

# European Maritime Security Capacity Building Assistance in Southeast Asia: Promises and Pitfalls

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Major European powers – Britain, France, and Germany – are increasingly turning their attention to the Indo-Pacific as the new global geo-economic and geostrategic centre of gravity. Both Britain and France consider themselves as resident Indo-Pacific powers with territories and military presence in the region. Germany, on the other hand, has no troops stationed in the region. The three powers' interests in the region were declared in the respective policy guidelines published by France, taking the lead, in 2019<sup>1</sup>, Germany in 2020<sup>2</sup>, and the United Kingdom in 2021, with its Integrated Review, its most comprehensive foreign and security policy recalculation in decades, which elaborated on London's "Global Britain" aspirations, with a clear "tilt" towards the Indo-Pacific.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, in 2020, the Netherlands became the first amongst the smaller European powers to develop Indo-Pacific policy guide-

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1. Ministry of Defence (France). 2019. France and Security in the Indo-Pacific. (<https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&ved=2ahUKEwjXgeflodLvAhV0muYKHa7OBNUQFjAAegQIBBAD&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.defense.gouv.fr%2Flayout%2Fset%2Fprint%2Fcontent%2Fdownload%2F532754%2F9176250%2Fversion%2F3%2Ffile%2FFrance%2BAnd%2BSecurity%2Bin%2Bthe%2BIndo-Pacific%2B-%2B2019.pdf&usg=AOvVaw3qplb6y-73W0ipXF3O3cgN>).

2. See, Federal Foreign Office (Germany). 2020. Policy Guidelines for the Indo-Pacific. (<https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/blob/2380514/f9784f7e3b3fa1bd7c5446d274a4169e/200901-indo-pazifik-le-itlinien--1-data.pdf>).

3. See, UK Government Cabinet Office. 16 March 2021. Global Britain in a Competitive Age: The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development, and Foreign Policy. (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/global-britain-in-a-competitive-age-the-integrated-review-of-security-defence-development-and-foreign-policy>).

lines of its own.<sup>4</sup> Other European powers with significant economic, diplomatic and security interests in the region may follow suit.

Underlining the growing European interest in the Indo-Pacific, the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) have also debated their respective positions and possible roles in the broader Indo-Pacific. In April 2021, the 27 member states of the European Union (EU) were able to agree on a draft strategy toward the region, titled the “EU Council’s Conclusions on the Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific”.<sup>5</sup> The EU’s formal Indo-Pacific strategy, published in September 2021, marks an important new starting point for Europe’s growing interest, presence, and activity in and toward the Indo-Pacific.

Both the European major powers and the EU recognise regional stability and freedom of navigation in the Indo-Pacific as key security concerns for Europe’s own prosperity. However, each power and the EU possess different levels of capacity, political will, and presence to act on those interests. To contribute to the regional maritime security in the Indo-Pacific Europe has several options to choose from: (1) despatch a single or a combined European naval task force to the region to safeguard the Sea Lines of Communication (SLOC) security and regional stability; (2) to cooperate with “like-minded” regional partners, such as India, Japan, South Korea, Australia, and the US, to pursue shared security interests; (3) to work through the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to improve maritime security in Southeast Asia and the South China Sea; and (4) to help regional states build national maritime security capacities in areas like maritime domain awareness and international maritime law.

This article focuses on European maritime security capacity building projects and initiatives in Southeast Asia. The paper provides an overview of the different maritime security capacity building tools available for the major European powers and the EU and assesses their contributions to the region’s maritime security architecture and challenges therein.

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4. See, Government of the Netherlands. 2020. Indo-Pacific Guidelines for Strengthening Dutch and EU Cooperation with Partners in Asia. (<https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&ved=2ahUKEwj5qLPzNfvAhV16XMBHalYBCYQ FjACegQIAhAD&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.government.nl%2Fbinaries%2Fgovernment%2Fdocuments%2Fpublications%2F2020%2F11%2F13%2FIndo-pacific-guidelines%2FIndo-Pacific%2BGuidelines%2BEN.pdf&usg=AOvVaw1kbkfsaWdKlf5M36Kg2oJo>).

5. See, Council of the European Union. 16 April 2021. Council Conclusions on an EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific. (<https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-7914-2021-INIT/en/pdf>).

## 2. EUROPEAN MARITIME SECURITY CAPACITY BUILDING ASSISTANCE

Europe is home to many traditional maritime powers. Many of these powers – Britain, France, and Germany – maintain comparatively small but very advanced and professional naval forces. All three powers have identified maritime security capacity building as a key mode of naval engagement with allies and partners in Southeast Asia and the broader Indo-Pacific.<sup>6</sup> Their unique sovereign capacities to assist in building local maritime security capabilities go undoubted but remain uneven due to variations and limits in regional presence and ability to project naval power.<sup>7</sup> After all, physical presence remains critical for building partner capacity. This article takes a close look at each of the three major European powers and their contributions to maritime security capacity building in Southeast Asia. Moreover, a critical assessment of various challenges and limitations in building partner capacities is also included.

### Britain

After leaving the EU, Britain adopted a global outlook – officially known as “Global Britain” – and published the first-in-a-decade “Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy”, in 2018 and 2021 respectively.<sup>8</sup> The two documents identified the Indo-Pacific as the most consequential region of the 21st century. In 1968, London announced the withdrawal of all its military forces “East of Suez”, leaving Britain with only a miniscule physical presence in the Indo-Pacific – at Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean and Brunei in Southeast Asia. Moreover, Singapore’s Sembawang is home to a small logistics facility that supports the Royal Navy’s presence missions in the region.

Nevertheless, Britain maintains an intermittent military presence in the region through its commitments in the Five Powers Defence Arrangements (FPDA) and the Five Eyes intelligence-sharing initiative. These two arrangements also evince London’s closest allies and partners in the region: Australia, New Zealand,

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6. As is evident in each state’s Indo-Pacific strategies. See, footnote 5.

7. Ibid.

8. See, House of Commons (UK). 2018. Global Britain. (<https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmfaff/780/780.pdf>); and UK Government. March 2021. Global Britain in a Competitive Age: The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy. ([https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/975077/Global\\_Britain\\_in\\_a\\_Competitive\\_Age\\_the\\_Integrated\\_Review\\_of\\_Security\\_Defence\\_Development\\_and\\_Foreign\\_Policy.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/975077/Global_Britain_in_a_Competitive_Age_the_Integrated_Review_of_Security_Defence_Development_and_Foreign_Policy.pdf)).

Singapore, and Malaysia. Japan and South Korea are also increasingly targeted with defence engagement.<sup>9</sup> Working through the existing multilateral security arrangements, Britain is able to collaborate with Australia and New Zealand in building capacities in areas of mutually shared interests, including in maritime security, counterterrorism, hybrid warfare, and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief.<sup>10</sup> In addition, Britain participates in various regional maritime security exercises as an observer, aspires to membership or observer status in the region's primary multilateral defence arrangement, the ADMM-Plus, and has sent an International Liaison Officer (ILO) to the Information Fusion Centre (IFC) in Singapore.<sup>11</sup> Bilaterally, Britain has continued to strengthen existing regional partnerships with Singapore and Malaysia as well as increased engagement with new partners, such as Vietnam, South Korea, and Japan.

Although Britain has very capable and well-trained armed forces, the military's ever-shrinking size inhibits its capacity to project power far away, thus limiting its ability to maintain a robust presence in the Indo-Pacific. The "Global Britain in a Competitive Age" document sought to ameliorate some of those deficiencies by creating two amphibious Littoral Response Groups (LRG), one of which would deploy to the Indo-Pacific, and by permanent deployment of two patrol boats to the region.<sup>12</sup> If fully materialised, Britain would be better positioned to address existing and future maritime security threats, engage in various regional defence diplomacy activities, and offer capacity building assistance to allies and partners. Whether Britain will be able to maintain the "Global Britain" momentum across several other interests and operational demands closer to home remains to be seen. Similarly, it is not certain that Britain can follow through with its ambitious naval build-up plan, leaving many to doubt London's future power projection capability. Nevertheless, Britain's expertise and experience in tackling various maritime security, terrorist, and other cross-border and non-state threats is significant and offers opportunities to tap into that capacity both multilaterally and bilaterally.

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9. UK Government. March 2021. *Global Britain in a Competitive Age: The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy*.

10. *Ibid.*

11. *Ibid.*

12. Childs, Nick. 25 June 2021. *UK Littoral Response Group: The Shape of Things to Come?* IISS: Military Balance Blog. (<https://www.iiss.org/blogs/military-balance/2021/06/uk-littoral-response-group>).

## France

France is undoubtedly the best positioned of any European power to assist in building maritime security capacities in Southeast Asia and the Indo-Pacific. France is the only European power that has maintained a meaningful physical military presence in the Indo-Pacific, with approximately 7,000 troops stationed throughout the vast area.<sup>13</sup> In addition, French defence attaché posts dot the region, engaging regional partners through defence sales, training, and exercises. Importantly, France acted as the prime mover in Europe and the European Union's turn toward the Indo-Pacific.

The French strategy for the region – “France and Security in the Indo-Pacific”, published in 2019 – outlined Paris' security interests and commitments in the mega region.<sup>14</sup> The document identifies India, Australia, and Japan as France's most important Indo-Pacific partners. Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia were also raised as key partners.<sup>15</sup> Others like Vietnam and the Philippines are also targeted with various defence engagement activities like sales and training.<sup>16</sup> With significant economic and strategic interests in the region, and it being home for 1.5 million French citizens, France is committed to the security and stability of the Indo-Pacific. France has also demonstrated her commitment to the region through both frequent naval patrols within the region as well as annual naval task force deployments from mainland France to the Indo-Pacific.

France utilises its unique presence and strong political backing to engage regional partners and build local maritime security capacities. France's contribution to maritime security capacity building in the Indo-Pacific is three-fold: First, France contributes to the regional maritime domain awareness architecture, participates in multilateral maritime security forums and other activities in the region, and initiates bilateral and minilateral dialogues amongst key regional maritime powers.<sup>17</sup> France's capacity building assistance in the region includes various educational

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13. See, Ministry of Defence (France). May 2019. France and Security in the Indo-Pacific. ([https://franceintheus.org/IMG/pdf/France\\_and\\_Security\\_in\\_the\\_Indo-Pacific\\_-\\_2019.pdf](https://franceintheus.org/IMG/pdf/France_and_Security_in_the_Indo-Pacific_-_2019.pdf)).

14. Ibid.

15. Ibid.

16. Author's communication with subject matter experts in Singapore in January 2021.

17. Regaud, Nicolas. 3 April 2020. France's Innovative Maritime Security Engagement in the Indo-Pacific. *The Diplomat*. (<https://thediplomat.com/2020/04/frances-innovative-maritime-security-engagement-in-the-indo-pacific/>).

courses, training, sale of naval capabilities, and, importantly, contribution to regional maritime domain awareness.<sup>18</sup>

Good examples of French leadership and role in building regional maritime security capacity through provision of expertise and know-how is the French central role in helping to set up the Regional Maritime IFC in Madagascar, its chairmanship of the Indian Ocean Region Association (IORA), and placing of International Liaison Officers in IFC-Singapore and IFC-Indian Ocean Region, in New Delhi.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, France is also committed to seeking membership or observer status in the ADMM-Plus and, in particular, its Maritime Security Experts' Working Group. The opposition of some of the "Plus" countries, however, has derailed French participation thus far.<sup>20</sup> Despite resource constraints, France has forged probably the most comprehensive network of maritime security specific dialogues of any middle power in the region, covering practically all aspects of maritime safety and security, thus giving Paris a unique position to act through defence diplomacy and boost French regional influence.

## Germany

Germany, too, aspires to a greater political and security role in the Indo-Pacific commensurate with its economic size and presence in the region, as outlined in the "Policy Guidelines for the Indo-Pacific: Shaping the 21st Century Together" document, published in September 2020.<sup>21</sup> Berlin's rationale for greater security policy engagement in the Indo-Pacific is based on the country's open economy's reliance on free and secure maritime trade routes and growing global interests.<sup>22</sup> Unlike France and Britain, Germany has zero physical military presence in the Indo-Pacific. Moreover, Germany's defence attaché presence is also relatively small, with its focus on defence equipment sales and commercial interests rather than defence diplomacy.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, Germany continues to lack concrete plans for regional

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18. Ibid.

19. Ibid.

20. Author's communication with subject matter experts in Singapore in January 2021.

21. See, Federal Government (Germany). September 2020. Policy Guidelines for the Indo-Pacific: Shaping the 21st Century Together. (<https://www.auswaertigesamt.de/blob/2380514/f9784f7e3b3fa1bd7c5446d274a4169e/200901-indo-pazifik-leitlinien--1--data.pdf>).

22. The Federal Government (Germany). September 2020. Policy Guidelines for the Indo-Pacific: Shaping the 21st Century Together, p. 35. (<https://www.auswaertigesamt.de/blob/2380514/f9784f7e3b3fa1bd7c5446d274a4169e/200901-indo-pazifik-leitlinien--1--data.pdf>).

23. Author's communication with a subject matter expert in Singapore on 5 March 2021.

defence engagement.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, Germany's future defence diplomacy efforts in the region will require substantial workups before any activity can materialise. Nevertheless, to demonstrate Berlin's seriousness, a German Navy frigate was despatched to the region in August 2021 with an intention to make the deployment an annual affair.<sup>25</sup> During the ship's presence in the region, small-scale training and exercises with regional partners were conducted. Germany, however, will need to start from low-key yet important engagements to build trust and interoperability with partners in the region.

Importantly, Germany's security and defence engagement in the region is conducted primarily through the regional multilateral fora. Berlin placed an International Liaison Officer in the IFC in Singapore and seeks membership in the IFC-IOR.<sup>26</sup> Germany works through these multinational arrangements to identify areas of mutual interest and where Germany could contribute to the building of regional maritime security capacities. Germany has also voiced its interest in applying for observer status in the ADMM-Plus.<sup>27</sup> However, prospects of gaining even observer status in the region's primary multilateral cooperative defence arrangement seem bleak due to Chinese and Russian resistance.<sup>28</sup> Germany also participates and supports the EU in the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) through its expertise and security policy contributions.<sup>29</sup>

Bilaterally, Germany already engages in various maritime security capacity building activities in the region, most notably in providing training courses on the law of the sea and through participation as an observer in regional maritime security exercises.<sup>30</sup> Importantly, through Germany's participation in multiple international and multilateral maritime security and defence initiatives, from the EU's Operation Atalanta to the mission to monitor UN sanctions against North Korea, the country already works closely with a number of regional partners, including Japan, South Korea, India, Singapore and Indonesia.<sup>31</sup> In Southeast Asia, Singapore,

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24. Ibid.

25. Ibid.

26. The Federal Government (Germany), September 2020.

27. The Federal Ministry of Defence (Germany), 9 December 2020. For Stability, Prosperity and a Rules-Based Order in the Indo-Pacific Region. (<https://www.bmvg.de/en/news/indo-pacific-region-for-a-rule-based-order-4912214>).

28. Author's communication with a subject matter expert in Singapore on 5 March 2021.

29. The Federal Government (Germany), p. 25. September 2020.

30. Ibid.

31. Ibid.

Indonesia, Malaysia, and Vietnam are identified as key partners and targets for capacity building assistance.

A major hurdle in advancing future security cooperation in the region, however, is the slow bureaucratic process involved in the planning and vetting of potential regional partners and activities. Moreover, the German public remains generally very resistant against any use of the country's armed forces overseas.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, due to the German government's vigorous vetting process, upholding (very) strong focus on democratic development and the human rights situation in each and every partner country, many Southeast Asian countries especially are left outside of Berlin's defence engagement.<sup>33</sup>

## The European Union

The EU is traditionally not seen as a "hard" security actor due to the lack of significant military capabilities of its own. Nevertheless, the EU has a growing interest in assuming a role in safeguarding global security and stability.<sup>34</sup> The EU is emerging as an important maritime security actor internationally and it has plenty to offer. However, most of the proposed projects remain in their infancy. The focus of the EU has long resided at Europe's own near abroad as well as the maritime security hotspots around the African continent and the Middle East, most prominently in the Gulf of Guinea and the Gulf of Aden. The relative success of these missions demonstrated the wealth of expertise the EU and its member states have accumulated in addressing global maritime security challenges. As part of or adjacent to these missions, the EU and its member states have helped build local technical and legal capacities and shared best practices. The EU's two most important contributions to maritime security capacity building have included activities centred on creating the "Common Information Sharing Environment" (CISE) and in improving maritime domain awareness more generally.<sup>35</sup>

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32. See, for example, Kaim, Markus and Vorrath, Judith. 2018. Missions in a Changing World: The Bundeswehr and Its Operations Abroad. SWP Research Paper RP06. (<https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/the-bundeswehr-and-its-operations-abroad/>).

33. Author's communication with a subject matter expert in Singapore on 5 March 2021.

34. See, European External Action Service (EEAS). June 2016. Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe - A Global Strategy For the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy. ([https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/top\\_stories/pdf/eugs\\_review\\_web.pdf](https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/top_stories/pdf/eugs_review_web.pdf)).

35. Pejsova, Eva. December 2019. The EU As a Maritime Security Provider. ISS Brief No. 13. ([https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/Brief%2013%20Maritime\\_0.pdf](https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/Brief%2013%20Maritime_0.pdf)).



The adoption of two documents, “Enhanced EU Security Cooperation in and with Asia” and the EU’s “Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific”, published in 2018 and 2021 respectively, gave the Indo-Pacific new importance in the EU’s foreign and security policy outlook.<sup>36</sup> To improve the EU’s engagement with partners in the region, the EU Commission accepted the extension and adaptation of the Union’s two model maritime security projects, the “Coordinated Maritime Presences” (CMP) programme and the “Critical Maritime Routes” (CRIMARIO) programme, to South and Southeast Asia.

## Coordinated Maritime Presences

To create and sustain a naval presence in the Indo-Pacific, the EU has considered emulating its successful earlier launch of the “Coordinated Maritime Presences” (CMP) programme in the Gulf of Guinea as a model for a European naval task force for the Indo-Pacific. Based on “pooling” and “sharing” of capabilities and mutual interests, EU member states can contribute to the rotating maritime task force deployments to the region. The task force would greatly improve EU visibility in the Indo-Pacific and help address “soft” maritime security challenges, such as piracy, maritime terrorism, and Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) fishing. Simultaneously, the Indo-Pacific task group would demonstrate Europe’s power projection capability and interest in safeguarding free and open sea routes. It could also help build regional maritime security capacities through various educational courses, training, exercises, and information sharing. An Indo-Pacific naval task group could thus act as a usable defence diplomacy leg for the EU’s future Indo-Pacific strategy for regional cooperation.

## CRIMARIO-I/-II

Another viable tool to raise the EU’s profile as a maritime security actor in the Indo-Pacific is the “Critical Maritime Routes” programme, or CRIMARIO. Launched in 2009 by the EU Commission, CRIMARIO-I (2015-2019) was aimed at improving regional maritime domain awareness in the Western Indian Ocean through information sharing and capacity building.<sup>37</sup> Following the successful CRIMARIO-I programme,

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36. See, Council of the European Union. 15 May 2018. Enhanced Security Cooperation In And With Asia - Council Conclusions. (<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/35456/st09265-re01-en18.pdf>); and Council of the European Union. 16 April 2021. Council Conclusions on an EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific. (<https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-7914-2021-INIT/en/pdf>).

37. See, *EU CRIMARIO* at <https://www.crimario.eu/en/>.

a successor – CRIMARIO-II – was launched in April 2020. CRIMARIO-II is a four-year project funded by the EU and implemented by France.<sup>38</sup> The project has a significantly more ambitious agenda, with an objective to expand the project from the Western Indian Ocean (CRIMARIO-I) to the Eastern Indian Ocean and, finally, to Southeast Asia. The programme's goal is to help expand EU influence in the region and assist selected partners build sovereign maritime security capacities. The EU has identified six target countries for the programme, including India, Indonesia, Japan, South Korea, and Vietnam.<sup>39</sup> Southeast Asian countries have already shown their interest in the project and European expertise in maritime domain awareness as well as legal questions and institution-building expertise.<sup>40</sup>

Amid the promises of these programmes many challenges remain for the EU's future regional engagement: First, the relative unfamiliarity with the region and its states' unique maritime security challenges and needs; Relatedly, second, the regional participants have all very different local circumstances and interests and, thus, require different means and resources to manage. This will endanger making the programme not one but several different programmes; Third, there is still a wide gap between political will and the reality of implementation of the EU projects; Fourth, the EU projects often lack continuity. For example, the CRIMARIO programme is thought to last four years, after which there is no certainty about the continuation of the processes created; The fifth challenge is the available resources and interests. Since France is practically the only EU power with any meaningful presence in the region it is also the best positioned to assume the lead in the implementation of the EU-funded projects. This, however, raises questions as to whose interests the project serves – French or the EU's? Lastly, the states targeted in the CRIMARIO programme already possess significant maritime capabilities, save Indonesia, raising further questions about the project's rationality and interests.<sup>41</sup>

### 3. CONCLUSION

This article has demonstrated the immense wealth of expertise and know-how Europe has in the field of maritime security and the myriad threats arising from the

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38. Ibid.

39. Author's communication with an EU official in Singapore on 1 February 2021.

40. Pejsova, Eva. December 2019.

41. More appropriate target countries would be those actors with negligible maritime assets and resources like, for example, the Philippines and Malaysia.

maritime environment. Leading Europe's push toward the Indo-Pacific, the region's major powers' – France, Germany, and Britain – sovereign capacities offer plenty of new opportunities for building regional maritime security capacities, ranging from tackling illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing, maritime piracy, and counter-terrorism to hybrid warfare and cybersecurity issues. Similarly, the EU is rapidly raising its profile as an international maritime security actor, directly combating maritime security threats at Europe's near abroad and providing funding, expertise, and training to various agencies further afield. Europe's interest of becoming a network security provider in Southeast Asia and the Indo-Pacific adds to both opportunities and challenges. The EU can summon unrivalled expertise and resources made available by its member states as well as the Commission. The big challenge facing the European powers and the EU, however, will be in the coordination between different assisting countries and other agents to avoid unnecessary duplication of efforts. Another set of challenges will be the local buy-in to the European projects as well as European actors' unfamiliarity with the region and its unique local needs and interests. Although some actors have long-established inroads in the region, such as France and Britain, they still face tough competition from the more active capacity building assistance providers like the United States, Japan, and Australia, as well as rising ones like China, India, and even Russia. Despite the problems ahead, Europe has a lot to offer in the maritime security field and reception has appeared overwhelmingly positive thus far.

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