

# Strange New Worlds: The European Union's Search for Like-Minded Partners in the Indo-Pacific

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## SETTING THE REGIONAL SCENE: OVERCOMING THE NEW BIPOLARITY

The Indo-Pacific has become the world's undisputed economic and strategic centre of gravity: The region is home to 60 per cent of the global population, produces 60 per cent of global GDP and contributes two thirds of global economic growth.<sup>1</sup> The pandemic has not changed these fundamentals, and China is now roaring back after two years of economic lockdown and the political cost associated with Covid-19. As the home region of the two largest countries by population that have competing ambitions and overlapping interests, the stability of the region clearly deserves the attention of the West. However, as the Indo-Pacific is fast becoming the main arena for great power competition, it risks transforming into a malign bipolarity between China and the United States that some commentators already call a new Cold War.<sup>2</sup>

The Chinese economic miracle has already rearranged regional supply chains and awarded Beijing disproportionate influence throughout the Asia-Pacific. Economic power begets political power and geo-economic plans beget geostrategic ambitions, which has led most of the region to hedge against Chinese assertiveness. So, for China's rise to remain peaceful and in the absence of fully regional security arrangements, other Asian actors are increasingly looking for new regional structures that combine elements of cooperation, competition and containment vis-à-vis China.

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1. European External Action Service. 2021. EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific. ([https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage\\_en/96741/EU%20Strategy%20for%20Cooperation%20in%20the%20Indo-Pacific](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage_en/96741/EU%20Strategy%20for%20Cooperation%20in%20the%20Indo-Pacific)).

2. Examples: Ferguson, Niall. 2020. Now We Are In Cold War II. (<https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/niall-ferguson-now-we-are-cold-war-ii>); Kaplan, Robert D. 2019. A New Cold War Has Begun. Foreign Policy. (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/01/07/a-new-cold-war-has-begun/>).

The dawning of a new bipolarity between Washington and Beijing in the Asia-Pacific is treacherous because it narrows the options for unfettered cooperation between third parties in the region. A position of equidistance between the great powers, i.e., a neutral ground of some sort between these two poles, becomes untenable once the superpower confrontation heats up. Here, the broader concept of an Indo-Pacific offers not merely the potential for a more effective balancing of China, but a larger pool of involved actors with a stake in regional stability that shows a way out of the zero-sum logic of bipolarity that is taking hold in the region.

Confrontation is not inevitable, of course, which is why the focus on the military build-up in the region is dangerous. The competition between Beijing and Washington goes beyond the military realm,<sup>3</sup> and there continue to exist large areas of cooperation, such as global health policy or the fight against climate change. A system of “managed strategic competition” would better encapsulate the complex relationship between the two superpowers.<sup>4</sup> It would also open up important avenues for what I would call “negotiated neutrality” for third parties in the region, as most countries in the region would want to retain some distance to the Sino-American competition. This paper will argue that these countries are the main stakeholders of regional stability – and thus the most important partners for the European Union (EU) in its quest for like-minded partnerships in the Indo-Pacific.

## **A EUROPEAN PIVOT TO ASIA? EU POWER RESOURCES AND ITS ROLE IN THE INDO-PACIFIC**

Without military assets of its own and with only an effective commercial foreign policy at its disposal, the European Union might look like an unconvincing choice for providing guidance on how to navigate the new bipolarity in the Indo-Pacific. Realists are correct to assume that without hard power that can be projected effectively halfway around the world the EU does not command much respect in Beijing’s foreign policy circles. On the other hand, constructivists are wrong to believe that economic interdependence alone will socialise the Middle Kingdom into a more

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3. Which is why the Cold War concept is rebuked by a number of authors, such as: Westad, Odd Arne. 2019. The Sources of Chinese Conduct. Are Washington and Beijing Fighting a New Cold War? *Foreign Affairs* 5/2019.

4. Former Prime Minister of Australia Kevin Rudd defined this term to include elements of cooperation and competition: Rudd, Kevin. 2021. Short of War. How to Keep U.S.-Chinese Confrontation From Ending in Calamity. *Foreign Affairs* 2/2021.

cooperative mindset because the Chinese government will finally see the light of global collaboration. This is why Brussels will have to work in sync with its member states to deploy an effective combination of soft and hard power in the region.

Yet the EU is not without power. While the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) is soft power-oriented, the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) is conceptually different in its hard power orientation. Both policies have their specific strengths and weaknesses – even though Brussels has traditionally been more effective on the soft power front, called the “Brussels Effect”:<sup>5</sup>

In CFSP, the Union’s role is complementary but separate to that of its member states. Only parts of CFSP are supranationally organised, as in the case of foreign economic policy where the power to negotiate trade deals lies exclusively with the European Commission. It is in these policy areas where the EU’s foreign policy is the most effective, mainly because there is no need for time-consuming institutionalised bargaining and coordination. The EU’s concrete soft power mostly stems from its global regulatory power, for instance through industrial standard-setting and human rights adjudication, or in the area of competition policy. On a more abstract level, the EU’s soft power flows from the attractiveness of its ideals, i.e., the protection of liberal democracy and the rule of law, which are deeply entrenched in the self-image of the EU and are much more than (authentic) narrative devices in the Union’s foreign relations.

CSDP on the other hand is focused on hard power. As military assets are owned and run by the member states, there is no distinct EU role beyond its convening power to help nudge member states in the direction of deeper security and military integration. Despite the ambitions of the “Geopolitical Commission” under its vocal president Ursula von der Leyen, the functions of the Commission in this context remain: enhance, enable, coordinate, facilitate. As the Permanent Structured Coordination (PESCO) demonstrates, Brussels tries to use financial inducements to incentivise “integration by projects”. Otherwise, the EU builds infrastructures for coordination – such as the EU Military Command or the European Defence Fund – and makes them available to its members as a platform to integrate around. CSDP remains overwhelmingly intergovernmental, as there are no autonomous EU capabilities in security and defence (yet).

In foreign policy, especially in trade and security cooperation, the importance of the Indo-Pacific will continue to increase. However, competing regional priorities and strategic cultures among the member states, especially in defence, make

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5. Bradford, Anu. 2021. *The Brussels Effect. How the European Union Rules the World*. Oxford: OUP.

a full-blown EU pivot to Asia – one that would be robust militarily and refocus European foreign policy squarely on containing China – unlikely, if not impossible. The EU will not gain autonomous defence capabilities and will not become a unified foreign policy actor anytime soon, probably never. These structural reasons explain why hopes for a European Pivot to Asia are misguided.

There will, however, be a Pacific Turn, as both member states and the European Commission have been pushing for an upgrade of their relationship with the Indo-Pacific region, especially with ASEAN, Australia and Japan. This turn is driven by both Brussels and the national capitals, albeit with distinct foci on different instruments of foreign and security policy. This should lead to a relatively coherent policy towards the different sub-regions of Asia, as preferences between both levels of government align better over time. Yet, as in other world regions the EU will leverage and enhance member state assets and instruments, but without being able to fundamentally alter its own character as a fractured foreign policy actor. Brussels, while capable of policy design and implementation in a wide variety of important policy areas from trade to development cooperation, will continue to have to rely on member states' hard power assets for the full realisation of its Global Strategy. It clearly states "cooperative regional orders" as one of its main priorities for the EU's external action<sup>6</sup> – a tall order in the Indo-Pacific region that lacks a culture of region-wide institutionalised cooperation.

## **CONCEPTUAL AMBITION: LIKE-MINDEDNESS AS A PARTNERSHIP PARADIGM**

Much like the category of "partnership" that is notoriously difficult to conceptualise, the definition of like-mindedness is purposefully vague. It is usually assumed that like-minded countries share common values, interests and outlooks, because foreign relations tend to be viewed as being a function of domestic political regimes (by Europeans, at least):<sup>7</sup> A commitment to human rights, economic competition and political and economic liberalism within its borders and beyond, a constructive engagement with and within international institutions as forums for the peaceful settlement of conflicts, as well as a cooperative, soft power-first reflex in

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6. European Union. 2016. Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe. A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy. Brussels: EEAS, pp. 32-29.

7. Hamilton, Eric. 2017. Democratic Domestic Institutions and Foreign Policy. Thies, Cameron (ed.). *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Foreign Policy Analysis*. Oxford: OUP. (<https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.407>).

international relations are all elements of the shared basic consensus the EU and its member states would look for in a “like-minded partner”. This mode of international behaviour, then, implies a dedication to the rules-based international order in all its forms and functions, i.e., a form of liberal internationalism, best (but not exclusively) epitomised by “the West”.<sup>8</sup>

But for a partner to be seen as like-minded, it need not tick all those boxes. The definition goes beyond the idea of a “Western state” or even liberal democratic capitalism *per se*.<sup>9</sup> Many countries in the Indo-Pacific region share at least some of the core elements of like-mindedness described above. They can be understood as “semi-westernised”, if Westernisation is conceptualised as a domestic constitutional-political framework (based on democracy, republicanism, rule of law) or/and transnationally as a liberal institutionalist category of foreign policy (commitment to a rules-based international order, human rights, peaceful conflict-resolution, open global markets). In this regard, there is already a large degree of overlap between the EU and its member states on one side, and Indo-Pacific partners on the other. This explains, at least in part, why the EU is able to maintain “strategic partnerships” with entities as different as Japan, India, South Korea or ASEAN.

The concept of like-mindedness is thus intentionally flexible and may include an element of *realpolitik*: Clearly, the level of trade dependence on China will influence the foreign policy behaviour of all states in the region. So does a physical border or an overlapping territorial claim with the military behemoth of the neighbourhood. The EU can accept these constraints on cooperation by offering alternatives to exposed states in the region for “subtle balancing” of an assertive China, for example through economic incentives, political support and development assistance – even in cases where the shared basic consensus is narrow or fragile.

Any regional strategy needs to take into account the structures of the regional order in question: These include regional power hierarchies and existing regional institutions as intervening variables.<sup>10</sup> The states in the Indo-Pacific region differ markedly in their level of autonomy from the Chinese economy, their exposure to regional security threats, and the amounts of financial resources at their disposal to mitigate these context factors. Also, the presence of the US as a powerful off-shore balancer with pronounced power projection capabilities is a strong influence

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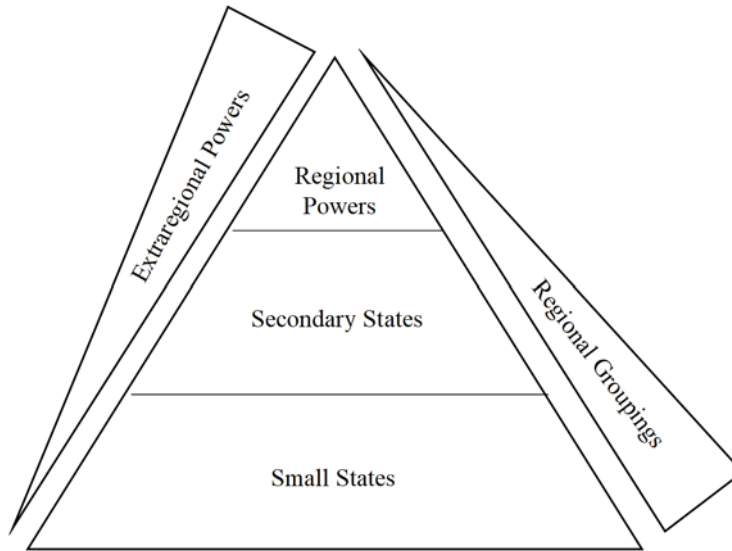
8. Ikenberry, G. John. 2020. *A World Safe for Democracy. Liberal Internationalism and the Crises of Global Order*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

9. Lazarou, Elena. 2020. *The future of multilateralism and strategic partnerships*. Brussels: European Parliament Research Service, p. 6.

10. Söderbaum, Fredrik. 2016. *Rethinking Regionalism*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 101.

on the regional order. The regional order in the Indo-Pacific is thus made up of five different categories of actors:

**Table 1: Schematic view of a regional order.**



- *Regional powers* sit at the top of the regional hierarchy and have the highest level of autonomy within a regional order. They outdo other states in power resources which affords them the freedom to define their own regional foreign policy profile without having to consider challengers or other constraining factors much. Still, any regional power leadership ambitions depend on some level of followership from secondary and small states. Countries in this category would be India, Japan and, of course, China.
- *Secondary states* are actors with some degree of autonomy from regional powers, enough to decide which regional (or extra-regional) power to reward or punish by granting or withdrawing followership. The smaller the difference in power resources vis-à-vis the regional power(s), the more effective a secondary state's conditioning of regional power hegemony will be. Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, South Korea, Singapore, Vietnam, or Australia would fit into this category.
- *Small states* have the lowest level of autonomy vis-à-vis larger states in their neighbourhood and have little means to insulate themselves from regional power hegemony. As small state behaviour mostly aligns with regional power preferences, in regions with more than one regional power there is usually some level of competition for the followership of these states, making them

not pawns but valuable assets in any regional order. Examples here would be Cambodia, Myanmar, Laos, Nepal, or the Pacific Island states.

- Even though *regional groupings* differ in their level of institutionalisation and capacity for collective action, they usually serve as an arena for coalition-building, especially for small states but, depending on their preferences, also for secondary states. If they have a high level of regional legitimacy these organisations can also serve as an arena for regional power competition. Prominent examples would be ASEAN, ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the Quad.
- *Extraregional powers* can be powerful conditioning factors of any regional order, especially if these powers have clearly defined interests vis-à-vis that region and also boast the ability to project hard power into the region, either through bases within it or through platforms that can be moved there quickly. Power projection does not have to be purely exogenous: Military and political alliances are conduits for the use of influence of extraregional powers that, while they happen by invitation of regional powers or secondary states (i.e., being endogenous to a given region), can serve to stabilise or modify a regional order. The most important extraregional power in the Indo-Pacific is clearly the United States.

## WHO FITS THE BILL? CHOOSING PARTNERS IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

If the EU's relationship with China remains shallow and limited beyond issues of trade and investment,<sup>11</sup> it needs to be reconceptualised. One way of achieving this is reframing it in a more regional and more multilateral way that is sensitive to power dynamics in the region and includes a broader base of (like-minded) partnership countries.

Even after the publication of the EU's Indo-Pacific strategy, the European approach to the region continues to be based on these four elements: *Rebalancing relations with China*, which is now seen as a partner, competitor and rival (mix competition with cooperation); *Scaling up of relations with the rest of Asia*, especially India and like-minded partners (offer geopolitical and geo-economic alternatives to Chinese influence without forcing countries to choose); *Upholding rules-based orders*

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11. Maher, Richard. 2016. The elusive EU-China strategic partnership. *International Affairs* 92, 4.

in the region and beyond; *Connectivity* (focus on physical infrastructures).<sup>12</sup> Brussels understands its Indo-Pacific strategy as being somewhat complementary to, but not in competition with the more robust approach of the United States which the EU sees as its like-minded partner *par excellence*.

This approach was broadened and specified in September 2021 to include seven areas of EU strategic engagement in the region: *Sustainable and inclusive prosperity; green transition; ocean governance; digital governance and partnerships; connectivity; security and defence; and human security*.<sup>13</sup> Based on that strategy, the following table outlines how the EU plans to engage in such a regional endeavour.

**Table 2: Applying the concept of like-mindedness to the region.**

Regional powers	Japan India	Step up implementation of Connectivity Partnerships
Secondary states	Malaysia Thailand	Conclude Partnership and Cooperation Agreements
Mostly secondary states	India Australia Indonesia Malaysia Philippines Thailand New Zealand ASEAN	Assess, resume and complete trade negotiations
Mostly secondary states	Japan Australia South Korea Singapore New Zealand	Strengthen cooperation on research and development Associate to "Horizon Europe"
Small states	Least-developed states	Support healthcare systems and pandemic preparedness
All categories	Willing like-minded partners	Build more resilient and sustainable global value chains Develop shared technological standards and regulations Conclude Green Alliances and Partnerships Strengthen ocean governance and fisheries management Expand digital partnerships Facilitate regulatory environments and funding for connectivity Enhance naval deployments by member states Boost capacity for maritime security

12. Borrell, Josep. 12 March 2021. The EU needs a strategic approach for the Indo-Pacific. HR/VP Blog. ([https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage\\_en/94898/The%20EU%20needs%20a%20strategic%20approach%20for%20the%20Indo-Pacific](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage_en/94898/The%20EU%20needs%20a%20strategic%20approach%20for%20the%20Indo-Pacific)).

13. High Representative of the Union for Foreign and Security Policy. 16 September 2021. Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council. The EU strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, pp. 5-16. ([https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/jointcommunication\\_2021\\_24\\_1\\_en.pdf](https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/jointcommunication_2021_24_1_en.pdf)).



The EU regards the Indo-Pacific as a natural partner region.<sup>14</sup> Despite all the bilateral ambitions, these relationships will be difficult affairs: Partner countries have their own interests and preferences, conditioned by geography and neighbourhood. Also, the more powerful the partner country is, the more balanced and thus complex the relationship will undoubtedly become.<sup>15</sup> At the end of the day, without the resources to effectively enhance the region's hard power balancing, EU influence over these states can only be limited – but in strategic partnerships held together by strong internal (like-mindedness) and external (regional power assertiveness) forces, common interests take precedence over differences.<sup>16</sup>

The multilateral element of the EU's Pacific Turn, by contrast, looks more promising: The EU already has a strategic partnership with ASEAN.<sup>17</sup> It has also long been one of the staunchest supporters of regionalism in Southeast Asia. The recent connectivity strategy between the EU and ASEAN bears testament to the continued commitment of both partners to this relationship. Not all ASEAN members can be regarded as like-minded states, but the convening and coalition-building power of ASEAN in a growing set of policy areas, from trade to health to the environment, and well beyond its membership base will continue to make this regional organisation a vital partner for any European strategy in the Indo-Pacific.

The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, or: Quad, consists of the United States, India, Japan and Australia, sometimes called the Asian “arc of democracy”.<sup>18</sup> It is not a formal alliance, but a security mechanism to create and enhance collective hard power response options against threats to regional public goods, such as the freedom of navigation in the South China Sea. The Quad, borne out of the ad hoc coordination of the four partners' relief efforts after the devastating 2004 tsunami, has been complementing strategic dialog with concrete manifestations of this cooperation since the first meeting of senior officials in Manila in 2017, now mostly in the form of joint naval exercises.

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14. High Representative of the Union for Foreign and Security Policy. 16 September 2021. Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council. The EU strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, p. 1. ([https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/jointcommunication\\_2021\\_24\\_1\\_en.pdf](https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/jointcommunication_2021_24_1_en.pdf)).

15. Emerging powers can become challengers to hegemonic multilateralism: Acharya, Amitav. 2014. *Rethinking Power, Institutions and Ideas in World Politics: Whose IR?* New York: Routledge, pp. 150-151.

16. Reiterer, Michael G.K. 2013. The Role of “Strategic Partnerships” in the EU's Relations with Asia. Christiansen, Thomas et al. (eds.). *The Palgrave Handbook of EU-Asia Relations*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

17. ASEAN is made up of Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam.

18. Heydarian, Richard Javad. 27 July 2020. Quad alliance forms “arc of democracy” around China. *Asia Times*. (<https://asiatimes.com/2020/07/quad-alliance-forms-arc-of-democracy-around-china/>).

The Quad should be seen by European capitals as a cooperation format of like-minded partners deserving of their support. Quad leaders have just reiterated their commitment to a “free and open Indo-Pacific” in March 2021: “We strive for a region that is free, open, inclusive, healthy, anchored by democratic values, and unconstrained by coercion.”<sup>19</sup> The “Quad Spirit” seems highly compatible with European values, interests and outlook: “Together, we commit to promoting a free, open rules-based order, rooted in international law to advance security and prosperity and counter threats to both in the Indo-Pacific and beyond. We support the rule of law, freedom of navigation and overflight, peaceful resolution of disputes, democratic values, and territorial integrity.”<sup>20</sup>

So, why does a strategic partnership between the EU and China still exist? Unlike in the United States where China has been downgraded to a “strategic competitor”, the EU still views Beijing as a strategic, but not a like-minded partner.<sup>21</sup> This is not a purely rhetorical difference. Rather Brussels, in its “multifaceted engagement with China”,<sup>22</sup> tries to keep the strategic dialog with Beijing alive – at least in those areas where there is still a large enough overlap of foreign policy interests and preferences to shape the global multilateral order. This includes the global trade regime and the one on global climate change mitigation, where Beijing is an important stakeholder with which multilateral cooperation promises large gains for the world as a whole. Even though fraught, since 2003 Brussels has maintained a “comprehensive strategic partnership” with Beijing: The breadth and depth of ambition of the partnership has grown over time to include a wide range of global challenges and international organisations, as showcased by the last EU-China summit in April 2019.<sup>23</sup> But “clashing political values, diverging geopolitical interests and priorities, and competing conceptions of world order have limited and will continue to limit any EU–China strategic relationship”.<sup>24</sup> If anything, the case of China-EU relations

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19. Quad Leaders’ Joint Statement. 21 March 2021. The Spirit of the Quad. (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/03/12/quad-leaders-joint-statement-the-spirit-of-the-quad/>).

20. Quad Leaders’ Joint Statement. 21 March 2021. The Spirit of the Quad. (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/03/12/quad-leaders-joint-statement-the-spirit-of-the-quad/>).

21. European Union. 2016. Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe. A Global Strategy for the European Union’s Foreign and Security Policy. Brussels: EEAS, pp. 37-38.

22. High Representative of the Union for Foreign and Security Policy. 16 September 2021. Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council. The EU strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, p. 4. ([https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/jointcommunication\\_2021\\_24\\_1\\_en.pdf](https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/jointcommunication_2021_24_1_en.pdf)).

23. EU-China Summit Joint statement. Brussels, 9 April 2019. (<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/39020/euchina-joint-statement-9april2019.pdf>).

24. Maher, Richard. 2016. The elusive EU-China strategic partnership. *International Affairs* 92, 4.

demonstrates how important like-mindedness as a partnership paradigm is, as a shared basic consensus on domestic and foreign policy is the main predictor of the scope and depth of any successful partnership.

The EU's constructivist foreign policy stance regarding China contrasts with that of some of the EU's member states, but it is a rational choice for an economic entity with global reach and a child of successful multilateral cooperation. This stance of selective cooperation – or rather: selective competition – by the EU paves the way for a deeper EU footprint in the Indo-Pacific that is not seen by the regional powers as meddlesome, antagonistic, or intrusive.

## **KEEPING YOUR FRIENDS CLOSE: HOW ROBUST WILL LIKE-MINDED PARTNERSHIPS TURN OUT TO BE?**

Is geography destiny? Like-mindedness alone is not a guarantee for a long-lasting partnership. After all, Chinese might is an inescapable reality in Southeast Asia, and it is widely felt across the Indo-Pacific more broadly. Apart from a predictable regional environment that keeps preferences stable, every partnership needs sustained interest from both sides to keep it alive. It remains to be seen how robust like-minded partnerships can be in the presence of Chinese power. The experience over the past decade at least seems to point toward the following rule of thumb: The more assertive Beijing becomes, the more the region rallies around hardened balancing and hedging strategies. Europe's responsibility is thus to play the long game and stay interested in the Indo-Pacific region.

So, will Europe commit long-term? The answer is yes,<sup>25</sup> and it is based on longer-term structural reasons that militate in favour of a common approach of Brussels and national capitals towards the Indo-Pacific:

One would expect the usual roadblocks on the way towards a more strategic European involvement in the Indo-Pacific: Structural barriers to further integration remain and continue to be a drag on the EU's ability to become a unified foreign policy actor, chiefly among them incompatible strategic cultures in different member states, as well as their competing foreign and security policy priorities. After

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25. The EU Indo-Pac strategy outlines a series of guiding principles for cooperation with Indo-Pacific partners based on established material policies, from the realisation of the Sustainable Development Goals to the fight against climate change and raising awareness for the impact of demographic trends: High Representative of the Union for Foreign and Security Policy. 16 September 2021. Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council. The EU strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, pp. 2-3. ([https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/jointcommunication\\_2021\\_24\\_1\\_en.pdf](https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/jointcommunication_2021_24_1_en.pdf)).

all, the effectiveness of EU integration is a function of member states' interests, preferences and priorities. European foreign policy is still too reactive and driven too much by external shocks. Also, due to geographic proximity, Russia will remain of more immediate concern for the EU. But there has been an awakening of sorts to the larger geostrategic and systemic global challenge that China poses for the liberal international order.

But in this case, although there is still no consensus among national capitals on what exactly the role of Brussels should be in CFSP – how much supranationalism? how much intergovernmentalism? –, there has been a strong push over the past decade to consolidate CFSP: Common strategies have been adopted, the institutional framework has been strengthened (European External Action Service, High Representative), the policy area has become more visible and more Europeanised. A new and ambitious Commission wants to convert Europe into a geopolitical powerhouse and has identified the Indo-Pacific as the main arena of great power competition. The Union has continuously pushed for more integration in the defence realm as well – even though, here, hard power assets will clearly remain on the member state level.

Apart from this institutional push towards more CFSP integration which increases the agency of EU institutions, structural forces push and pull Europe towards a common Indo-Pacific approach: The economic interdependence that all EU member states share with China keeps Europe's attention focused on Beijing (push). The US-China polarisation equally has an impact on all member states, as Washington keeps the Europeans interested in the Indo-Pacific (pull). Beijing's assertiveness in the region as well as in international organisations is rebalancing the regional and global orders Europe has helped build (push) – and is creating a growing demand in the region for outside balancers (pull). Finally, an alignment in the perception of China, ASEAN and the Quad in the most powerful EU member states is creating momentum towards a more streamlined European approach towards the Indo-Pacific.<sup>26</sup>

European Union interests in the Indo-Pacific thus broadly mirror those of its member states: multilateralism, climate and environmental security, economic interdependence, regional security. Neither Brussels nor national capitals want to be forced to take sides between China and the US. So, even though “more Europe”

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26. Grare, Frédéric and Reuter, Manisha. 2021. Moving closer: European views of the Indo-Pacific. Paris: European Council on Foreign Relations.

does not necessarily translate into “more European hard power” in the region, the EU will feel compelled to remain in the region for the foreseeable future.

## **PRESERVING NEUTRAL GROUND: LEVERAGING REGIONAL ORGANISATIONS FOR CONFLICT PREVENTION AND STRATEGIC DIALOGUE**

All actors involved stand to gain from a stable and prosperous Indo-Pacific. Their goal should be to create regional structures that allow for a system of “managed strategic competition” between the United States and China. Here, ASEAN has an important role to play: It has successfully defined a profile as an unintrusive but dedicated regional organisation that allows even fundamental differences to exist without standing in the way of negotiated solutions. It has kept open channels of communication with Beijing despite Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea. So, even if not all ASEAN members fit the bill of like-mindedness for the EU, the regional organisation remains a vital partner that will benefit from continued support from Brussels. ASEAN can effectively leverage the cooperative aims and the soft power (unburdened by a military presence in the region) the EU wants to put to good use in the region. Without having to create new bureaucracies, ASEAN affiliates such as the ASEAN Regional Forum can become the premier forum for the strategic security dialogue the region so desperately needs. The EU’s new Indo-Pacific strategy also affirms the centrality of ASEAN and promises a stronger EU role in ASEAN’s security architecture.<sup>27</sup>

But what about the Quad, until the emergence of AUKUS still the only vehicle for effective hard power balancing of China? There is not much the European Union *per se* can offer the Quad in terms of lessons learned for defence integration. Brussels serves only as an enhancer, enabler and facilitator for improved coordination between Paris, Berlin, Rome, Athens, and Madrid.<sup>28</sup> Military resources remain at the national level, owned and run by the EU’s member states. Because of sovereignty issues these processes tend to be politically sensitive and *ergo* very cumbersome.

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27. High Representative of the Union for Foreign and Security Policy. 16 September 2021. Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council. The EU strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, pp. 5, 14. ([https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/jointcommunication\\_2021\\_24\\_1\\_en.pdf](https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/jointcommunication_2021_24_1_en.pdf)).

28. For the five different policy modes of EU governance that range from complete supranational integration to voluntary coordination between member states, see: Wallace, Helen et al. (eds.). 2014. Policy-Making in the European Union. Oxford: OUP. Chapter 4. For an application to the Indo-Pacific case, see: Rieck, Christian E. 2021. A Pacific Turn? The Foreign and Security Policy of the European Union towards Asia. (<https://www.rsis.edu.sg/event/rsis-webinar-series-on-multilateralism-studies/#.YUlwrgzato>).

The secret to the Quad's effectiveness, by contrast, is its nimbleness and focus, result of an alignment of geopolitical interests of its members in a (technical) policy area with low levels of politicisation. Yet, the EU Commission and especially the EU's Military Staff could publicly reach out to the Quad, thus lending it legitimacy. Formal ties to the Quad could also be a conduit for the EU to facilitate exercises and other more robust forms of cooperation between its member states and the Quad countries.

So far, the low level of institutionalisation has kept the Quad nimble and flexible enough to remain effective and thus relevant. The Quad should resist the temptation of mission creep and not take on more mandates and instead remain a security arrangement. A more complex political agenda will complicate bargaining within the grouping and distract from its singular focus on security, which remains the basis of its success. The Quad already serves as a confidence-building tool, though. Cooperation of the Quad in the security field is already creating momentum for better coordination in other policy arenas, such as UNCLOS (international law of the seas), WHO (health), COVAX (pandemic response), and COP26 (climate change).<sup>29</sup> If Quad countries regard their cooperation as worthwhile and see that their interests have converged enough to take on coordination in more policy areas,<sup>30</sup> they could help create new regional mechanisms ("Quad Plus formats") to deal with these issues. Here, the Quad will remain inclusive and open to cooperation with other actors in the region, especially ASEAN. Given its trajectory in regional integration export, the EU would take up such initiatives and support any such new body.<sup>31</sup>

Together with stronger links especially with regional like-minded secondary states, the EU and Indo-Pacific actors would be able to retain some level of autonomy vis-à-vis Beijing, while leaning on Washington more for their security – without having to negotiate a formal security guarantee. Deepening ties with like-minded partners in policy areas ranging from economic integration to capacity-building in education, health and digital, from security policy to military cooperation will en-

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29. Quad Leaders' Joint Statement. 21 March 2021. The Spirit of the Quad. (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/03/12/quad-leaders-joint-statement-the-spirit-of-the-quad/>).

30. Some identify Covid-19, climate change, critical and emerging technologies, counterterrorism, cybersecurity and disaster recovery as possible areas of cooperation, see: D'Ambrogio, Enrico. 2021. The Quad: An emerging multilateral security framework of democracies in the Indo-Pacific region. Brussels: European Parliament Think Tank. ([https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document.html?reference=EPRS\\_BRI%282021%29690513](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document.html?reference=EPRS_BRI%282021%29690513)).

31. High Representative of the Union for Foreign and Security Policy. 16 September 2021. Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council. The EU strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, p. 4. ([https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/jointcommunication\\_2021\\_24\\_1\\_en.pdf](https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/jointcommunication_2021_24_1_en.pdf)).

able secondary powers to hold their own and offer alternatives for cooperation as well as economic diversification beyond the US-China bipolarity they seek to avoid. This division of labour between the EU and the US would help produce and diffuse security as a regional public good, strengthen regional cooperation and increase the European footprint in the Indo-Pacific. It would also embed the United States more deeply in the Indo-Pacific region, something the EU (as a like-minded partner) would welcome.

Any EU strategy in the Indo-Pacific region can only be *successful* if there is a functioning division of labour and a reasonable level of alignment of preferences with its member states (something the Indo-Pacific strategy calls the “Team Europe approach”)<sup>32</sup> – as well as with the United States. It can only be *effective* if it builds on functioning regional alliances, no matter their level of institutionalisation. It can only be *legitimate* if it supports like-minded partners on the sidelines (and front-lines) of the new bipolarity.

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32. High Representative of the Union for Foreign and Security Policy. 16 September 2021. Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council. The EU strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, p. 4. ([https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/jointcommunication\\_2021\\_24\\_1\\_en.pdf](https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/jointcommunication_2021_24_1_en.pdf)).