

European Approaches to the Indo-Pacific: Same, Same, but Different

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INTRODUCTION

European countries have been comparatively late in adopting the concept of the Indo-Pacific. The idea of seeing the two oceans as one contiguous space was first introduced by then Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe when he spoke in the Indian parliament in August 2007. Over the following years, Australia, India and the United States also started to use the term *Indo-Pacific* in official documents on foreign and security policy and developed their own distinct understandings and strategies for this new geo-economic and geo-political construct.¹ The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) published their own “Outlook on the Indo-Pacific” in 2019.²

In Europe, France was the first member state of the European Union (EU) to use the Indo-Pacific concept, in 2018, with Germany and the Netherlands following suit in fall 2020. The UK announced its own “tilt” to the Indo-Pacific in spring 2021.³ Based on the initiative of France, Germany, and the Netherlands with some other

1. See for a systematic comparison of the different Indo-Pacific concepts Heiduk, Felix and Gudrun Wacker. 2020. From Asia-Pacific to Indo-Pacific. Significance, Implementation and Challenges. SWP Research Paper 9. (https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/research_papers/2020RP09_IndoPacific.pdf).

2. ASEAN.org. 2019. ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific. 23 June 2019. (<https://asean.org/asean-outlook-on-the-indo-pacific/>).

3. See HM Government. 2021. Global Britain in a competitive age. The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy. March 2021. (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). For the military posture of the UK, including in the Indo-Pacific, see Ministry of Defence. March 2021. Defence in a competitive age. (https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/974661/CP411_-_Defence_Command_Plan.pdf).

member states supporting the idea, the EU has been working on an Indo-Pacific strategy, which was published in mid-September 2021.⁴

For France, President Emmanuel Macron set the tone for his country's approach to the Indo-Pacific in his speech on Garden Island near Sydney in May 2018.⁵ Four official papers have been published by the French government after that, two by the Ministry of Defence and one by the Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs in 2019.⁶ The latest and most comprehensive one by the French government came out in July 2021.⁷ It goes without saying that the two documents published by the Ministry of Defence are more narrowly focused on the security dimension of France's role in the Indo-Pacific region, while the other two documents also cover other areas like investment and trade, development cooperation and cultural and scientific cooperation. The September 2020 *Policy guidelines for the Indo-Pacific*⁸ promulgated by the German government was approved by the Cabinet and therefore represents a "whole-of-government" approach with all relevant ministries contributing. The Netherlands followed not long after Germany in November 2020 with a short and concise non-paper titled "Indo-Pacific: Guidelines for strengthen-

4. The EU High Representative Josep Borrell outlined his ideas in March 2021 in a blog titled "The EU needs a strategic approach for the Indo-Pacific". 12 March 2021. (https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage_en/94898/The%20EU%20needs%20a%20strategic%20approach%20for%20the%20Indo-Pacific). The EU published Council Conclusions in April 2021 and a Joint Communication in September 2021: Council of the European Union. 2021. EU strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific. Council Conclusions. 7914/21. 16 April 2021. (<https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-7914-2021-INIT/en/pdf>); European Commission. 2021. Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council. The EU strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific. Brussels, 16 September 2021. JOIN (2021) 24 final. (https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/jointcommunication_2021_24_1_en.pdf).

5. No transcript of this speech is available, but a video can be accessed on the website of the Elysée Palace here: Discours à Garden Island, base navale a Sydney. 3 May 2018. (<https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2018/05/03/discours-a-garden-island-base-navale-de-sydney>).

6. Ministère des Armées. 2019. France's Defence Strategy in the Indo-Pacific. May 2019. (<https://www.defense.gouv.fr/content/download/559608/9684004/file/France's%20Defence%20Strategy%20in%20the%20Indo-Pacific%20-%202019.pdf>). Ministère des Armées. 2019. France and Security in the Indo-Pacific. June 2019. (https://franceintheus.org/IMG/pdf/France_and_Security_in_the_Indo-Pacific_-_2019.pdf). Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires étrangères. 2019. French Strategy in the Indo-Pacific. For an inclusive Indo-Pacific. (<https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/asia-and-oceania/the-indo-pacific-region-a-priority-for-france>).

7. Gouvernement. July 2021. France's Indo-Pacific Strategy. (https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/en_a4_indopacifique_v2_rvb_cle432726.pdf).

8. The Federal Government. 2020. Policy guidelines for the Indo-Pacific. Germany-Europe-Asia. Shaping the 21st century together. September 2020. (<https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/blob/2380514/f9784f7e3b3fa1bd7c5446d274a4169e/200901-indo-pazifik-leitlinien--1--data.pdf>).

ing Dutch and EU cooperation with partners in Asia”.⁹ Both the German and the Dutch papers explicitly state that they are to be understood as contributions to a future EU position on the Indo-Pacific.

This paper will focus on the commonalities of and the differences between the French, German and Dutch approaches to the Indo-Pacific. It will also cover the UK’s Indo-Pacific “tilt” as a part of “Global Britain” in comparison to the three EU member states. In the third part, we will look at the present state and progress made within the context of the new Indo-Pacific concepts. This includes the new trilateral security cooperation between Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States, under the acronym AUKUS, which was announced on 15 September 2021. The possible impact of this event for the French and EU position in the Indo-Pacific will be discussed in the conclusions.

1. COMMONALITIES BETWEEN FRANCE, GERMANY, AND THE NETHERLANDS¹⁰

Analysis and assessment of the Indo-Pacific region

The three EU member states share the general assessment of the Indo-Pacific region and its importance for the EU. The official papers issued by the three governments all underline the economic and strategic significance of the Indo-Pacific. Even though there are of course differences in the exact wording, the main points can be summarised as follows: The global economic and geo-political centres of gravity have shifted to this region. Countries in the Indo-Pacific contribute about two thirds to global growth. The Indian and Pacific Oceans are not only important due to the percentage of global energy and goods that are passing through the sea lanes here, but also due to the fact that the region has recently also become the main theatre of the growing strategic rivalry between China and the United States. It will therefore be crucial for the future of the international order.

For the three member states and the EU as a whole the Indo-Pacific region is of growing significance because of their strong economic, political, and in the case of

9. An English translation of the Dutch paper can be downloaded here: Indo-Pacific: Guidelines for strengthening Dutch and EU cooperation with partners in Asia. 13 November 2020. (<https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/publicaties/2020/11/13/indo-pacific-een-leidraad-voor-versterking-van-de-nederlandse-en-eu-samenwerking-met-partners-in-azie>).

10. In the following, bracketed page numbers refer to the official papers of the three countries. In the case of France, they refer to the most recent and comprehensive published in July 2021: France’s Indo-Pacific Strategy, if not indicated otherwise.

France, also military, links to the region and the challenges to the rules-based order they observe there.

Interests, principles, objectives, and partners

The documents issued by the three member states list their priorities or main pillars of their respective approaches to the Indo-Pacific.

France: The French strategy rests on four main pillars (pp. 3f.): security and defence (freedom of navigation and overflight), economy (connectivity of physical and digital infrastructure), promotion of effective multilateralism (based on the rule of law and the rejection of coercion) and commitment to common goods (focused on climate, biodiversity, ocean governance). Additionally, the French paper underlines that the Indo-Pacific “must be one of the main priorities on [the] European agenda” (p. 4).

Germany: The first part the German *Guidelines* addresses Germany’s interests (pp. 9f.) and principles, but the distinction between interests and principles is not always clear. The eight “interests” are: peace and security, diversifying and deepening relations (avoiding unilateral dependencies), neither a unipolar nor a bipolar regional order, open shipping routes, open markets and free trade, digital transformation and connectivity, protect our planet, and access to fact-based information. Seven “principles” are guiding the German approach to the region (pp. 11f.): European action, multilateralism, the rules-based order, United Nations Development Goals, human rights, inclusivity (no containment, no decoupling strategies), and partnership among equals (cooperating with Indo-Pacific partners in third countries). Based on these interests and principles, the *Guidelines* move on to more concrete initiatives in seven areas (pp. 13-19): strengthening multilateralism; tackling climate change, protecting the environment; strengthening peace, security and stability; promoting human rights and the rule of law; strengthening rules-based, fair and sustainable free trade; rules-based networking and digital transformation of regions and markets; and bringing people together through culture, education and science.

The Netherlands: The Dutch paper identifies six areas in which the Netherlands and the EU should become more active, and distinguishes clearly between what should be done by the EU (pp. 4-8) and what the Netherlands is prepared to contribute, either by national efforts or by joining EU activities or smaller coalitions of EU member states (pp. 8-10). The six topics are: security and stability, a framework for cooperation with democratic, like-minded countries in Asia, sustainable trade and economies, effective multilateralism and the international legal order, sustainable

connectivity, and climate change and the Sustainable Development Goals as global challenges.

While there are some notable differences between the three countries in terms of ranking, emphasis and structuring of specific areas of cooperation, there are core topics recurring in all of the documents. The four pillars in the French paper summarise these focal points in the most concise way. A high degree of congruence can also be found between the three countries when it comes to the core regional partners they intend to deepen cooperation with. Japan, Australia and India – all of which had already formulated their own Indo-Pacific strategies before the Europeans – constitute a first tier. Partnering with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and participating more actively in ASEAN-centred regional organisations are “natural” choices, because strengthening multilateralism figures prominently in the approaches of the EU as well as the three member states. Other “like-minded” countries mentioned as partners are South Korea and New Zealand. However, Taiwan is not mentioned despite its credentials as a democracy. This can be explained by the fact that China claims the island for itself and sees everything to do with it as an “internal affair”. And while not denying the challenges to the regional (and global) order posed by China’s rise, France, Germany and the Netherlands present their approaches to the Indo-Pacific as “inclusive”, declaring their willingness to work with all countries in the region, including China, mainly due to its importance as an economic partner and for tackling global challenges like climate change and arms control.¹¹

With respect to China, there is a notable difference between the French documents published in 2019 (*For an inclusive Indo-Pacific*) and in 2021 (*France’s Indo-Pacific Strategy*): while the former devotes a paragraph to “strengthening and rebalancing [the] comprehensive strategic partnership with China” (p. 31), the latter does not mention China anymore in the chapter on France’s partnerships. It is also more outspoken on China’s behaviour, which is seen as a threat to peace and stability in the region. This change reflects a broader shift that can be observed in the European Union towards a China policy that gives more emphasis to the “systemic rival” dimension of the relations.¹² The Dutch non-paper, and even more so the

11. However, the Joint Communication of the EU does mention Taiwan several times, e.g., as a partner on semiconductors (p. 6), on trade and investment (p. 7) and on countering illegal fishing (p. 9).

12. The Strategic Outlook of the EU on China published in March 2019 had characterised China as a cooperation and negotiation partner, a competitor and a systemic rival of the EU. See High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. 2019. Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the European Council and the Council. EU-China – A strategic outlook. JOIN (2019) 5 final. 12 March 2019. (<https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/communication-eu-china-a-strategic-outlook.pdf>), p. 1.

German *Guidelines*, tend to avoid naming China directly when addressing the flash points and conflicts in the region, like the disputes in the South and East China Seas, but both governments have also moved towards a more critical attitude vis-à-vis China. The Dutch government went through a review process of its China policy and published its new position in May 2019.¹³ How Germany's China policy will evolve in the post-Merkel era will depend on the coalition government to be formed after the federal election in September 2021. However, all three countries converge in trying to avoid any large-scale decoupling from China and openly joining a US-led "united front" against Beijing. The overall goal of their Indo-Pacific strategies is to diversify and deepen partnerships with regional countries other than China, especially with middle powers like Japan, Australia, India, and with some states in Southeast Asia.

2. MAIN DIFFERENCES

Points of departure: "resident nation" versus rules-oriented trading nation

The major difference between the French position, on the one hand, and the German and Dutch, on the other, is their starting point and main rationale for a stronger engagement in the Indo-Pacific.

Due to its overseas territories, France sees itself as a resident power in the region: Paris has authority over islands spanning from the eastern coast of Africa (La Réunion, Mayotte, Scattered Islands) to the South Pacific (New Caledonia, French Polynesia, Wallis and Futuna) to as far as the western coast of Central America (Clipperton island). About 1.6 million French citizens live in these overseas territories and 200,000 more in other countries of the Indo-Pacific region. Three quarters of the vast French Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) are located in the Indian and Pacific Oceans. France has about 7,000 military personnel permanently stationed there, and the region is divided into five military commands. All papers published on the Indo-Pacific by the French government state that protecting French citizens and French sovereignty is the highest priority for the country in the region. After Brexit, France is the only EU member state with territories in the Indo-Pacific. It is now also the only nuclear power and the only EU country with a permanent seat in the United Nations (UN) Security Council. These three factors provide for a unique

13. See Government of the Netherlands. 2019. The Netherlands and China: a new balance. May 2019. Available for download here: <https://www.government.nl/documents/policy-notes/2019/05/15/china-strategy-the-netherlands--china-a-new-balance>.

position, setting France apart not only from Germany and the Netherlands, but from the rest of the EU as well.

In contrast, Germany and the Netherlands put forth two main arguments explaining their heightened interest in the region: First, as trading nations they depend on open sea lanes and open markets, and second, as countries committed to effective multilateralism, they are interested in maintaining a functioning rules-based order, regionally and globally. Both see these interests challenged by the trends unfolding in the Indo-Pacific. Trade/open markets and multilateralism/a functioning regional order are also high on the agenda of the EU. Therefore, the points raised by Germany and the Netherlands are more compatible with the interests of the EU as a whole and the majority of member states than the special national position of France.¹⁴

The different points of departure of the three EU member states also explain the differences in the geographical definition of the Indo-Pacific space: For France, it ranges from the eastern coast of Africa all the way to the South Pacific, covering all its territories in the Indian and Pacific Oceans. The Netherlands have a narrower understanding, stating that “[t]he region extends from Pakistan to the islands of the Pacific” (p. 2). The German *Guidelines* points out that different actors have different understandings, but for Germany, it is “the entire region characterised by the Indian Ocean and the Pacific” (p. 8). However, all maps in the German document (pp. 62ff.) focus on countries in the Indo-Pacific east of and including Pakistan, very similar to the Netherlands’ definition.

Cooperation with the US and the Quad, role of NATO

In the Indo-Pacific documents issued by the three EU member states the possibility of cooperation with the United States in the region is hardly mentioned. The Dutch paper just calls for EU support for US efforts to negotiate a trilateral arms control agreement with Russia and China (p. 5) and also encourages the EU to consider joining the “Blue Dot Network” (p. 7), an initiative by the US, Japan and Australia to promote quality standards for infrastructure projects.¹⁵ In the German *Guidelines*,

14. However, overseas territories of EU member states are also linked to the EU. The EU differentiates between outermost regions, which are an integral part of the EU, and overseas territories, which are neither part of the common market, nor EU territory. Of the French territories in the Indo-Pacific, La Réunion and Mayotte are outermost regions; the rest are overseas territories. See EU & outermost regions. (https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/policy/themes/outermost-regions/), and Overseas countries and territories. (https://ec.europa.eu/international-partnerships/where-we-work/overseas-countries-and-territories_en).

15. U.S. Department of State. [n.d.] Blue Dot Network. (<https://www.state.gov/blue-dot-network/>).

the US comes up as a member of the ASEAN-centred security organisations of the regions (pp. 24, 25) and in the context of the technological competition between China and the US (p. 56), but there is no mention of trans-Atlantic cooperation or coordination in the Indo-Pacific. Only the latest French document includes a passage declaring the intention to achieve more interoperability with the armed forces of France's "major partners in the region, in particular India, Australia, Japan and the United States." (p. 48)

The fact that the United States and trans-Atlantic cooperation in the Indo-Pacific do not play a prominent role in the earlier French and the German and Dutch documents can be explained by two factors: First, as outlined above, the European approach is an inclusive one that sees China not only as a part of the region, but also as an important economic partner and partner on global issues like climate change and arms control. Therefore, they are careful to avoid giving the impression that European countries or the EU are part of a US-led anti-China coalition. Second, at the time of the publication of the German *Guidelines* the US presidential elections had not taken place yet: under a second presidency of Donald Trump, the potential for cooperation with the US in the Indo-Pacific would have been foreseeably limited.

The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (in short: Quad) between the US, Japan, Australia and India has been given a new push in recent years.¹⁶ A first summit at leader level was held in March 2021, which in addition to underlining the commitment to a "free and open Indo-Pacific" also focused on plans by the Quad to cooperate on health, climate change, as well as critical and emerging technologies.¹⁷ Neither the German *Guidelines* nor the Dutch non-paper mentions the Quad. The French document in fact refers to a different Quad, namely the "Pacific Quad", a format in which France has been cooperating with Australia, New Zealand and the United States (pp. 39, 46, 54). This mini-lateral grouping operates in the South Pacific to conduct maritime surveillance and fight illegal fishing.

16. The Quad originally formed as an ad-hoc group after the 2004 tsunami in South and Southeast Asia. The four countries then started a short-lived security dialogue in 2007, which was revived in 2017. On the genesis of the Quad, see, e.g., Buchan, Patrick Gerard and Rimland, Benjamin. March 2020. Defining the Diamond. Past, Present, and Future of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue. CSIS Briefs. (https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/200312_BuchanRimland_QuadReport_v2%5B6%5D.pdf?fuRA6mwjWYKqROtSmJD4u5ct.vjldkZv).

17. The White House. 12 March 2021. Quad leaders' joint statement: "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/>).

However, in April 2021, France conducted for the third time a military exercise called La Pérouse in the Bay of Bengal. With the Indian navy joining this exercise in 2021, it included for the first time France and all members of the Quad.¹⁸

As for NATO, there is no mention of the alliance in the French documents at all. In contrast, the German (pp. 16, 39) and Dutch (p. 6) papers raise the issue of NATO's partners across the globe and express their support for strengthening the existing links with countries in the Indo-Pacific (Australia, New Zealand, Japan and South Korea).

Multilateral, multipolar, mini-lateral?

All three EU member states are part of the "Alliance for Multilateralism", which was launched mainly in response to the US withdrawal from multilateral organisations under the presidency of Donald Trump. While they all underline the importance of (effective) multilateralism and regional organisations, especially those centred on ASEAN, there is a difference in their approach to mini-lateral formats.

The *Guidelines* states as one of Germany's interests that the Indo-Pacific is "neither unipolar, nor bipolar" (p. 9). So far, no intentions have been expressed to join existing or to create new ad-hoc mini-lateral groupings by either Germany or the Netherlands. France mentions the importance of ASEAN as being central for building a "multipolar Asia" (p. 5). Paris does not have a problem with cooperating within mini-lateral formats. In his Garden Island speech, Macron proposed a new strategic axis, Paris-Delhi-Canberra,¹⁹ and France takes part in several mini-lateral initiatives, like the above-mentioned "Pacific Quad" and the FRANZ (France, Australia, New Zealand) agreement, focusing on disaster relief.

However, the three countries have demonstrated that they are willing to work with partners inside and outside the European Union. For example, in September 2020, the UK, France and Germany presented their position on China's maritime claims in the South China Sea to the United Nations in a Note Verbale.²⁰ And as

18. See Dubey, Mrityunjaya and Parpiani, Kashish. 4 April 2021. La Pérouse – Quad naval exercise and India's strategic partnership with France. (<https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/la-perouse-quad-naval-exercise-and-indias-strategic-partnership-with-france/>). See also French Naval Exercise La Perouse: India Joins to Make it Full QUAD. 3 April 2021. (<https://www.financialexpress.com/defence/french-naval-exercise-la-perouse-india-joins-to-make-it-full-quad/2226137/>).

19. See on the Paris-Delhi-Canberra axis: Mohan, C. Raja and Medcalf, Rory. 8 May 2018. New Indo-Pacific Axis. The Indian Express. (<https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/emmanuel-macron-india-france-relations-paris-delhi-canberra-axis-malcolm-turnbull-narendra-modi-5167221/>).

20. See Note Verbale. UK NV No. 162/20. New York. 16 September 2020. (https://www.un.org/depts/los/clcs_new/submissions_files/mys_12_12_2019/2020_09_16_GBR_NV_UN_001.pdf).

members of the G7, France and Germany approved the summit communiqué in June 2021 in which the importance of a free and open Indo-Pacific was stressed and concerns about maintaining peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait as well as about the situation in the East and South China Seas were addressed with unprecedented frankness.²¹ The flexibility to work within variable frameworks and formats is essential, since EU decisions on foreign and security policy still require unanimity. This often leads to watered-down statements reflecting the lowest common denominator among member states.

Domestic debate

Since the French strategy in the Indo-Pacific is solidly rooted in national interests, there is no critical public debate contesting that France has to stay engaged in the region. In Germany, the publication of the *Guidelines* was mainly discussed among specialists for Asia. Of the political parties running in the election on 25 September 2021, all party programmes touch upon relations with China, but only the Green Party devoted an entire paragraph to the Indo-Pacific, while other parties just mention it in one sentence or not at all. The most controversial issue discussed in the German media and public was the deployment of the frigate *Bayern* to the region (see below). In general, for many member states of the EU, the Indo-Pacific is not very high on the agenda.²² If the EU and its member states are not forced to pay more attention because of China's growing assertiveness in the region, it will therefore be a challenge to mobilise EU-wide support for a sustainable and meaningful implementation of its Indo-Pacific strategy.

3. THE UK'S "TILT" TO THE INDO-PACIFIC

Point of departure

In the late 1960s, the UK announced its withdrawal from the region "East of Suez", but several countries in the Indo-Pacific remained members of the Commonwealth. The UK also maintained a limited military presence in the region (Brunei,

21. See Carbis Bay G7 Summit Communiqué. 13 June 2021. (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/06/13/carbis-bay-g7-summit-communique/>), paragraph 60.

22. See the survey of the European Council on Foreign Relations: Grare, Frédéric and Reuter, Manisha. September 2021. Moving closer: European views of the Indo-Pacific. (<https://ecfr.eu/wp-content/uploads/Moving-closer-European-views-of-the-Indo-Pacific.pdf>).

Singapore, Diego Garcia) and continued its participation in the Five Powers Defence Arrangements (FPDA)²³.

The Indo-Pacific “tilt” announced by the British government in the document *Integrated Review* in March 2021 is part of the UK’s post-Brexit “Global Britain” vision. The geo-economic and geo-strategic importance of the Indo-Pacific region and its significance for the UK are mentioned several times in the document – sharing the overall assessment also found in the French, German and Dutch documents. The actual framework for the Indo-Pacific tilt comprises only a short sub-chapter (pp. 66f.). It outlines three areas of deeper engagement – economic opportunities (new trade arrangements, digital and technological innovation and standards, renewables and green tech, supply chains), security (especially freedom of navigation), and values (open societies, international rules and norms, girls’ education, climate change) – and briefly addresses the UK’s overarching goal, role, actions and presence in the region.

Principles, objectives, partners

The *Integrated Review* sets a clear goal for the UK: “By 2030, we will be deeply engaged in the Indo-Pacific as the European partner with the broadest, most integrated presence in support of mutually-beneficial trade, shared security and values.” (p. 66) This is quite ambitious considering the limited capabilities deployed by London so far in the region and the fact that the UK does not have any overseas territories in the Indian or Pacific Ocean with the exception of Diego Garcia²⁴. Britain intends to sustain and support bilateral and multilateral partnerships (FPDA, ASEAN, Pacific Islands Forum) and also wants to work closer with European partners (France, Germany). The focus of the UK will be on nine areas (p. 67): bilateral trade agreements with Australia and New Zealand as well as an enhanced trade agreement with India plus new trade dialogues; acceding to the

23. The other participants in the FPDA are Malaysia, Singapore, Australia and New Zealand. On the potential of the FPDA in the current situation see Mishra, Rahul and Wang, Peter Brian M. 12 August 2021. The Five Power Defence Arrangements: time for the “quiet achiever” to emerge. The Strategist (ASPI). (<https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/the-five-power-defence-arrangements-time-for-the-quiet-achiever-to-emerge/>).

24. The status of Diego Garcia is controversial, since it was illegally retained by the UK in 1965 from Mauritius. The UK has leased Diego Garcia to the United States until 2036. See in more detail Heiduk, Felix. 24 August 2021. A Delicate Mission: The Frigate Bayern, the Rules-Based International Order and the Status of Diego Garcia. (<https://www.swp-berlin.org/publikation/a-delicate-mission-the-frigate-bayern-the-rules-based-international-order-and-the-status-of-diego-garcia>).

Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP)²⁵; strengthening supply chain resilience; becoming an ASEAN dialogue partner; strengthening security cooperation, including maritime security; cooperating and building capacity on cyber security; tackling climate change; promoting open societies and protecting public goods; and using development assistance more strategically to support these objectives. Deepening science and technology cooperation with the region is seen as central.

China is recognised as an important power in the Indo-Pacific, and the UK declares its intention to adapt to Beijing's growing impact. The UK wants to improve its ability to respond to the systemic challenge posed to security, prosperity and values by China, but also to pursue positive trade and investment relations (p. 22). Overall, the Integrated Review is fairly outspoken in addressing China as a "systemic challenge" not only to the UK, but also its allies and partners (p. 22).

Domestic debate

The debate in the UK on the Indo-Pacific tilt is mainly focused on its military dimension. Questions have been raised as to whether the tilt would divert capabilities from the Euro-Atlantic theatre and/or whether the planned deployment in the region means an overstretch for British armed forces.²⁶

4. STATE OF PLAY AND IMPLEMENTATION

The following part will look at the progress that has already been made or is in the making by the four European countries in going forward with their Indo-Pacific strategies. It will focus on the main developments, since it would go beyond the scope of this paper to list all steps taken within the respective Indo-Pacific frameworks.

France: Over the last years, France has systematically strengthened its security and defence cooperation in the region with a special focus on India, Australia and Japan. It has been a member in security forums in the Pacific, such as the Western Pacific Naval Symposium and the South Pacific Defence Ministers' Meeting, and

25. After the US pulled out of the Trans-Pacific Partnership free trade agreement (TPP) under Donald Trump, the other countries that had negotiated TPP (Australia, Brunei Darussalam, Canada, Chile, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, Peru, New Zealand, Singapore and Vietnam) decided to maintain the agreement as CPTPP in January 2018.

26. See Brooke-Holland, Louisa. 2021. Integrated Review: The defence tilt to the Indo-Pacific. House of Commons Library Briefing Paper 09217. 11 May 2021. (<https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-9217/CBP-9217.pdf>). Chapter on "Risks and opportunities of the tilt", pp. 8-10.

regularly participated in multi-national naval exercises like RIMPAC. It has also been a member of the biannual Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS).

Since the latest Indo-Pacific strategy paper of the French government was published in July 2021, it is also a good indicator of what progress has been made in the two previous years. It has stepped up its presence in the Indian Ocean by becoming a member in the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) in December 2020 and an observer in the Indian Ocean Council (IOC) in March 2020. The IONS, where France will hold the chair for two years, was hosted by the French Navy at La Réunion in June 2021.²⁷ France also gained observer status in ASEANPOL (the Southeast Asian equivalent to Interpol) in 2019 and is a candidate for observer status in a working group of the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting plus (ADMM+). It also plans to accede to the Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia (ReCAAP).

In December 2020 France appointed an ambassador to the Indo-Pacific. In September 2020 and in May 2021, the first trilateral dialogues between France, India and Australia were held.²⁸

Germany: Prior to the publication of the *Guidelines*, Germany had – in contrast to France – not established strong links on security and defence in the region, but it had a solid presence as an economic actor as well as in the fields of development cooperation and cultural and scientific exchanges. The German government published in September 2021 a first progress report on the implementation of the *Guidelines*²⁹ which not only addresses progress made at the national, but also at the EU level during Germany's EU presidency in the second half of 2019, e.g., ASEAN and the EU becoming strategic partners in December 2020.

In April 2021, Germany acceded to the International Solar Alliance initiated by France and India and it became a member of ReCAAP in August.³⁰ The frigate *Bayern* embarked on its half-year patrol and training mission to the Indo-Pacific in May 2021. For the first time, consultations between the German and Japanese foreign

27. See Indian Navy. 2021. 7th Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) 28 June - 1 July 2021, La Réunion, France. (<https://www.indiannavy.nic.in/content/7th-indian-ocean-naval-symposium-ions-28-june-01-july-2021-la-r%C3%A9union-france>).

28. See India-France-Australia Joint Statement on the occasion of the Trilateral Ministerial Dialogue. 5 May 2021. (https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/33845/IndiaFranceAustralia_Joint_Statement_on_the_occasion_of_the_Trilateral_Ministerial_Dialogue_May_04_2021).

29. The Federal Government. 13 September 2021. Progress report on the implementation of the German Government policy guidelines on the Indo-Pacific region. (<https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/blob/2481638/cd9bf25e722b94db263c94e4dc8ec87e/210910-llip-fortschrittsbericht-data.pdf>).

30. The Netherlands, Denmark, Norway and the United Kingdom have participated in ReCAAP for several years.

and defence ministers (“2+2 consultations”) were held in April 2021. In June, the second 2+2 meeting between Germany and Australia took place and the relationship was upgraded to an “enhanced strategic partnership”. The new German Regional Information Centre in Singapore took up its work in August 2021. The German foreign ministry appointed a special representative for South Asia and Indo-Pacific policy and established a small unit to coordinate activities.

The Asia-Pacific Committee of German Business published a position paper on cooperation with the region in May 2021.³¹

The Netherlands: The most visible step the Dutch government has taken after publishing its Indo-Pacific guidelines was the decision to participate with a frigate in the mission of the British carrier strike group which departed to the Indo-Pacific in May 2021.³² The Hague will focus its concrete activities on capacity building in the region and also plans to become a signatory of ASEAN’s Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC).

The UK: Already since 2019, the UK has an ambassador to ASEAN, and in 2020, a Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) director general responsible for the Indo-Pacific was appointed.

In February 2021, the UK officially applied to become a member of free trade agreement CPTPP.

The most visible action taken by the UK was the deployment of the carrier strike group led by HMS *Queen Elizabeth* in May 2021 in the Indo-Pacific (with the participation of a US destroyer, combat aircraft by the US Marine Corps, as well as a Dutch frigate). This “Operation Fortis” is the first British mission of this scale since 1997.³³ London also announced concrete plans for the UK’s future military deployments in the Indo-Pacific: At the end of 2021, two off-shore patrol vessels; in 2023, a Littoral Response Group; and later in the decade, Type 31 frigates.³⁴

31. Asia-Pacific Committee of German Business. May 2021. EU Economic Cooperation with Asia-Pacific. Perspectives of German Business. (<https://www.asien-pazifik-ausschuss.de/en/positions/apa-position-eu-economic-cooperation-with-asia-pacific-perspectives-of-german-business>).

32. See, on the Netherlands, in more detail Okano-Heijmans, Maaiké. 14 July 2021. The Netherlands and the EU turn to the Indo-Pacific. (<https://www.clingendael.org/publication/netherlands-and-eu-turn-indo-pacific>).

33. For some background of the mission see Hayton, Bill. July 2021. The Carrier Strike Group in the South China Sea. Council of Geostrategy Explainer GPE03. (<https://www.geostrategy.org.uk/app/uploads/2021/07/GPE03-27072021.pdf>).

34. Brooke-Holland, Louisa. 2021. Integrated Review: The defence tilt to the Indo-Pacific, p. 3.

In August 2021, the UK became a full dialogue partner of ASEAN.³⁵ It had signed the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) already in 2012, but as a result of Brexit, it lost its formal links to the Southeast Asian grouping, including membership in the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF)³⁶. By becoming a full dialogue partner, the UK expects that it will be able to join not only the ARF, but also other ASEAN-centred forums like the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting plus (ADMM+) and eventually maybe even the East Asia Summit (EAS). With Japan the UK concluded a Maritime Security Arrangement focusing on maritime awareness. It also plans to sign a Memorandum of Understanding on defence logistics with India.

The most important step with possibly far-reaching implications, including for the EU's Indo-Pacific strategy, was announced by the UK together with the US and Australia on 15 September 2021 (more or less at the same time as the EU presented its Indo-Pacific strategy): a new trilateral security partnership with the acronym AUKUS³⁷. In their Joint Statement the three sides declared the intention of this enhanced security partnership as promoting deeper information and technology sharing; fostering deeper integration of security and defense-related science, technology, industrial bases, and supply chains; and deepening cooperation on a range of security and defense capabilities (initially focusing on cyber, artificial intelligence, quantum technologies and additional undersea capabilities). Supporting Australia in acquiring nuclear-powered submarines was the first concrete initiative announced. British Prime Minister Boris Johnson presented AUKUS as Britain's Indo-Pacific "tilt" at work.³⁸

From an EU perspective, this announcement was not only unfortunate in terms of its timing, France especially felt betrayed by the announcement of the submarine deal included in AUKUS, since it had itself concluded an agreement with Australia in 2016. At that time, Australia had specifically asked for diesel-powered submarines. Apparently, France had been given no prior warning that AUKUS was about to be announced. The importance of the Future Submarine programme had even been explicitly praised in a joint statement published after the inaugural 2+2 meeting between the French and Australian foreign and defence ministers on 30 August

35. GOV.UK. 6 August 2021. UK becomes ASEAN dialogue partner. (<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-becomes-asean-dialogue-partner>).

36. The ARF is the only ASEAN-based organisation where the EU was granted full membership.

37. See Joint Leaders Statement on AUKUS. 15 September 2021. (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/09/15/joint-leaders-statement-on-aucus/>).

38. See House of Commons. 16 September 2021. Boris Johnson makes a statement on AUKUS. Guardian News. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=26eolJ4q3ug>).

2021,³⁹ about two weeks before the surprise launching of AUKUS. As a first response, the French foreign and defence ministers expressed their deep displeasure with Australia and the US⁴⁰, and France recalled their ambassadors for consultations (albeit not from the UK). At an informal meeting of the EU foreign ministers on 20 September 2021, the ministers expressed their disappointment about the new partnership and solidarity with France.⁴¹

5. CONCLUSIONS

Despite the differences in their starting points and approaches to the Indo-Pacific, France, Germany and the Netherlands share the general assessment of the region's economic and strategic importance for the EU. They also agree that they can have a bigger and more sustainable impact in the Indo-Pacific region if their national strategies are embedded in an EU framework and their capabilities and resources can be supplemented and augmented by efforts at the EU level and/or by other EU member states. Free trade agreements can only be negotiated by the EU, not by individual member states. All three countries aim at diversifying and deepening their partnerships with countries in the region and with ASEAN, thus reducing their over-dependency on China. They realise that China's ambition and behaviour is a challenge to the regional and the global order. However, they still see China as an important economic partner who needs to be engaged on global issues like climate change, biodiversity and arms control. Cooperation and coordination with partners outside the EU which share similar interests and values in the region like the United States or the United Kingdom, while not figuring prominently in the published documents, are in no way excluded.

What repercussions the announcement of AUKUS will have in this regard and more specifically on French-Australian and EU-Australian relations are not clear at this point. In the short term, it has certainly not made trans-Atlantic cooperation

39. See the joint statement published on the website of the Australian Ministry of Foreign Affairs: Inaugural Australia-France 2+2 Ministerial Consultations. 30 August 2021. (<https://www.foreignminister.gov.au/minister/marise-payne/media-release/inaugural-australia-france-22-ministerial-consultations>).

40. Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires Étrangères. 16 September 2021. Joint communiqué issued by Jean-Yves Le Drian and Florence Parly. (<https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/australia/news/article/joint-communique-issued-by-jean-yves-le-drian-and-florence-parly-16-sept-2021>).

41. See Informal EU Foreign Ministers meeting: Remarks by the High Representative Josep Borrell at the press conference. New York. 20 September 2021. (https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/104404/informal-eu-foreign-ministers-meeting-remarks-high-representative-josep-borrell-press_en).

between the EU and the United States in the region any easier. France might rethink and modify its strategy in the Indo-Pacific since AUKUS has undoubtedly dealt a blow to the Paris-Delhi-Canberra axis in which France has invested a lot of diplomatic and political capital.

With the Indo-Pacific not very high on the political agenda of most EU member states it will be a challenge to ensure a sustainable engagement in the region and to achieve the diversification and strengthening of partnerships beyond China that is at the heart of the strategies.

Visible divisions – e.g., in the stance vis-à-vis China – and lack of trust between the US, the UK and the EU – such as displayed by AUKUS – will make it not only much harder to tackle the many challenges in the Indo-Pacific, ranging from cyber threats to climate change, but also to support partners in the region in making their own sovereign choices free from coercion and interference.

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