power Centre–Australia. *Nuclear-Powered Submarines for Australia*. Royal Australian Navy, March 2023. <https://seapower.navy.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-03/Nuclear-Powered%20Submarines%20for%20Australia%20%281%29.pdf>.

¹³ Department of Defence (Australia). *Defending Australia in the Asia Pacific Century: Force 2030 (2009 Defence White Paper)*. Canberra: Australian Government, 2009. <https://www.defence.gov.au/about/strategic-planning/defence-white-paper>.

¹⁴ "Subs Could Be Switched to Nuclear, Says Navy Chief." *The Australian*. October 2019. <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/nation/defence/subs-could-be-switched-to-nuclear-says-navy-chief/news-story/9fe9ade84e5c04444ab38c73e63bf195>.

¹⁵ Jennings, Peter. "Why Didn't Australia Consider Nuclear Propulsion for Its New Submarines?" *The Strategist*. Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 10 November 2020. <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/why-didnt-australia-consider-nuclear-propulsion-for-its-new-submarines>.

¹⁶ Pyne, Christopher. "Only Risk to Future Submarines Project Is Naval Group Not Holding Up Their End of the Deal." *Adelaide Now*. March 2021. <https://www.adelaidenow.com.au/news/opinion/christopher-pyne-only-risk-to-future-submarines-project-is-naval-group-not-holding-up-their-end-of-the-deal/news-story/8b15166f35f6681916fcac2b503621c6>.

What Changed US, UK and Australian Approaches to Nuclear-Powered Submarines?

How, in such a short period of time, did the acquisition of SSNs transform from an unlikely opportunity discussed by some foreign policy strategists¹⁷ to the most expensive defence project undertaken in Australian post-war history? Rapidly changing strategic circumstances play a major part in explaining this shift. In the 1980s, Australia's defence planning had been underpinned by the notion that the nation's geography and global circumstances afforded it a decade-long window of strategic warning time for a conflict. The Australian government's 2020 Defence Strategic Update, however, rejected that window of strategic warning time, "As the strategic circumstances have deteriorated, this 10-year period [warning time] is no longer an appropriate basis for defence planning".¹⁸

Whether it be the United States introducing strategic competition with China in 2017 or the United Kingdom saying it faced a "systemic competitor" in 2021, the alarm in the US and UK about the changed strategic circumstances has only increased over the last decade.¹⁹

Simultaneous to these deteriorating strategic circumstances, there was also increasing concern in government about Canberra's existing contract with the French Naval Group to produce twelve conventionally powered Attack-class submarines. In the wake of cost estimates rapidly increasing from A\$50 billion to A\$90 billion, delivery dates shifting from the 2030s to the 2050s, five years of work and A\$2.4 billion spent, the Australian government ultimately decided to ditch the French submarines altogether to pursue the AUKUS pathway. In the eyes of the three partners, nuclear-powered submarines were a more effective deterrent than the Attack-class submarines thanks to the former's ability to stay submerged for longer, stay in theatre for longer, avoid detection better and maintain high speeds for longer.

The 16 September 2021 joint media statement by the leaders of Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States announcing AUKUS for the first time made clear that the shifting strategic circumstances changed not only Australia's thinking but the thinking in all three nations: "The security challenges in the

¹⁷ National Security College, Australian National University. *The Future of the Undersea Deterrent*. June 2024. https://nsc.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/2024-06/the_future_of_the_undersea_deterrent.pdf.

¹⁸ Department of Defence (Australia). *2020 Defence Strategic Update*. Canberra: Australian Government, 2020. <https://www.defence.gov.au/about/strategic-planning/2020-defence-strategic-update>.

¹⁹ HM Government, *Global Britain in a Competitive Age: The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy* (London, 2021), <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/global-britain-in-a-competitive-age-the-integrated-review-of-security-defence-development-and-foreign-policy>; The White House, *National Security Strategy* (Washington, DC, December 2017), <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>.

Indo-Pacific region have grown significantly. Military modernisation is occurring at an unprecedented rate and capabilities are rapidly advancing and their reach expanding. The technological edge enjoyed by Australia and our partners is narrowing.”²⁰

Gone unmentioned in both the official media release as well as most subsequent government announcements on AUKUS in Australia is a clear articulation of which entity is behind those security challenges, whose military modernisation is occurring at an unprecedented rate, and which country is narrowing the technological edge enjoyed by Australia and its partners. It remains China.

How Much Has China Changed?

Over the last 15 years, China has undergone the largest military build-up – including the largest nuclear weapon build-up – in the world while engaging in increasingly assertive behaviour across the Indo-Pacific.

To put such growth into perspective: China’s official defence spending – which is generally regarded by analysts to be less than actual amounts²¹ – has increased 13-fold in 30 years, going from around one-sixth of US defence spending in 2012 to being more than five times as much as Japan’s, seven times as much as South Korea’s and more than a third of US spending in 2025.²²

From a nuclear perspective, China has more than doubled its nuclear arsenal from 300 weapons in 2020 to around 600 in 2025 and is expected to reach 1,000 nuclear weapons by 2030. In September 2025, China revealed it had five nuclear capabilities within reach of the continental United States.²³ China has also rapidly grown its nuclear-powered submarine fleet, with the launching of seven nuclear-powered submarines between 2010 and 2020 and an additional ten more between 2021 and 2025.²⁴

²⁰ Morrison, Scott, Boris Johnson, and Joe Biden. “Joint Media Statement: Australia to Pursue Nuclear-Powered Submarines through New Trilateral Enhanced Security Partnership.” Australian Department of Defence, 16 September 2021. <https://www.minister.defence.gov.au/statements/2021-09-16/joint-media-statement-australia-pursue-nuclear-powered-submarines-through-new-trilateral-enhanced-security-partnership>.

²¹ “Despite a Supposedly Defensive Policy, China’s Military Budget Rises Fast.” *The Diplomat*. March 2026. <https://thediplomat.com/2026/03/despite-a-supposedly-defensive-policy-chinas-military-budget-rises-fast/>.

²² “China’s Military: 10 Charts.” Center for Strategic and International Studies. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/chinas-military-10-charts>.

²³ “Parading China’s Nuclear Arsenal Out of Shadows.” Center for Strategic and International Studies. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/parading-chinas-nuclear-arsenal-out-shadows>.

²⁴ “Chinese Navy Expanding Nuclear Attack Boat Fleet and Missile Strike Capabilities, ONI Commander Says.” *USNI News*. 5 March 2026. <https://news.usni.org/2026/03/05/chinese-navy-expanding-nuclear-attack-boat-fleet-and-missile-strike-capabilities-oni-commander-says>.

Having already become the largest navy in the world in 2015 by number of battle force ships, the Chinese navy is quickly becoming a “blue-water navy” projecting power globally, with multiple aircraft carriers and access to many naval ports around the world, including Djibouti (its first formal overseas military logistics base established in 2017), Cambodia, Sri Lanka, Vanuatu and Cuba. One study estimated that China operates or has ownership of one or more ports in every continent except Antarctica.²⁵

This rapid build-up of China’s military has coincided with China’s antagonistic “Wolf Warrior” diplomacy, militarisation of the South China Sea, economic coercion of Australia in 2020, brazen foreign interference, and increasingly aggressive behaviour towards both Taiwan and the region more broadly. In 2025 alone, the unprecedented growth in geographic reach and operational tempo of Chinese naval activities included but were by no means limited to:²⁶

- live-fire exercises in the Tasman Sea between Australia and New Zealand with virtually no warning to the Australian government, thereby forcing dozens of commercial aircraft to divert flights, followed by a circumnavigation of Australia
- a record of 163 operations in the South China Sea, including a new record number of live-fire exercises and the harassment of neighbouring countries like the Philippines
- a record number of live-fire exercises occurring closer to Taiwan than ever before
- its “largest maritime show of force to date” in December of more than 100 naval ships across the Yellow Sea, East China Sea and South China Sea²⁷

Researchers at the Australia-China Relations Institute in February 2025 succinctly summarised Beijing’s efforts in and around Australia by saying “Beijing’s efforts to intimidate belie the importance that Canberra should seek to get more out of Washington, whose recent strategy of responding to acts of intimidation with condemnations, re-commitments to security agreements with allies and post-factum military drills have done little to rein in Beijing’s maritime bellicosity.”²⁸

²⁵ “China’s Overseas Ports.” Council on Foreign Relations. <https://www.cfr.org/articles/china-overseas-ports>.

²⁶ “China’s Increased Military Activities in the Indo-Pacific in 2025.” *China Power*. Center for Strategic and International Studies. <https://chinapower.csis.org/china-increased-military-activities-indo-pacific-2025/>.

²⁷ “100 Ships at Sea: Strategic Observations on the Chinese Navy’s 2025 Winter Exercises.” *The Diplomat*. December 2025. <https://thediplomat.com/2025/12/100-ships-at-sea-strategic-observations-on-the-chinese-navys-2025-winter-exercises/>.

²⁸ University of Technology Sydney. “Perspectives: Examining Why the PRC’s Live-Fire Exercises in the Tasman Sea Matter.” February 2025. <https://www.uts.edu.au/news/2025/02/perspectives-examining-why-prcs-live-fire-exercises-tasman-sea>.

Ultimately, China has made clear that it has the intent and increasing capability to change the balance of power in the Indo-Pacific. China's behaviour, both before and after the September 2021 AUKUS announcement, has only cemented Australia's commitment to complicating such behaviour and aspirations.

The Concerns about the Rationale of AUKUS

The Australian government's decisive embrace of the largest military project in its history has not eliminated the many arguments against AUKUS. From militarising the region and increasing concerns of US reliability to domestic challenges like sovereignty and whether the high cost of AUKUS limits Australia's other capabilities, significant concerns in the foreign policy community and the public more broadly about AUKUS remain. Such concerns and criticisms should not go unaddressed.

Antagonism

History is littered with examples of military build-ups provoking the very outcome the build-ups had intended to deter, with World War I perhaps the most well-known. With that said, history is also filled with rising revisionist powers, ranging from Napoleonic France to Nazi Germany, fomenting a coalition to balance against the revisionist power. Amongst most US allies and partners in the region, the initiative is generally deemed to be the latter.

In the age of strategic competition, it is by no means surprising that the loudest argument against AUKUS – not only by China but also in the region more broadly and among vocal groups in Australia – is that it increases the risk of regional confrontation. China's Foreign Ministry has argued that the pact is “extremely irresponsible,” will “fuel military confrontation,” and leads to “increased militarisation of the region”.²⁹ Malcolm Turnbull, whose government selected France as Australia's submarine partner in 2016³⁰, before the programme was cancelled to make way for AUKUS, has called AUKUS antagonistic, unhelpful, and a terrible deal. Another former Australian prime minister, Paul Keating, has repeatedly argued that AUKUS unnecessarily provokes China and binds Australia too closely to US military planning.

It is undeniably accurate to posit that AUKUS increases the militarisation of the Indo-Pacific and ties Australia's military closer to the US military. But it is also

²⁹ “AUKUS: China Says Pact Will ‘Fuel Military Confrontation’ in Asia.” *BBC News*. 16 September 2021. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-58582573>.

³⁰ Australian Department of Defence, “Prime Minister, Minister for Defence: Future Submarine Program”, 26 April 2016, <https://www.minister.defence.gov.au/media-releases/2016-04-26/prime-minister-minister-defence-joint-media-release-future-submarine-program>.

correct to say that AUKUS is a direct response to China's unprecedented military build-up and increasingly brazen behaviour in the region. Ultimately, deterrence against China's revisionist behaviour and aspirations is ineffective if Beijing does not believe that the deterrent act *incurs costs* for China's revisionist behaviour and aspirations.

China's response to the Quad, another minilateral partnership between nations with territory and interests in the Indo-Pacific, is instructive on this front. Formally created in 2007 and characterised as an "informal grouping", China's opposition to the Quad in 2007 and 2008 saw the four nations chiefly prioritise disaster relief and highlight the grouping's efforts on trade and culture. Nonetheless, China demarched all four Quad members, repeatedly accusing the four democracies of encircling China, engaging in a Cold War mentality that was an "Asian NATO", and antagonising China in a way that would cause Beijing to accelerate its own military modernisation.³¹

For reasons that remain under debate, the Quad was disbanded in 2008. Yet it was then revived by the Trump administration in 2017. The reason for its revival was straightforward. As one US scholar argued in 2026: "The Quad came down and China did exactly what it said it was going to do if the Quad persisted."³² In other words, appeasement failed. Were AUKUS to also fail, few in the region would expect China's behaviour and military modernisation to change for the better.

Partnering with an Unreliable United States

Polling during President Trump's second term has shown low confidence in him overseas, including in Australia and the United Kingdom.³³ Correspondingly, the United States' image deteriorated across many countries surveyed in 2025.³⁴ Collaborating on a multi-generational project that increases interoperability with a partner nation led by a president who has injected unprecedented levels of uncertainty about US actions undoubtedly has its risks – particularly when the project was inked by President Biden, whose projects and efforts President Trump has sought to undermine or eliminate altogether. It is therefore understandable that a sizeable proportion of Australians, 40 per cent in 2025,

³¹ "Chinese Ghost Story." *The Diplomat*. February 2008. <https://thediplomat.com/2008/02/chinese-ghost-story/>.

³² United States Studies Centre. "The Future of the Quad in the Age of Trump." Public event, 25 February 2026. <https://www.ussc.edu.au/the-future-of-the-quad-in-the-age-of-trump>.

³³ Wike, Richard, Jacob Poushter, Laura Silver, and Janell Fetterolf. "U.S. Image Declines in Many Nations Amid Low Confidence in Trump." *Pew Research Center*. 11 June 2025. <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2025/06/11/confidence-in-trump/>.

³⁴ Wike, Richard, Jacob Poushter, Laura Silver, and Janell Fetterolf. "U.S. Image Declines in Many Nations Amid Low Confidence in Trump." *Pew Research Center*. 11 June 2025. <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2025/06/11/confidence-in-trump/>.

said Donald Trump would probably cancel the project, with only 16 per cent disagreeing with them.³⁵ Furthermore, while China seeks to increase its military outposts around the world, the United States under President Trump has pursued its America First agenda which includes attempts to decrease its overseas obligations as well as badgering allies who are deemed insufficiently supportive of the US war effort against Iran.

Yet despite persistently negative views of both President Trump and the United States under his leadership, only 17 per cent of Australians and nine per cent of Japanese respondents in 2025 said their nations should end their alliances with the United States — with the Australian figure nine percentage points lower than the year before.³⁶ Furthermore, a plurality of Australian, Japanese and Indian respondents agreed that their country “needs its alliance with the United States more than ever”.³⁷ These views are almost identical in 2026.³⁸ Such polling indicates that US allies and partners in Asia do not see much of an alternative to the United States.

US allies and partners are not favourably disposed to the Trump administration and Australians in particular worry about whether the Trump administration will cancel AUKUS, but when speaking alongside Prime Minister Albanese in his October 2025 visit to Washington, President Trump ended months of uncertainty by endorsing the trilateral project, declaring AUKUS was “moving along rapidly” and “full steam ahead”.³⁹ This vote of support follows reviews of AUKUS by all three nations, who have each undergone changes in political

³⁵ Garrett, Samuel, Ava Kalinauskas, and Jared Mondschein. *Allies and Partners Poll 2025: Where the Quad Countries Stand on Trump, Security and the Future of the Indo-Pacific*. United States Studies Centre, 2025. <https://www.ussc.edu.au/allies-and-partners-poll-2025-where-the-quad-countries-stand-on-trump-security-and-the-future-of-the-indo-pacific>.

³⁶ Samuel Garrett, Ava Kalinauskas, and Jared Mondschein, *Allies and Partners Poll 2025: Where the Quad Countries Stand on Trump, Security and the Future of the Indo-Pacific* (United States Studies Centre, 2025), <https://www.ussc.edu.au/allies-and-partners-poll-2025-where-the-quad-countries-stand-on-trump-security-and-the-future-of-the-indo-pacific>; Samuel Garrett, “The Albanese–Trump Summit: Where Do Australians Stand on Their Most Important Ally?”, United States Studies Centre, 16 October 2025, <https://www.ussc.edu.au/the-albanese-trump-summit-where-do-australians-stand-on-their-most-important-ally>.

³⁷ India does not have a formal alliance with the United States. Indian respondents were asked whether they felt their country needed “its relationship with the United States more than ever.” Garrett, Samuel, Ava Kalinauskas, and Jared Mondschein. *Allies and Partners Poll 2025: Where the Quad Countries Stand on Trump, Security and the Future of the Indo-Pacific*. United States Studies Centre, 2025. <https://www.ussc.edu.au/allies-and-partners-poll-2025-where-the-quad-countries-stand-on-trump-security-and-the-future-of-the-indo-pacific>.

³⁸ Garrett, Samuel, Ava Kalinauskas, and Jared Mondschein. *Allies and Partners Poll 2026: Alliances hold, views fragment*. United States Studies Centre, 2026. <https://www.ussc.edu.au/allies-and-partners-poll-2026-alliances-hold-views-fragment>.

³⁹ Associated Press. “Trump Endorses AUKUS at White House Meeting with Prime Minister Albanese.” Video report, October 2025. <https://newsroom.ap.org/editorial-photos-videos/detail?itemid=95d572a8eb1a44c8affd9476fcea9d2e&mediatype=video>.

leadership – further evidence that support for deterrence in the Indo-Pacific is structural and unlikely to change with a change of political leadership.

Sovereignty

Former Australian Prime Minister Paul Keating has vehemently criticised AUKUS ever since it was announced in 2021, repeatedly arguing that it undermines Australian sovereignty.⁴⁰ Aspirations for completely sovereign military capabilities are understandable but also often cost prohibitive and therefore unrealistic for nations like Australia. As one Australian analyst argued, “If self-reliance were cheap and easy to develop, we’d take as much of it as we could get. But it’s neither cheap nor easy, so we either have to accept that we depend on foreign suppliers and governments for defence equipment and know-how, or we need to be prepared to spend a lot of money to get there.”⁴¹

Frequently mentioned in concerns about AUKUS threatening Australian sovereignty is whether the pact pre-emptively commits Australia to future US contingencies. Former Secretary of State Blinken clarified that “there are no follow-on reciprocal requirements of any kind”⁴² yet polling indicates that the Australian people are not entirely convinced. Nearly half of Australians, 46 per cent in 2025, said that AUKUS locks their country into supporting the United States in an armed conflict. In looking at more specific scenarios that would likely involve the United States and Australia, it becomes clear that similar percentages of Australians – ranging from 37 to 46 per cent from 2022 to 2025⁴³ – have supported sending Australian military forces to help the United States defend Taiwan from a Chinese attack. Australians do not necessarily condone being locked into supporting the United States in a conflict – indeed, a majority of Australians have supported an “independent foreign policy”⁴⁴ for some time –

⁴⁰ Paul Keating, “AUKUS Statement by PJ Keating”, National Press Club, 15 March 2023, <https://www.paulkeating.net.au/shop/item/aukus-statement-by-pj-keating-the-national-press-club-wednesday-15-march-2023>.

⁴¹ Andrew Davies, “Can Australia Fight Alone? The Cost of the Military’s US Dependency”, Australian Foreign Affairs 2 (February 2018), <https://www.australianforeignaffairs.com/articles/extract/2018/02/can-australia-fight-alone>.

⁴² Australian Department of Defence, “Joint Press Conference: Washington DC, United States of America”, 16 September 2021, <https://www.minister.defence.gov.au/transcripts/2021-09-16/joint-press-conference-washington-dc-united-states-america>.

⁴³ Garrett, Samuel, Ava Kalinauskas, and Jared Mondschein. *Allies and Partners Poll 2025: Where the Quad Countries Stand on Trump, Security and the Future of the Indo-Pacific*. United States Studies Centre, 2025. <https://www.ussc.edu.au/allies-and-partners-poll-2025-where-the-quad-countries-stand-on-trump-security-and-the-future-of-the-indo-pacific>.

⁴⁴ Garrett, Samuel, Ava Kalinauskas, and Jared Mondschein. *Allies and Partners Poll 2025: Where the Quad Countries Stand on Trump, Security and the Future of the Indo-Pacific*. United States Studies Centre, 2025. <https://www.ussc.edu.au/allies-and-partners-poll-2025-where-the-quad-countries-stand-on-trump-security-and-the-future-of-the-indo-pacific>.

but Australians have continued to exhibit a level of nuance that is perhaps overlooked in the media coverage of AUKUS.

Looking at historical parallels is instructive on this. In 1958, the United Kingdom received nuclear propulsion technology from the United States but only a few years later, chose to not join the US fight in the Vietnam War – despite fierce lobbying by US President Lyndon Johnson.⁴⁵ The same United Kingdom also chose to oppose the 1983 US intervention in Grenada by the Reagan administration as well as the Trump administration's 2026 war in Iran. While the United States and the United Kingdom continue to work closely together and share technology, design components and missiles related to nuclear-powered submarines, there is no indication that the United Kingdom has lost its sovereign decision-making.

Ultimately, AUKUS will see Australian submariners independently operate second-hand submarines before operating a new class of submarines developed in partnership with the United Kingdom. In the same way that the United Kingdom has not lost any sovereignty over its sovereign decisions and military capabilities, there is no indication that Australia will either.

Capability Gaps and Cannibalisation

A top concern arising about AUKUS in 2021 was the “capability gap” that ensued from cancelling a contract for conventionally powered submarines that were seen as militarily inferior but nonetheless expected to arrive sooner than nuclear-powered submarines. To overcome such challenges, Australia is relying on its current Collins-class fleet for longer than previously expected, with significant life extensions planned. Furthermore, the building of Submarine Rotational Force-West in Western Australia will allow for regular rotations of UK and US nuclear-powered submarines. In other words, US and UK nuclear-powered submarines will be able to stay “in theatre” longer, including when Australia’s own nuclear-powered submarines have yet to arrive.

AUKUS Pillar Two is also integral to managing these challenges. Current military engagements in Europe and the Middle East make clear that asymmetric warfare, particularly drones and other unmanned weapons systems, is decisive in today's battlefields. Should nuclear-powered submarine technology be rendered obsolete or less advantageous by other strategic technologies, Pillar Two is a means by which Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom can collaborate on restoring a technological edge to restore deterrence.

⁴⁵ UK Government, “History of Harold Wilson”, <https://www.gov.uk/government/history/past-prime-ministers/harold-wilson>; David Lammy, “Foreign Secretary Article on Defence Spending: February 2025”, 25 February 2025, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/foreign-secretary-article-on-defence-spending-february-2025>.

Pillar Two undoubtedly remains a work in progress and there are legitimate questions as to Australia's defence spending priorities.⁴⁶ The Australian government posits that AUKUS is not cannibalising the defence budget because the government is increasing the defence budget – and therefore increasing all defence capabilities – by A\$70 billion over the next decade.⁴⁷ Furthermore, the Australian government, as well as an independent review of the government's defence strategy, have argued that the funding is increasingly being re-oriented to more relevant capabilities, including northern base infrastructure and long-range missiles.

Where Does the Indo-Pacific Stand on AUKUS?

The unforeseen nature of the September 2021 announcement did not just catch Australians off-guard – it also caught the allies and partners of the AUKUS nations by surprise, too. Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison deemed the secrecy surrounding AUKUS necessary in order to prevent France from undermining the deal, an effort that would see France lose out on a major multi-billion dollar defence contract already years underway.⁴⁸ Regardless of the rationale, the failure to follow the more conventional approach of assuaging concerns amongst allies and partners by discussing major developments before they are made public contributed to considerably mixed initial Indo-Pacific reactions to AUKUS in 2021, ranging from condemnation or scepticism to support or neutrality. However, in the years since and despite China's considerable campaigns against the trilateral effort, most governments in the Indo-Pacific are either supportive or less sceptical about AUKUS than they were when it was first announced in 2021.

Public polling in some of the Indo-Pacific countries most strategically aligned with the United States and Australia bears this out. Within the four-nation Quad, for example, August 2025 polling found that despite Beijing's vehement arguments otherwise, only 14 per cent of Indians, 13 per cent of Australians, eight per cent of Japanese respondents and four per cent of Americans said that AUKUS makes Asia less safe. Nine times as many American respondents, three times as many Japanese respondents and twice as many Indian respondents said the AUKUS partnership makes Asia safer compared to those who

⁴⁶ Dean, Peter J., and Alice Nason. "AUKUS Pillar II Is Failing in Its Mission: It Needs Its Own Optimal Pathway." *War on the Rocks*. 2 June 2025. <https://warontherocks.com/aukus-pillar-ii-is-failing-in-its-mission-it-needs-its-own-optimal-pathway/>.

⁴⁷ "Minister Rejects Opposition Claim AUKUS Spending Cannibalising Defence Budget." *News.com.au*. <https://www.news.com.au/technology/innovation/military/minister-rejects-opposition-claim-aukus-spending-cannibalising-defence-budget/news-story/771ab68d075a22c233f732478537305c>.

⁴⁸ "Not the Same as Lying to Him: Morrison Defends Keeping AUKUS Secret from Macron." *Sydney Morning Herald*. 22 June 2023. <https://www.smh.com.au/world/europe/not-the-same-as-lying-to-him-morrison-defends-keeping-aukus-secret-from-macron-20230622-p5digz.html>.

disagreed. Beyond public opinion, policymakers and strategic communities in Japan, New Zealand, and South Korea have discussed the merits of their nations joining or replicating AUKUS in one way or another.⁴⁹

Southeast Asia. AUKUS has been shown to have little public resonance, with one 2023 poll finding only 11 per cent of Indonesians have heard of it.⁵⁰ But beyond public opinion, governments across the wider Indo-Pacific, including India, South Korea, Singapore, Vietnam and the Philippines, have come out in favour of the trilateral pact, though to varying degrees.⁵¹ The Indonesian government initially expressed concern about AUKUS in 2021 yet has more recently said that Indonesia should view AUKUS as partners and has deepened its bilateral partnerships with the United States and Australia.⁵² The Malaysian government, which also initially expressed the most vocal opposition to AUKUS outside of China, has not downgraded relations with the three AUKUS partners, instead re-orienting to a more pragmatic approach and decreasing both the frequency and tenor of its criticism of AUKUS.⁵³

The outlier in the region on AUKUS is the exception to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) consensus on United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea: Cambodia. Former Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen, who ruled the country for nearly forty years until August 2023, called the AUKUS pact a “starting point of a very dangerous arms race”. Yet Hun Manet, Hun Sen’s successor and eldest son, has overseen a warming of relations with the United States though this shift is not necessarily to the exclusion of China. As one

⁴⁹ Perth USAsia Centre. *Japan's Views on AUKUS*. November 2023. <https://puac-wp-uploads-bucket-aosudl-prod.s3.ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/10161457/Japan-s-views-on-AUKUS.pdf>; Perth USAsia Centre. “AUKUS Two Years On: South Korea’s View.” <https://perthusasia.edu.au/research-and-insights/publications/aukus-series-aukus-two-years-on-south-koreas-view/>; David Scott. “AUKUS and New Zealand: Strategic Interests and Regional Alignment.” *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 78, no. 4 (2024). <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10357718.2024.2391336>.

⁵⁰ Lowy Institute. *How South-East Asia Views AUKUS*. 2023. <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/how-south-east-asia-views-aukus>.

⁵¹ “Singapore Backs AUKUS and Says Australia Could Play Bigger Role in Regional Security.” *The Guardian*. 1 May 2023. <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2023/may/01/singapore-backs-aukus-and-says-australia-could-play-bigger-role-in-regional-security>; Perth USAsia Centre. “Philippine Exceptionalism: Why AUKUS Matters to Manila in the Age of Great Power Competition.” <https://perthusasia.edu.au/research-and-insights/publications/aukus-series-philippine-exceptionalism-why-aukus-matters-to-manila-in-the-age-of-great-power-competition/>; “At IAEA, India Supports AUKUS.” *The Diplomat*. October 2022. <https://thediplomat.com/2022/10/at-iaea-india-supports-aukus/>; “Australia Can Count on Vietnam to Support AUKUS.” *The Strategist*. Australian Strategic Policy Institute. <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/australia-can-count-on-vietnam-to-support-aukus/>.

⁵² “A Pragmatic Path: Indonesia’s Engagement with AUKUS.” Policy Brief IP24099. S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies. <https://rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/idss/ip24099-a-pragmatic-path-indonesias-engagement-with-aukus/>.

⁵³ Perth USAsia Centre. “Malaysia’s Position on AUKUS: A Question of Stagnation or Pragmatism?” <https://perthusasia.edu.au/research-and-insights/publications/aukus-series-malaysias-position-on-aukus-a-question-of-stagnation-or-pragmatism/>.

Cambodia expert said in March 2026, Prime Minister Hun Manet is pursuing “a diversified foreign policy strategy that is shaped less by ideological or strategic allegiance than by the practical imperative of survival and adaptability.”⁵⁴

Pacific Island Countries. Initial reactions in the Pacific Islands to AUKUS included concern about nuclear proliferation, escalations of geopolitical tensions and muted support. The fact that Pacific leaders only learned about AUKUS through the media, instead of directly from Australian officials, did not go unnoticed by Pacific governments.⁵⁵ While Fijian Prime Minister Rabuka has come out supportive of AUKUS in recent years, other Pacific leaders have made limited comments about it. However, two leaders in particular – Cook Islands Prime Minister Mark Brown and former Kiribati President Anote Tong – have remained opposed to AUKUS, albeit less vociferously than when the trilateral pact was first announced in 2021.⁵⁶ Furthermore, the Cook Islands in April 2026 signed a security pact with New Zealand, a Five Eyes intelligence partner and a nation which has an alliance with Australia. Meanwhile, Kiribati has re-engaged with the Pacific Islands Forum and accepted increased diplomatic engagement with New Zealand.⁵⁷

While substantive public polling on the topic in the Pacific Islands remains unavailable, analysing the sentiment of comments on Pacific Island news sources can be helpful to gauge levels of support. One study of online messaging in the Pacific following the September 2021 announcement found that the Chinese government “promoted clear narratives and disinformation, including claims that Australia’s agreement to obtain nuclear submarines was in breach of the Treaty of Rarotonga and a threat to PICs’ security and prosperity” though the impact of such efforts “had limited penetration into the online information environment”.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ “Is Cambodia Pivoting to the US by Joining President Trump’s ‘Board of Peace?’” *The Diplomat*. March 2026. <https://thediplomat.com/2026/03/is-cambodia-pivoting-to-the-us-by-joining-president-trumps-board-of-peace/>.

⁵⁵ “Pacific Responses to AUKUS: A Mix of Unease and Understanding.” *The Diplomat*. April 2023. <https://thediplomat.com/2023/04/pacific-responses-to-aukus-a-mix-of-unease-and-understanding/>.

⁵⁶ “Pacific Responses to AUKUS: A Mix of Unease and Understanding.” *The Diplomat*. April 2023. <https://thediplomat.com/2023/04/pacific-responses-to-aukus-a-mix-of-unease-and-understanding/>.

⁵⁷ “Cook Islands-NZ Security Pact Is About ‘Us Moving Forward as Two Countries’: PM Brown.” *Radio New Zealand*. April 2026. <https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/pacific/591968/cook-islands-nz-security-pact-is-about-us-moving-forward-as-two-countries-pm-brown>; “New Zealand and Kiribati Sign Statement of Partnership Agreement.” *Radio New Zealand*. <https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/pacific/584429/new-zealand-and-kiribati-sign-statement-of-partnership-agreement>.

⁵⁸ Johnson, Blake, and Joshua Dunne. *Seeking to Undermine Democracy and Partnerships: How the CCP Is Influencing the Pacific Islands Information Environment*. Australian Strategic Policy Institute, March 2023. <https://www.aspi.org.au/report/seeking-undermine-democracy-and-partnerships/>.

The Challenges for Executing AUKUS

Amid continued political backing and more public support than not for the notion of AUKUS, the question then becomes one of execution. The challenges for executing a multi-generational trilateral defence agreement remain formidable but not impossible to overcome. As one research report on AUKUS in 2025 said, “it is difficult to overstate the scale of the enduring challenges.”⁵⁹ While considerable progress on AUKUS has been made in the four years since its announcement, persistent challenges for policymakers moving forward primarily involve the workforce, messaging, and messengers necessary to maintain the social licence.⁶⁰

The capacity. In Australia, AUKUS is expected to generate more than 20,000 jobs altogether. In fact, the scale is significant enough to raise concern about workforce availability, particularly in the specialised fields AUKUS will require to succeed.⁶¹ More than doubling the nation’s shipbuilding workforce in an effort to become the only non-nuclear power to operate nuclear-powered, conventionally armed submarines is not a simple feat.⁶² Mobilising the necessary highly skilled industrial workforce in a country that recently experienced its lowest rate of unemployment in 50 years will remain a key challenge though not one without precedent or pragmatic pathways forward. This includes government efforts to attract highly skilled labourers in AUKUS-adjacent industries, foster public-private partnerships that upskill Australian workers, and the development of a national workforce plan that prioritises diversity, versatility and adaptability.

US capacity, specifically *Virginia*-class production constraints, remains another key challenge for AUKUS. Australia has already begun paying instalments that will total A\$4.5 billion to the United States to expand US defence industrial capacity yet there remain questions as to whether it is enough for the United States to make enough boats in time. Wars in Ukraine and Iran have highlighted the need to revisit long-neglected defence production lines. Shipbuilding is another formidable challenge that Congress is actively seeking to address.⁶³

⁵⁹ Nason, Alice, and Peter Dean. *Rising to the Challenge: Delivering Australia's Nuclear-Powered Submarine Program*. United States Studies Centre, 2025. <https://www.ussc.edu.au/delivering-australias-nuclear-powered-submarine-program>.

⁶⁰ Mayo, Sophie, Peter K. Lee, and Alice Nason. “The Social Licence for AUKUS Has Not Yet Been Earned.” United States Studies Centre, August 2023. <https://www.ussc.edu.au/the-social-licence-for-aukus-has-not-yet-been-earned>.

⁶¹ Dean, Peter, Alice Nason, Sophie Mayo, and Samuel Garrett. *AUKUS Inflection Point: Building the Ecosystem for Workforce Development*. United States Studies Centre, December 2023. <https://www.ussc.edu.au/workforce-challenges-potentially-largest-threat-to-aukus-new-report-finds>.

⁶² United States Studies Centre. “AUKUS Economics: The Price of a Megaproject.” <https://www.ussc.edu.au/explainer-aukus-economics-the-price-of-a-megaproject>.

The messaging. Surveying public opinion across a number of polls, the Australia-China Relations Institute concluded in November 2025 that “support for AUKUS has not waned and may have even strengthened slightly.”⁶⁴ Support for AUKUS in Australia remains bipartisan both in parliament and amongst the Australian people.⁶⁵ Within the university⁶⁶ and industry sectors,⁶⁷ support for AUKUS remains significant given the considerable commercial opportunities the initiative provides.

At the same time, however, public confusion about AUKUS abounds. US Studies Centre polling also in 2025 found that only a quarter of Australians said their government has properly explained why Australia needs nuclear-powered submarines⁶⁸. Australians may be more than twice as likely to support AUKUS than oppose it, but the trilateral project remains, according to Australia’s public-service broadcaster, a “perplexing issue for most Australians”.⁶⁹ In an era defined by cost-of-living pressures and the energy and inflation levels at rates not seen in many years, convincing the Australian people to continue spending hundreds of billions of dollars on AUKUS is an undeniable challenge.

Australia’s official messaging on AUKUS, which often focuses on the prospects for domestic jobs, has been sporadic.⁷⁰ The Australian government did not decide to undergo the largest military investment since World War II to simply create more Australian jobs. The highly skilled jobs that the AUKUS investment

⁶³ Congressional Budget Office. *Shipbuilding Challenges*. April 2026. <https://www.cbo.gov/system/files/2026-04/62258-shipbuilding-challenges.pdf>.

⁶⁴ “AUKUS: Support for Submarine Deal Holds Steady Despite Concerns Over Cost.” *Crikey*. 19 November 2025. <https://www.crikey.com.au/2025/11/19/aukus-cost-support-australian-polling-submarine-deal-united-states-united-kingdom/>.

⁶⁵ Garrett, Samuel, Ava Kalinauskas, and Jared Mondschein. *Allies and Partners Poll 2025: Where the Quad Countries Stand on Trump, Security and the Future of the Indo-Pacific*. United States Studies Centre, 2025. <https://www.ussc.edu.au/allies-and-partners-poll-2025-where-the-quad-countries-stand-on-trump-security-and-the-future-of-the-indo-pacific>.

⁶⁶ Group of Eight Australia. *GO8 AUKUS Capability Statement*. June 2024. <https://go8.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/GO8-AUKUS-Capability-Statement.pdf>.

⁶⁷ Business Council of Australia and American Chamber of Commerce in Australia. *Australia’s AUKUS Pillar II Opportunity*. November 2025. <https://www.bca.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/Australias-AUKUS-Pillar-II-Opportunity-BCA-AmCham-report-WEB.pdf>.

⁶⁸ Garrett, Samuel, Ava Kalinauskas, and Jared Mondschein. *Allies and Partners Poll 2025: Where the Quad Countries Stand on Trump, Security and the Future of the Indo-Pacific*. United States Studies Centre, 2025. <https://cdn.sanity.io/files/ooh1fq7e/production/ee7c2c6e14c2c64b965b0cf0ead5e8f84b69fdc2.pdf/2025-Allies-and-partners-poll-Where-the-Quad-countries-stand-on-Trump-security-and-the-future-of-the-Indo-Pacific.pdf>.

⁶⁹ “AUKUS Critics Explain Controversy Around Security Partnership.” *ABC News*. 12 February 2025. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2025-02-12/aukus-critics-explain-controversy-around-security-partnership/104883284>.

⁷⁰ Lee, Peter K., and Alice Nason. “365 Days of AUKUS: Progress, Challenges and Prospects.” United States Studies Centre, 14 September 2022. <https://www.ussc.edu.au/365-days-of-aukus-progress-challenges-and-prospects>.

enables are a by-product of a broader goal: deterring China and maintaining a favourable balance of power in the Indo-Pacific. The decades-long roadmap for AUKUS requires a persistent articulation of the necessity of the project.

The messengers. The Australian population has broadly, since its 2021 announcement, remained more supportive of AUKUS than not. Yet despite such persistent support, a difference in views of AUKUS amongst men and women has also persisted. Australian women are 19 points less supportive of AUKUS than men and three times as likely as men to say they are unsure about AUKUS.⁷¹ While this coincides with known gender differences on the alliance,⁷² it need not remain this way. To this day, the primary messengers about AUKUS, from the political leaders of the three countries to the military leaders of the three countries, have not been women. With that said, in April 2026 Australia appointed its first female Defence Secretary and Foreign Minister Penny Wong has discussed AUKUS with the media, highlighting its importance for deterrence and maintaining a favourable balance of power.⁷³ The social licence for such an ambitious endeavour cannot be taken for granted and will require more explicit support from a more diverse array of government and non-government actors.

Conclusion

As much as China may assert that AUKUS is provocative, it has the causation backwards. Australia pursued the largest single defence investment in its history because the strategic circumstances merited it. There are undoubtedly significant challenges Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom will need to overcome to successfully deliver AUKUS, most notably around execution and maintaining the necessary social licence. And while regional perceptions of AUKUS have broadly improved, such successes are by no means pre-ordained. Ultimately, however, it is difficult to deny that AUKUS more effectively deters China's ambitions in the Indo-Pacific compared to the pathway Australia was previously on. The three governments will need to continue to make the case that AUKUS is a sizeable investment in deterrence worth pursuing.

⁷¹ Garrett, Samuel, Ava Kalinauskas, and Jared Mondschein. *Allies and Partners Poll 2025: Where the Quad Countries Stand on Trump, Security and the Future of the Indo-Pacific*. United States Studies Centre, 2025. <https://www.ussc.edu.au/allies-and-partners-poll-2025-where-the-quad-countries-stand-on-trump-security-and-the-future-of-the-indo-pacific>.

⁷² "Australian Embassy 'Mateship' Campaign Including Only White Men." *The Guardian*. 6 July 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2018/jul/06/australian-embassy-mateship-campaign-including-only-white-men>.

⁷³ Wong, Penny. "Doorstop Interview – Parliament House." Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. <https://www.foreignminister.gov.au/minister/penny-wong/transcript/doorstop-parliament-house-8>. See also Prime Minister of Australia, "Appointment of New Secretary of the Department of Defence", 28 April 2026, <https://www.pm.gov.au/media/appointment-new-secretary-department-defence>.

About the Author

Jared Mondschein is the Director of Research at the United States Studies Centre, The University of Sydney. Jared's analysis has appeared in outlets including ABC, BBC, CNN, Foreign Policy, MSNBC, and Sky News as well as across major Australian mastheads. Previously, Jared was a Research Analyst at Bloomberg BNA in Washington, DC, where he focused on cross-border tax issues. Prior to joining Bloomberg BNA, Jared was a Research Associate in the Asia Studies program of the Council on Foreign Relations, an editorial assistant at Foreign Policy magazine, and an assistant editor at a policy journal in Beijing. He holds a Bachelor of Arts in government and international affairs from Skidmore College in New York and a Master of Arts degree in international relations from King's College London.

From Presence to Persistence: Canada, Europe, and the Challenge of Credible Indo-Pacific Security Engagement

Hugues Canuel

From Visibility to Credibility

The Indo-Pacific has emerged as the principal theatre of twenty-first-century geopolitical competition. The region concentrates major maritime trade routes, critical supply chains, technological competition, and an increasing share of global military build-up. It also sits at the centre of intensifying strategic rivalry between the United States and China, while regional actors simultaneously seek to preserve autonomy, economic openness, and strategic flexibility.

For European states, the Indo-Pacific has evolved from a geographically distant strategic concern into a region increasingly connected to European prosperity, maritime security, and broader geopolitical stability. For Canada, a Pacific nation that has historically oscillated between Atlantic and Pacific priorities, the challenge has been less one of geography than of sustaining long-term strategic attention and operational commitment.

Although the Indo-Pacific is far from strategically uniform, Southeast Asia provides a particularly revealing lens through which to examine how regional actors assess the credibility and sustainability of external security engagement. Situated at the maritime crossroads between the Indian and Pacific Oceans, the region increasingly serves as a practical testing ground for questions of persistence, logistics, defence diplomacy, and strategic reliability.

Over the past decade, this growing recognition has produced a marked expansion in Canadian and European engagement with the region. The European Union adopted its Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific in 2021.¹ France, Germany, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom have all articulated Indo-Pacific strategies or policy frameworks, albeit from differing strategic positions and levels of regional embeddedness. Canada similarly released its Indo-Pacific Strategy in 2022, accompanied by increased naval

¹ European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. 2021. "The EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific." Accessed 17 May 2026.

https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/jointcommunication_2021_24_1_en.pdf

deployments, enhanced regional defence engagement, and expanded diplomatic initiatives.²

At the operational level, this shift has become increasingly visible. European naval deployments to the Indo-Pacific have multiplied in frequency, scale, and political profile.³ France, as a resident Indo-Pacific power with overseas territories and permanent military forces in both the Indian and Pacific Oceans, occupies a somewhat distinct category and has sought to maintain recurring major naval deployments to the region through varying carrier, amphibious, and surface task group configurations. More broadly, virtually all European aircraft carrier groups have visited the wider Indo-Pacific theatre in recent years, reflecting the growing symbolic and operational ambition of European engagement. Canada has similarly expanded participation in multinational exercises, sanctions enforcement missions, forward naval presence operations, and regional defence diplomacy initiatives.⁴

Yet visibility alone does not necessarily produce credibility. Across Southeast Asia and the broader Indo-Pacific, regional perceptions of external security actors are shaped less by occasional demonstrations of presence than by assessments of consistency, endurance, and reliability. Naval diplomacy is still important, but regional governments increasingly evaluate whether external actors have the political will, logistical resources, and strategic coherence needed to sustain engagement during periods of prolonged tension or crisis.⁵

This distinction between presence and persistence is becoming increasingly important. Presence may be episodic, symbolic, or rotational. Persistence implies something deeper: sustained operational engagement, reliable access arrangements, enduring partnerships, and the ability to remain strategically relevant over time despite competing priorities and limited resources. In practical terms, persistence depends not only on ship deployments, but also on

² Government of Canada. 2022. "Canada's Indo-Pacific Strategy." Accessed 17 May 2026.
<https://www.international.gc.ca/transparency-transparence/indo-pacific-indo-pacifique/index.aspx?lang=eng>

³ Gill-Tiney, Patrick. 2024. "European Naval Deployments in the Indo-Pacific: Why Are They There?" LSE Department of International Relations Blog, 9 May. Accessed 21 May 2026.
<https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/internationalrelations/2024/05/09/european-naval-deployments-indo-pacific/>.

⁴ Nadjibulla, Vina. 2026. "From Presence to Impact: Shaping the Next Phase of Canada's Indo-Pacific Strategy." Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada, June 4. Accessed 6 June 2026.
<https://www.asiapacific.ca/publication/presence-to-impact-shaping-next-phase-canadas-indo-pacific-strategy>.

⁵ Sharon Seah et al., *The State of Southeast Asia: 2025 Survey Report* (Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2025), <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/The-State-of-SEA-2025-1.pdf>.

logistics, maintenance cycles, defence diplomacy, industrial support, and policy continuity.

For middle powers such as Canada and many European states, the challenge is therefore not to replicate the scale of American or Chinese military presence. Such a goal would be unrealistic and strategically counterproductive. Rather, the challenge is to build forms of engagement that are credible, sustainable, and aligned with both regional expectations and available resources.

This paper argues that the future relevance of Canada and Europe in the Indo-Pacific will depend less on symbolic demonstrations of commitment than on their ability to sustain meaningful and resilient engagement over time. It first examines how regional partners increasingly assess the credibility of external security actors. It then explores the operational and logistical dimensions of maritime persistence, including the growing importance of defence diplomacy, access arrangements, and maritime resilience. Finally, it considers the implications for Canada and Europe as they look to reconcile Indo-Pacific ambitions with competing strategic demands closer to home.

How Southeast Asian Partners Assess Credibility

For many Southeast Asian states, the return of geopolitical competition to the Indo-Pacific presents both opportunities and risks. Regional governments generally welcome sustained external engagement as a means of preserving strategic balance and avoiding excessive dependence on any single major power. Yet, they remain wary of becoming pawns in intensified great-power confrontation.

As a result, regional actors increasingly evaluate external security partners through a pragmatic lens centred on consistency, reliability, and long-term utility rather than rhetorical alignment alone. This perspective is particularly visible in maritime security. Southeast Asian governments routinely interact with a wide spectrum of external naval actors, including the United States, China, Japan, Australia, India, and a growing number of European partners. Canada cultivates a steadily expanding regional profile through naval deployments, sanctions enforcement operations, and defence engagement activities. In this crowded strategic environment, symbolic presence retains diplomatic value, but it is no longer sufficient to distinguish one partner from another.

Instead, government officials and defence establishments increasingly focus on questions such as:

- Which partners maintain sustained operational engagement?
- Which actors reliably return over time?

- Which states contribute meaningfully to regional capacity-building efforts?
- Which partners remain present during periods of tension or crisis?
- Which actors demonstrate long-term political resolve and operational endurance?

In this context, consistency often matters more than scale. A modest but sustained engagement posture may ultimately generate greater regional credibility than intermittent demonstrations of high-profile naval activity unsupported by broader institutional follow-through. Defence diplomacy therefore becomes cumulative. Relationships built through recurring exercises, educational exchanges, operational cooperation, liaison arrangements, and sustained military-to-military engagement often matter as much as highly visible but episodic demonstrations of presence.

This dynamic helps explain why certain Indo-Pacific middle powers have successfully expanded their regional influence despite relatively limited force structures. Japan, Australia, and Singapore, for example, have all invested heavily in long-term defence diplomacy, institutional engagement, and recurring operational presence. Their regional credibility derives not simply from hardware, but from sustained patterns of interaction, reliability, and predictability.⁶ Canada and European actors approach the region from a different strategic position as external partners rather than resident powers. Nevertheless, they generally benefit from positive regional perceptions. They are often viewed as comparatively pragmatic, less coercive, and more supportive of multilateral norms than larger competing powers. Many Southeast Asian governments also value their support for international law, maritime governance, humanitarian assistance, and professional military cooperation.

At the same time, regional observers remain attentive to inconsistencies between rhetoric and operational reality. European declarations regarding the Indo-Pacific have expanded rapidly in recent years.⁷ Yet regional assessments often distinguish between countries with permanent or sustained regional presence and those whose engagement remains primarily declaratory or episodic. France occupies a distinct category due to its overseas territories,

⁶ Evelyn Goh, "Great Powers and Hierarchical Order in Southeast Asia: Analyzing Regional Security Strategies", *International Security* 32, no. 3 (Winter 2007/08): 113–157, <https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/great-powers-and-hierarchical-order-southeast-asia-analyzing-regional-security>.

⁷ HM Government. 2021. *Global Britain in a Competitive Age: The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy*. London: HM Government, 66–68; Government of Germany. 2020. *Policy Guidelines for the Indo-Pacific*. Berlin: Federal Government of Germany; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands. 2020. *Indo-Pacific: Guidelines for Strengthening Dutch and EU Cooperation with Partners in Asia*. The Hague.

permanent military presence, and long-standing Indo-Pacific posture. Britain similarly benefits from a longstanding expeditionary naval tradition and global defence networks, even if its regional posture remains more limited than that of the United States. Other European actors, however, continue to face questions regarding the long-term sustainability of their engagement.

Canada faces a somewhat different dynamic. Unlike most European states, Canada is itself a Pacific country. Yet Ottawa has historically oscillated between Atlantic and Pacific strategic priorities, often devoting intermittent rather than sustained attention to the region. Consequently, regional interlocutors frequently assess Canadian engagement less through the lens of geographic legitimacy than through questions of consistency and endurance. The issue is not whether Canada belongs in the Indo-Pacific, but whether it can maintain long-term engagement despite competing obligations elsewhere.

This challenge reflects Canada's unique strategic geography. Few allies face the simultaneous demands of North American defence, Arctic security, Atlantic commitments, and Pacific engagement. Maintaining a meaningful Indo-Pacific presence therefore requires not only naval deployments but also sustained political attention and a willingness to resist the cyclical tendency to shift strategic focus from one theatre to another. Canada's experience illustrates how persistence, rather than geography alone, ultimately determines regional credibility.

Such perceptions are reinforced by the broader strategic environment. Southeast Asian governments increasingly operate under conditions of chronic uncertainty shaped by maritime disputes, grey-zone activity, technological competition, economic coercion, and intensifying rivalry between major powers. Under these conditions, regional actors place growing value on partners capable of sustained engagement and practical cooperation rather than purely symbolic demonstrations of solidarity. Consequently, credibility in the Indo-Pacific increasingly depends upon endurance.

Maritime Persistence and the Logistics of Credibility

The importance of persistence is reinforced by the changing operational tempo of Indo-Pacific competition. Unlike short-duration crisis responses or occasional coalition operations, contemporary maritime competition increasingly unfolds as a long-term contest of endurance, presence, and institutional resilience. Navies are expected not simply to deploy occasionally into the region, but to maintain recurring patterns of engagement over years or even decades.

This dynamic places particular pressure on middle powers. For Canada and European states, Indo-Pacific operations are conducted at significant distance

from home ports and industrial support bases. Sustaining deployments therefore requires more than individual platforms; it demands access to maintenance infrastructure, replenishment capabilities, secure communications, spare-parts supply chains, and reliable regional partnerships. In practice, persistence depends upon an entire support ecosystem running largely out of public view.⁸

The operational implications are substantial. Long transits reduce on-station presence. Maintenance periods consume a growing share of deployment cycles. Personnel shortages and industrial delays increasingly affect force generation across many Western navies. Meanwhile, heightened operational demands in the European and Atlantic theatres continue to compete for limited naval resources. Maritime persistence therefore becomes not only a strategic ambition, but also a question of institutional sustainability.

These realities help explain why regional partners place increasing emphasis on reliability rather than occasional visibility. A navy that returns consistently, takes part in recurring exercises, and maintains long-term defence relationships may generate greater strategic confidence than one capable of sporadic but highly symbolic deployments unsupported by enduring institutional engagement.

This cumulative logic also applies to multilateral security cooperation exercises such as RIMPAC, Komodo, Kakadu, Pacific Partnership, and regional maritime domain awareness initiatives that derive much of their value from repetition and continuity. Familiarity between operational staffs, recurring liaison relationships, and institutional memory all contribute incrementally to interoperability and trust. Maritime partnerships are rarely built through single deployments alone.

If persistence is becoming central to regional credibility, then logistics increasingly constitute the foundation upon which persistence rests. For Canada and European actors operating far from home waters, these constraints are particularly significant. The Indo-Pacific imposes immense geographic distances and operational demands. Transit times alone consume substantial portions of deployment cycles. Maintenance and replenishment requirements become increasingly complex as distance from national support infrastructure expands. Force generation constraints further limit the number of platforms available for sustained deployment.

In practice, this means that a single frigate deployment to the Indo-Pacific often represents the temporary concentration of a much larger logistical and institutional effort. Consequently, the sustainability of Indo-Pacific engagement depends heavily upon access to regional infrastructure and partnerships. Port

⁸ Till, Geoffrey. 2018. *Seapower: A Guide for the Twenty-First Century*. 4th ed. Abingdon: Routledge, 288–312.

facilities, logistics agreements, maintenance support, fuel availability, and defence relationships become strategically important enablers of persistence.

This reality helps explain the growing importance of regional hubs such as Singapore. The Lion City occupies a uniquely prominent position within the Indo-Pacific maritime system.⁹ Located near the Strait of Malacca, one of the world's most critical maritime chokepoints, it serves as both a logistical hub and a strategic connector between the Indian and Pacific Oceans. The city-state's advanced port infrastructure, political stability, and longstanding support for international maritime access have made it an essential node for many external naval actors.

For middle powers operating at long distance from home ports, access to such facilities significantly enhances operational endurance and flexibility. Replenishment, maintenance, crew rest, and operational coordination may appear mundane compared to carrier strike operations or freedom of navigation transits, yet they often decide whether sustained presence is possible.

This is where defence diplomacy and logistics intersect. Much of the practical architecture supporting maritime persistence is built quietly through years of professional engagement, trust-building, technical cooperation, and institutional relationships. Access agreements and logistical arrangements rarely emerge spontaneously during crises.¹⁰ They are usually the product of cumulative political and military engagement conducted over extended periods.

As a result, defence diplomacy increasingly forms an operational capability in its own right. Exercises, staff talks, educational exchanges, liaison officer arrangements, and professional military cooperation all contribute to building the trust and familiarity required for more durable strategic relationships. In many cases, these forms of engagement generate longer-lasting influence than occasional high-profile deployments.

At the same time, maritime persistence also requires political sustainability. Many Canadian and European governments face competing demands closer to home. Russia's invasion of Ukraine and renewed concern about Atlantic and European security have reinforced the continued importance of NATO and the Euro-Atlantic theatre. Yet these pressures do not affect all actors identically. For many European states, the challenge lies in balancing legitimate Indo-Pacific interests with enduring responsibilities in the Atlantic, Mediterranean, and

⁹ Say Xian Hong, "Assessing Singapore's Maritime Governance Capacity: Priorities and Challenges", Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, Center for Strategic and International Studies, 6 December 2023, <https://amti.csis.org/assessing-singapores-maritime-governance-capacity-priorities-and-challenges/>.

¹⁰ Le Mièr, Christian. 2014. *Maritime Diplomacy in the 21st Century: Drivers and Challenges*. Abingdon: Routledge, 87-112.

continental theatres. For Canada, the challenge is broader still. Canadian defence policy must simultaneously address North Atlantic commitments, North American defence, Arctic security, and Indo-Pacific engagement despite limited naval mass and long-standing procurement pressures.

Increasing debate within Asian strategic circles regarding the long-term sustainability of external partners' commitment to Indo-Pacific security reflects broader regional awareness of these constraints.¹¹ The issue is rarely whether involvement should continue, but whether it can remain operationally credible over time. These realities do not invalidate Indo-Pacific engagement. Rather, they underscore the importance of aligning ambition with sustainability. The credibility of Canadian and European commitment to the Indo-Pacific will depend not on the proliferation of strategic statements, but on whether governments can maintain realistic and durable forms of operational presence over time.

Maritime Resilience and the Grey-Zone Environment

The evolving Indo-Pacific security environment increasingly blurs the distinction between traditional naval operations and broader questions of maritime resilience as well. Competition in the region unfolds just below the threshold of open conflict. Grey-zone activity, economic coercion, maritime militia operations, cyber threats, disinformation campaigns, and pressure on critical infrastructure have become recurring features of the strategic landscape. Maritime security is therefore no longer limited to questions of fleet engagement or territorial defence alone.

This shift has important implications for Canada and Europe. Many regional partners increasingly seek cooperation not only in high-end warfighting, but also in areas such as maritime domain awareness, coast guard cooperation, cyber resilience, critical infrastructure protection, and the defence of undersea communications networks.

The growing strategic importance of undersea infrastructure is particularly significant. Submarine telecommunications cables carry the overwhelming majority of global digital communications and financial transactions. Energy pipelines and offshore infrastructure similarly underpin global economic activity. Much of this infrastructure traverses contested or strategically vulnerable maritime spaces.

¹¹ Heiduk, Felix. 2022. *Security in the Indo-Pacific: The Asianisation of the Regional Security Architecture*. Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik Research 11. Accessed 13 May 2026. <https://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2022RP11/>.

Recent incidents involving suspected interference with undersea infrastructure in both European and Indo-Pacific waters have reinforced concerns regarding the vulnerability of these networks.¹² As a result, maritime resilience increasingly includes not only naval deterrence, but also the protection of critical seabed infrastructure, digital connectivity, and commercial shipping systems. Fresh efforts to strengthen cooperation in this area illustrate how maritime security is evolving beyond traditional naval competition.

At the 2026 Shangri-La Dialogue, Singapore and sixteen partner nations launched the Guiding Principles for Underwater Infrastructure Defence Exchanges (GUIDE), a framework intended to enhance cooperation on the protection of critical underwater infrastructure.¹³ Significantly, the initiative brought together a diverse grouping of Southeast Asian and European states, reflecting a growing recognition that threats to undersea communications and energy networks constitute shared vulnerabilities that transcend traditional regional boundaries.

This broader conception of maritime security may actually create comparative advantages for Canada and Europe. While neither can compete directly with the scale of Chinese or American military power in the Indo-Pacific, both possess significant expertise in maritime governance, multilateral cooperation, coast guard operations, legal frameworks, cybersecurity, and institutional capacity-building. European initiatives such as CRIMARIO, ESIWA, and Coordinated Maritime Presences illustrate this trend.¹⁴ Canada similarly contributes through maritime training initiatives, intelligence cooperation, and broader defence diplomacy. Importantly, these forms of engagement are often highly valued regionally because they support resilience without necessarily forcing regional states into rigid geopolitical alignment.

Many Southeast Asian governments continue to resist binary strategic choices between major powers.¹⁵ They generally prefer diversified partnerships that enhance autonomy and capacity while avoiding excessive dependence on any

¹² GSTS Blog. 2025. "Critical Undersea Infrastructure (CUI): Trends, Threats, and Risks." November 27. Accessed 17 May 2026. <https://gsts.ca/fr/critical-undersea-infrastructure-trends-threats-and-risks/>.

¹³ Ministry of Defence Singapore. 2026. "Singapore and Partner Nations Launch the Guiding Principles for Underwater Infrastructure Defence Exchanges (GUIDE) at the Shangri-La Dialogue 2026." News Release, May 30. Accessed 2 June 2026. <https://www.mindef.gov.sg/news-and-events/latest-releases/30may26-nr6/>.

¹⁴ European Union Critical Maritime Routes Indo-Pacific (CRIMARIO). 2023. "Mission and Objectives." Accessed 12 May 2026. <https://crimario.eu/mission-and-objectives/>; European Union. 2024. "ESIWA – Enhancing Security Cooperation in and With Asia (ESIWA)." August 2. Accessed 12 May 2026. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/esiwa-enhancing-security-cooperation-and-asia_en.

¹⁵ Khoo, Nicholas. 2022. "Great power Rivalry and Southeast Asian Agency: Southeast Asia in an Era of US-China Strategic Competition." *Political Science*. 74 (2–3):141–154.

single actor. Middle-power engagement that emphasises practical cooperation, maritime resilience, and institutional support may therefore prove particularly attractive. The emergence of initiatives such as GUIDE suggests that functional cooperation on shared security challenges may offer a particularly promising avenue for external partners seeking to contribute to regional stability without intensifying geopolitical polarisation.

This also reinforces the importance of persistence over symbolism. Building maritime resilience is inherently cumulative. Trust, interoperability, institutional familiarity, and technical cooperation develop gradually over time. Occasional naval deployments may support visibility, but resilience partnerships depend upon sustained engagement and continuity. Consequently, the future strategic value of Canadian and European engagement may lie less in attempts to show great-power status than in their ability to remain reliable and practical long-term contributors to regional resilience.

The Limits of Symbolic Engagement

This does not mean symbolic engagement lacks value. Naval deployments continue to perform important strategic functions. Few instruments of naval diplomacy signal political commitment, demonstrate interoperability, reassure partners, and contribute to deterrence more visibly than the deployment of a large aircraft carrier or amphibious strike group, particularly when operating alongside allied and partner navies. Port visits, exercises, and multinational operations also provide visible evidence that the Indo-Pacific remains connected to broader international security interests.

Nevertheless, symbolic engagement becomes problematic when political rhetoric significantly exceeds sustainable operational capacity. This risk is not unique to Canada or Europe. Many states confront pressures to show strategic relevance through increasingly ambitious declaratory policies or highly visible deployments. Yet regional observers often distinguish between symbolic demonstrations of intent and long-term operational credibility.¹⁶

The issue is not whether external actors should engage in the Indo-Pacific. Rather, it is whether such engagement remains aligned with realistic force-generation capacity, logistical sustainability, and long-term political commitment. In practical terms, persistence may sometimes require accepting more modest but more sustainable forms of engagement. A smaller but recurring naval presence supported by robust defence diplomacy, regional

¹⁶ Ballestracci, Emanuele. 2026. "Is the European Engagement in the Indo-Pacific Already Coming to an End?" RSIS Commentary No. 067/2026. May 25. Accessed 2 June 2026. <https://rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/rsis/is-the-european-engagement-in-the-indo-pacific-already-coming-to-an-end/>.

access arrangements, and sustained institutional cooperation may ultimately generate greater strategic credibility than intermittent demonstrations of high-end naval activity that cannot be maintained consistently.

This is particularly relevant for middle powers. Unlike major powers with extensive overseas basing infrastructure and large fleet inventories, Canada and many European states operate under tighter resource constraints and broader competing obligations. Their strategic effectiveness therefore depends heavily upon prioritisation, cooperation, and the careful alignment of ambition with capability.

This reality also reinforces the importance of coalition operations. Multinational deployments, coordinated maritime presence initiatives, interoperability arrangements, and shared logistical support may help middle powers sustain meaningful engagement despite finite resources. Such approaches not only improve operational efficiency but also reinforce broader political signalling about collective commitment to maritime stability and international law.

At the same time, coalition operations cannot entirely eliminate strategic trade-offs. The resurgence of European security concerns following Russia's invasion of Ukraine has reminded governments that maritime competition has also returned to the Atlantic, Arctic, and Mediterranean theatres.¹⁷ Reinforcement routes, critical infrastructure protection, and anti-submarine warfare have again become central strategic concerns.

For Canada and Europe alike, the challenge therefore involves balancing multiple horizons simultaneously. The Indo-Pacific matters profoundly. Yet the sustainability of engagement abroad still depends upon keeping secure foundations closer to home.¹⁸ Maritime persistence in the Indo-Pacific cannot be entirely separated from broader questions of alliance cohesion, industrial capacity, and force sustainability across the Atlantic system.

Conclusion

Canada and Europe have entered a new phase of Indo-Pacific engagement. The question is no longer whether the region matters strategically. That debate has largely been settled by the growing centrality of the Indo-Pacific to global trade, technological competition, maritime security, and geopolitical rivalry. The more prominent issue now concerns the credibility and sustainability of external

¹⁷ NATO. 2022. *NATO 2022 Strategic Concept*. Madrid: North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

¹⁸ For a broader discussion of the growing interdependence between Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific maritime security dynamics, see Canuel, Hugues. 2025. "Historical Perspectives on European Maritime Security: Balancing Atlantic Commitments and Indo-Pacific Engagements." Paper presented at the Kingston Consortium on International Security Conference, November 19.

engagement. Across Southeast Asia and the wider Indo-Pacific, regional actors increasingly distinguish between symbolic presence and durable persistence. Visibility is still important, but credibility is increasingly measured through consistency, resilience, and long-term operational engagement.

For Canada and European actors, this shift carries important implications. Strategic relevance in the Indo-Pacific will depend less on episodic demonstrations of naval presence than on the ability to sustain practical and reliable engagement over time. Logistics, access arrangements, defence diplomacy, institutional cooperation, and maritime resilience are therefore becoming central components of strategic credibility.

This does not require replicating the scale of American or Chinese military power. Middle powers retain important comparative advantages in areas such as maritime governance, multilateral cooperation, professional military engagement, institutional capacity-building, and support for international law. Many Indo-Pacific partners continue to value these contributions precisely because they support resilience and strategic autonomy without necessarily intensifying regional polarisation.

At the same time, realism stays essential. Canada and Europe both face finite resources, competing strategic priorities, and growing security demands closer to home. Yet these pressures emerge from different strategic geographies and institutional realities. European actors increasingly confront renewed continental security pressures, while Canada must simultaneously balance Atlantic, Arctic, North American and Pacific commitments. The challenge, therefore, is not to maximise visibility at all costs, but to build forms of engagement that are strategically sustainable.

Persistence ultimately matters more than spectacle. In an increasingly contested Indo-Pacific, regional credibility will belong less to those who appear occasionally with great visibility than to those who remain present consistently, reliably, and over time. As strategic competition between China and the United States intensifies, middle powers will increasingly be judged by the durability rather than the visibility of their engagement.

About the Author

Captain Hugues Canuel, RCN, recently concluded his tour as Canadian Defence Advisor in Singapore. He previously served as Defence Attaché in Japan. He holds a PhD in War Studies from the Royal Military College of Canada, where he was appointed Adjunct Associate Professor in 2021. His research focuses on maritime strategy, Cold War history, Indo-Pacific security, and contemporary defence policy.

The views expressed in this paper are those of the author alone and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Government of Canada, the Department of National Defence, or the Canadian Armed Forces.

The Limits of EU Maritime Engagement in the Indo-Pacific

Lizza Bomassi

Research Analyst, EUISS

The Indo-Pacific's vast maritime spaces underpin the global economy, from major sea lines of communication to critical subsea infrastructure. The region carries a significant share of international trade and sits at the intersection of intensifying strategic competition and economic interdependence. For the EU, whose prosperity depends on secure maritime routes and stable supply chains, engagement in the Indo-Pacific is no longer optional but increasingly necessary. In recent years, the EU has expanded its maritime engagement in the region through initiatives aimed at strengthening maritime domain awareness, enhancing coordination, and building institutional capacity. These efforts have improved information-sharing and reinforced the EU's profile as a broadly accepted partner, but their impact has remained uneven.

This paper argues that this uneven impact reflects a structural misalignment between the EU's cooperation-based engagement model and the conditions that shape maritime governance in the Indo-Pacific. These include sovereignty sensitivities and strategic hedging, fragmented institutional architectures, and the growing complexity of the maritime domain. Together, these factors constrain not only the depth of maritime cooperation, but also the extent to which external actors such as the EU can translate engagement into sustained operational effect. Drawing upon semi-structured interviews and workshop discussions conducted across the region¹, the paper examines how these constraints interact with the EU's approach to maritime engagement in the Indo-Pacific and identifies areas where its engagement could deliver more consistent impact.

The EU's Maritime Engagement Model

The EU's maritime engagement in the Indo-Pacific is shaped by a cooperation-based model that prioritises awareness, coordination, and capacity-building rather than direct operational control. This reflects both strategic choice and practical constraints given the EU's limited force projection capability outside its immediate neighbourhood. As set out in the EU's 2023 Maritime Security

¹ Author's interviews and workshop discussions were conducted from November 2025 to March 2026.

Strategy² (EUMSS), EU maritime actions are geared towards achieving a maritime security posture marked by coordinated operations, integrated awareness, protected infrastructure, advanced interoperable capabilities, and effective rules-based partnerships.

In practice, this translates into a model centred on enhancing capabilities. The EU invests in information-sharing systems, supports institutional capacity, and facilitates coordination among national and regional actors. Initiatives such as EU-CRIMARIO³, an EU-funded capacity-building project aimed at strengthening maritime safety and security through improved inter-agency cooperation and information-sharing, and its maritime information-exchange platform IORIS⁴, illustrate this approach. These EU-supported initiatives work to improve the ability of maritime authorities to exchange information and develop a shared operational picture. Complementary programmes, including Enhancing Security Cooperation in and with Asia and the Indo-Pacific⁵ (ESIWA+), extend engagement into dialogue, training, and cooperation across maritime security and related domains.

This model reflects the EU's comparative advantages. Interview data indicate that, particularly in the maritime domain, the EU is widely perceived as a neutral actor, able to operate in politically sensitive environments where more overt security roles, especially those involving the US and China, are contested. Its emphasis on technical tools and capacity-building enables it to contribute to areas of high demand, such as the ocean economy, which has rapidly become central to global growth. The OECD estimates that between 1995 and 2020, the global ocean economy doubled in real terms, from US\$1.3 trillion to US\$2.6 trillion in gross value added, with over 75 per cent of that growth originating in Asia and the Pacific⁶.

Given this ocean environment, the EU's maritime engagement has primarily been delivered through a broad network of programmes with varying geographic and thematic scopes, spanning from the Atlantic and Latin America to the Indo-Pacific and European sea basins. Activities focus on public

² Council of the European Union. Council Conclusions on the Revised EU Maritime Security Strategy (EUMSS) and Its Action Plan. Brussels, 24 October 2023. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/67499/st14280-en23.pdf>.

³ CRIMARIO II. EU Crimario – Interconnecting the Indo-Pacific. 2023. <https://crimario.eu/>.

⁴ EU CRIMARIO. "IORIS: Moving from Situational Awareness to Situational Understanding and Action." 2023. <https://ioris.org/>.

⁵ European Commission. "Building Bridges to Prevent Violent Extremism: EU-Indo-Pacific Engagement through ESIWA+." European Commission Newsroom, 10 December 2024. <https://ec.europa.eu/newsroom/home/items/861266/en>.

⁶ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. The Ocean Economy to 2050. Paris: OECD Publishing, 2025. https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2025/03/the-ocean-economy-to-2050_e3f6a132/a9096fb1-en.pdf.

diplomacy, legal reforms and rule of law initiatives, monitoring and surveillance, maritime exercises and training, supply and procurement, and freedom of navigation contributions. This results in a large but somewhat weakly integrated project landscape. In practice, this can limit interoperability, create duplication, and complicate the consolidation of outcomes.

This fragmentation is compounded by uneven uptake of EU-supported systems. In contexts where national capabilities are limited, EU tools can become central to information-sharing and coordination. In more capable countries, maritime domain awareness tools are often used selectively alongside national systems or alternative partner platforms. This uneven integration reduces the extent to which shared awareness translates into collective action and sustains an environment in which multiple systems operate in parallel with varying levels of utilisation and effectiveness.

A further defining feature of the EU model, similar to most large institutional and intergovernmental entities, is its reliance on project-based delivery. The strengths of this approach lie in its facilitative nature, supporting capacity-building for example. However, because many initiatives operate within fixed funding cycles, continuity between project phases is limited, constraining long-term institutional embedding. In practice, progress achieved through training or system deployment may not always be sustained, particularly where follow-on funding, maintenance, or local ownership remains uncertain.

Constraints on the EU's Maritime Engagement

While understanding the EU's maritime engagement model is important, it is only one part of the broader ocean environment picture. EU maritime engagement in the Indo-Pacific is limited by a layered and interacting set of political, institutional, and operational constraints, each conditioning the extent to which the EU can contribute meaningfully to the Indo-Pacific's maritime environment.

Political Constraint: Sovereignty versus Priority

One of the central tensions shaping maritime engagement lies in the transboundary nature of maritime challenges. In principle, under international law, and most notably the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea⁷ (UNCLOS), coastal states are responsible for regulating and protecting, and have the right to regulate and protect, their maritime interests within specifically designated maritime zones. This exercise of sovereignty in the maritime domain is a key foundation of how the international maritime system has evolved over

⁷ United Nations. United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. 10 December 1982. https://www.un.org/depts/los/convention_agreements/texts/unclos/unclos_e.pdf.

the decades. And yet the complexity and interconnected nature of maritime security challenges mean that coastal states, particularly those with more limited capabilities, for example in maritime domain awareness, often rely on systems or tools beyond their full sovereign control, whether intergovernmental or privately operated. This defines the limits of what countries are willing to share and coordinate, ensuring that cooperation remains conditional and carefully calibrated. As a result, countries may accept technical support, dialogue, and information exchange, all the while resisting arrangements perceived to constrain sovereign discretion or increase exposure to political risk.

This sensitivity has become more pronounced as geopolitical competition has intensified, particularly between the US and China, including in the Indo-Pacific, parts of which China considers its immediate backyard. In Southeast Asia, for example, this has resulted in a situation where cooperation is increasingly filtered through the logic of hedging. Many countries continue to rely on the US as a security guarantor while remaining exposed – to varying degrees – to China economically. This dual dependence encourages caution rather than alignment and leads countries to rely on multiple tools offered by different external actors simultaneously⁸. In other words, maritime cooperation is judged not only on technical merit, but also in terms of strategic signalling, domestic political implications, and the risk of narrowing room for manoeuvre vis-à-vis major powers.

For the EU, this creates both opportunity and constraint. Its comparatively neutral profile makes it an acceptable partner in areas such as capacity-building and, to some extent, maritime domain awareness, but it also conditions the depth of cooperation and shapes its direction. At the same time, EU priorities in the Indo-Pacific do not enter a neutral policy space; they are filtered through national interests, threat perceptions, and political sensitivities. This becomes particularly evident where EU priorities are not fully aligned with those of partner countries. Issues such as sanctions evasion or the regulation of shadow-fleet vessels, which feature high on the EU's list of maritime concerns, may be politically sensitive or of secondary importance for some partners, while concerns such as illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing or maritime crime may be more immediate locally but may not be prioritised as highly in the EU's list of strategic maritime priorities.

In practice, this divergence produces a form of “active selectivity”. Partners engage with EU-supported initiatives where these align with national priorities, but engagement may also occur for pragmatic reasons, including access to

⁸ Brewster, David, and Anthony Bergin. “AI Revolutionises Maritime Intelligence.” Australian National University, National Security College, 24 July 2024. <https://nsc.anu.edu.au/content-centre/article/opinion/ai-revolutionises-maritime-intelligence>.

funding or a desire to avoid signalling disengagement from external partners. Conversely, cooperation may be limited or more cautious where initiatives touch on politically sensitive areas or do not align with domestic priorities. The result is a ceiling on the depth of cooperation, shaped by the interplay between sovereignty, strategic positioning, and differing political priorities.

Institutional Constraint: Fragmented Governance

Even where political willingness to cooperate exists, maritime engagement in the Indo-Pacific is constrained by fragmented governance structures at both national and regional levels. Maritime governance does not fall under a single authority, but spans a wide range of policy domains, including fisheries, environmental and climate policy, energy, security, development, and technology.

This complexity is particularly evident in the security domain, which involves multiple actors such as navies, coastguards, maritime police, customs agencies, port authorities, and increasingly cyber and infrastructure regulators. These actors operate under distinct mandates, institutional cultures, and planning processes, sometimes with limited integration. Governance is further layered across national, regional, and global levels, creating a dense and fragmented operating environment.

In practice, this fragmentation complicates the translation of “awareness into action”. While information may be shared across platforms or agencies, responsibility for response is often divided or unclear. A typical national system illustrates the problem: naval forces are responsible for external defence, coastguards for law enforcement and search and rescue, and civilian agencies for fisheries, customs, or port security, each operating under separate command structures and priorities. Without well-established coordination mechanisms, even identified risks can fall between the institutional cracks. For example, a suspicious vessel detected through shared platforms may require coordination between naval, coastguard, and civilian authorities, sometimes across geographic jurisdictions. Yet unclear mandates or slow inter-agency procedures can delay or prevent a timely response. This is particularly evident in countries with limited enforcement capacity, which face both growing operational demands and resource constraints.

These challenges are compounded at the regional level. While cooperation frameworks such as the Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia⁹ (ReCAAP) exist, they tend to be

⁹ Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia Information Sharing Centre. “About ReCAAP Information Sharing Centre.” https://www.recaap.org/about_ReCAAP-ISC.

consensus-based and limited in operational scope. ReCAAP, for example, was designed to promote cooperation against piracy and armed robbery at sea. However, as the ocean economy has grown in importance, so too has the range of governance challenges it generates. While regional frameworks can facilitate information-sharing and capacity-building, they are less effective in supporting coordinated enforcement or joint response, precisely because they operate within an already fragmented governance landscape.

Variation in national priorities further reinforces these limitations. Where sufficient political will exists among a group of states, specific issues can be addressed collectively, as seen in the case of piracy. However, priorities differ across countries and can be complicated by challenges related to definitions or even attribution. These differences make it more difficult to sustain the political will required to address collective action problems. The result is the persistence of bottlenecks and a governance environment in which cooperation often depends on ad hoc, rather than institutionalised, arrangements. This ultimately reinforces the pattern of fragmentation over time.

In this context, the EU is only one actor among many, operating within a dense and competitive institutional landscape. This creates a further structural ceiling on the effectiveness of its engagement. While tools such as IORIS can improve communication and situational awareness, they do not resolve the underlying fragmentation of authority nor the ability to act collectively or individually on this shared information.

Evolutionary Constraint: Domain Complexity

A further constraint lies in the increasing complexity of the ocean environment itself. A central challenge is the growing gap between technological change and governance capacity¹⁰. In the area of Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA), for example, which is consistently cited as an essential cornerstone of effective maritime governance, MDA is no longer limited to monitoring surface activity or responding to conventional threats such as piracy or trafficking. It now extends to less visible, more technically demanding areas, including subsea infrastructure, digital systems, and hybrid forms of disruption. This expansion alters the nature of the challenge in that what is already a fragmented governance landscape becomes more complex as the scope of what must be monitored and managed continues to grow.

A direct consequence of this is the further fragmentation of maritime governance. Coastal states increasingly face an expanding range of MDA options and tools, with systems differing in capability, cost, and ownership,

¹⁰Bueger, Christian. "The New Frontier of Maritime Domain Awareness." 2024. <https://bueger.info/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Bueger-2024-The-new-frontier-of-MDA.pdf>.

spanning public, private, and hybrid providers. Because the choice of national systems remains a matter of sovereign discretion, this proliferation further complicates coordination and interoperability. Responsibility is not only distributed across civilian, military, and private actors, but also shaped by ownership structures. Critical infrastructure such as subsea cables, for example, is overwhelmingly built, owned, and operated by private-sector companies. Around 98 per cent of the world's undersea cables are manufactured and installed by four firms. Ownership is shared across consortia of telecommunications providers and technology firms and control is further dispersed through leasing arrangements, while major platforms such as Amazon, Google, Meta, and Microsoft account for roughly half of global bandwidth.¹¹ This increasingly requires coordination not only between states, but also with commercial actors operating under different incentives and regulatory frameworks.

These challenges are reinforced by definitional and jurisdictional inconsistencies. What constitutes critical maritime infrastructure, for example, is not uniformly defined across states. Where one country designates an asset as critical and another does not, responses may differ accordingly, particularly in areas where infrastructure is transnational. Subsea cables, which carry over 95 per cent of global data traffic, illustrate this problem clearly.¹² Globally, an estimated 150-200 subsea cable faults occur each year, most of them accidental¹³, highlighting both the fragility of this infrastructure and the need for coordinated response.

As transversal systems that cross jurisdictions, they raise questions about responsibility and prioritisation that existing governance frameworks are not well equipped to address. In Southeast Asia, for example, dense maritime traffic, shallow waters, and intensive fishing activity increase exposure to disruption, with a significant proportion of cable damage attributed to accidental causes such as fishing activity and anchoring. However, the difficulty of attribution and distinguishing between accidental damage and hostile activity complicates response and weakens deterrence. Geopolitical dynamics can further exacerbate these challenges, including restrictions linked to contested

¹¹ Runde, Daniel F., Erin L. Murphy, and Thomas Bryja. "Safeguarding Subsea Cables: Protecting Cyber Infrastructure amid Great Power Competition." Center for Strategic and International Studies, 16 August 2024. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/safeguarding-subsea-cables-protecting-cyber-infrastructure-amid-great-power-competition>.

¹² Koshino, Yuka. "The Changing Submarine Cables Landscape." European Union Institute for Security Studies, March 2024. <https://www.iss.europa.eu/publications/briefs/changing-submarine-cables-landscape>.

¹³ European Commission, Joint Research Centre. "Subsea Cables: How Vulnerable Are They and Can We Protect Them?" n.d. https://joint-research-centre.ec.europa.eu/jrc-explains/subsea-cables-how-vulnerable-are-they-and-can-we-protect-them_en.

maritime spaces that affect the installation, maintenance, and repair of infrastructure.

More broadly, hybrid threats increasingly operate across interconnected domains, linking cyber, economic, and political pressures in ways that existing governance structures are not designed to manage. This growing complexity places additional strain on already fragmented governance systems. As a result, the gap between the scope of maritime risks and the capacity to govern them continues to widen, creating constraints that are largely beyond the direct control of external actors, including the EU.

Why This Matters

Collectively, these constraints shape not only the scope of maritime cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, but also its effectiveness in practice. Their significance lies not simply in the increase in maritime risks, but in the transformation of the environment in which those risks are managed. Maritime security, for example, is no longer simply limited to safeguarding sea lanes or responding to discrete incidents. It is increasingly intertwined with economic security, digital infrastructure, supply chain resilience, and the governance of critical technologies.

As a result, maritime disruption now carries wider systemic implications. A cable cut, shipping disruption, or grey-zone maritime incident can simultaneously affect trade flows, energy markets, data connectivity, and broader perceptions of regional stability. This growing interdependence is a defining feature of the maritime environment. At the same time, the governance context is becoming more fragmented and transactional. Interview data points to declining confidence in the consistent application of global rules and norms, greater selectivity in cooperation, and increasing pressure on multilateral frameworks.

This shift has direct implications for the EU precisely because its maritime engagement is built on cooperation, rules, and coordination — strengths that remain relevant but are increasingly difficult to translate into operational effect. The challenge is therefore not whether the EU has a role in the Indo-Pacific, but whether its current model is suited to an environment in which risks are more systemic, politically contested, and embedded in economic and technological systems.

This challenge is reinforced by a gap between EU priorities and those of regional partners. Issues emphasised by the EU do not always align with the more immediate concerns of partner countries, while emerging domains such as subsea infrastructure, maritime cybersecurity, and underwater systems remain only partially integrated into existing governance frameworks. The result is a

more crowded and politically sensitive arena where prioritisation becomes more important but consensus more difficult to sustain.

The implications extend beyond maritime security alone. They concern whether the EU can remain a meaningful actor in a region where cooperation is increasingly selective and the boundary between maritime security and economic resilience is increasingly blurred. In this context, improving awareness remains necessary but no longer sufficient.

Priorities for EU Engagement

The EU already invests tens of millions of euros,¹⁴ if not more, in the Indo-Pacific's ocean environment, reflecting both an effort to address shared regional concerns and Europe's reliance on stable sea lanes and supply chains. Yet the structural constraints highlighted above impose heavy limitations on the extent and effectiveness of the EU's maritime engagement in the region. The EU must therefore operate within these limits and prioritise where it can realistically improve outcomes. Three priority areas then emerge from the analysis.

First, interview data and project literature point to improved maritime awareness as a central achievement of EU engagement. However, its value depends on whether information can be translated into timely and coordinated action. Addressing this requires greater focus on the operational "last mile", which often lies beyond the EU's immediate remit and involves a wider set of actors than those engaged just in information-sharing. Progress will depend on tackling structural constraints such as weak inter-agency coordination, unclear operational responsibilities, and limited links between information-sharing platforms and actors with enforcement mandates. In practice, however, these challenges extend beyond the public sector. In areas such as critical maritime infrastructure, ownership and operational control are largely in private hands¹⁵, meaning that awareness alone does not guarantee response capacity. Translating information into action therefore depends not only on coordination between state agencies, but also on engagement with commercial operators operating under different incentives and regulatory frameworks.

¹⁴ See: European Commission. CRIMARIO II Factsheet. 2023.

https://www.crimario.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/CRIMARIO_Factsheet_A4_V2.pdf; European Commission. EU CRIMARIO (Phase III). https://fpi.ec.europa.eu/projects/projects-action/eu-crimario_en; and Expertise France. Enhancing Security Cooperation in and with Asia and the Indo-Pacific (ESIWA+). <https://www.expertisefrance.fr/en/projects/esiwa-enhancing-european-unions-security-cooperation-and-asia-and-indo-pacific>.

¹⁵ Runde, Daniel F., Erin L. Murphy, and Thomas Bryja. "Safeguarding Subsea Cables: Protecting Cyber Infrastructure amid Great Power Competition." Center for Strategic and International Studies, 16 August 2024. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/safeguarding-subsea-cables-protecting-cyber-infrastructure-amid-great-power-competition>.

Second, as outlined above, maritime cooperation in the Indo-Pacific is shaped by sovereignty concerns, strategic hedging, and differing threat perceptions. In this context, EU engagement tends to gain traction where it responds directly to partner-defined priorities and remains limited where it does not. In practice, this is reflected in uneven levels of engagement across initiatives and selective engagement around politically sensitive issues. This implies a more selective approach to engagement, focusing resources where convergence with partner priorities enables sustained cooperation and tangible outcomes, while adapting the framing of sensitive issues, for example by emphasising shared risks or technical cooperation, where direct approaches would limit traction. Alignment should therefore be understood not as a political concession, but as a practical condition for securing access, influence, and operational impact.

Finally, project delivery should also be a priority. Interview data point to the breadth of EU maritime engagement, but also to persistent discontinuities in delivery. While project-based approaches may enable flexibility, they often operate on separate timelines, with limited coordination between implementing partners and weak links to political dialogue. This results in gaps between project cycles, duplication of efforts, and activities carried out with limited visibility or follow-up. Addressing these issues requires rethinking coordination beyond individual projects and ensuring clearer alignment across activities. Without such adjustments, the impact of individual interventions is likely to remain time-bound and uneven.

Conclusion

The EU has established itself as a credible and broadly accepted maritime partner in the Indo-Pacific, but its impact remains uneven. This reflects not a lack of engagement, but structural and political constraints that shape how far cooperation can translate into sustained outcomes. The central challenge lies in bridging the gap between awareness and action, aligning EU and partner priorities more deliberately, and ensuring greater coherence across initiatives. Addressing these issues does not require expanding the EU's role but refining how it delivers it. This is not a marginal adjustment. In a maritime environment that is more fragmented, politically contested, and systemically important, the effectiveness of engagement depends not solely on presence but also on the ability to convert cooperation into operational effect. For the EU, the question is no longer just whether it is engaged in the Indo-Pacific, but also whether its approach is structured in a way that allows it to matter when it counts.

About the Author

Lizza Bomassi is a Research Analyst for the Indo-Pacific at the European Union Institute for Security Studies. Her work focuses on Europe's strategic engagement with the region, including maritime security, economic security and supply-chain resilience, and the EU's relations with India and Southeast Asia. Her recent research has examined EU–India relations, the Western Indian Ocean, Indo-Pacific maritime security and regional responses to geopolitical competition.

How the Middle East Wars Are Impacting the Indo-Pacific

Jean-Loup Samaan

Prior to October 2023, conflicts in the Middle East increasingly looked like a distant relic from the “war on terror” era. Seen from Asia, the US retreat from Afghanistan in August 2021, quickly followed by the announcement of the AUKUS partnership with Australia and the United Kingdom, sent a clear signal: the time of US endless wars in the Middle East was over, and from then on, the focus would be, finally, on Asia. Prior to October 2023, Asian perceptions of the Middle East had also evolved. During the 2010s, China, India, or Japan deepened economic and diplomatic ties with local powers such as Israel or the Gulf states. In a way, the pre-7 October narrative, conveyed by the Biden administration, that the Middle East “is quieter today than it had been in two decades,” was shared by Asian policymakers and investors.¹ This belief was fed by the Middle East itself. In 2020, the Abraham Accords saw Israel normalise relations with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Bahrain, soon joined by Morocco and Sudan. Meanwhile, a general move towards de-escalation and rapprochement in the Middle East took hold: Saudi Arabia lifted the blockade it had imposed on Qatar in 2017 and also resumed diplomatic relations with Turkey. Finally, Saudi and Iranian foreign ministers shook hands in Beijing in March 2023. The deal between the two rivals suggested two things: that Middle East powers had grown exhausted from the regional cold war and that China, not the US, had been the external power shaping the new dynamics. Both assumptions would prove wrong a few months later, as Hamas launched a surprise attack on Israel on the morning of 7 October 2023, triggering a regional conflict of unprecedented intensity - and one from which China was largely absent. Against that backdrop, this paper unpacks six major trends around the ongoing Middle East conflicts that directly impact Asia.

¹ Gal Beckerman, “The Middle East Region is quieter today than it has been in two decades”, *The Atlantic*, 7 October 2023. <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2023/10/israel-war-middle-east-jake-sullivan/675580/>

The Gaza War Sparks Public Outrage Across Asian Societies

After Hamas' initial attack, Israel's operation in Gaza quickly exceeded all previous wars in terms of civilian casualties and destruction. The humanitarian crisis caused by Israel's handling of the war and the genocidal rhetoric used by several of its far-right ministers caused a major uproar in Asia, as elsewhere in the world.

Anti-Israel sentiments in Asia were not new. Since the late 1940s, Asian public opinion looked at Israel through the lens of non-alignment and the struggle against colonialism. In that context, Israel was perceived as a Western import in the Arab world. Furthermore, within Asian countries with large Muslim populations, such as Indonesia, Pakistan, and Malaysia, religious and cultural identities informed views on the Israel-Palestine conflict.

The surge of anti-Israeli sentiments, though not new, reached a level that forced even Asian governments with strong ties with Israel (Singapore, India, or the Philippines) to acknowledge this resentment. For instance, Singapore, a close military partner of Israel, issued several statements condemning the mishandling of the Israeli operation and urging a ceasefire.² India, after initially supporting Israel, also found itself forced to adopt a more balanced position.

Perhaps the most notable decline was in the relations between Israel and China. Despite a significant Chinese presence in the Israeli economy, the government in Beijing condemned Israel's operation in Gaza. To a certain extent, the Chinese diplomatic stance was simply an extension of the country's longstanding support for the Palestinian cause, but it generated deep resentment among Israelis who expected, perhaps wrongly, that China would adopt a more conciliatory approach after the attacks of 7 October. Diplomatic tensions later worsened when, in September 2025, Prime Minister Netanyahu publicly accused China of waging an information campaign against Israel amid the Gaza war. The Chinese government strongly denied the accusation.³

Noticeably, China's coverage of the Gaza war not only projected a negative view of Israel's military action but also of US involvement in enabling the Israeli operation. Indeed, as the Biden administration quickly deployed troops and warships to support Israel, Chinese media depicted the conflict through the lens of a Palestinian struggle against US imperialism, a narrative that portrayed Israel

² Singapore Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "MFA Spokesperson's Comments on the Situation in Gaza", 24 July 2025. <https://www.mfa.gov.sg/newsroom/press-statements-transcripts-and-photos/mfa-spokesperson-comments-on-gaza-july-2025-24-jul-2025/>

³ Fan Hongda, "Netanyahu vs TikTok: How China became a scapegoat for Israel's image crisis", *Think China*, 23 September 2025. <https://www.thinkchina.sg/politics/netanyahu-vs-tiktok-how-china-became-scapegoat-israels-image-crisis>

as the local US proxy and the Palestinians as the oppressed. According to that narrative, US military aid to Israel fuelled the conflict and amplified its intensity.

For Asian audiences, such a narrative struck a chord. It echoed the Asian wars of independence against Western colonial powers and enabled China to play the role of a benign power interested in fostering economic ties and staying out of local disputes. In Southeast Asia in particular, US support for Israel increased negative perceptions of local elites towards Washington, as documented in the 2024 State of Southeast Asia survey report prepared by Singapore's ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute.⁴ Though the Gaza war may not be the primary factor in the erosion of the US image in the region, it amplified a broader trend of countries progressively leaning towards China.⁵

The Red Sea Crisis Affects Indo-Pacific Economies

The Gaza War triggered strong emotions, but its direct consequences for Asian security were limited. It was only when the conflict spilled over into the Red Sea that it began affecting Asian states and their economies. On 19 November 2023, the Houthis — the Yemeni insurgent group on one side of the country's civil war — began a campaign of missile and drone attacks against civilian ships crossing the Red Sea. Their stated motive was to express solidarity with Palestinians in the wake of the Gaza war by targeting Israeli vessels, or those headed to or from the country. In reality, many of the ships that were attacked were neither.

The Houthi attacks impacted global supply chains: Approximately 11 per cent of world trade flows across the Red Sea⁶ — the year before the war, 21,344 ships (averaging 59 a day) traversed the route. As attacks mounted, shippers rerouted their vessels via the Cape of Good Hope, a diversion that added between 3,000 and 6,000 nautical miles and two weeks to each trip.

A month after the attacks began, the Biden administration launched Operation Prosperity Guardian to protect commercial shipping in the Red Sea. Twenty-four countries publicly joined the US intervention, the majority of them NATO member states. In the Arab world, Bahrain was the only country that acknowledged participation. In Asia, public condemnations of the Gaza war and the US unconditional support to Israel put governments in a delicate position.

⁴ ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, "The State of Southeast Asia 2024 Survey Report". <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/The-State-of-SEA-2024.pdf>

⁵ Yuen Foong Khong, Joseph Chinyong Liow, "Southeast Asia is starting to choose: Why the Region is Leaning Toward China", *Foreign Affairs*, July-August 2025. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/southeast-asia-starting-choose-khong-liow>

⁶ Samuel Wendel, "How Red Sea attacks could rewire Middle East trade and economic cooperation", *Al Monitor*, 3 March 2024. <https://www.al-monitor.com/pro/memos/how-red-sea-attacks-could-rewire-middle-east-trade-and-economic-cooperation>

As a result, only Singapore and Sri Lanka formally participated in Prosperity Guardian.

The fact that Sri Lanka promised to deploy vessels in support of the US coalition was remarkable, given the modest capabilities of its national navy. The contribution made sense for economic reasons - to secure imports to the country transiting via the Red Sea - and, perhaps more importantly, strategic reasons - to strengthen its cooperation with the US Navy at a time when the relationship with Washington is a priority in Colombo. Still, overall, the operational contribution of partner nations was symbolic: only the UK dispatched a warship (HMS Diamond), while other nations sent only small teams of naval personnel. Even a close US ally like Australia rejected a request from Washington to send a vessel.⁷

India, a nation whose interests were directly affected by the Red Sea crisis, stayed away from Prosperity Guardian. The Red Sea area remains critical for India's trade relations with Europe, East Africa, and the US East Coast. Together, the passage accounts for 50 per cent of India's imports, and 60 per cent of its exports (worth roughly US\$113 billion).⁸ The region falls under what Indian naval commanders call their "primary maritime zone of interest".

In the first months of the crisis, dozens of ships heading towards the country, or with Indian crews on board, were targeted by the Houthis. Instead of joining the US-led coalition, however, New Delhi went its own way: The Indian Navy increased patrols in the Red Sea to protect merchant ships and deployed five guided-missile destroyers and a maritime patrol aircraft to the area.⁹

Just as the Gaza war did, the Red Sea crisis highlighted the limits of China's influence in the Middle East. The Houthi attacks did not jolt China into action, despite Beijing having as much to lose as India. Unsurprisingly, China declined an official invitation from the Biden administration to contribute to Prosperity Guardian. Its diplomats simply called for an end to the Houthi attacks. In the spring of 2024, Beijing reportedly reached an agreement with the Houthis, mediated by Oman, to ensure the safe passage of its ships.¹⁰ All told, China's

⁷ Grant Wyeth, "Why Australia isn't sending a ship to the Red Sea", *The Diplomat*, 27 December 2023. <https://thediplomat.com/2023/12/why-australia-isnt-sending-a-ship-to-the-red-sea/>

⁸ K. Bharat Kumar, "The Red Sea churns: India's economic costs mount", *The Hindu*, 13 March 2024. <https://www.thehindu.com/business/watch-economic-costs-of-continued-conflicts-on-the-red-sea/article67947997.ece>

⁹ Shayesta Nishat Ahmed, "The Indian Navy and Maritime Security in the Red Sea", Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, 19 February 2024. <https://www.idsa.in/issuebrief/The-Indian-Navy-and-Maritime-Security-in-the-Red-Sea-SNAhmed-190224>

¹⁰ "Yemen's Houthis tell China and Russia their ships won't be targeted", *Straits Times*, 22 March 2024. <https://www.straitstimes.com/world/middle-east/yemen-s-houthis-tell-china-russia-their-ships-won-t-be-targeted>

calculus on the Red Sea crisis amounted to that of a free rider. It was easier to leave the difficult task of enforcing maritime security to the US Navy, while also enabling Beijing to keep cultivating its image as the benign power in the Middle East.¹¹

Middle East Wars Remain Disconnected from the US-China Competition

One of the most significant lessons from the Middle East conflicts of the past three years pertains to the dynamics of the US-China competition. As mentioned above, China has struggled to build a coherent strategy towards the conflicts. Diplomatically, Beijing stuck to its traditional rhetoric of not interfering in local disputes. From the Gaza war to the US-Israel operation on Iran in 2026, Chinese officials may have assumed that such restraint would win them public support in the region and beyond. To a certain extent, it did work, but only because of a rejection of US support for Israel in the Arab world and in Asia.

Beyond Beijing's posture of non-interference, one can question how much China is truly staying out of the Middle East conflict. Israel repeatedly accused Beijing of waging an information campaign against the Jewish State. Chinese media outlets definitely did not maintain a neutral stance on the Gaza war or the Israel-Iran war. Meanwhile, the absence of Chinese action in the Red Sea crisis can be read in two ways: it could highlight a lack of Chinese influence on the Houthis and their state sponsor, the Iranian regime. But it could also be a convenient excuse for Beijing to agree to a non-aggression deal with the Houthis while letting the Yemeni insurgents target Western and Indian ships in the area.

With regard to the US, its involvement in Middle Eastern wars since 2023 raises questions about its ability to focus on the Indo-Pacific. In the US National Security Strategy and National Defense Strategy released by the Trump administration in the winter of 2026, the geopolitical priorities are clearly stated: the Western Hemisphere is presented at the top, while deterring China in the Indo-Pacific is considered a second "line of effort". In that context, the Middle East constitutes a peripheral theatre where local partners are to "take primary responsibility".¹²

This prioritisation is similar to commitments made by previous US administrations, but in practice, US diplomatic and military resources remain heavily mobilised in the Middle East. For the past decade, the size of the US military presence in the region has remained roughly the same, with 40,000

¹¹ Leonie Allard, "China is testing its freeriding strategy in the Red Sea", Atlantic Council, 13 February 2024. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/china-is-testing-its-freeriding-strategy-in-the-red-sea/>

¹² US Department of War, *US National Defense Strategy 2026*, 23 January 2026: 20. <https://media.defense.gov/2026/Jan/23/2003864773/-1/-1/0/2026-NATIONAL-DEFENSE-STRATEGY.PDF>

troops deployed in partner nations. Moreover, as of this writing, the US has started a new war against Iran to destroy its military assets, if not the entire regime. The operation, officially named Epic Fury, suggests that, despite Washington's rhetoric about shifting the burden to partners, the US remains the primary player in local conflicts, whether at the military or diplomatic level.

This was also demonstrated by Donald Trump's initiative with the Board of Peace, which was supposed to monitor the reconstruction of Gaza. When asked about the possible tension between prioritising the Indo-Pacific while getting involved in the Middle East, US officials like to say they can "walk and chew gum at the same time".¹³ In theory, this is true, but past experience suggests that when facing an immediate crisis, such as the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the US pushed other strategic matters to the background. There is already evidence that the US is reallocating military resources from Europe and Asia to the Middle East, out of necessity for the Iran war.¹⁴

Gaza's Reconstruction Reveals Indonesia's Ambitions

Prior to the Gaza War, analysts speculated whether Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim country, might join the Abraham Accords. The belief was based on geopolitical arithmetic: because Indonesia has close ties with the UAE and because Saudi Arabia was also thought to be pursuing a normalisation agreement with Israel, it made sense that Jakarta might follow suit.

This did not materialise, but Indonesia has not completely reversed its position either. First, President Prabowo Subianto surprised observers at home and abroad when he discussed the idea of conditional recognition of Israel during his speech at the UN General Assembly in September 2025, saying, "We must have an independent Palestine, but we must also recognize, we must also respect and guarantee the safety and security of Israel".¹⁵ The statement went against the tone of most leaders coming from Muslim-majority countries. But it was not an isolated event. Prabowo's speech was followed by Indonesia's participation in the Sharm El-Sheikh peace summit in Egypt on 13 October 2025¹⁶, where the US administration pushed for a new international coalition to rebuild the Gaza Strip. Later, Prabowo attended the inauguration of Trump's

¹³ Jim Garamone, "Austin: How the U.S. walks, chews gum at the same time", US Department of Defense, 13 June 2022. <https://www.war.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3061381/austin-how-the-us-walks-chews-gum-at-the-same-time/>

¹⁴ Jack Detsch, John Sakellariadis, Phelim Kine, "Allies fear Iran war will leave them without US weapons they bought", *Politico*, 7 March 2026. <https://www.politico.com/news/2026/03/07/allies-fear-iran-war-will-leave-them-without-u-s-weapons-they-bought-00817204>

¹⁵ "Speech by the President of the Republic of Indonesia Prabowo Subianto at the 80th Session of the United Nations General Assembly" 26 September 2025. <https://www.uinjkt.ac.id/en/speech-by-the-president-of-the-republic-of-indonesia-prabowo-subianto-at-the-80th-session-of-the-united-nations-general-assembly>

Board of Peace that the US president mandated to monitor the reconstruction of Gaza. Prabowo's most consequential decision was to commit 8,000 soldiers to a multinational peacekeeping force in Gaza.¹⁷

Indonesia is no stranger to UN missions in the Middle East, having been one of the biggest contributors to UNIFIL in Lebanon since joining the force in 2006.¹⁸ UNIFIL surely enabled Indonesian soldiers and commanders to get accustomed to difficult conflict environments, but Prabowo's pledge in Gaza exceeds what Indonesia has done in Lebanon. Part of the Indonesian gamble may be driven by a desire to curry favour with the Trump administration, but it could rapidly put the country's armed forces in a perilous situation. As of today, Arab states have publicly stayed away from committing forces to an international peacekeeping mission whose mandate remains unclear. Many fear that the peacekeeping mission lacks the legitimacy and the means to disarm Hamas, and as a result, could find themselves in the middle of a new Israeli operation. For the time being, Indonesia's government carefully insists its troops would not get involved in the disarmament of Hamas. But the Israeli government has made clear that it reserves the right to relaunch operations in Gaza if Hamas does not surrender. Indonesian soldiers – and by extension their government in Jakarta – could find themselves caught in the middle of a new war.

India and Pakistan Get Dragged into Middle East Rivalries

Both India and Pakistan have slowly found themselves entangled in the new Middle East rivalries, specifically between Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Israel. In September 2025, eight days after Israel launched an air campaign against Hamas's operatives inside Qatar that shocked the Gulf, Saudi Arabia revealed the signature of a new defence pact with Pakistan. The agreement was reportedly in the making for several months, but its completion was likely accelerated because of the Israeli attack.

The Saudi-Pakistani pact is unlikely to rival the arrangements that Riyadh negotiates with the US, but it matters for what it reveals about the connections between the Gulf and South Asia. Pakistan is not a new player in the Arabian Peninsula. Its migrant workers represent a major diaspora and a source of

¹⁶ Cabinet Secretariat of the Republic of Indonesia, "President Prabowo Subianto Attends Sharm El-Sheikh Peace Summit", 14 October 2025, <https://setkab.go.id/en/president-prabowo-subianto-attends-sharm-el-sheikh-peace-summit/>.

¹⁷ Reuters, "Indonesia readies 1,000 troops for potential peacekeeping force in Gaza in early April", 16 February 2026, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/indonesia-readies-1000-troops-potential-peacekeeping-force-gaza-early-april-2026-02-16/>

¹⁸ UNIFIL, "UNIFIL Indonesians Peacekeepers Help Maintain Stability along Blue Line", 15 June 2020, <https://www.unmissions.org/en/peacekeeping/news/unifil-indonesians-peacekeepers-help-maintain-stability-along-blue-line>.

remittances. In the military domain, several Gulf armed forces have historically relied on Pakistani officers for training purposes. Pakistani soldiers have even deployed to secure Saudi territory, including holy cities like Mecca and Medina. Back in the 1980s, the intelligence services of both countries coordinated (with the US) their support and training of the Afghan mujahideen against the Soviet Union. Saudi Arabia was also widely believed to have financially supported Pakistan's nuclear programme – a suspicion that takes on another significance with this new defence pact.

Until the last decade, Pakistan's clout in Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf states constrained India's ability to deepen its own engagement with Arab monarchies. However, the premiership of Narendra Modi, starting in 2014, brought new momentum. India raised its ambitions to become a strategic player in the region through increased high-level visits, investment frameworks, and greater cooperation on security issues such as counterterrorism and maritime security. At the same time, India joined US-led initiatives in the Middle East, such as I2U2 (alongside Israel and the UAE) and the India-Middle East-Europe Corridor (IMEC). The first designates a minilateral grouping that was built on the momentum generated by the signing of the Abraham Accords, which normalised Israel's relations with the UAE and Bahrain. At first, I2U2 was dubbed the "Quad of the Middle East" by Indian observers, suggesting a concerted strategy against China, but in practice, it focused mostly on trade issues. The second project, IMEC, was announced by the Biden administration in September 2023 and was meant to create new maritime and land infrastructure linking India to Europe via the Arabian Gulf and the Levant. Here too, ambitions petered out after the Gaza war.

India's reaction to the Saudi-Pakistani pact contrasted with its past restraint. Asked by the media, the spokesperson from India's Ministry of External Affairs emphasised the need for Saudi Arabia to remember "sensitivities" surrounding its pact with Pakistan.¹⁹ The diplomat did not dwell on it, but the statement revealed the limits of "multi-alignment" foreign policies. It will be worth watching whether India becomes more vocal when Gulf states engage with China in the security domain.

The situation became even more complex as tensions between Saudi Arabia and the UAE increased in late 2025. After the Arab revolutions of 2011, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi had cultivated a close partnership based on a shared regional outlook that led them to fight together in Yemen, support the military coup in

¹⁹ Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, "Transcript of Weekly Media Briefing by the Official Spokesperson", 19 September 2025.
https://www.mea.gov.in/media-briefings.htm?dtl/40151/Transcript_of_Weekly_Media_Briefing_by_the_Official_Spokesperson_September_19_2025

Egypt in 2013, and impose a blockade on their neighbour Qatar between 2017 and 2021. Though there were always lingering issues (including a border dispute) between the two Gulf states, they seemed minor until they resurfaced in December 2025, when Saudi Arabia denounced Abu Dhabi's support for the Rapid Support Forces in Sudan and launched airstrikes on UAE-backed militias in Yemen.

The Saudi-Emirati dispute is unlikely to escalate into an open conflict, but it will surely shape regional politics for the coming years. It places India in a delicate position: although the Modi government claims it seeks to build relationships with everyone, its main strategic partner in the Gulf is the UAE. In fact, the fallout between Riyadh and Abu Dhabi coincided with the signature of a new strategic defence partnership between the UAE and India in late January 2026. The official statement talks of expanding cooperation in the defence industry, interoperability, cyberspace, and counterterrorism. In substance, none of those domains is new, but at the political level, the timing, after both the Saudi-Pakistani defence pact and the Riyadh-Abu Dhabi dispute, is hard to dismiss.²⁰

The Known Unknown: A New Wave of Radicalisation?

One consequence of the Gaza war that remains hard to gauge is how much the conflict feeds radicalisation and a new wave of terrorism beyond the Middle East. This is a particular concern in Southeast Asia, where transnational groups like Al Qaeda and the Islamic State have maintained a significant presence. In the cyber domain, the Gaza war has unsurprisingly become a major rhetorical tool of mobilisation for terrorist groups searching for new recruits.

But to date, this has not led to an obvious uptick in terrorist activities. One reason might be that radical groups tend to follow local, rather than global, agendas. They might use Middle Eastern issues, in particular Palestine, as a symbol to recruit and agitate, but when it comes to action, they often are guided by the politics of their own region. Still, several events suggest a potential connection. Perhaps the most spectacular case was the attack on a Jewish community celebration in Sydney, Australia, in December 2025, killing fifteen people. The two attackers claimed allegiance to the Islamic State and reportedly travelled a month earlier to the Philippines, in Mindanao, where IS is still active.²¹ In the absence of a clear path towards peace between Israelis and Palestinians, and with the latest Iran war, the risk of terrorist attacks, for

²⁰ Sudha Ramachandran, "India, UAE Embark on a Strategic Defense Partnership", *The Diplomat*, 22 January 2026. <https://thediplomat.com/2026/01/india-uae-embark-on-a-strategic-defense-partnership/>

²¹ Joshua Roose, "The Bondi Attack: ISIS-Inspired Antisemitic Terrorism in Australia", RSIS Commentary, 9 February 2026. <https://rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/rsis/the-bondi-attack-isis-inspired-antisemitic-terrorism-in-australia/>

instance, targeting US or Israeli embassies (as well as Jewish sites like cultural centres and synagogues) will remain high.

Conclusion

For many in Asia, the Middle East remains a distant and misunderstood region from which it may be better to stay away. The events that unfolded since October 2023 have only strengthened this preconception. From the Gaza war to conflicts in Lebanon and Iran, the region has witnessed a level of violence rarely seen. In practice, Asian countries have no choice but to monitor and anticipate these developments, at a minimum, to prevent their spillover. Those wars have already impacted Asia, from disruptions in maritime routes in the Red Sea to the reshuffling of diplomatic arrangements between the Persian Gulf and countries like India and Pakistan, and the ongoing US-China competition. This Asian exposure to the Middle Eastern turbulence won't disappear, even in the aftermath of the latest war involving Iran, Israel, and the US.

About the Author

Jean-Loup Samaan is a senior research fellow at the Middle East Institute of the National University of Singapore and a non-resident senior fellow at the Atlantic Council and the Institut Montaigne. Prior to his position in Singapore, he was policy advisor at the French Ministry of Defense (2008 to 2011), research advisor at the NATO Defense College (2011-2016) and associate professor in strategic studies with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) National Defense College (2016-2021). His most recent book, *Iron Dome: A History of Israel's Military Strategy*, is now available with Bloomsbury. He has authored six other books and several articles for various international academic and policy journals such as *Survival*, *The National Interest*, *Orbis*, *The International Spectator*, and *Politique Étrangère*. He holds a Ph.D. in political science (2009) from the University of Paris, La Sorbonne as well as an accreditation to supervise research (2017) from the doctoral school of Sciences Po, Paris.

Enabling Active Multi-Alignment: Europe as a Soft Balancer between the United States and China

Christian E. Rieck

The Indo-Pacific is no longer a distant theatre of European foreign policy – it is the central arena in which the future of the international order is being decided. As the United States and China compete for regional influence, smaller and middle powers face increasing pressure to align. This has important global ramifications. The main theoretical argument this paper will make is that this alignment increases the overall polarity of the world system, increasing the likelihood of regional or even global conflict. From this hypothesis flows a policy recommendation that is both straightforward and vexingly difficult to achieve: Reducing the need for alignment by increasing options for all state actors in the Indo-Pacific, especially regional and secondary powers.

As the Indo-Pacific becomes the focal point of strategic rivalry between the United States and China, conventional theories of balancing would predict a marginal role for actors lacking significant military capabilities. Yet the EU has expanded its presence in the region through trade agreements, regulatory initiatives, and diplomatic engagement. This creates a theoretical and empirical puzzle: How can an actor without traditional power projection capabilities influence a competitive geopolitical environment?

This paper argues that the answer to this puzzle lies in the two-level game “Europe” represents: It will conceptualise the EU as a soft balancer that operates primarily through non-military instruments to constrain and shape great-power behaviour. At the same time, EU member states can provide some hard power projection to undergird EU soft power efforts, but also to offer regional actors security and defence partnerships below the threshold of a military alliance. Finally, this paper argues that this approach enables the active multi-alignment of states in the region: an attempt to help preserve the strategic autonomy of regional actors and uphold a global rules-based order without engaging in direct military competition, but not without the ability to project “strategic solidarity” into the region.

Multipolarity and Multi-Alignment

The world system is rapidly morphing into a much less multilateral and more multipolar arrangement – the “geopolitical turn”¹ –, turning on an elite group of great powers that are carving out exclusive spheres of influence. It still displays elements of multilateral cooperation and competition centred on international organisations (IOs) – but with the erosion of IOs such as the World Health Organization and World Trade Organization (with Washington notifying its withdrawal from the former while remaining a member of the latter, and Beijing exerting pressure from within)² and the dismantling of multilateral regimes such as the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change or the Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development, it is fast degrading into a “concert of great powers” where powerful states enjoy unconstrained freedom of action in the national interest, unfazed by the considerations of the rest of the world. The financial strangulation of the United Nations and the politicisation of earmarked funding for UN programmes is hastening this shift: The budget of the UN system was expected to contract by 30 per cent in 2025;³ furthermore, America owes a significant share of its assessed contributions and China has a long-established practice of paying its contributions late, in effect defunding the UN.⁴ This, as the rest of this section will show, is fundamentally a hard power world – with authors such as Marc Saxer calling it the “Wolf World”.⁵

Today, only two countries – America and China – are great powers in the sense that they are able and willing to project power around the world at will – true world powers. Power projection does not simply mean the ability to display and displace military power, but also includes a global economic, technological, diplomatic and cultural presence to influence local domestic and foreign political calculations around the world. According to this metric, Russia is a declining great power, and India is a rising, not yet a great, power. These trends have a deep impact on the regional balance in the Indo-Pacific that is prone to “hegemonic ordering”.⁶

¹ Christian E. Rieck, “Anarchy in the international system: A new era of realism?”, *Diálogo Político* 1/2026 (2026): 20–33, at 20.

² World Health Organization, “WHO Statement on Notification of Withdrawal of the United States”, 24 January 2026, <https://www.who.int/news/item/24-01-2026-who-statement-on-notification-of-withdrawal-of-the-united-states>; World Trade Organization, “United States of America and the WTO”, n.d., https://www.wto.org/english/thewto_e/countries_e/usa_e.htm.

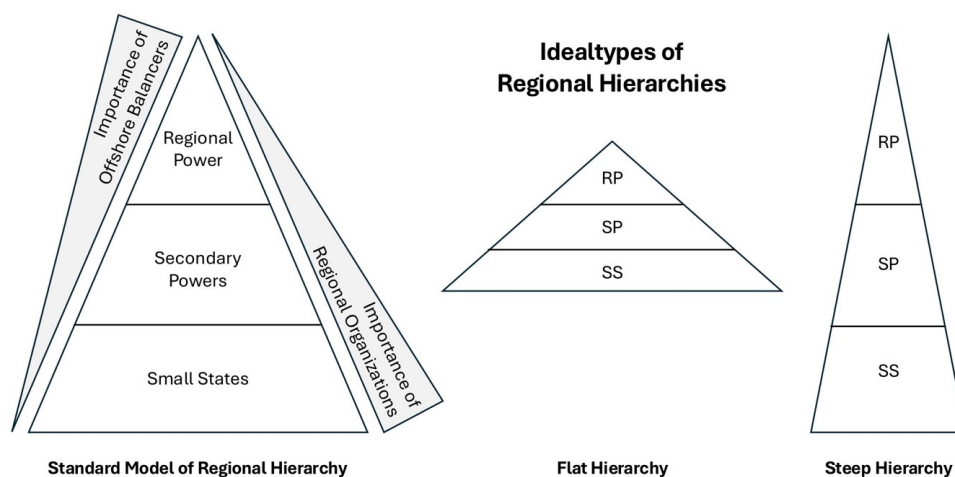
³ Ronny Patz, *Reforming the UN during a financial crisis: A foreseeable failure to align money, mandates, and majorities?* (Brussels: Global Governance Institute, 2025), 4.

⁴ Ronny Patz, *The UN80 Initiative as a Productive Failure: Between Geopolitical Disruptions and Organizational Path Dependency* (Brussels: Global Governance Institute, 2026), 26–27.

⁵ Marc Saxer, *Geopolitical Conflict in the Wolf World: Great Power Competition and the Illiberal Revolt against the Liberal Order* (London: Bloomsbury, 2026).

Given the diplomatic instruments but also the military muscle that both world powers can project into the Indo-Pacific, political elites in less powerful states may believe that their countries do not have any agency left amid the posturing of the great powers. Indeed, the spaces for autonomous engagement are shrinking across the Indo-Pacific. While this loss of autonomy is an experience smaller states have been having for decades, this is true today even for relatively powerful states such as Indonesia or South Korea, and for regional powerhouse Japan. Even states that until now have been far away from the Chinese assertiveness off the coasts of the mainland – such as Australia, New Zealand and, of course, the Pacific Island States who seem stuck in a geopolitical rivalry between Canberra, Washington and Beijing⁷ – do not have the luxury of geographic distance anymore. Geopolitics is trumping geography.

Figure 1: Ideal Types of Regional Hierarchies



This points towards a deeper structural shift in the regional hierarchy of states across the Indo-Pacific: Over the past fifteen years, the tremendous growth of Chinese soft and hard power and its accompanying assertiveness in the region under President Xi Jinping has led to higher levels of distrust in the region and, as in the cases of secondary states the Philippines and Vietnam, to a marked increase in maritime conflict over disputed islands in the South China Sea. Regional responses to the more robust Chinese posture include various hard power-based balancing strategies which broadly favour the West – from

⁶ Beverly Loke and Ralf Emmers, "Coalition-building and the politics of hegemonic ordering in the Indo-Pacific", *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 79, no. 4 (2025): 543–551.

⁷ Marc Julienne, *China's Strategy Toward Pacific Island Countries: Countering Taiwan and Western Influence* (Paris: Institut Français des Relations Internationales, 2026).

rekindled security guarantees by the United States for Manila, Tokyo and Seoul, to security and defence partnerships with the EU by Seoul and Canberra, to deeper security relationships between regional powers Jakarta and Canberra.⁸ This increases the importance of Europe as a strategic partner and of the United States as an offshore balancer. At the same time, Washington's erratic leadership under President Donald Trump is undermining longstanding alliances which creates incentives for everyone in the region to also hedge against abandonment by America by investing in relationships beyond the West. Navigating this complex web of contradictions requires a flexible and pragmatic foreign policy by regional actors, a "strategic realism".⁹

As the power difference between Beijing and the rest of the region grows, the regional hierarchy is becoming steeper (see Figure 1).¹⁰ This increases China's "hegemonic temptation", i.e. a stronger willingness to use unilateralism and coercion to get what the hegemon wants from its neighbourhood, encouraged by a favourable regional distribution of power. Arguably, despite continuing coalition-building in the region by China,¹¹ this makes the military takeover of Taiwan more likely.

But multipolarity in the Indo-Pacific is increasingly defined not only by the structural rivalry between the United States and China, but by the agency of regional powers pursuing strategies of multi-alignment – a foreign policy role-conception that goes far beyond hard power and includes economic, natural resource and trade, cultural and political, as well as scientific, diplomatic and technology instruments.¹² Rather than adhering to rigid bloc politics, countries such as Indonesia, Japan, South Korea, and Australia navigate a complex landscape through selective partnerships that maximise autonomy while mitigating risk.¹³

⁸ Penny Wong and Anthony Albanese, "Australia and Indonesia sign historic security treaty" (2026), <https://www.foreignminister.gov.au/minister/penny-wong/media-release/australia-and-indonesia-sign-historic-security-treaty>.

⁹ Bryce Wakefield, "Flexible Partnerschaften statt fester Blöcke", *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 13 February 2026.

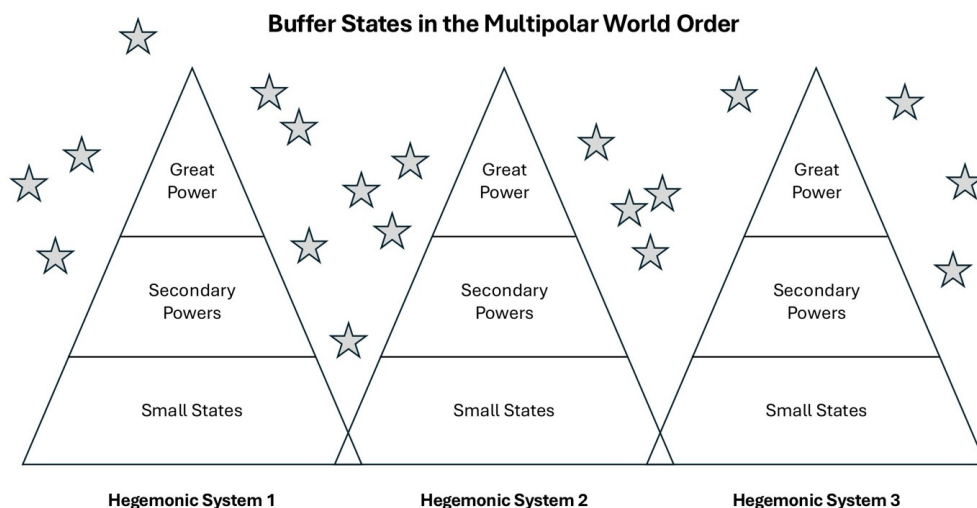
¹⁰ Christian E. Rieck, "Why Institutions Still Matter", in *Global Economic Governance in a Fragmented World: How Geopolitics Shapes International Cooperation and its Institutions*, ed. Gunter Rieck Moncayo (Berlin: Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 2026), 9–20, at 11.

¹¹ Beverly Loke and Xiaoli Guo, "China's coalition-building in the Indo-Pacific: strategies of connectivity and association", *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 79, no. 4 (2025): 552–569.

¹² For Singapore, see Cortez A. Cooper and Michael S. Chase, *Regional Responses to U.S.-China Competition in the Indo-Pacific: Singapore* (Santa Monica: RAND, 2020).

¹³ Denny Roy, "Southeast Asia and China: Balancing or Bandwagoning?", *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 27, no. 2 (2005): 305–322.

Figure 2: Buffer States in the Multipolar World Order



Indonesia exemplifies this approach through its longstanding commitment to strategic non-alignment and its central role within ASEAN. Jakarta seeks to preserve regional inclusivity, ASEAN centrality, and to avoid great-power domination by emphasising multilateral frameworks, diplomatic equidistance to the great powers, and a “global hedging diplomacy”¹⁴ – despite Southeast Asia as a whole slowly drifting towards China.¹⁵ In contrast, Japan has incrementally expanded its security role while maintaining its alliance with the United States. Through initiatives such as the “Free and Open Indo-Pacific,” Tokyo combines alignment with Washington with broader regional engagement, including economic cooperation with diverse partners. South Korea occupies a particularly delicate position, balancing its security dependence on the United States with deep economic ties to China, seeking to avoid zero-sum choices while adapting to intensifying technological and geopolitical competition.¹⁶ Australia, meanwhile, is more firmly aligned with the United States, as evidenced by its participation in security arrangements such as AUKUS, a powerful symbol of what Thomas Wilkins calls “strategic minilateralism”.¹⁷ Yet

¹⁴ Akhmad Hanan, “Navigating Among Giants: Indonesia’s Strategic Semiconductor Architecture and Global Hedging Diplomacy” (2026), <https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/navigating-among-giants-indonesias-strategic-semiconductor-architecture-and-global-hedging-diplomacy/>.

¹⁵ Yuen Foong Khong and Joseph Chinyong Liow, “Southeast Asia Is Starting to Choose: Why the Region Is Leaning Toward China”, *Foreign Affairs* 104, no. 4 (2025): 151–161.

¹⁶ Sil Jin and Jin-young Kim, “Switching lanes? South Korea’s shifting hedging behavior in the U.S.-China rivalry”, *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 79, no. 1 (2025): 1–23.

¹⁷ Thomas S. Wilkins, *Strategic Minilateralism and the Regional Security Architecture of the Indo-Pacific: The Quad, AUKUS, and the Trilateral Strategic Dialogue* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2025).

even Canberra maintains significant economic links with China, illustrating that alignment and interdependence can coexist.

A pattern of strategic behaviour emerges from these cases: Multi-alignment enables regional actors to shape the emerging order by hedging, diversifying partnerships, and resisting binary choices, thereby complicating simplistic narratives of bipolar confrontation. Such multi-aligned states – especially the more powerful regional and secondary powers – serve as “buffer states” in the multipolar world order by resisting calls for alignment, actively defining areas of cooperation, and keeping channels of communication with and between the great powers open, thereby strengthening cooperation and reducing the incentives for regional conflict (see Figure 2).¹⁸ Multi-alignment is both a symbol and a guarantee of the continued agency of regional actors.

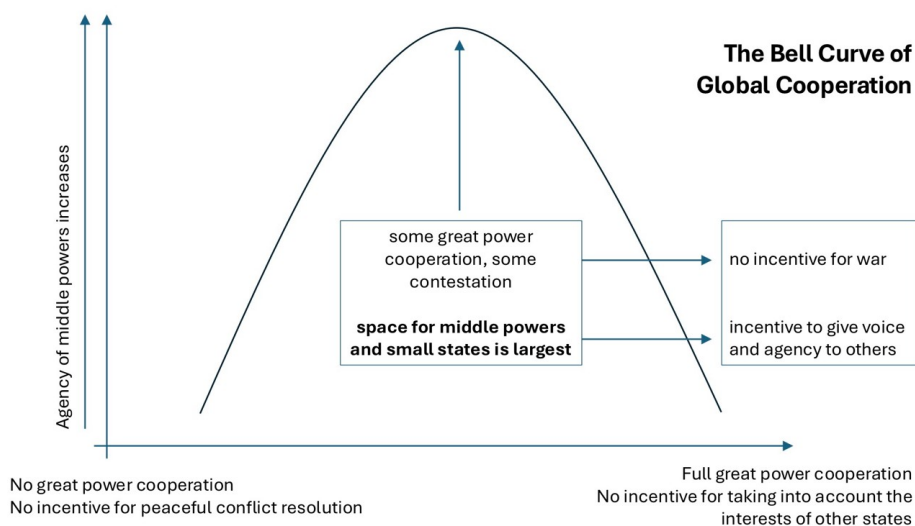
At the same time, as the rivalry between America and China continues to heat up, the pressure on regional and secondary powers increases, not merely because of pressure to take sides in this geopolitical struggle, but also because the Sino-Russian partnership is actively weakening and reshaping the global order that has been the foundation of the security and prosperity of the region.¹⁹ Here, the quality of relations between Washington and Beijing is decisive: Deteriorating ties raise the risk of costly confrontation, while overly close alignment risks marginalising middle and small states by concentrating decision-making in a de facto great-power concert. The emerging order will always combine elements of competition and cooperation, but the key challenge for liberal middle powers – such as the European states and their Indo-Pacific partners – is to identify and stabilise the “sweet spot” of cooperation where their agency and influence are maximised (see Figure 3).²⁰

¹⁸ Rieck, “Why Institutions Still Matter”, 14.

¹⁹ Rajeswari Pillai Rajagopalan, *The Sino-Russian partnership: Why it matters for Australian security and defence* (Canberra: Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 2026).

²⁰ Rieck, “Why Institutions Still Matter”, 12.

Figure 3: The Bell Curve of Global Cooperation



All of these developments threaten the function of regional and secondary powers as buffer states that keep the overall polarity of the regional system low. Protecting as much of the buffer states' autonomy in the face of hardening great power postures as possible should be Europe's main goal in the Indo-Pacific. As the next section will show, this is also a function Europe is singularly suited for, given its soft power diplomatic posture, its industrial and technological strength, and its relative lack of military power projection capabilities.

Europe's Potential as a Soft Balancer

So, why does Europe matter in a region increasingly defined by hard power competition between great powers, and what role should it play? Any proposed role-conception has to consider the specificities of Europe, as well as its particular strengths and the limitations of European power projection in the Indo-Pacific.

In this context, the two-level game Europe represents – made up of a Union superstructure and powerful member states, entangled in a federal constitutional structure that clearly sets out which level regulates which policy field – is not simply a structural weakness. To be sure, structural limitations do persist: The European Union is not and will very likely never become a “unified foreign policy actor” enjoying full “strategic autonomy”.²¹ Internal fragmentation within the EU complicates the formulation of a unified strategic outlook, while

²¹ Barbara Lippert, Nicolai von Ondarza and Volker Perthes, *European Strategic Autonomy: Actors, Issues, Conflicts of Interests* (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, 2019), 35–36.

limited capabilities for hard power projection restrict Europe's ability to act independently in security terms. Thus, Europe risks being perceived as normatively ambitious but strategically marginal.

Instead, the hybrid nature of the EU serves as an amplifier for both member states' and Union interests – if sufficient alignment between the two levels of governance exists. Put differently, “European power”, i.e. the EU's foreign policy effectiveness, is a function of issue-specific consensuses in Brussels between the Commission (as the guardian of the Union's interests), the Council (as the collective representation of the member states), and national capitals (where the political costs of policy initiatives are highest). In the case of the Indo-Pacific foreign policy priorities between the two European levels of governance are deeply aligned, as a series of member state and Union strategy papers on the region demonstrate.²²

This Pacific Turn enables a collaborative, burden-sharing “Team Europe” approach to security and stability in the Indo-Pacific where member states can provide (1) the military capabilities necessary to project European hard power into this faraway region, (2) the industrial relations to make economic and technological cooperation effective, and (3) funding to complement EU initiatives, e.g. in science, technology and innovation. At the same time, the Union can use its external trade, regulatory, and diplomatic instruments to create a framework amenable to cooperation and economic integration which benefits its member states. This is the foundation of Europe's soft balancing approach.

Here, Europe's position in the evolving strategic landscape between Washington and Beijing is marked by a deliberate ambiguity, even though the perception of China as a systemic rival has grown over the past decade: On the one hand, both the Union and its member states align closely with the United States on key issues such as security concerns and technological competition. On the other, they maintain continued engagement with China, particularly in areas like trade, climate policy, and global governance. This dual approach is a calculated strategy of managed interdependence between the superpowers. It is also an example of “relational geopolitics”, simultaneously pursuing traditional deterrence and constructing a broader “security crisis space” grounded in spatial complexity, local agency, and the co-production of order.²³

Multi-alignment in the Indo-Pacific reinforces the logic of soft balancing by creating a strategic environment in which rigid blocs are diluted and influence is

²² Christian E. Rieck, “Strange New Worlds: The European Union's Search for Like-Minded Partners in the Indo-Pacific”, *Panorama* 2021/1 (2021): 39–53, at 50, 53.

²³ Veronica Anghel, “Why the EU is a geopolitical power: wartime enlargement, integration, and reform”, *Journal of European Public Policy* 32, no. 12 (2025): 1–24, at 7.

exercised through non-military means. As regional powers diversify partnerships and resist exclusive alignment with the United States or China, they open space for actors like the EU to operate through regulatory, economic, and diplomatic instruments. In this context, Europe's soft balancing does not counter multi-alignment but complements and enables it, especially in like-minded states,²⁴ reinforcing a pluralistic order in which power is mediated by institutions, interdependence, and negotiated norms rather than military dominance.

From Theory to Policy

If the European Union is to act credibly as a soft balancer in the Indo-Pacific, its policies should reinforce strategic autonomy, expand the room for manoeuvre of like-minded states, and strengthen Europe's capacity to shape rules. Using the "Team Europe" approach and the EU's strengths in "relational geopolitics", Brussels should continue to deploy a range of soft and hard power instruments in the interest of stabilising the regional balance. A coherent approach could rest on five pillars:

First, the EU should deepen its tailored economic statecraft by expanding high-quality trade and investment frameworks with key regional partners. Here, recent free trade agreements with Australia and India are important examples of geopolitical signalling, embedding the EU in the region's economic architecture. The focus should lie on building resilient supply chains, advancing green infrastructure, and enhancing digital connectivity – and increasingly also on establishing frameworks to secure access to rare earths and natural resources, on the creation of innovation ecosystems in research- and technology-intensive fields, and on improving military industrial relations. At the same time, initiatives such as the Global Gateway serve as a soft, standards-based alternative to China's Belt and Road Initiative – though transforming it into visible and bankable projects will be crucial. EU science diplomacy – centred on granting access to Horizon Europe funding mechanisms for collaboration in science and technology, research and innovation, and mobility schemes – also serves to create alternatives to American and Chinese advances. Through these mechanisms, Europe is able to shape regional norms and practices by socialising like-minded partners into a collaborative mindset. The overall objective should be to widen the strategic choices available to Indo-Pacific countries.

Second, Europe should leverage its regulatory power more strategically: Its comparative advantage lies in standard-setting, particularly in digital

²⁴ Rieck, "Strange New Worlds", 45–49.

governance, environmental standards, supply chain due diligence requirements, and industrial policy. By externalising these standards, pursuing regulatory partnerships with interested countries (such as with South Korea in digital services), and aligning selectively with the United States where interests converge, the EU can turn the “Brussels Effect”²⁵ into a meaningful geopolitical instrument – without becoming overly dependent on any single partner. In this way, Europe can exert structural influence without direct geopolitical confrontation.

Third, the EU should not undermine multi-alignment in the region but rather enthusiastically support it. This entails reinforcing the centrality of ASEAN, a regional organisation the EU actively engages with on a wide range of issue areas. The Union and the member states also participate in other Indo-Pacific forums and partnerships, and – of special value to the Pacific Island States – contribute to climate diplomacy and development cooperation. Europe should also continue to develop flexible and issue-based cooperation formats (in science and technology, say, or in professional training), and avoid rigid binary narratives such as “democracy versus autocracy” where they constrain engagement. Such a pragmatic approach aligns with the strategic preferences of many Indo-Pacific states across all sub-regions, from Southeast Asia to the South Pacific, and enhances Europe’s legitimacy as an external actor. Multilateral diplomacy remains a cornerstone of Europe’s global strategy – reinforcing its identity as a protector of the rules-based international order in an increasingly contested geopolitical environment.

Fourth, while not aspiring to be a hard military balancer, Europe should provide targeted and calibrated security contributions. Selective naval deployments by Berlin, Paris and London, limited but symbolically important, can signal presence without seeking dominance. Participation in freedom of navigation operations in support of international maritime law conveys a commitment to regional stability. Investments in maritime capacity-building can strengthen regional resilience; examples could include coast guard training and maritime domain awareness.

In addition, cooperation in technical, non-traditional security areas, including cybersecurity, climate security, and especially disaster relief and disaster risk reduction, further showcases Europe’s commitment. These actions enhance Europe’s credibility as a security actor while avoiding escalation into overt military balancing.

²⁵ Anu Bradford, *The Brussels Effect: How the European Union Rules the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

Fifth, and perhaps most importantly, the EU must strengthen its internal coherence. A credible external role depends on improved coordination among member states, closer alignment between EU institutions and national Indo-Pacific strategies, and clearer prioritisation of regions and partnerships. Despite the Pacific Turn across Europe, internal fragmentation remains the most significant constraint on effective soft balancing.

In sum, by enabling multi-alignment, setting rules, and providing credible alternatives, Europe can position itself as a stabilising force in an increasingly competitive Indo-Pacific. Unlike traditional hard balancers, the EU does not seek to contain China militarily, but rather seeks to constrain unilateral dominance, preserve an open and rules-based international order, and avoid being forced into binary alignment between great powers. After all, the EU's comparative advantage lies in shaping the environment in which others make their strategic choices.

Conclusion: Soft Balancing in the Interest of Security and Stability

The intensifying strategic rivalry between the United States and China has become the defining feature of contemporary international politics, particularly in the Indo-Pacific. Europe's Indo-Pacific strategies represent a case of conscious (soft) balancing, not passive hedging, despite the limitations of soft power in a hardening bipolar order. It can be seen as a "Team Europe" attempt by the Union and its member states at offshore soft balancing, despite the hard power elements it contains. This strategy is deployed in the interest of keeping the regional balance, by increasing the room for manoeuvre of regional powers and secondary powers in the Indo-Pacific vis-à-vis Washington and Beijing. It also differs from American offshore balancing in important ways, as the mix of instruments Europe can deploy is different from that of the United States, given its lack of statehood on the Union level and relative lack of military power on the member state level. Brussels is not Washington; neither are Paris, London and Berlin.

Conventional theories of balancing would predict a marginal role for actors lacking significant military capabilities. Yet Europe has expanded its presence in the region through trade agreements, regulatory initiatives, diplomatic engagement, and a selective military presence. The paper conceptualises the EU as a soft balancer that operates primarily through non-military instruments to constrain and shape great-power behaviour. At the same time, EU member states can provide some hard power projection to undergird EU soft power efforts, but also to offer regional actors security and defence partnerships below the threshold of a military alliance. This two-level game Europe represents – made up of a Union superstructure and powerful member states –

is seen not simply as a structural weakness as is often stated in the literature, but as an amplifier for both member states' and Union interests if, as in the case of the Indo-Pacific, sufficient alignment between the two levels of governance exists. Finally, this approach enables the active multi-alignment of states in the region: an attempt to help preserve the strategic autonomy of regional actors and uphold a global rules-based order without engaging in direct military competition, but not without the ability to project "strategic solidarity" into the region.

Arguably, Europe is pursuing a benign strategy of influence-maximisation: Rather than choosing sides or retreating into irrelevance, the European Union has sought to assert itself through economic statecraft, regulatory influence, and multilateral diplomacy – complemented by selective member state military power projection and industrial relations. This specific form of soft balancing is not supposed to position Europe as a unified strategic actor posturing as another world power in the Indo-Pacific. Rather, it should continue to seek to enable states in the region to make the most of their "active multi-alignment". The overarching goal remains to keep the regional balance and thus the regional peace, lowering the temperature between America and China. The demand in the region for such specifically European instruments of stabilisation continues to increase.

About the Author

Dr. Christian E. Rieck is an Associate Professor of War Studies at the University of Potsdam in Germany. He holds a postgraduate degree in Latin American Studies from the University of Oxford and a PhD in diplomatic history from the University of Potsdam. Christian is also a Non-Resident Senior Fellow at the Global Governance Institute in Brussels and in 2025 was a KAS Asia-Pacific Fellow at the United States Studies Centre of the University of Sydney.

Active Nos for a Safer Sea: A Study of Vietnam's Maritime Security Posture

Jan Asmussen

Vietnam and the Philippines endure an inordinate volume of conflicts emanating from China's progressively belligerent posture in the South China Sea. These states, arguably, confront the most significant number of such disputes. Of these, the ones targeting Vietnam have exhibited the highest levels of violence. Recent decades have seen several military conflicts between China and Vietnam, including the Paracel Islands conflict in 1974¹, the Sino-Vietnamese War in 1979,² followed by armed clashes over the land border until 1987, the Spratly Islands skirmish in 1988, and standoffs in the Vietnamese exclusive economic zone (EEZ) in the 1990s, 2014 and 2019.³

A study previously conducted by the author that dealt with the potential for enhanced ASEAN naval cooperation produced mixed results. Singapore and Malaysia recognise China's assertiveness but have not changed their defence strategies. Thailand is indifferent, while Indonesia sees great power competition as a threat. The Philippines views China as the main regional threat. ASEAN naval cooperation exists but is mainly limited to constabulary tasks. No preparation for major conflicts is noted.⁴ Vietnam's role in the context of ASEAN naval cooperation, particularly with regard to the challenges posed by China's increasing assertiveness, constitutes a notable omission from the aforementioned contribution. Therefore, this study is focused on maritime strategic thinking in Vietnam. Drawing upon a comprehensive review of strategy documents, scientific publications and interviews with local experts, politicians and military officials, this study will provide a detailed analysis of the evolution of naval cooperation in Vietnam. The study also underscores the challenging nature of the road ahead for the country as it endeavours to adopt a more collaborative maritime security approach. It will be argued that Vietnam's official 'Four Nos' policy is shifting significantly from strict non-alignment towards a

¹ Toshi Yoshihara, 'The 1974 Paracels sea battle: a campaign appraisal'. *Naval War College Review*, 69 (2) 2016, 41-65. <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol69/iss2/6/>.

² Xiaoming Zhang, Deng Xiaoping's Long War: The Military Conflict between China and Vietnam, 1979–1991. The New Cold War History. The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill 2015.

³ Dung Huynh, 'Facing the Ravenous Sea Dragon. How Weaker Nations Confront Chinese Coercion in the South China Sea', *RAND Research*, 1.9.2022, p. 1, https://www.rand.org/pubs/rgs_dissertations/RGSDA2470-1.htm.

⁴ Jan Asmussen, 'Integrated Maritime Security Cooperation in South-East Asia', *Asia in Review (AiR) Special Edition*, CPG, Bangkok, July 2025, pp. 47-48, https://cpg-online.de/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/Fn_Jan-Asmussen-Integrated-Maritime-Security-10_07_2025.pdf.

more flexible hedging strategy. Before addressing specific research questions, it is prudent to examine Vietnam's strategic outlook and its naval capabilities.

Vietnam's Strategic Outlook: the "Four Nos"

From a geostrategic perspective, Vietnam and its Spratly Islands in the South China Sea are of particular significance, as they represent the most substantial impediment to Chinese expansion in the region. The South China Sea is of critical importance to Beijing's long-term maritime strategy, as it serves as a pivotal gateway to the Indo-Pacific region⁵. Moreover, the absence of any security or military alliance between Vietnam and other states renders the nation susceptible to targeted aggression from Beijing should the latter choose to employ force.⁶

Vietnam's overall defensive strategy is based on the so-called "Four Nos":

1. No military alliances: Vietnam avoids formal military pacts.
2. No siding with one country against another: The policy promotes neutrality in great power rivalries.
3. No foreign military bases or using territory against others: Vietnam won't host foreign bases or allow its territory to be used for aggression.
4. No using force or threatening force in international relations: This reflects a commitment to peaceful conflict resolution.⁷

The strategic purpose of the Four Nos is based on the principles of strategic autonomy, balancing relations and the needs of national defence:

- Strategic Autonomy: Prevents Vietnam from being drawn into conflicts or becoming a pawn in geopolitical struggles.
- Balancing Relations: Allows flexible engagement with multiple partners (US, China, India, Japan, etc.) for economic and security benefits.
- National Defence: Focuses on modernising its military through diversified partnerships rather than alliances, strengthening self-reliance.⁸

In 1998, Vietnam's Ministry of National Defence (MND) published its first white paper outlining the country's defence priorities and limits. Notably, the ministry forswore military alliances, foreign-military-basing arrangements, and power

⁵ James Borton, ed., *The South China Sea: Challenges and Promises*, Xlibris Corporation, Bloomington, Indiana 2015.

⁶ Dung Huynh, 'Facing the Ravenous Sea Dragon', op.cit., p. 14.

⁷ Mukesh Kumar, 'Vietnam's Four No's Amid the US-China Tug of War', *Indian Council of World Affairs*, 26 August 2025, https://www.icwa.in/show_content.php?lang=1&level=3&ls_id=13440&lid=8197.

⁸ International Trade Administration, *Vietnam Country Commercial Guide, Defense and Security Sector*, 03.01.2024, <https://www.trade.gov/country-commercial-guides/vietnam-defense-and-security-sector>.

balancing accomplished by partnering with one country to act against another.⁹ These limitations, subsequently reaffirmed in two additional white papers in 2004 and 2009,¹⁰ became known as the Three Nos: no joining military alliances, no hosting foreign bases on Vietnamese soil, and no using one country to balance against another. In 2019, the ministry published a fourth white paper, in which it shifted its policy from Three Nos to Four Nos. While it kept the original Three Nos, the new policy added a further qualification by denouncing the use or threat of violence in international relations. However, it also opened the possibility of increased military partnerships with other countries by indicating that Vietnam could consider expanding defence cooperation with other countries “depending on circumstances and specific conditions.”¹¹ While adhering to the policy, Vietnam remains pragmatic, developing necessary defence ties and seeking cooperation on shared challenges, demonstrating a flexible, non-aligned approach.¹² This shift can be explained by the growing awareness of Chinese aggressive behaviour in and around the South China Sea.¹³

Vietnam’s maritime strategy is fundamentally based on two key concepts: “active defense” and “all-people’s war at sea”. The doctrine under discussion places significant emphasis on the notion of countering threats from a distance, with a particular focus on anti-amphibious operations. The strategy under discussion makes use of the country’s geography, with islands being used as bases to support and conceal naval assets. The strategy is characterised by its comprehensive approach to integrating diverse operational elements, encompassing the navy, the coast guard, and a substantial maritime militia comprising fishermen. This multifaceted force is utilised for the conduct of surveillance and asymmetric operations. The procurement of mobile coastal defence missile systems, such as the Bastion-P, serves to reinforce the layered defence-in-depth strategy employed.¹⁴

⁹ Socialist Republic of Vietnam—Ministry of National Defence, *1998 White Paper: Strengthen National Defense, Protect the Fatherland*, Hanoi 1998, pp. 7–12, see www.mod.gov.vn.

¹⁰ Socialist Republic of Vietnam—Ministry of National Defence, *Vietnam’s National Defense in the Early Years of the 21st Century*, Hanoi 2004, see www.mod.gov.vn / Socialist Republic of Vietnam—Ministry of National Defence, *Vietnam National Defense*, Hanoi, December 2009, see www.mod.gov.vn.

¹¹ Socialist Republic of Vietnam—Ministry of National Defence, *2019 Viet Nam National Defense*, Hanoi: National Political Publishing House, 2019, pp. 23–24, see www.mod.gov.vn.

¹² Abdul Rahman Yaacob, ‘Vietnam’s flexible nonalignment’, *EastAsiaForum*, 02 April 2024, <https://eastasiaforum.org/2024/04/02/vietnams-flexible-nonalignment/>.

¹³ Zeberlein, Jeff (2024) ‘Vietnam and the Four Nos—How Chinese Actions in the South China Sea Influence Vietnam’s Hedging Strategy,’ *Naval War College Review*, Vol. 77: No. 1, Article 8, 2024, <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol77/iss1/8>.

¹⁴ Thu Nguyen Hoang Anh, ‘Assessing Vietnam’s Maritime Governance Capacity: Priorities and Challenges’, *CSIS, Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative*, 10.01.2024, <https://amti.csis.org/assessing-vietnams-maritime-governance-capacity-priorities-and-challenges/>.

Vietnam's Naval Capabilities

The Vietnam People's Navy (VPN) is undergoing a transition from a coastal patrol force to a more capable green-water navy. This shift is driven by the need to protect its extensive coastline, extensive exclusive economic zone, and national interests in the contested South China Sea. The navy's development prioritises the enhancement of defensive capabilities, thereby shaping a maritime strategy that is centred on asymmetric warfare and area denial.

A fundamental aspect of the modernisation of the VPN has been the procurement of key foreign platforms, most notably Kilo-class submarines and Gepard-class frigates from Russia.¹⁵ In an effort to mitigate reliance on a solitary supplier and augment autonomy, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam is undertaking measures to fortify its domestic shipbuilding industry. Whilst Russia continues to be the primary defence partner of Vietnam, there has been an observable shift in the nation's procurement strategy. Evidence suggests that Vietnam has begun to diversify its acquisitions, with systems being obtained from a variety of countries, including Israel, the Netherlands, and India.¹⁶ Notwithstanding the aforementioned advancements, the operational effectiveness of the VPN is impeded by two factors. Firstly, there is a paucity of experience in large-scale naval combat; secondly, there is a need for more advanced Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (C4ISR) capabilities to facilitate the full integration of its new and diverse assets.¹⁷

Domestic Experts' Views on Vietnam's Naval Security

In order to examine Vietnam's naval security from a domestic perspective, fifteen interviews were carried out in November 2025. All interviews were conducted under the Chatham House Rule and are therefore anonymised. Interview excerpts have been lightly edited for grammar and punctuation. Local experts, scientists, politicians and military officials were invited to answer the following four research questions.

1. Which principal naval threats are currently being experienced by Vietnam?
2. In what manner is the Vietnamese People's Navy collaborating with other naval forces in order to address these threats? Are there any preferred partners?

¹⁵ Vietnam People's Navy, GlobalMilitary.net, <https://www.globalmilitary.net/navies/vnm/>.

¹⁶ Truong Minh Vu and Nguyen The Phuong, 'The Modernization of the Vietnam People's Navy: Grand Goals and Limited Options', *CSIS, Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative*, 06.04.2017, <https://amti.csis.org/modernization-vietnam-navy/>.

¹⁷ Vietnam People's Navy, GlobalMilitary.net, <https://www.globalmilitary.net/navies/vnm/>.

3. In what ways does the Vietnamese People's Navy prepare itself for the possibility of a global conflict breaking out in the South China Sea, or the People's Republic of China invading Taiwan?
4. In what capacity might Europe assist Vietnam in dealing with future naval threats?

Security Threats

How do Vietnamese experts perceive the naval and maritime dangers that the country is subjected to?

During the interviews, China was identified as the primary security threat to Vietnam and the primary agent of regional instability.¹⁸ The events that transpired in the vicinity of the Spratly Islands were cited, and further complications emanating from that region were anticipated. Vietnam's extensive coastline, which presented significant logistical challenges due to its vast expanse and terrain that was difficult to monitor and defend, posed a considerable obstacle. The defence of the islands and the coastal regions posed significant challenges. Additionally, there were threats from other foreign navies that were present in the area. Furthermore, there were non-traditional threats, including those to the environment.¹⁹

More nuanced assessments raised concerns about the emergence of great-power competition between China and the US that has the potential to spill over into the South China Sea. Furthermore, a multitude of non-traditional threats required the Vietnamese Navy to allocate its resources. Vietnam would regard itself as a proactive actor, seeking to avert escalation. While China was not identified as the primary threat, the discourse indicated that threats stemming from Chinese coercive behaviour significantly influenced Vietnam's defensive posture and doctrine. This notion was further substantiated by the observation that shipbuilding occupied a pivotal position in the broader context of strategic capability. Given China's prolific shipbuilding industry, pertinent questions emerged: "Where are they all going to be deployed?" and "Where will they test them out?" China considered itself to be in a position of superiority. The Vietnamese were not unhappy with this hubris and reasoned that they "want(ed) them to develop luxury systems." These would be costly and could be neutralised by means of asymmetric warfare.²⁰

Maritime think tanks and scientists equally identified China as the primary threat to Vietnam's maritime security. An armed attack by the People's

¹⁸ Conversation with a former senior Vietnamese diplomat, Danang, 04.11.2025.

¹⁹ Interview with a senior official from the Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam, Danang, 04.11.2025.

²⁰ Conversation with senior officials from the Ministry of National Defense, Hanoi, 06.11.2025.

Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) on Vietnam was not likely to happen soon, but some analysts sensed that it could well take place in five to ten years. China would prepare by developing military cooperation, for example with Cambodia, where Chinese influence was growing and naval bases were being established.²¹ Some members of the armed forces exhibited a state of paranoia concerning the United States. The rationale behind this phenomenon is the pervasive influence of disinformation disseminated through social media platforms. The spectre of a coloured revolution in Vietnam would undoubtedly evoke trepidation. However, it is evident that the United States does not currently advocate for such measures. Therefore, it can be posited that the true peril emanated from China. Vietnam's real problem was the perceived inadequacy of its defence capabilities. The number of vessels to control the coastline was insufficient and the maritime domain awareness (MDA) system was not good enough. This was actually no secret, but Navy officials were reluctant to admit it publicly. Another problem was emergent underwater (military) technology. Vietnam was threatened by China's projection of these technologies. In 2011, China had cut Vietnamese cables, which came as a real shock!²²

Assessment

It is notable that the most significant threat to Vietnam's maritime security was identified as China's growing assertiveness. Whilst diplomats and other public officials were somewhat more hesitant to attribute responsibility to China, independent scientists and think tankers were less restrained in their criticism of Beijing, regarding it as the primary instigator in the region. It is evident that other threats, including those posed by other navies and non-traditional actors, were acknowledged. However, these threats were perceived to be of lesser significance in the broader context of Vietnam's threat perception.

Security Partners

Which potential partners could Vietnam collaborate with to address naval security threats? Is it possible to partner with other navies without joining any formal alliances?

Official representatives saw no prime or prioritised partner for Vietnam, but singled out the United States, Japan and Australia as important collaborators. However, there was no concrete naval cooperation, not even with the Philippine Coast Guard, despite the existence of port visits. Vietnam would engage in open dialogue with potential partners and pursue capacity-building, particularly with

²¹ Interview with a Vietnamese political scientist, Ho Chi Minh City, 11.11.2025.

²² Interview with a representative of Vietnamese maritime think-tank, Hanoi, 10.11.2025.

Australia and Japan.²³ Vietnam would “engage everyone and exclude no one” in terms of partnering. However, India, Australia and Japan were singled out as partners that were equally important to Vietnam. “Southeast Asia was still shifting between modernity and legacy,” meaning it tried to find some middle ground between East and West. This is a reference to Southeast Asia’s ongoing tension between adopting Western-style progress (modernity) and preserving deep cultural traditions (legacy), seen in evolving identities, architecture, and power dynamics where countries would redefine their paths, blending old values with new tech, challenging Western dominance and creating unique “Asian modernities” that differ from European models.

When it came to ASEAN partners, Vietnam would support the ASEAN outlook with strong support for ASEAN centrality and unity. Asked if the ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meeting could be a forum for cooperation, the responses were rather cautious, saying that one would rarely hear “in ASEAN: let’s work together in the defense industry.” Thus, ASEAN naval cooperation was mainly confined to symbolic exercises, such as early warning mechanisms and intelligence sharing. In terms of non-traditional threats, a good deal had been done in coordinating search and rescue operations and disaster response. Referring to existing naval cooperation with China, interviewees pointed to the aforementioned inclusive approach of engaging everyone, while at the same time “Struggling with China as well”. Referring to the official stance of Malaysia, it was sensed that it could be described as a policy of “we see nothing, we hear nothing, (...) so nothing happens to us” which would amount to another kind of Four Nos. Vietnam would closely monitor the minilaterals like the Quad, AUKUS, and the JPN-US-PHL triangle. However, there was no inclination to follow that path.²⁴

According to think-tank analysts, previously Russia was the main security partner. It was still active in the south, especially with regard to the oil and gas industry. However, its influence was declining. India also played a role, often in concert with Russia. In terms of capabilities, it was vital for Vietnam to diversify, and this would need new partners. (South) Korea and the US were emerging partners, but the development was very slow. In addition, Japan was an important partner, but, so far, the cooperation was not so effective. Cooperation with the Philippines was hindered by the fact that China was the red line. Vietnam would try not to antagonise China. Instead, it was using the Philippines as leverage against China. The think-tank analyst thought Vietnam should be more active in cooperation with the Philippines. The Philippine opposition to Chinese vessels was not enough to discourage Chinese assertiveness.²⁵

²³ Interview with a senior official from the Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam, Danang, 04.11.2025.

²⁴ Conversation with senior officials from the Ministry of National Defense, Hanoi, 06.11.2025.

²⁵ Interview with a representative of Vietnamese maritime think-tank, Hanoi, 10.11.2025.

Vietnamese scientific analysts pointed out that there was “not any single most important” partner. The United States, while growing to be more important, could not be fully trusted. At present it is significant politically; “but both times when China attacked the Paracel islands in 1974 and the Spratlys 1988 it was when US and China were close or had had [good] relations.” When it comes to ASEAN states, the scholar judged that the Philippines was “not so important, there are joint maneuvers, but no patrols”. Port visits were mainly goodwill missions. There was nothing done with Malaysia. The relations were maybe better with Singapore, but mainly confined to diplomatic activities. There was no direct naval cooperation with Indonesia. Other important naval security partners were a) Japan, which he qualified as a “promising partner”, which gave significant diplomatic support, as well; b) South Korea, which was similar to Japan, but overall “less supportive” while at the same time showing a strong interest in arms sales; and finally c) Australia with a significant interest in defence cooperation and the allocation of military assets.²⁶

Assessment

The core of Vietnam’s military cooperation centres on strengthening capabilities with partners for regional stability and humanitarian aid. Key areas of focus are enhancing Vietnam’s ability to monitor its waters (Maritime Domain Awareness), joint efforts in humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) and peacekeeping, and the modernisation of Vietnam’s defence forces. In a nutshell, Vietnam is trying to strengthen its military capacity and regional role through enhanced cooperation, to ensure freedom of navigation and stability in the South China Sea.

The US, as the biggest antagonist to China, appears to be a natural partner. Defence ties between Vietnam and the United States have expanded significantly since the 2023 Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. Areas of cooperation are maritime security (provision of Hamilton-class cutters, Metal Shark patrol boats, and training for the Coast Guard), air capability (possible acquisition of C-130 Hercules transport planes and the delivery of T-6 trainers), and exercises and training (RIMPAC, the Global Peace Operations Initiative (GPOI), and joint manoeuvres).²⁷ That said, the majority of interviewees cautioned that aligning with the United States would be inadvisable, given Vietnam’s neutral stance and, to a certain extent, the perceived hegemonic tendencies of the United States. Therefore, it would be more prudent to seek partners with whom Vietnam would see eye to eye. Japan, India, South Korea

²⁶ Interview with a Vietnamese political scientist, Ho Chi Minh City, 11.11.2025.

²⁷ U.S. Embassy Vietnam, ‘U.S. Security Cooperation with Vietnam’, <https://vn.usembassy.gov/u-s-security-cooperation-with-vietnam>.

and Australia were frequently mentioned, as was the Philippines as the most important ASEAN partner. The significance of other ASEAN nations for Vietnam's naval security was described as being of a rather symbolic nature.

Conflicts around Taiwan and the South China Sea

The possibility of an outbreak of all-out war in the Taiwan Strait or the South China Sea would have grave consequences for Vietnam. A crucial question to address is how Vietnam is currently preparing itself for such a scenario.

Officially, Vietnam has not made preparations for that contingency. It would defend its sovereignty in case of an all-out war in the region. In addition, the Vietnamese armed forces and diplomatic services would do "our best against a possible invasion." Their main aim was to "prevent this from happening!"²⁸ Vietnam's defence establishment regards problems in the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait as interconnected. A conflict in Taiwan would have many spill-over effects in Southeast Asia. Apart from military action, trade and migration (refugees) would be affected. Any conflict in the South China Sea or Taiwan would be fought in the same theatre. In order to prevent an outbreak of all-out war, Vietnam must take proactive action. With regard to the South China Sea, one cannot rely only on hope! 'Active peace' is needed, as 'we cannot rely on hope', such as the hope that major powers will exercise restraint or that geography will protect us. Vietnam is "always ready to prepare for the worst!" The Vietnamese conception of national defence also means that the 'Four Nos' are 'active Nos'! 'Vietnam wants to promote active peace', as there is a "need to do our best to provide peace". In this respect, the 'Four Nos' policy does not entail a passive role for Vietnam. Quite the contrary, Vietnam would need to deploy all necessary means for peace.²⁹

Vietnam has fought a war with China. Because of this, it would try to make peace and work with other countries. China is seen as overly sensitive because it is the only country in its position. There were no real allies that China could or would trust. So, it would introduce policies to make things more secure. This was something Vietnam had to guard itself against. Vietnam has been able to do this by working closely with China. As one defence official put it, "We know how a communist country works!"³⁰

Vietnam, as an ASEAN member state, would understand the situation from within. A policy that is carefully crafted between ASEAN nations could discourage China from adventures. One rationale was that if you have China

²⁸ Interview with a senior official from the Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam, Danang, 04.11.2025.

²⁹ Conversation with senior officials from the Ministry of National Defense, Hanoi, 06.11.2025.

³⁰ Conversation with senior officials from the Ministry of National Defense, Hanoi, 06.11.2025.

invest in your country, it would make it more difficult to engage in aggressive behaviour.³¹

When push comes to shove, Vietnam, as a small country, would need asymmetric solutions. “When navy goes out to sea, the shore should be ready, too.” Vietnam did not project power beyond its continental shelf. Multilayered defence was needed, for example the installation of coastal missiles. Asked whether Vietnam would conduct war-gaming, the response was that “Vietnam is always ready to prepare for the worst!” It was vital to develop the ability to anticipate emerging situations.³²

At the time of the interviews, Vietnam did not have a contingency plan in place. “If you think you have measures in place, that’s exactly how you end up unprepared”, but the central focus would be local defence. Each and every unit would need contingency planning. This would differ from Western-style national defence planning. It would be more locally based (autonomous). In any case, Vietnam needed to improve. As one defence official put it: “We need to stay hungry, to meet real-time demands.” This preparedness should signal deterrence. But one could “only deter if you’re on the same level. If you have a mighty adversary it can be counterproductive. The Philippines can, for example, not build credible deterrence against China. So, how can we measure effectiveness?” Vietnam was troubled because “China knows our weaknesses, but China would also fear Vietnam” given their experiences in past conflicts.³³

In the case of Taiwan, Vietnam was monitoring very closely what happened in the Taiwan Strait. As for the many Vietnamese citizens in Taiwan, evacuation plans are in place that need to be developed further.³⁴

At present the US was trying to complicate the nuclear posture in the region, because it gave the green light for the Republic of Korea to build nuclear submarines. This might be a game-changing decision with an unpredictable outcome.³⁵

Independent think-tankers have asked the question about Vietnam’s response to a regional escalation “some years ago at an event with military, diplomats and government officials. (But) there was no clear answer!” The government would stick to the official policy of not joining either side. However, there were

³¹ Conversation with senior officials from the Ministry of National Defense, Hanoi, 06.11.2025.

³² Conversation with senior officials from the Ministry of National Defense, Hanoi, 06.11.2025.

³³ Conversation with senior officials from the Ministry of National Defense, Hanoi, 06.11.2025.

³⁴ Conversation with senior officials from the Ministry of National Defense, Hanoi, 06.11.2025.

³⁵ Conversation with senior officials from the Ministry of National Defense, Hanoi, 06.11.2025.

preparations ongoing. Even the Vietnamese island-building in the Spratlys should be regarded as part of preparation against a war in the region.³⁶

A local political scientist noted discrepancies between the two cases. With respect to Taiwan, Vietnam would maintain a neutral stance. However, regarding the South China Sea, this was not “hundred percent the case.” He considered the likelihood of Vietnam aligning with the United States in the event of an armed conflict. Regarding the preparations of the Vietnamese navy, he stated that he did not possess any classified information. However, he speculated that there were contingency plans in place for both a general war and the Spratlys. At the recent Expo Hanoi, there was a clear indication of the presentation of homemade missiles with the potential to reach the Spratlys.³⁷

Assessment

It is considered a serious threat to Vietnam's security that there is a strong possibility of a major conflict involving the US and China around Taiwan or the South China Sea. Although the Vietnamese government has not formally acknowledged any contingency planning or war-gaming for such a scenario, it is evident that the country is preparing for the worst. In light of the country's official non-alignment policies, it is challenging to envision a scenario in which it would be subject to an attack by China. Vietnam's primary strategy is thus based on a revised version of the “Four Nos policy”, which facilitates partnerships with other like-minded nations without the need for formal alliances. At the same time, Vietnam has learned from past experiences that it should not rely on external assistance. Therefore, it prepares itself by employing asymmetric methods of warfare to counter any superior foe. Vietnam is proactively engaging in diplomatic efforts to demonstrate its readiness, deter any aggression, and prevent major conflict.

Europe's Potential Role in Vietnam's Maritime Security

In consideration of Vietnam's declared commitment to maintaining a neutral stance, it would be prudent to explore potential partnerships with entities that demonstrate a less pronounced inclination towards regional domination, as evidenced by the behaviours of China and the United States. In light of Europe's long-standing relinquishment of its colonial ambitions, the question arises as to whether it could serve as a reliable security partner.

Vietnam regards economic development as the backbone of building security. That would be the first basis for cooperation with Europe. What was needed were investment arrangements and not only free trade agreements. Vietnam

³⁶ Interview with a representative of Vietnamese maritime think-tank, Hanoi, 10.11.2025.

³⁷ Interview with a Vietnamese political scientist, Ho Chi Minh City, 11.11.2025.

needed help with capacity-building. Vietnam needed a resilient economy because of China. Europe could help to achieve this with capacity-building and even more importantly, with the transfer of technology. This should be done in the undersea, space and air domains. Vietnam's needs were not so much connected with the acquisition of new platforms, but with technology. More Vietnamese students should go to Germany. A joint defence industry could be built that would enable a stable defence supply chain. This would be mutually beneficial (to Germany and Vietnam). This cooperation should be on an equal footing. On the basis of past experiences, Vietnam wouldn't trust any country. The US was considered to be as revisionist as China. As a result, European states could be the preferred choice for cooperation.³⁸

Other official interviewees stressed that EU countries were very important for Vietnamese security and pointed out the long history Europe has in the region. Now, European countries would return to the Indo-Pacific. Vietnam's main interest was vested in its interest in technology, especially military technology. At present, most of Vietnam's weapons are from Russia. In order to be less dependent, Vietnam needed to develop its own weapons. Therefore, "we want to work with more partners!" European engagement must be coordinated and should be respectful. Defence cooperation should help Vietnam to enhance its capacity, not merely substitute platforms. One important field is coastal missiles. Vietnam would focus on this issue. At present, the supply was mostly from Russia, but Vietnam was now gaining economic strength and was considering building its own and buying from other sources. Another important field of cooperation could be unmanned platforms and vehicles. In general, Vietnam needs to find something that fits its own military doctrine. It calls on Europe: "Help us diversify security architecture!" Vietnam supports cooperative and inclusive frameworks. In this respect, South Korea was a good example for Vietnam as it has become a mighty dealer and producer of weapons. When it comes to Europe, Vietnam had mixed experiences. The European missile manufacturer MBDA was cited as a negative example of the absence of a common European approach. In this particular case, French missile efforts in Vietnam failed because a French misreading of Vietnam's strategic culture, budget priorities, existing Russian integration, and desire for technology transfer all worked against French suppliers. On the other hand, Vietnam's own shipbuilding industry was growing and was due to cooperate with the Netherlands. When it came to Germany, there was an urgent need for both governments to think more strategically about their respective complementary advantages. Germany would face similar problems versus China to those of Vietnam versus China. There was a need to work together in order to

³⁸ Interview with a senior official from the Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam, Danang, 04.11.2025.

understand China. More concretely, Vietnam needed help in capacity-building in maritime awareness and Germany has that ability.³⁹

Non-governmental think-tankers and researchers saw Europe's main role in providing training and sales of assets, especially unmanned surface vessels (USVs). Another role was Europe's insistence on freedom of navigation. One interviewee did not disagree with the suggestion that Europe was supposed to do the job for Vietnam.⁴⁰ Generally, there were four fields of possible enhanced collaboration. These were submarine economy, underwater technology, defence technology and maritime domain awareness (MDA) applications. There was already cooperation with Germany in terms of military training. But there was bias against those who went. Some didn't get promoted and it was difficult to transfer their knowledge, because of opposition to Western views. Other European partners were Turkey and France. However, the collaboration with France "didn't go well". The French (MBDA) had complained about difficult communications. Last year's German deployment and other freedom of navigation operations were welcome and more of this kind would be needed. In the past Germany had been interested in marine research and climate change cooperation, but because of the war in Ukraine there was less capacity or interest from Germany. This could be attributed to a presumed overstretch.⁴¹ The Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction (BBNJ)⁴² Treaty on cooperation was another tool for Vietnam's active pursuit of diplomacy. Vietnam called for it and uses it – among other things – to compel China to abide by international agreements.⁴³

Assessment

Security in Vietnam is closely linked to economic development. This approach necessitates strategic investments, rather than relying solely on free trade agreements. Vietnam is seeking to build a resilient economy and is in need of support for capacity-building and technology transfer, particularly in the areas of undersea, space, and air technologies. The country wishes to diversify its defence partnerships beyond Russia, focusing on European countries, which are viewed as more reliable due to Vietnam's past experiences with the US and China. Key areas for cooperation include manufacturing coastal missiles and

³⁹ Conversation with senior officials from the Ministry of National Defense, Hanoi, 06.11.2025.

⁴⁰ Interview with a Vietnamese political scientist, Ho Chi Minh City, 11.11.2025.

⁴¹ Interview with a representative of Vietnamese maritime think-tank, Hanoi, 10.11.2025.

⁴² *Agreement under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea on the Conservation and Sustainable Use of Marine Biological Diversity of Areas beyond National Jurisdiction adopted on 19 June 2023 by the Intergovernmental Conference on Marine Biodiversity of Areas Beyond National Jurisdiction*, <https://www.un.org/bbnjagreement/en>.

⁴³ Interview with a representative of Vietnamese maritime think-tank, Hanoi, 10.11.2025.

unmanned platforms that better align with Vietnam's military doctrine. Other potential fields for enhanced collaboration with Europe include submarine economy and submarine defence technology. Vietnam's growing economic strength is driving a strategy to reduce dependency on Russian weaponry, with collaboration with countries like Germany and the Netherlands. There have been challenges in previous collaborations, notably in the field of French missile development, which was unsuccessful due to cultural misunderstandings and strategic misalignment. It is emphasised that there is a need for more cooperative naval operations and training with European partners. In summary, Vietnam is advocating for a diversified security architecture and collaborative frameworks with Europe to enhance its defence capacities while addressing its strategic interests in the face of regional challenges.

Conclusions

The primary threat to Vietnam's maritime security is China's increasing assertiveness, as highlighted by independent scientists and think tankers. In contrast, diplomats and other government officials adopt a more cautious stance when openly criticising the mighty neighbour. It is acknowledged that there are additional threats from disparate navies and non-traditional actors; however, these are regarded as less significant. Vietnam's strategic focus on military cooperation is driven by a multifaceted approach to enhance its capacity for regional stability, monitor its waters, and modernise its defence forces. This approach is aimed at ensuring freedom of navigation in the South China Sea.

The United States is regarded as a pivotal partner in the context of mounting tensions with China. The scope of cooperation encompasses maritime security, air capability, and joint exercises. However, interviewees warn against aligning too closely with the US due to Vietnam's neutral stance and apprehensions regarding US hegemony. Preferred partners include Japan, India, South Korea, and Australia, with the Philippines regarded as a pivotal ASEAN ally.

A potential conflict between the US and China over Taiwan or the South China Sea poses a serious threat. Vietnam has not publicly disclosed its contingency planning for such scenarios; however, it is preparing for challenges while adhering to its non-alignment policy. The strategy encompasses a modified "Four Nos policy," which entails the establishment of collaborative relationships with nations that share similar outlooks, eschewing formal alliances. It also involves the utilisation of asymmetrical warfare methodologies, aimed at cultivating self-sufficiency.

In the aftermath of the 14th Party Congress, General Secretary To Lam underscored that Vietnam's foreign relations and international integration had

been designated as a “central and ongoing task” for both the state and the party. This shift can be interpreted as a deviation from the preceding “bamboo diplomacy,” a strategy under which Vietnam cultivated partnerships predicated on flexibility and resilience. Following the conclusion of the Party Congress, Vietnam aspires to be regarded as a responsible, proactive, and constructive member of the international community.⁴⁴ This is the true essence of the “Active Nos”.

Vietnam is pursuing initiatives to diversify its defence partnerships with European countries, with the objective of reducing its reliance on Russia and acquiring advanced technology. The nation has underscored the imperative for enhanced collaboration with European countries to bolster its defence capabilities in response to prevailing regional challenges.

In essence, Vietnam is endeavouring to establish a diversified security architecture to address maritime challenges, while ensuring economic stability and independence from conventional defence partners such as Russia. The issue of whether the current policies of Vietnam are sufficient to deter China’s increasingly assertive actions, particularly in the South China Sea, remains a subject of considerable debate. The country’s leadership may wish to consider adopting a more robust position in collaboration with other like-minded nations and partners. One potential course of action would be to initiate joint patrols, akin to those implemented in the Malacca Strait. There is ample evidence to suggest that a more proactive approach, integrating publicity, diplomacy, and confrontation, complemented by the leveraging of support from third parties such as the United States, Japan, the European Union, and Australia, is instrumental in achieving the desired outcomes in the face of Chinese coercion.⁴⁵

About the Author

PD Dr. Jan Asmussen is a political scientist and historian at the University of Rostock. His research focuses on conflict studies, naval security, state-building, reconciliation, international relations and comparative politics. He was Professor at the Polish Naval Academy and is Senior Research Fellow at Thammasat University’s German Center of Excellence in Bangkok. Previously, he headed the Conflict and Security Cluster at the European Centre for Minority Issues and has worked at several international universities.

⁴⁴ Lewe Paul, The 14th National Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam, KAS Office Vietnam, Hanoi, 2 February 2026 <https://www.kas.de/en/web/vietnam/laenderberichte/detail/-/content/the-14th-national-congress-of-the-communist-party-of-vietnam-strengthens-general-secretary-to-lam-an>.

⁴⁵ Dung Huynh, ‘Facing the Ravenous Sea Dragon’, op.cit. pp. 210-211, https://www.rand.org/pubs/rgs_dissertations/RGSDA2470-1.htm.

The Maldives and the Limits of Hedging: Autonomy, Diversification, and Dependency in the Indo-Pacific

Eva Abdulla

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Introduction

On 5 February 2026, President Mohamed Muizzu addressed the opening session of the Maldivian parliament and declared that ‘not a single grain of sand from Maldivian soil, nor the smallest atom of its territory’ would be surrendered. He was reviving the Maldives’ claim to the Chagos Archipelago, which Britain had agreed to hand to Mauritius following the International Court of Justice’s 2019 advisory opinion on decolonisation. He was also announcing legal proceedings to challenge the maritime boundary established in 2023 between the Maldives and Mauritius by a special chamber of the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea^{1,2}.

Within hours, the Maldives National Defence Force began patrolling the disputed waters³.

The timing was deliberate. Just two weeks earlier, President Trump had denounced the UK-Mauritius deal as ‘an act of GREAT STUPIDITY,’ declaring that Britain was giving away ‘the site of a vital U.S. Military Base... FOR NO REASON WHATSOEVER⁴.’ A crack had opened between great power allies over the Maldives’ own backyard, and Muizzu stepped into it.

But his moment lasted one night. While Malé slept, London called Washington. It was 2 a.m. over the Indian Ocean, 9 p.m. in Downing Street, 4 p.m. in the White House. By the time the Maldives woke the next morning, the gap had

¹ International Court of Justice, Legal Consequences of the Separation of the Chagos Archipelago from Mauritius in 1965, advisory opinion, 25 February 2019, <https://www.icj-cij.org/case/169>; International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea, “Dispute Concerning Delimitation of the Maritime Boundary between Mauritius and Maldives in the Indian Ocean”, ITLOS/Press 334, 28 April 2023, https://www.itlos.org/fileadmin/itlos/documents/press_releases_english/PR_334_EN.pdf.

² President’s Office, Republic of Maldives. “Presidential Address at the Opening of the First Session of the Seventh Parliament of 2026.” 5 February 2026. <https://presidency.gov.mv/Press/Article/36135> (accessed 14 February 2026).

³ Ministry of Defence, Republic of Maldives (@MoDmv). “MNDF Begins Patrol of Disputed Waters.” X (formerly Twitter), 5 February 2026. <https://x.com/MoDmv/status/2019364312515768829> (accessed 14 February 2026).

⁴ “UK Defends Chagos Deal After Trump Calls It ‘Act of Great Stupidity.’” BBC News, 5 February 2026. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c0mkp021rvro> (accessed 14 February 2026).

closed. Starmer and Trump had spoken, and the deal Muizzu tried to disrupt was back on track⁵.

This is hedging made visible, and so are its limits. A small island nation read the fractures between great powers and positioned itself in the spaces they create. But great powers realigned overnight, and the room for manoeuvre diminished.

The Chagos bid is a sharp example, but not the only one.

The war on Iran has revealed a different kind of misstep. Muizzu's Salafist base would not countenance alignment with Shia Tehran, but public sentiment in the Maldives ran strongly against the US and Israel. Muizzu condemned Iran's strikes on Sunni Arab states. Faced with backlash, he then made the inflammatory statement that Iran should direct its attacks at Israel and US military facilities⁶. A scheduled meeting with the US ambassador was cancelled, and to this day, no one can say with clarity what the Maldives' position on the war actually was.

If Chagos is adventurism and Iran is incoherence, the Maldives' relationship with India reveals something longer: it is here that the limits of hedging become truly visible.

In November 2023, Mohamed Muizzu took office as President of the Maldives after a campaign built around 'India Out', demanding removal of Indian military personnel, pledging reviews of bilateral agreements, declaring that India's presence threatened the country's sovereignty.

In July 2025, for the Maldives' 60th Independence Day, Malé was draped in Indian flags. Prime Minister Modi arrived as chief guest, signing agreements, pledging credit lines, launching free trade negotiations.⁷ President Muizzu, beside him, called India his country's "closest ally" and "most trusted friend", with a fervency that belied the rhetoric of eighteen months prior.

The imagery captures a broader pattern now visible across the Indian Ocean. As great power competition intensifies, small littoral states are leveraging what they have: not economic weight or military capability, but geostrategic location.

This article examines what drives Maldivian foreign policy and how hedging operates through a shifting partnership landscape. It looks at the India-Maldives

⁵ "Trump Rows Back His Criticism of UK's Chagos Islands Deal." Financial Times, 6 February 2026. <https://www.ft.com/content/86e4d2f7-87b5-4f6b-98e6-1f6031527c6d> (accessed 14 February 2026).

⁶ "Maldives Condemns Iran at UN Days After Muizzu Called for Strikes on Israel 'Day and Night,'" Maldives Independent, 27 March 2026, <https://maldivesindependent.com/politics/maldives-condemns-iran-at-un-days-after-muizzu-called-for-strikes-on-israel-day-and-night-d5e7>, (accessed 20 June 2026).

⁷ Ministry of External Affairs, India. "List of Outcomes: State Visit of Prime Minister to Maldives, 25-26 July 2025." 26 July 2025. <https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/39877/> (accessed 1 February 2026).

relationship as the sharpest illustration of hedging's limits. It concludes with implications for Maldives and external partners seeking influence in a region where multi-alignment has become the norm.

Hedging in Action: the Partnership Landscape

At its core, Maldivian foreign policy is driven by the pursuit of autonomy. This is what the Muizzu administration, too, is ultimately seeking: expanding Maldivian agency, reducing reliance on any single partner, preserving the flexibility to make foreign policy choices on its own terms.

This is not new. The balancing of multiple partners has defined Maldivian foreign policy since independence in 1965, with the country pursuing a non-aligned posture, balancing relationships across competing powers whilst engaging actively in multilateral forums. Under Maumoon Abdul Gayoom's three decades in power, the Maldives cultivated ties with India, the Arab world, and Southeast Asia simultaneously, engaging all without alignment to any. The democratic transition under Mohamed Nasheed expanded this further, deepening engagement with Western democracies on investment, governance, and climate, strengthening ties with India and other neighbours, and using this image of an open, democratic, Muslim country to position the Maldives on the international stage. Both managed diversification without antagonising any major partner.

How the Maldives sees itself also shapes its foreign policy choices. The country carries a distinct sense of self, with Islam central to national identity, enshrined in the constitution, woven into political and everyday life. Nationalism and faith are intertwined. Partnerships with Muslim-majority countries carry a resonance domestically and a legitimacy that transcends strategic calculation.

What has changed is the intensity of great power competition in the Indian Ocean, and with it the stakes of partnership choices. The aim remains consistent: not being beholden to one power, retaining room to manoeuvre. For a small state, agency is not given. It is constructed through diversification. This is the larger story of Maldivian foreign policy.

But there is a more immediate logic too. Diversification is not abstract. It is shaped by pressing needs, the imperative to deliver, and the fiscal and economic constraints that make delivery difficult. Three main pressures weigh on every foreign policy choice.

The first is debt. The Muizzu administration inherited a fiscal crisis and it has only deepened. Public debt now exceeds 125 per cent of GDP⁸. Foreign exchange reserves fell to alarming levels in 2024, at one point covering less than a month of imports. The World Bank and IMF have issued repeated warnings: the Maldives remains at high risk of debt distress⁹. A major test came this year. More than US\$1 billion in external debt servicing fell due. The US\$500 million sukuk that matured in April was repaid, though the full terms remain opaque. Circumstantial evidence suggests the government drew on currency swaps, the Sovereign Development Fund, and Bank of Maldives reserves. The severe dollar shortage at Bank of Maldives Limited today points to the cost. The underlying debt burden remains.

The second is the challenge of delivery. Every recent administration in the Maldives has made infrastructure its claim to legitimacy. Bridges, harbours, housing, airports are the currency of electoral politics. Failure to deliver is failure at the ballot box. The current administration made ambitious pledges on the campaign trail, and many remain unfulfilled. Projects have stalled, contractors await payment, fisherfolk are protesting, the dollar trades at a premium on the black market, timelines perpetually slip. The political cost of this is real.

Beyond the immediate infrastructure demands, the delivery of longer-term development work has fallen by the wayside. Gender programming receives little attention. Decentralisation has been gutted, partly because a cash-strapped central government needs the revenue that was meant to flow to councils. Investment in education, health, and the judiciary has not kept pace with what communities need. Programmes for entrepreneurship, for the elderly, for young people and other vulnerable populations barely exist. When fiscal space is this constrained, it is the slower, less visible work that suffers first.

The third is a narrow economic base. Tourism dominates the Maldives economy, generating roughly a fifth of GDP and the bulk of foreign exchange earnings. Revenue continues to grow year on year, and the sector undoubtedly still serves the Maldives well. But over-reliance on a single industry carries risks. The war on Iran has made this clear: with Gulf airspace closed and transit hubs disrupted, daily tourist arrivals fell from nearly nine thousand to under five thousand, cancellations spiked, and the European market that accounts for

⁸ World Bank. Maldives Development Update, October 2024: Seeking Stability in Turbulent Times. Washington, DC: World Bank, October 2024. <https://documents.worldbank.org/en/publication/documents-reports/documentdetail/099846210302541970> (accessed 1 February 2026).

⁹ IMF. "Maldives: 2024 Article IV Consultation." IMF Country Report Number 24/106. May 2024. <https://www.imf.org/en/publications/cr/issues/2024/05/10/maldives-2024-article-iv-consultation-548770> (accessed 1 February 2026).

more than half of visitors was effectively severed¹⁰. For an economy dependent on tourism for foreign currency, the impact was immediate.

Fishing, historically a major pillar, has declined as a share of the economy. Fewer islands engage in it today, and some traditional fishing communities now lack even a single vessel. The potential for value-added processing and exports remains largely untapped. Other sectors have not emerged at the scale needed to diversify the base. The economy therefore remains exposed. The Maldives cannot rely on tourism alone, but it has not yet built the alternatives.

These domestic pressures drive the foreign policy calculus. They shape not just whether the Maldives hedges, but how it hedges, and towards whom it turns. A government asking who can help refinance debt, who can deliver infrastructure, who can bring investment, is not choosing partners on ideology. It is choosing on the basis of who will deliver.

The current Maldivian partnership portfolio reflects this. India has been present for decades, across every dimension of national life. China's footprint expanded after 2014, with the Belt and Road Initiative bringing large-scale infrastructure.¹¹ The United States, United Kingdom, European Union, Japan, Saudi Arabia, and South Korea have maintained quieter but steady engagement over the years. And then there are the newest arrivals: Turkey and the Gulf States, entering with vigour over the past two years and bringing propositions that could reshape the landscape entirely.

India is the enduring constant. Ties span trade, infrastructure, development, health, education, tourism, and crucially, financial assistance. India has been present across every dimension of Maldivian life for decades.

China's role deepened after the Maldives joined the Belt and Road Initiative in 2014. Beijing brought large-scale infrastructure: a US\$300 million bridge connecting Malé to Hulhumalé, housing projects, roadworks, airport expansion, and a Free Trade Agreement. China offered speed and scale, and asked fewer questions about governance or human rights. For governments needing to show delivery, this mattered.¹²

¹⁰ "Middle East War Leaves Maldives Exposed on Every Front," Maldives Independent, 20 June 2026, <https://maldivesindependent.com/economy/middle-east-war-leaves-maldives-exposed-on-every-front-3ed4>, (accessed 24 June 2026).

¹¹ Basarkar, Rhea. "The Maldives Is Moving Toward China. Here's What to Know." Council on Foreign Relations, 2 May 2024. <https://www.cfr.org/articles/maldives-moving-toward-china-heres-what-know> (accessed 1 February 2026).

¹² The Hindu. "Maldives Gets IMF Debt Warning as More Chinese Loans Loom." 14 May 2024. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/maldives-gets-imf-debt-warning-as-more-chinese-loans-loom/article68171903.ece> (accessed 1 February 2026).

The United States, United Kingdom, European Union, Saudi Arabia, Japan, and South Korea maintain quieter but sustained partnerships across security, governance, and development. These partnerships may lack the headlines of Chinese infrastructure or Gulf mega-projects, but they provide a different kind of value: technical assistance, capacity-building, and engagement that does not generate the political friction that proximity to India or dependence on China can provoke.

The Gulf States are not new to the Maldives, but the scale of their entry is. In May 2025, the Maldives signed a deal with Dubai-based MBS Global Investments, the family office of Qatar's Sheikh Nayef bin Eid Al Thani, to build a US\$8.8 billion financial hub in Malé.¹³ The figure is staggering: it exceeds the Maldives' entire GDP. The Maldives International Financial Centre, to be completed by 2030, will feature three residential and office towers, a 3,500-seat convention centre, hotels, and retail, spanning 780,000 square metres and accommodating 6,500 new residents. It promises no corporate tax, tax-free inheritance, no residency requirements, multi-currency banking, and regulations designed to attract fintech, digital assets, and green finance. The ambition is to transform Malé into a global financial hub rivalling Dubai or Singapore. The Gulf is attractive to Malé because it brings financial resources with a transactional approach that does not demand strategic alignment. For a government seeking to demonstrate delivery, this represented a different vector entirely.

Turkey too has emerged over the past two years; the scale is striking, and in the defence sphere the partnership is unprecedented. In March 2024, the Maldives took delivery of six Bayraktar TB2 armed drones in a US\$37 million deal, establishing for the first time a Maldives National Defence Force Air Corps.¹⁴ In August 2025, Turkey gifted a Doğan-class fast attack craft, a former Turkish Navy vessel now commissioned as CGS *Dharumavantha*, armed with a 76 mm main gun and capable of 38 knots.¹⁵ Turkish personnel are training Maldivian operators. This represents the largest boost to Maldivian military capacity in recent years. Beyond defence, a preferential trade agreement signed in late 2024 is expected to come into force shortly. Private Turkish investment in the Maldives is expanding, including in tourism, renewable energy and education.

¹³ "The Government of the Maldives and MBS Global Investments Pledge \$8.8 Billion to Create the Maldives International Financial Centre." PR Newswire, 4 May 2025.
<https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/the-government-of-the-maldives-and-mbs-global-investments-pledge-8-8-billion-302445575.html> (accessed 1 February 2026).

¹⁴ Adhadhu. "MVR 560 Million Contract with Turkish Company for MNDF Military Drones." 16 January 2024.
<https://adhadhu.com/article/48443> (accessed 1 February 2026).

¹⁵ @nex_def. "Turkey Gifts Doğan-class Fast Attack Craft to Maldives." X (formerly Twitter), 2025.
https://x.com/nex_def/status/1957729718528274910 (accessed 1 February 2026).

Like the Gulf, Turkey is a Muslim-majority country, and both partnerships fit comfortably with Maldivian domestic sentiment and the administration's own ideological leanings. They allow Muizzu to project nationalist credentials whilst moving away from India, and provide partners outside the India-China binary, ones that do not carry the political baggage of either. These are partners who are neither regional rivals nor traditional powers.

Turkey has not been a presence in these waters since the Ottoman Empire. Its return to the Indian Ocean, and its cultivation of ties with Muslim-majority states across the region, is part of Turkey's broader project of positioning itself as a Muslim power with global reach. These are not neutral developments. Questions remain about how the defence acquisitions were financed, at what cost, and for what purpose a small island nation needs armed drones and fast attack craft. For regional powers watching closely, none of this will go unnoticed.

Diversification and Its Demands

Delhi will be paying attention. India views the Indian Ocean as its strategic environment. Turkish military cooperation of this scale with a neighbour seventy nautical miles from Indian territory is alarming. Major Gulf investment challenges Indian economic presence and leverage. Beijing too will be watching. China sees the Maldives as a crucial node in its Maritime Silk Road, and Gulf capital at this scale dilutes Chinese leverage. The United States and others have their own interests in a country positioned at the heart of the Indian Ocean, a linchpin in the security and trade architecture of the region. The Iranian missile attack on Diego Garcia in March 2026, targeting the US military base less than a thousand kilometres to the south, made this tangible.

If these investments deliver, they could be transformative. The Maldives is no longer a least developed country. It has the highest GDP per capita in South Asia. Investments of this scale have transformed other small economies, and they could do the same here. Gulf capital could diversify the economy beyond tourism. These are real opportunities.

But they require careful handling. Investments of this scale demand the kind of transparency, accountability, and oversight that ensures they serve the country and its people, rather than burden them. Without robust governance, clear terms, and scrutiny from parliament and public alike, they could create vulnerabilities of their own.

A venture exceeding the country's entire GDP could deepen an already precarious debt situation if it falters. An offshore financial hub in a country with weak oversight capacity could facilitate money laundering and trafficking along major shipping routes. The Maldives had one of the highest per capita rates of

foreign fighters joining ISIS, has experienced domestic attacks, and appears on multiple international watchlists.¹⁶ Enforcement capacity remains thin.

Fiscal instability and security vulnerabilities in the Maldives do not stay contained. Partners with stakes in regional stability understand this.

And none of this changes the underlying reality. Hedging creates options, but it does not eliminate dependencies. Diversification can spread risk; it does not eliminate reliance. It can enhance autonomy, but some ties cannot be undone. The India-Maldives relationship is the clearest illustration of where those limits lie.

The Limits of Hedging

The India-Maldives relationship has been turbulent for over a decade, and the turbulence itself is striking. India is the Maldives' closest neighbour, its largest trading partner, its most consistent development partner. Yet over the last decade, anti-India sentiment has ebbed and flowed with political cycles, sharpening under some administrations, softening under others.¹⁷ In 2023, it reached a peak. Muizzu's campaign made 'India Out' its rallying cry, and it was the slogan that cut through, the one that buried every other electoral pledge beneath it.

Yet disentangling from India was never, for the Maldives, a simple proposition. Over decades, India had built something substantial. The US\$500 million Greater Malé Connectivity Project, the largest infrastructure undertaking in Maldivian history.¹⁸ The Hanimaadhoo airport expansion. The Addu reclamation. The Gulhifalhu port. Right down to community centres, water and sanitation systems, and fishing vessels for outlying islands.¹⁹ India's assistance in development spanned health systems, schools, educational exchanges, and capacity-building in governance and institutions. Less visible but no less significant was India's support for democracy and good governance during the Maldives' reform period. The 'India Out' campaign may have made military

¹⁶ Basit, Abdul. "Poverty, Criminality, Extremism: The Interrelated Sources of Insecurity in Maldives." Observer Research Foundation, 16 December 2023. <https://www.orfonline.org/research/poverty-criminality-extremism-the-interrelated-sources-of-insecurity-in-maldives> (accessed 1 February 2026).

¹⁷ Joshi, Manoj. "Muizzu's Landslide Victory in Maldives." Observer Research Foundation, 25 April 2024. <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/muizzus-landslide-victory-in-maldives> (accessed 1 February 2026).

¹⁸ High Commission of India, Male. "Press Release for GMCP Signing: India Undertakes Largest Ever Infrastructure Project in Maldives." 28 September 2021. <https://hci.gov.in/male/?13440?003> (accessed 1 February 2026).

¹⁹ High Commission of India, Male. "India-Maldives High Impact Community Development Projects (Status as on November 2023)." November 2023. <https://www.hcimale.gov.in/docs/1739862439BP-2.pdf> (accessed 1 February 2026).

personnel the focus, drowning out everything else in the narrative. But narratives do not erase what has been built.

And India had been first responder, again and again. When the 2004 tsunami devastated the islands, India reached the Maldives before anyone else.²⁰ When Malé's desalination plant failed in 2014 and the capital faced a water crisis, India shipped drinking water within hours.²¹ When Covid struck, India sent vaccines and medical supplies while much of the world hoarded its own.²²

Muizzu took office and the trajectory seemed set. "We don't want any foreign military boots on Maldivian soil," he told the BBC. "I promised this to the people of the Maldives and I will live up to my promise from day one."²³ His first state visits were to Turkey and China, not to India, a departure from the tradition of newly elected Maldivian leaders making Delhi their first port of call. Indian military personnel were asked to leave. The rhetoric held.

Then reality intervened.

The inherited fiscal crisis ran deeper than anyone had acknowledged. Debt repayments loomed. When the Maldives sought refinancing from China, which holds roughly 40 per cent of its external debt, the response fell short of what the moment demanded. Sri Lanka's collapse, following overreliance on Chinese lending, cast a long shadow over Malé. The Maldives needed immediate financial relief, needed it fast, and the partner most able to provide it was precisely the one the campaign had promised to push away. This was the limit of diversification laid bare.

India had not closed the door. Delhi's approach was measured, addressing Maldivian concerns directly: engaging with the ruling party to dispel perceptions of favouritism towards previous governments, focusing on completing existing projects rather than announcing new ones.²⁴ In its 2025-26 Union Budget, India increased development aid to the Maldives by nearly 28 per cent²⁵. Crucially, India provided immediate liquidity and forex relief targeting the most urgent

²⁰ Maritime History Society India. "Remembering Indian Navy's Humanitarian Intervention: Tsunami 2004." 26 December 2023. <https://mhsindia.org/all/remembering-indian-navys-humanitarian-intervention-tsunami-2004/210035/> (accessed 1 February 2026).

²¹ BBC News. "Maldives in Water Crisis After Fire at Treatment Plant." 5 December 2014. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-30344155> (accessed 1 February 2026).

²² United Nations Maldives. "COVID-19 Vaccines Shipped by COVAX Arrived in Maldives." 8 March 2021. <https://maldives.un.org/en/115607-covid-19-vaccines-shipped-covax-arrived-maldives> (accessed 1 February 2026).

²³ Ethirajan, Anbarasan. "Mohamed Muizzu: The Maldives' New President Wants India Out." BBC News, 22 October 2023. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-67166425> (accessed 1 February 2026).

²⁴ Maldives Financial Review. "Delays and Challenges Surround the Greater Male' Connectivity Project." 25 November 2023. <https://mfr.mv/male/delays-and-challenges-surround-the-greater-male-connectivity-project> (accessed 1 February 2026).

obligations. Currency swaps, treasury bill rollovers, budgetary assistance. Precisely what a government facing depleted reserves required. A free trade agreement is now in the pipeline. The message was unmistakable. India is the partner that shows up. By July 2025, Prime Minister Modi stood in Malé as chief guest for Independence Day, Muizzu beside him calling India the Maldives' closest ally and most trusted friend. It was a long way from 'India Out'.

The episode captures what hedging cannot escape. The Maldives sought to diversify away from India, but when the fiscal crisis hit, when immediate relief was the only thing that mattered, geography and history reasserted themselves. Options for the Maldives are real, and will continue to present themselves. But the underlying reality had not shifted.

Implications for the Maldives and External Partners

The international order is fraying. Alliances once thought immutable are being questioned. War has returned to the Middle East, with consequences that ripple far beyond the region. Great powers themselves are hedging, recalibrating, pursuing transactional arrangements when it suits them. Small states are watching. They see the unpredictability, the realignments, the relationships being redrawn. In this environment, multi-alignment is not an aberration. It is a rational response to an uncertain world.

And small states are no longer bystanders in great power competition. They are actors, leveraging what they have. For the Maldives, that is location. Straddling shipping lanes that connect East Asia to Europe and the Middle East, positioned at the heart of the Indian Ocean, it commands attention that its size alone would never warrant. A country of the Maldives' geostrategic value will always have options. Partners will come calling.

But options are not the same as solutions. Diversification spreads risk, enhances autonomy, creates room to manoeuvre. Yet it is not without limits. Geography does not change. Debt does not disappear. Immediate needs do not wait for the perfect partner. The Maldives can cultivate new relationships, court new investors, sign new agreements. It cannot wish away the dependencies that proximity, history, and fiscal reality have created.

For the Maldives, the task is twofold. Internally, the handling of these partnerships matters as much as the partnerships themselves. How contracts are scrutinised, how debt is managed, how projects are overseen, how public money is accounted for. President Muizzu declared that the Maldives is too

²⁵ De, Abhishek. "Thaw in Ties? Maldives Gets Highest Increase in Budget." India Today, 1 February 2025. <https://www.indiatoday.in/budget/story/budget-2025-maldives-aid-allocation-increase-bangladesh-sri-lanka-myanmar-2673297-2025-02-01> (accessed 1 February 2026).

small to get entangled in great power struggles²⁶. But without careful stewardship, hedging itself becomes the entanglement, and the vulnerabilities multiply.

Externally, Maldivian choices must serve its citizens first, and transactional relationships in pursuit of that are entirely legitimate. But the Maldives does not exist in isolation. It sits at the heart of the Indian Ocean, and its choices carry weight beyond its borders. The Maldives must be cognisant of its responsibility to the stability and security of the region it inhabits. Transactional need not mean fickle. Consistency invites consistency. The inverse is also true.

For external partners, the logic is similar. In an era when great powers themselves pursue transactional arrangements, interests and pragmatism are not obstacles to influence.

But the slower work still matters too: institution-building, capacity development, support for good governance, investment in the kind of economic resilience that lasts. These investments do not announce themselves, and returns are not immediately visible. But presence is not the same as influence, and it is these investments that build influence in the long game.

What Comes Next

A February 2026 poll by the Baani Centre for International Policy²⁷ asked Maldivians to rate bilateral partners on a scale of 0 to 10. Saudi Arabia and China tied at the top with 6.9. India followed closely at 6.2. The United States came last at 3.5. The results are instructive. For the Maldivian public, the source of assistance and its terms matter less than whether it arrives. There is little debate on conditions attached or on which partner delivers. There is awareness of India's longstanding reliability, of China's speed in delivering infrastructure, and of the debt burdens Chinese lending has created globally. Concerns about Chinese debt surface in parliamentary debate, in expert commentary, and in media coverage. But politically, the two are treated differently. Anti-India sentiment has been stoked for domestic advantage; China has not been weaponised in the same way. The difference lies not in what each partner brings, but in how each has been used in Maldivian politics.

²⁶ Ethirajan, Anbarasan. "Mohamed Muizzu: The Maldives' New President Wants India Out." BBC News, 22 October 2023. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-67166425> (accessed 1 February 2026).

²⁷ "Maldivians Most Positive Towards Saudi Arabia and China: Survey," Edition.mv, 28 February 2026, <https://edition.mv/news/48692>, accessed 19 June 2026.

All indications are that the Muizzu administration will not return to power. Recent electoral losses²⁸, and a voting public that has never returned an incumbent to a second term since multiparty democracy began, make that likely. If the main opposition returns to power, the relationship with India would likely stabilise. The bar is not 'India First'. It is simply a foreign policy that is not wielded for domestic political gain. That alone would offer predictability and reliability that the current approach does not. And China's role as a development partner will continue regardless; that relationship is now a mainstay. What changes is not the hedging, but the manner of it.

About the Author

Eva Abdulla is a former Deputy Speaker of the Maldives Parliament and three-term elected MP. She is Chair of The Maldives Policy Think Tank (MPTT). Her work focuses on policy analysis, strategic consulting, and academic writing on Maldivian politics, foreign policy, and governance. Eva also chairs the Foreign Relations Committee of the Maldivian Democratic Party. In 2025 she was inducted into the Democratic Innovators of the 21st Century Politicians' Hall of Fame at the Athens Democracy Forum.

²⁸ "Referendum Defeated, Cities Lost: Voters Deliver Mid-term Rebuke to Muizzu," Maldives Independent, 5 April 2026, <https://maldivesindependent.com/politics/referendum-defeated-cities-lost-voters-deliver-mid-term-rebuke-to-muizzu-3ba6>, (accessed 19 June 2026).

The Security Implications of the EU-India FTA

Mahima Duggal

Doctoral Researcher, German Institute for Global and Area Studies (GIGA)

In January 2026, India and the EU surprised many by concluding negotiations for a free trade agreement (FTA) after nearly two decades.¹ While it remains subject to legal scrubbing and ratification procedures, it has already been labelled the 'mother of all deals'.² Once in force, it would create a free trade area encompassing nearly two billion people and a quarter of global GDP. For European businesses, the deal represents the most significant diversification opportunity since the opening of the Chinese market; for India, it secures preferential access to a high-value market, greater investment, and a stronger position within global supply chains. An incredibly ambitious pact between two economic giants, the FTA offers potential for deep, structural cooperation – unlike the much narrower deal that New Delhi concluded with the US.

Yet the EU-India FTA was arguably driven less by economics and more by geopolitics. The agreement gets its 'mother of all deals' label not only from the technical complexity of its negotiations or its (potential) substantial financial benefits, but also from its strategic implications. What stood out most about the deal was its acceleration over the last six months despite almost two decades of inconsistent negotiations. The differences in perspective that prevented its conclusion did not vanish. However, the geopolitical context in which both actors operate shifted significantly. Trump's transactional diplomacy and disruptive approach to alliances, and the threat environment posed by China and Russia for India and the EU respectively, have compelled both Brussels and New Delhi to reassess their strategic positioning. A prolonged series of global shocks has led to the weaponisation of supply chains and forced governments around the world to reorder their policy priorities. The EU-India FTA must be considered in this context.

In such a profoundly different geopolitical environment, the FTA is not only about tariff reductions and market access. It stands as an instrument of economic security, strategic autonomy, and foreign policy signalling. The central question is not whether the EU-India FTA is commercially significant – it

¹ European Commission, "EU-India", https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/eu-trade-relationships-country-and-region/countries-and-regions/india/eu-india-agreements_en.

² "India and the EU Agree the 'mother of All' Trade Deals. Here's What to Know," World Economic Forum, 4 February 2026, <https://www.weforum.org/stories/2026/02/india-eu-mother-of-all-trade-deals-what-to-know/>.

undoubtedly is – but what its security dimensions and implications are. This paper examines the EU-India FTA through a security lens to understand the immediate and enduring value propositions of the deal. It posits that the FTA's immediate value proposition is as a signalling instrument that conveys to the world, and particularly great powers, that India and the EU are 'middle power actors uniting' and prioritising a pragmatic interest-driven partnership in a fractured world order. It contends that while the FTA does not address the structural differences and misalignments that shape India-EU security ties, it provides the conditions needed to build an enduring strategic partnership in an era of systemic rivalry.

FTA as a Signal of Strength and Solidarity

The FTA's biggest value proposition is as an exercise in foreign policy signalling. Signalling is a purposive act in which information is communicated by one party ("signaller"), intentionally, publicly and at some monetary or political cost, and observed by another ("receiver").³ It is a rationally calculated decision to alter strategic interactions between actors.⁴ Signals must be differentiated from mere symbolism or actions purely to realise specific foreign policy objectives, even though in practice, such acts can include elements of signalling.

Effective signals are characterised by costliness, intentionality, and publicity, which make them credible and impactful.⁵ The EU-India FTA embodies all three qualities. The FTA incurs both economic and political costs. Both sides expended significant political capital to garner domestic support and sustain negotiations over a prolonged period. Highly visible statements from the leadership – such as a public commitment to its early conclusion and speedy ratification – carry reputational costs by putting the leadership's credibility at stake. The agreement received significant publicity and was framed as the "mother of all deals" that would help shield the EU and India against challenges posed by the world's biggest economies.⁶ Further, the agreement is clearly intentional. It is not a by-product of routine trade expansion but a consciously pursued initiative, revived

³ Kai Quek, "Are Costly Signals More Credible? Evidence of Sender-Receiver Gaps," *The Journal of Politics* 78, no. 3 (2016): 925–40, <https://doi.org/10.1086/685751>.

⁴ Erik A. Gartzke et al., "Signaling in Foreign Policy," in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*, ed. Erin Hannah (Oxford University Press, n.d.), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.481>.

⁵ Johannes Plagemann, "Introduction to Special Issue: 'Foreign Policy Signaling in the Indo-Pacific: Responses to the US-China Rivalry in a Multipolar World' - Johannes Plagemann, 2025," *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 17 December 2024, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/13691481241306387>.

⁶ "EU and India Announce 'mother of All Deals' Representing 25% of Global GDP," France 24, 26 January 2026, <https://www.france24.com/en/asia-pacific/20260126-eu-and-india-to-announce-mother-of-all-deals-representing-one-third-of-global-trade>.

and prioritised in a shifting geopolitical context. Together, these features make the FTA difficult to abandon, which is precisely what gives it signalling strength.

What does the FTA signal, and to whom? The signal that the FTA seeks to send can be read not only by its framing in political discourse but also by what the text includes, and more importantly, excludes. Material signals can be understood through the social framing that actors attach to them.⁷ Here, the framing of the FTA in political communication sends a clear signal of alignment and resilience in an increasingly unstable global order. Across both India and the EU, the agreement is deliberately presented not merely as a trade deal but as a mechanism to strengthen “political ties between the world’s two largest democracies” and create a “stable and predictable environment” for economic integration.

The timing further signalled that both actors were seeking to hedge against potential shifts in US policy and China’s coercive economic statecraft. Both the EU and India increasingly face a deteriorating rules-based international system in which great powers are weaponising interdependence and injecting uncertainty in the global political economy. While China’s coercive economic statecraft over the past few years⁸ has prompted a turn towards derisking strategies, the second Trump presidency has similarly brought new challenges. Washington’s growing camaraderie with Pakistan, imposition of 50 per cent tariffs, and criticism over the purchase of Russian oil have led to a public downturn in US-India ties. For the strategic circles in New Delhi, it has reinforced doubts over the US’ reliability as a partner that have persisted since American support for Pakistan during the 1971 Indo-Pak war that led to the independence of Bangladesh,⁹ and reinforced instincts to diversify its strategic security partnerships. For the EU, Trump’s tariff warfare, tensions within NATO, security divergences over Ukraine and threats to annex Greenland have fostered a belief that while the US may be a necessary security partner for now, the partnership lacks credibility. In other words, the rupture in the transatlantic partnership is not a temporary hiccup but a long-term structural shift that has prompted Europe to build an independent security strategy and invest more in other partnerships.

Against this background, the FTA signals that India and the EU are middle powers working together to strengthen their strategic autonomy and proactively

⁷ Raphaëlle Khan and Kate Sullivan de Estrada, “Signalling through Implicature: How India Signals in the Indo-Pacific,” *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 27, no. 1 (2025): 43–68, <https://doi.org/10.1177/13691481241270422>.

⁸ Evan S. Medeiros and Andrew Polk, “China’s New Economic Weapons,” *The Washington Quarterly* 48, no. 1 (2025): 99–123, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2025.2480513>.

⁹ Gary J. Bass, *The Blood Telegram: Nixon, Kissinger, and a Forgotten Genocide* (Pulitzer Prize Finalist) (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2013).

diversifying their options in a fragmented global order. Shortly before the FTA's conclusion was announced, Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney delivered a powerful call to middle powers to lead.

Ursula von der Leyen echoed this and pointed to the pressure that Europe feels in the new world order. Europe must rethink its structural dependencies and hasten its push for independence in all areas from security to economy, she said at Davos. More recently, during his visit to Brussels to discuss the implementation of the EU-India summit agenda, Jaishankar underscored the importance of the partnership as a “factor of stability and resilience” in a multipolar and uncertain world. The EU-India deal signals a rising determination among middle powers to be bolder and create options outside the dichotomy of choices presented by the US and China.

Apart from the discourse surrounding the FTA, the scope of the deal – both what it includes and what it excludes – is a signal between partners to reassure earnest commitment to the partnership. Despite several robust outcomes for both sides, the deal is notably less ambitious than the EU's previous trade pacts. It excludes some key and sensitive sectors, such as India's heavily protected dairy sector, and the EU's beef, sugar, poultry, and rice sectors. While the EU secured market access for India's usually protectionist labour-intensive sectors, its enforcement mechanisms on climate action are softer, relying on consultation rather than compliance. The fact that both sides agreed to compromise on complex issues that had plagued negotiations for almost two decades to clinch a deal shows visible concessions on both sides. While plenty of substantive issues have been kept off the table, the signalling value of concluding the negotiations is immense in itself. This choice to compartmentalise sensitive issues and prioritise a pragmatic “win-win” outcome is a signal of reassurance. It confirms for both sides that the other has the political will to turn a promise-based partnership into a long-term, institutionalised and action-oriented one.

Concluding the negotiations does not put the FTA into force. Legal revision, signature and the required approval procedures must still be completed. The deal is structured to minimise problems that could hinder ratification in the European Parliament. The trade agreement is intended to fall within the EU's exclusive competence, requiring approval at EU level rather than separate ratification by each member state. It also excludes selected sensitive agricultural products, and has been compartmentalised – the Investment Protection Agreement is being negotiated separately – to avoid bottlenecks during the process. Yet, it could still be dragged into party politics and caught up in procedural or substantive problems during ratification. Regardless of these issues, the announcement of the deal and the narrative surrounding it have

already served a key purpose: to signal the strength and solidarity of the EU-India partnership in the new world order.

FTA as an Instrument of Strategic Autonomy

Beyond the rhetoric and the signal that the deal sends to international audiences, what is the FTA's substantive impact? Is it truly the mother of all deals, as both actors suggest, or an overhyped agreement with few benefits better described as a marriage of convenience?

It is important to acknowledge that the deal has limits. Firstly, some experts estimate that despite all the hype surrounding the deal, its actual economic benefits could be modest.¹⁰ The FTA is not likely to bring significant economic relief in the short term or alter global supply chains away from the US and China. Yet, it opens the door for future growth and a deeper strategic relationship. From a security perspective, the deal's enduring impact lies in equipping both actors with the rules, tools, and institutional pathways necessary to operate in an increasingly conflict-prone and fragmented international system. A reading of the provisional text of the FTA shows that it lays the foundations for a denser EU-India interdependence in areas that sit at the boundary of economics and security: supply chains, digital governance, cyber resilience, and institutional crisis management. The FTA therefore does not function solely as an economic instrument but embeds security logics across economic governance, industrial development and technological cooperation.

Economic Security

The FTA reflects a shared recognition that the global economic order is no longer insulated from geopolitical conflict. This is particularly noteworthy for the EU, which has long treated trade as separate from security issues. Provisions on customs cooperation, supply-chain security, and risk management explicitly embed security considerations into trade governance.¹¹ The agreement enables structured data exchange, targeting of high-risk goods, and cooperation on supply-chain integrity, thereby laying the groundwork for resilience against disruption, coercion, and conflict-driven fragmentation. Crucially, these are not merely reactive tools. They are forward-looking mechanisms designed to

¹⁰ See "The EU-India Trade Deal: 'Mother of Deals' or 'Overhyped' and Full of Loopholes? The Answer May Be Both," EUobserver, 29 January 2026, <https://euobserver.com/200847/the-eu-india-trade-deal-mother-of-deals-or-overhyped-and-full-of-loopholes-the-answer-may-be-both/>; Mark Linscott, "The India-EU Trade Deal Is Worth Watching, but Not Overhyping," *Atlantic Council*, 27 January 2026, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/dispatches/the-india-eu-trade-deal-is-worth-watching-but-not-overhyping/>.

¹¹ See Chapter 4 in "Text of the Agreements - Trade and Economic Security - European Commission," accessed 2 April 2026, https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/eu-trade-relationships-country-and-region/countries-and-regions/india/eu-india-agreements/text-agreements_en.

function under crisis conditions, including sanctions environments, technological decoupling, and strategic chokepoint vulnerabilities.

The war in Iran has been a stark reminder of the urgent economic vulnerabilities that India and Europe face. India, in particular, has a heavy dependence on crude oil and refined products; the blocking of the Strait of Hormuz and surging energy costs have already weakened the rupee and highlighted the country's need to strengthen its industrial and manufacturing bases and diversify its imports.¹² Despite its efforts to become a manufacturing hub, as well as ideal structural assets such as size, demographic and cost structure, India has attracted little by way of foreign direct investment (FDI). The agreement could support India's Aatmanirbhar Bharat objectives by encouraging FDI, localisation, and joint ventures in advanced manufacturing, while helping European firms diversify production and reduce overexposure in an era of strategic competition.

Notably, the FTA text currently omits any clauses on investment market access; this has instead been pushed to a parallel Investment Protection Agreement being negotiated separately. For the FTA to be truly effective in achieving economic (and energy) security goals, it must be treated as the first step rather than the end goal. The following agreements must be treated as equally (if not more) critical to build a transformative partnership.

Defence Industrial Complex

Defence is already one of the most functional domains of the relationship. The FTA and the EU-India Security and Defence Partnership (SDP), which was signed at the EU-India Summit where the conclusion of FTA negotiations was announced,¹³ essentially formalise defence as a key operational corridor. The FTA does not explicitly regulate defence cooperation, but its provisions have significant implications for the defence industrial base linking Europe and India. It creates conditions for expanding industrial and technological collaboration in defence-related sectors. It facilitates localisation of production and value chains, the protection of intellectual property, regulatory transparency, and the mobility of skilled professionals.

The FTA reduces tariffs and brings about regulatory alignment, which will likely boost market access for high-value commodities like aerospace components. Import duties on aircraft and spacecraft are currently 11 per cent and the

¹² Alicia Garcia Herrero, "The EU-India Deal Is Not Enough. India Needs Investment – Now," *Euractiv*, 8 April 2026, <https://www.euractiv.com/opinion/the-eu-india-deal-is-not-enough-india-needs-investment-now/>.

¹³ "Security and Defence: EU and India Sign Security & Defence Partnership," EEAS, accessed 9 April 2026, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/security-and-defence-eu-and-india-sign-security-defence-partnership_en.

implementation of the FTA will eliminate these for almost all products over a period of 5 to 10 years. This grouping includes landing gear components and avionics housing that are crucial to building complex commercial and defence-related aerospace platforms. Machinery and electrical equipment too, which currently face tariffs of up to 44 per cent, will enjoy zero tariffs for almost all products within 5 to 7 years.¹⁴ These tariff reductions will significantly lower the cost structures for manufacturing of defence-related equipment. For the EU, it will make aerospace exports to India more competitive, and for India, it will give manufacturers an advantage when working with European partners to develop integrated supply chains.

India-EU defence relations must factor in India's bilateral defence cooperation with EU member states like France, Germany, Italy and Spain. India and Italy have deepened maritime security cooperation in the Indo-Mediterranean corridor, through joint naval exercises and information sharing.¹⁵ The India-Spain partnership is also accelerating, with growing focus on aerospace and naval cooperation, including in defence technology.¹⁶ While France ranks as India's second-largest defence supplier, Germany has also been increasing strategic cooperation with it. These relationships are now shifting from buyer-seller to joint development and production. Some European and Indian companies are already establishing final assembly lines (FAL) in India. For instance, French company Airbus Helicopters partnered with Tata Group to establish a FAL in Karnataka for H125 light helicopters and their military variants, in what the Indian Defence Minister described as an example of the "limitless collaboration".¹⁷ Dassault and Tata are also set to manufacture critical structural components such as the Rafale fighter aircraft fuselage in India by 2028.¹⁸ In 2025, Thales inaugurated a maintenance, repair and overhaul (MRO)

¹⁴ "Factsheet - EU-India Free Trade Agreement: Main Benefits - Trade and Economic Security," accessed 9 April 2026, https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/eu-trade-relationships-country-and-region/countries-and-regions/india/eu-india-agreements/factsheet-eu-india-free-trade-agreement-main-benefits_en.

¹⁵ Antonio Bartoli, "Italy-India. Ambassador Bartoli on Trade, Strategic Connectivity and Rome's Indo-Mediterranean Role – India-EU Trade Council," India EU Trade Council, 10 February 2026, <https://eu-india.org/2026/02/10/italy-india-ambassador-bartoli-on-trade-strategic-connectivity-and-romes-indo-mediterranean-role/>.

¹⁶ Daniel Basteiro and Sudhi Ranjan Sen, "Spain and India Agree to Expand Economic and Tech Partnership," *Bloomberg.Com*, 18 February 2026, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2026-02-18/spain-and-india-agree-to-expand-economic-and-tech-partnership>.

¹⁷ "Prime Minister & French President Virtually Inaugurate Final Assembly Line of H-125 Light Utility Helicopter at Vemagal, Karnataka," PIB, accessed 13 April 2026, <https://www.pib.gov.in/www.pib.gov.in/Pressreleaseshare.aspx?PRID=2229395>.

¹⁸ "Dassault Aviation Partners with Tata Advanced Systems to Manufacture Rafale Fighter Aircraft Fuselage for India and Other Global Markets - Press Kits," *Dassault Aviation, a Major Player to Aeronautics*, 13 April 2026, <https://www.dassault-aviation.com/en/group/press/press-kits/dassault-aviation-partners-with-tata-advanced-systems-to-manufacture-rafale-fighter-aircraft-fuselage-for-india-and-other-global-markets/>.

facility near Delhi, with Dassault now planning a similar set-up for Rafale maintenance. These developments will be underpinned by a working arrangement to boost aerospace manufacturing signed in March 2026¹⁹ – pointing to continued technical and strategic engagement that has built in recent months following the FTA and SDP. In the long term, we could see India's involvement in Europe's sixth-generation combat aircraft programme as well.

Importantly, the SDP institutionalises annual ministerial and working-level dialogues across key areas of focus: maritime and space security, cyber issues, AI and other disruptive technologies, counterterrorism, hybrid threats, and critical infrastructure. These dialogues will lay the groundwork for deeper industrial collaboration between the Indian and European defence and aerospace industries. The SDP states that India and the EU will “explore, where there are mutual interests and alignment of security priorities, possibilities for India's participation in relevant EU defence initiatives, as appropriate, in line with respective legal frameworks”.²⁰ While it is subject to future approvals, the SDP opens the door for Indian companies to participate in European defence programmes, like Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) projects and the €150 billion Security Action for Europe (SAFE) initiative. Crucially, it launched negotiations for a Security of Information Agreement (SoIA), which will enable exchanges of classified information and technologies, thereby laying the groundwork for a much deeper defence-industrial collaboration.

A logic of reciprocal bargaining underpins the India-EU SDP.²¹ For Europe, the deal could help boost scale, speed and efficiency in defence manufacturing. At the end of the Cold War, as the West celebrated the end of history, Europe believed that a favourable status quo had prevailed in its neighbourhood. The 2003 European Security Strategy claimed that Europe had “never been so prosperous, so secure nor so free”.²² Most European countries' defence-industrial capabilities dwindled as they relied on increasingly restrictive export policies amid a lack of domestic demand. They focused on small numbers of high-profile platforms, such as aircraft and ships, over basic ammunition, rockets or ground-based air-defence missiles.²³ However, as Europe faces new geopolitical realities characterised by high-intensity and large-scale warfare

¹⁹ “The European Union and India Sign a Working Arrangement on Industrial Aviation Production | EEAS,” accessed 13 April 2026, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/india/european-union-and-india-sign-working-arrangement-industrial-aviation-production_en?s=167.

²⁰ “Security and Defence.”

²¹ Shashank Tiwari, “The India-EU Defense Agreement: Industrial Logic and Strategic Context,” *South Asian Voices*, 13 February 2026, <https://southasianvoices.org/sec-m-in-r-india-eu-defense-02-13-2026/>.

²² Council of the European Union, A Secure Europe in a Better World: European Security Strategy, 15895/03 (Brussels, 8 December 2003), 3, <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-15895-2003-INIT/en/pdf>.

against enemies with technological superiority, it needs to urgently fill capability gaps. The ReArm Europe initiative launched in 2025 seeks to mobilise €800 billion by 2030 for this purpose. Given India's expertise in areas where Europe lacks capacity, like ammunition and small UAVs, it can help expand production and fill the gap. In 2022-2024, India exported US\$135.25 million in munitions to EU countries,²⁴ which were reportedly redirected to Ukraine despite Russian objections. Notably, this number was surpassed in the first nine months of FY2025-2026 alone, marking a 62 per cent year-on-year increase in India's defence industrial exports to Europe.²⁵ In other words, Europe seeks to rapidly expand production and reduce structural dependencies within European supply chains, and the FTA can facilitate this.

On the other hand, India's goal is to reduce its extensive import dependency and showcase its self-reliance in defence. For India, a deeper defence industrial partnership would align closely with its long-standing objective of strengthening its domestic defence manufacturing industry – it targets US\$36 billion in annual production and US\$6 billion in annual exports by 2030 – and becoming a global defence manufacturing hub.²⁶ To achieve this, there have been several acquisition reforms to diversify suppliers, promote 'Make in India' programmes for co-development and co-production, and mobilise the private sector. However, while there has been some success, most of the indigenisation that India has achieved has been in low-technology items like nozzles, nuts, bolts and screws.²⁷ Restrictive laws and tedious procedures on technology transfer have hindered indigenisation of larger platforms like jet engines, submarine propulsion, long-range missile technologies, electronic warfare systems, and advanced UAVs – where European industries hold some expertise. The Project 75(I) submarine programme illustrates the role of international technology partnerships. On 11 September 2025, TKMS and India's state-owned Mazagon Dock Shipbuilders Limited (MDL) announced the start of official contract negotiations for six German-designed submarines. TKMS's offer included air-

²³ Hannah Aries et al., "The Guns of Europe: Defence Industrial Challenges in a Time of War," IISS, 19 June 2023, <https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/survival-online/2023/06/the-guns-of-europe-defence-industrial-challenges-in-a-time-of-war/>.

²⁴ "Russian Ire Grows As Indian Ammunition Appears On Ukrainian Frontlines: Reports," Outlook India, 19 September 2024, <https://www.outlookindia.com/national/russian-ire-grows-as-indian-ammunition-appears-on-ukrainian-frontlines-reports>.

²⁵ I. E. Wire, "India Defence Exports Hit \$4.1 Billion, Tripling in Five Years," 5 April 2026, <https://indiaeuropa.com/india-defence-exports-hit-4-1-billion-tripling-in-five-years/>.

²⁶ "Make in India Powers Defence Growth," accessed 13 April 2026, <https://www.pib.gov.in/www.pib.gov.in/Pressreleaseshare.aspx?PRID=2114546>.

²⁷ G. G. Dwivedi, "India's Quest for Self-Reliance in Defence Sector Reality Check, Challenges and Way Ahead," *Journal of Defence Studies* 19, no. 3 (2025): 54–72.

independent propulsion (AIP) systems, linking India's domestic naval ambitions with German technology and local manufacturing.²⁸

At the same time, there could be some tensions between Europe's SAFE and India's Atmanirbhar Bharat initiatives, which seek to anchor production in their respective territories. A single platform cannot viably achieve both SAFE and India's indigenous production requirements without raising costs and losing the economic benefits of co-development. Nevertheless, such differences can be managed in a trusted partnership with political will, which India and the EU seem to have.

Securing Technology Cooperation

The defence industry is highly technology-dependent, and India's bid to develop high-end tech indigenously has achieved mixed results. With tech transfer becoming the preferred mode for defence cooperation, the co-development and co-production opportunities that the SDP provides are vital. The FTA is expected to significantly improve access to advanced technologies while creating new opportunities for localisation and increased exports. Unlike traditional trade deals, the EU-India FTA focuses on fostering a technology-driven partnership where innovation, tech sharing and manufacturing, and digital governance are central to collaboration. It safeguards sensitive technologies and preserves regulatory sovereignty while providing the building blocks for a legal and institutional environment necessary to operationalise such cooperation.

Notably, India has been investing increasingly in futuristic technologies such as AI-driven intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance systems, quantum computing, hypersonic glide vehicles, military exoskeletons, autonomous defence platforms, and cyber warfare tools.²⁹ The Ministry of Defence's modernisation agenda seeks to integrate such futuristic capabilities across its combat arsenal over the next 15 years. In AI and emerging disruptive technologies too, there is room for co-developing critical technologies and developing best practices for their responsible use and governance.

The expansion of the Trade and Technology Council (TTC), which has thus far yielded few results, will be important for this. The two sides plan to use the format to expand exchanges on Digital Public Infrastructure, semiconductors, AI, 6G, and quantum computing, including interoperable standards and best

²⁸ TKMS, "Milestone in Indian Submarine Program: TKMS Enters Contract Negotiations with Mazagon Dock Shipbuilders (MDL) for P75(I) Program", 11 September 2025, <https://www.tkmsgroup.com/news/article/milestone-in-indian-submarine-program-tkms-enters-contract-negotiations-with-mazagon-dock-shipbuilders-mdl-for-p75i-program>.

²⁹ P. P. Singh, *Assessment of India's Indigenous Defence Manufacturing Capabilities* (United Services Institute, 2025), https://usiofindia.org/pdf/PP_Singh_sp.pdf.

practices. The goal is to build trusted digital ecosystems and advance cooperation in clean tech.³⁰ The TTC will also include discussions on economic security, resilience of supply chains and research security, to ensure they can build the needed infrastructure for protecting sensitive technologies. While the TTC is currently a platform to build consensus and coordinate issues – it does not anchor investments or include direct cooperation mechanisms like the US-India iCET does for semiconductors – it has bold objectives and could, in the future, develop the necessary architecture to achieve shared ambitions. It can, for instance, establish a technology investment corridor with funding from the EU Chips Act and India's Semiconductor Mission to encourage collaboration. It could also propose frameworks for joint ownership principles, building on the intellectual property provisions of the FTA, to further enable defence technology co-production.

To complement this, the FTA will enable increased people-to-people contact, generating greater opportunities for training manpower in specialised high-tech fields as well as joint research. The SDP echoes this by highlighting the importance of joint training and education as part of cyber and maritime capacity-building. It provides channels to consult on consular crisis preparedness for the security and safety of their citizens in third countries, and to exchange analysis and consult on positions in multilateral organisations. Together, the SDP and the FTA establish structured defence cooperation, facilitating technological exchanges and interoperability. They provide renewed impetus to India's bilateral defence collaboration with European partners. In other words, India and the EU are laying the foundations for cooperation in crises requiring rapid response. The partnership is about more than military hardware; it is about cooperating on and shaping the standards for defence technologies that will (and already do) define warfare in the coming times.

Conclusion: Navigating Challenges

Geopolitics alone cannot serve as a sufficient or sustainable driver of the partnership, even if it has acted as a catalyst for the FTA. Although shared concerns about global instability and shifting power dynamics were crucial in driving momentum, relying exclusively on geopolitics as a factor of convergence risks overstating coherence even where important divergences exist. It could result in a partnership that is superficial, lacking robust foundations and sustained primarily by rhetoric. Instead, geopolitics should be treated as a problem to be managed while building functional cooperation in areas of mutual interest. Regular dialogues at working and senior levels will be critical for

³⁰ "Joint Statement of the 16th EU-India Summit," Text, European Commission - European Commission, accessed 13 April 2026, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/ro/statement_26_225.

this. In addition, India can leverage its bilateral partnerships with EU member states to develop multilateral and modular formats for domain-specific collaboration, allowing for compartmentalising differences at the EU level while still building cooperation in targeted areas. Russia, for example, has been a prominent irritant in EU-India relations in recent years. It will likely remain a point of divergence, shaping areas where they can and cannot cooperate. Yet, the fact that both concluded FTA negotiations and signed an SDP, and also expanded their defence industrial linkages despite opposition from Russia, shows that the misalignment can be managed with political will and prioritising pragmatism over idealism. Both must have persistent political will to overcome such challenges and learn to operate amid strategic misalignments.³¹

The FTA should therefore be understood not as a singular breakthrough, but as one instrument within a broader toolkit of engagement. It does not provide a transformational trade or security partnership, but it does lay the groundwork for one. The partnership's long-term significance depends less on the FTA than on the political commitment that follows the agreement. India's previous FTAs have frequently remained underutilised because implementation failed to match ambition. If the EU-India FTA is to avoid a similar fate, both sides need to sustain political attention well beyond the initial signalling value of the agreement. This will ensure that the FTA delivers long-term structural benefits and does not become yet another celebrated diplomatic achievement that recedes from the political agenda once it has served immediate political dividends.

For the Indo-Pacific, the security dynamics of the FTA carry important implications. A more operational EU-India security partnership will contribute to a denser web of economic and strategic linkages across the region. For Europe especially, the deal will be a crucial way to anchor itself in the region as an extra-regional actor. It can lean on India's role as a leading regional security provider, while contributing niche capabilities like satellite technology for maritime domain awareness or regulatory instruments to support peace and regional governance. The deal also creates scope for joint projects, potentially under forums like ESIWA, Global Gateway or IPOI. For India, it provides an additional strategic partner in the region. Delhi can lean on the EU's civilian and normative power to advance development-oriented and connectivity initiatives, and explore third-country cooperation in areas like capacity-building.

India has historically resisted treaty alliances or any defence arrangements that could obstruct its strategic autonomy, and the EU has largely avoided any

³¹ Lizza Bomassi, "Living with Friction: Three Anchors of the EU-India Partnership | European Union Institute for Security Studies," 26 January 2026, <https://www.iss.europa.eu/publications/briefs/living-friction-three-anchors-eu-india-partnership>.

expeditionary military roles outside Europe and its immediate neighbourhood. The security partnership takes into account these realities and focuses on coordination without evolving into a formal alliance, thus ensuring both can maintain their strategic autonomy and policy flexibility. However, this also imposes some limits. India and the EU will not be able to achieve deep operational interoperability that is characteristic of security alliances and, outside of military exercises, their cooperation in the Indo-Pacific will likely be confined to low-intensity missions such as HADR and anti-piracy. Despite efforts to better align regulations on issues like IP, highly sensitive technology transfers are not likely to happen in the near to mid-term future. Nevertheless, these limitations should not obscure the broader significance of the partnership. The willingness of both sides to work through longstanding differences demonstrates a shift in strategic thinking. The next phase now requires them to evolve beyond a transactional relationship that frames India primarily as a market and the EU as primarily an investor into a materially consequential partnership.

About the Author

Mahima Duggal is a doctoral researcher and project coordinator for the Community and Expertise on the Indo-Pacific in Europe (CEIPE) programme at the German Institute for Global and Area Studies (GIGA). Her research examines the geopolitical and security dynamics of the Indo-Pacific, including the European Union's actorness in the region, evolving patterns of minilateral and multilateral cooperation, and India's foreign and security policy. She is also a visiting researcher at the Centre for Security, Diplomacy and Strategy (CSDS) and an associated fellow at the Institute for Security and Development Policy (ISDP), and was previously an associate fellow at the Centre for Air Power Studies (CAPS), a New Delhi-based think tank affiliated with the Indian Air Force.

About the Authors

Jared Mondschein

Jared Mondschein is the Director of Research at the United States Studies Centre, The University of Sydney. Jared's analysis has appeared in outlets including ABC, BBC, CNN, Foreign Policy, MSNBC, and Sky News as well as across major Australian mastheads. Previously, Jared was a Research Analyst at Bloomberg BNA in Washington, DC, where he focused on cross-border tax issues. Prior to joining Bloomberg BNA, Jared was a Research Associate in the Asia Studies program of the Council on Foreign Relations, an editorial assistant at Foreign Policy magazine, and an assistant editor at a policy journal in Beijing. He holds a Bachelor of Arts in government and international affairs from Skidmore College in New York and a Master of Arts degree in international relations from King's College London.

Hugues Canuel

Captain Hugues Canuel, RCN, recently concluded his tour as Canadian Defence Advisor in Singapore. He previously served as Defence Attaché in Japan. He holds a PhD in War Studies from the Royal Military College of Canada, where he was appointed Adjunct Associate Professor in 2021. His research focuses on maritime strategy, Cold War history, Indo-Pacific security, and contemporary defence policy.

Lizza Bomassi

Lizza Bomassi is a Research Analyst for the Indo-Pacific at the European Union Institute for Security Studies. Her work focuses on Europe's strategic engagement with the region, including maritime security, economic security and supply-chain resilience, and the EU's relations with India and Southeast Asia. Her recent research has examined EU-India relations, the Western Indian Ocean, Indo-Pacific maritime security and regional responses to geopolitical competition.

Jean-Loup Samaan

Jean-Loup Samaan is a senior research fellow at the Middle East Institute of the National University of Singapore and a non-resident senior fellow at the Atlantic Council and the Institut Montaigne. Prior to his position in Singapore, he was policy advisor at the French Ministry of Defense (2008 to 2011), research advisor at the NATO Defense College (2011-2016) and associate professor in strategic studies with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) National Defense College (2016-2021). His most recent book, *Iron Dome: A History of Israel's Military Strategy*, is now available with Bloomsbury. He has authored six other books and several articles for various international academic and policy journals such as *Survival*, *The National Interest*, *Orbis*, *The International Spectator*, and *Politique Étrangère*. He holds a Ph.D. in political science (2009) from the University of Paris, La Sorbonne as well as an accreditation to supervise research (2017) from the doctoral school of Sciences Po, Paris.

Christian E. Rieck

Dr. Christian E. Rieck is an Associate Professor of War Studies at the University of Potsdam in Germany. He holds a postgraduate degree in Latin American Studies from the University of Oxford and a PhD in diplomatic history from the University of Potsdam. Christian is also a Non-Resident Senior Fellow at the Global Governance Institute in Brussels and in 2025 was a KAS Asia-Pacific Fellow at the United States Studies Centre of the University of Sydney.

Jan Asmussen

PD Dr. Jan Asmussen is a political scientist and historian at the University of Rostock. His research focuses on conflict studies, naval security, state-building, reconciliation, international relations and comparative politics. He was Professor at the Polish Naval Academy and is Senior Research Fellow at Thammasat University's German Center of Excellence in Bangkok. Previously, he headed the Conflict and Security Cluster at the European Centre for Minority Issues and has worked at several international universities.

Eva Abdulla

Eva Abdulla is a former Deputy Speaker of the Maldives Parliament and three-term elected MP. She is Chair of The Maldives Policy Think Tank (MPTT). Her work focuses on policy analysis, strategic consulting, and academic writing on Maldivian politics, foreign policy, and governance. Eva also chairs the Foreign Relations Committee of the Maldivian Democratic Party. In 2025 she was inducted into the Democratic Innovators of the 21st Century Politicians' Hall of Fame at the Athens Democracy Forum.

Mahima Duggal

Mahima Duggal is a doctoral researcher and project coordinator for the Community and Expertise on the Indo-Pacific in Europe (CEIPE) programme at the German Institute for Global and Area Studies (GIGA). Her research examines the geopolitical and security dynamics of the Indo-Pacific, including the European Union's actorness in the region, evolving patterns of minilateral and multilateral cooperation, and India's foreign and security policy. She is also a visiting researcher at the Centre for Security, Diplomacy and Strategy (CSDS) and an associated fellow at the Institute for Security and Development Policy (ISDP), and was previously an associate fellow at the Centre for Air Power Studies (CAPS), a New Delhi-based think tank affiliated with the Indian Air Force.

About the Editors

Andreas Michael Klein

Andreas Michael Klein has more than 20 years of experience working for the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS). He joined KAS in February 2000 as Director of its newly established country office in Skopje, Macedonia (2000–2004). He subsequently served as a desk officer in the Department for International Cooperation in Berlin, Germany (2004–2006), and as Director of the KAS offices in Düsseldorf, Germany (2006–2007), Riga, Latvia (2007–2012), Hamburg, Germany (2012–2016), and Santiago de Chile (2016–2022).

From April 2022 to August 2026, Andreas Klein was Director of the KAS Regional Programme Political Dialogue Asia. As of September 2026, he is Head and State Commissioner of the Political Education Forum in KAS Saarland.

He studied Political Science, Modern History and Spanish at the University of Bonn, Germany (1993–1999), where he obtained an MA in Political Science. He also studied Intercultural Communication at the University of Jyväskylä, Finland.

Anish Mishra

Anish Mishra is a Project Manager and Research Fellow for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy at the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS) Regional Programme Political Dialogue Asia in Singapore. His work focuses on foreign affairs and security policy in the Indo-Pacific, with particular emphasis on traditional and non-traditional security, climate security, cybersecurity, AI governance, geopolitical developments, international cooperation, and the evolving political and strategic dynamics of the region.

He is also a PhD candidate in Political Science at Heidelberg University, Germany, where his doctoral research examines patterns and processes of regime oscillations in South and Southeast Asia. He holds an MA in Development, Environment, Societies and History in South Asia, with Political Science as his major, from Heidelberg University. His broader research interests include democratisation and authoritarianism, civil–military relations, political elites, regime transitions, constitutional politics, and comparative politics. He has conducted extensive field research in South and Southeast Asia and is the author of *Regime Oscillations and Disruptions in Pakistan's Democratic Transition* (2023).

Contributors

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