



**European Strategic  
Approaches to the Indo-Pacific**

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# European Strategic Approaches to the Indo-Pacific

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## Preface

In Europe, the Indo-Pacific region, in all its political and geographical definitions, has seen a palpable increase in attention over the past couple of years. While allies and friends such as Japan, the US, India or Australia have thought about this strategic space for a while, the newly found attention is undoubtedly a reflection of the region's staggering importance for Europeans and their own foreign policies, too. Population composition and growth, trade volume with Europe, share of global gross domestic product, and infrastructure development are only a few select measurements which make the region's significance unambiguously clear. Via France, the European Union (EU) also has territory in the Indo-Pacific. European engagement in the region is certainly bound to increase and by and large seen as an opportunity for mutual growth and cooperation.

To be sure, the region is also awash with challenges, ranging from security, to social, to environmental, and to economic and political matters of global consequences. Not least as the main theatre for great power rivalry today, many issues are amplified way beyond local contestations. As a consequence of both opportunities and challenges, the Indo-Pacific will be of utmost relevance to the future of the global order, but also to the EU itself. Brussels has acknowledged as much.

By the end of September 2021, three EU member states, France, Germany and the Netherlands, as well as the EU, had published their respective strategies or guidelines on the Indo-Pacific region. The national papers have clearly driven the eventual EU-wide approach, with France and Germany leading from the front and the most important tenets of the national papers reflected in the EU document.

This issue of *Panorama: Insights into Asian and European Affairs* reflects on these strategies, and crucially, their perception in the region. The issue begins by laying out the main commonalities of the European strategies and where they differ – mainly in nuance. The astute comparison in the first article portrays mostly a great consensus on central issues, around which the eventual EU strategy was formed as well. The issue continues by asking the difficult question of how China fits into the strategic approaches of Germany and the EU in particular. A third article then asks how likeminded partners for the EU can be identified amidst increasing bipolarity and great power tensions, and how the EU can be successful in its “quest for like-minded partnerships in the Indo-Pacific”, as described by the author. Before regional perspectives on the EU strategy in particular are discussed, namely from an Indian, Japanese and broader Southeast Asian perspective, the fourth article looks

at “what the EU [is] seeking to accomplish by joining the Indo-Pacific bandwagon, and if and how Brussels can make a difference.”

*Panorama 1/2021* ends by elaborating on concrete areas of cooperation, with three regional experts taking a closer look at European maritime security cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, EU-Indian Partnership on Sustainable Development, as well as EU engagement during the Covid-19 pandemic in Southeast Asia and the potential for what is referred to as a “nexus approach” to managing pandemics and other non-traditional security threats.

I am very pleased to share this *Panorama* issue with you as it offers both analyses on larger strategic questions as well as concrete discussions on specific issues. Most importantly, it offers Asian and European insights, contributing to both the inter- and intra- regional discourse. This exchange continues KAS’ efforts to provide insights and platforms where European and Asian viewpoints meet, expectations are documented, and inter-regional exchange contributes to successful partnerships. I would like to thank the contributing experts for their timely work on this issue and wish all readers an informative and interesting read!



Christian Echle  
Director  
Political Dialogue Asia, Singapore



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

*Gudrun Wacker*

## 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.<sup>1</sup> The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) published their own “Outlook on the Indo-Pacific” in 2019.<sup>2</sup>

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.<sup>3</sup> Based on the initiative of France, Germany, and the Netherlands with some other

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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](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](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](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.<sup>4</sup>

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.<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup> The latest and most comprehensive one by the French government came out in July 2021.<sup>7</sup> 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*<sup>8</sup> 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-

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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](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](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](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](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”.<sup>9</sup> 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 NETHERLANDS<sup>10</sup>**

### **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

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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.<sup>11</sup>

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.<sup>12</sup> The Dutch non-paper, and even more so the

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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.<sup>13</sup> 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

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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.<sup>14</sup>

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.<sup>15</sup> In the German *Guidelines*,

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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/](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](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.<sup>16</sup> 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.<sup>17</sup> 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.

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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](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.<sup>18</sup>

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,<sup>19</sup> 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.<sup>20</sup> And as

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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](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.<sup>21</sup> 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.<sup>22</sup> 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,

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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-communiqué/>), 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)<sup>23</sup>.

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 Garcia<sup>24</sup>. 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

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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)<sup>25</sup>; 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.<sup>26</sup>

## 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

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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.<sup>27</sup> 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.<sup>28</sup>

**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*<sup>29</sup> 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.<sup>30</sup> 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

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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](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.<sup>31</sup>

**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.<sup>32</sup> 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.<sup>33</sup> 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.<sup>34</sup>

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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, Maaïke. 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.<sup>35</sup> 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)<sup>36</sup>. 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 AUKUS<sup>37</sup>. 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.<sup>38</sup>

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

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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,<sup>39</sup> 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 US<sup>40</sup>, 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.<sup>41</sup>

## 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

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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](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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# Germany and the EU's New Indo-Pacific Strategy: China at the Centre of Europe's Engagement?

*Johann Fuhrmann and Heiko Herold*

## INTRODUCTION

The global economic and strategic centre of gravity has been shifting towards the Indo-Pacific region for years. The EU's announcement that it would adopt its own strategy for the region reflected this global shift in power. After months of waiting, the EU finally published its "strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific" on 16 September 2021. Amid rising tensions between China and the US and its Indo-Pacific allies over a broad range of issues, the strategy calls for more multilateralism in various fields of action and stresses that the EU's "approach to the region is one of cooperation, not confrontation."<sup>1</sup> More strongly than expected, the paper criticises China's aggressive behaviour in the region.

However, the publication was overshadowed by the announcement of a new tri-lateral defence pact for the region between the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia called AUKUS. "We regret not having been informed, not having been part of these talks," a surprised Joseph Borrell, the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs, informed the international press.<sup>2</sup> According to the Mercator Institute for China Studies the failure to include Brussels in the alliance reflects Washington's impatience regarding cooperation on countering China along with scepticism that the EU could become a major security partner in the Indo-Pacific re-

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1. European Commission. 2021. Questions and Answers: EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, 16 September 2021. ([https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/QANDA\\_21\\_4709](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/QANDA_21_4709)).

2. Joseph Borrell, quoted in: EU unveils Indo-Pacific strategy in response to US-led pact. 16 September 2021. Deutsche Welle. (<https://www.dw.com/en/eu-unveils-indo-pacific-strategy-in-response-to-us-led-pact/a-59203426>).

gion in the near future.<sup>3</sup> This assessment from Washington may come as a surprise for many Europeans, given that several EU member states like France and Germany have recently increased their presence in the region. However, from a US perspective, these efforts, like the ongoing deployment of German frigate *Bayern* to the Indo-Pacific region, are generally considered half-hearted. This raises the question as to whether the EU is willing and able not only to cooperate with China when possible and compete with it when needed, but also confront it when necessary beyond the NATO obligations of individual member states. Will the EU become a major player in the region? Or will it be primarily the US, its Indo-Pacific allies, and the People's Republic of China that will determine the future of the Indo-Pacific region?

## **THE INDO-PACIFIC DEPLOYMENT OF GERMAN FRIGATE *BAYERN* – A SYMBOL FOR AN AMBIVALENT CHINA POLICY**

On 2 August 2021, the German frigate *Bayern* set sail for a historic mission to the Indo-Pacific region. It was about time. For 19 years, no German warship has shown the flag in these distant waters. “The message is clear: we are standing up for our values and interests together with our partners and allies,” German Minister of Defence Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer stated. “For our partners in the Indo-Pacific,” she added, “it is a reality that sea routes are no longer open and secure, and that claims to territory are being applied by the law of might is right.”<sup>4</sup> However, the message is not as clear as it should be, because the *Bayern* will not conduct freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea or Taiwan Strait like the naval vessels of other NATO countries, including the US, the UK, and France. Explicitly avoiding sailing through these contested international waters could be misinterpreted as an indirect acceptance of China's claims over these maritime regions. In fact, Germany is not yet ready to confront China when necessary. However, Germany's appeasement approach was not even rewarded by the Chinese government: While Chinese warships can freely operate and conduct manoeuvres in the North and Baltic Sea,

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3. MERICS. Transatlantische Zusammenarbeit zu China gerät in unruhiges Fahrwasser, 23 September 2021. (<https://merics.org/de/kurzanalyse/transatlantische-zusammenarbeit-zu-china-geraet-unruhiges-fahrwasser>).

4. Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, quoted in: German warship sets sail for Indo-Pacific region. 2 August 2021. Deutsche Welle. (<https://www.dw.com/en/german-warship-sets-sail-for-indo-pacific-region/a-58733630>).

and even participate in major maritime festivals like Kiel Week, China denied the request for *Bayern* to make a port call in Shanghai.<sup>5</sup>

In Germany, the *Bayern* deployment to the Indo-Pacific is not very popular. Critics disparaged it as modern “gunboat diplomacy.”<sup>6</sup> Instead of criticising the non-conduct of freedom of navigation operations in East Asian waters contested by China, left wing commentators labelled a supply stop at the US naval base on Diego Garcia, an island claimed by Mauritius, as being counterproductive for the vessel's mission.<sup>7</sup>

Both the goals and route of the *Bayern* deployment reflect and symbolise the ambivalent German China policy. For decades, it has focused on good business and trade relations. However, in recent years Germany as well as the European Union have started shifting their approach to China gradually. The European Commission's strategic outlook paper on EU-China relations from March 2019 marks a major milestone. For the first time, China was officially declared a systemic rival: “China is, simultaneously, in different policy areas, a cooperation partner with whom the EU has closely aligned objectives, a negotiating partner with whom the EU needs to find a balance of interests, an economic competitor in the pursuit of technological leadership, and a systemic rival promoting alternative models of governance.”<sup>8</sup> Germany supports this approach, although it is not included in the German Indo-Pacific Guidelines from August 2020.<sup>9</sup>

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5. Liu Zhen, Finbarr Bermingham. China denies request for German frigate to make port call in Shanghai. 15 September 2021. South China Morning Post. (<https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3148895/china-denies-port-call-request-german-frigate-berlin>); Friederike Böge. China begründet Absage an Fregatte Bayern mit mangelndem Vertrauen. 17 September 2021. Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung. (<https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/ausland/china-begrueudet-absage-an-fregatte-bayern-mit-mangelndem-vertrauen-17541862.html>).

6. Moritz Brake, Sebastian Bruns. Frigate Bayern in the Pacific: The Return of German Gunboat Diplomacy? 20 July 2021. Center for International Maritime Security. (<https://cimsec.org/frigate-bayern-in-the-pacific-the-return-of-german-gunboat-diplomacy>).

7. Matthias Rauch. An der Route der Fregatte “Bayern” regt sich Kritik. 7 September 2021. Der Tagesspiegel. (<https://www.tagesspiegel.de/politik/mission-im-indo-pazifik-an-der-route-der-fregatte-bayern-regt-sich-kritik/27578158.html>).

8. European Commission, 2019. EU-China – A strategic outlook. (<https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/communication-eu-china-a-strategic-outlook.pdf>).

9. Die Bundesregierung, 2020. Leitlinien zum Indo-Pazifik. (<https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/blob/2380500/33f978a9d4f511942c241eb4602086c1/200901-indo-pazifik-leitlinien--1--data.pdf>); “China ist Partner, Wettbewerber und Rivale”: Außenminister Heiko Maas im Interview mit dem Redaktionsnetzwerk Deutschland. 12 July 2020. Redaktionsnetzwerk Deutschland. (<https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/de/newsroom/maas-rnd/2367282>); Deutscher Bundestag, 2020. China als systemischer Rivale. Auswärtiges/ Antwort auf Große Anfrage - 30.06.2020 (hib 683/2020). (<https://www.bundestag.de/presse/hib/703540-703540>).

## GERMANY AND THE EU: OLD FRIENDS OF CHINA?

In an official farewell video chat held in mid-October 2021, China's President Xi Jinping referred to outgoing German Chancellor Angela Merkel as a "lao pengyou," an old friend.<sup>10</sup> Above all, China credits the chancellor for her efforts to promote EU-Chinese economic relations. In 2014, Germany elevated relations with China to a comprehensive strategic partnership, reflecting Beijing's growing importance for Berlin. In 2020, China was Germany's main trading partner for the fifth year in a row, and for the first time it surpassed the US as the EU's primary trading partner for goods. The German government did not bow to significant pressure from Washington to explicitly exclude Huawei from its domestic 5G networks. Undoubtedly, Merkel was a major driving force behind the EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI), which was concluded in December 2020. However, due to reciprocated sanctions, the ratification was put on hold by the European Parliament and the future of the agreement remains, at best, doubtful, even though the new Indo-Pacific strategy states that progress in ratifying the agreement "is in the EU's and China's mutual interest."<sup>11</sup>

Similar to Germany's pioneering Policy Guidelines for the Indo-Pacific that were published in September 2020, the new EU strategy does not exclude China while implicitly repudiating China's efforts to undermine the international rules-based order and its military build-up in the East and South China Sea. However, with its focus on the entire Indo-Pacific region, the eighteen-page EU document does not mention any areas of successful cooperation with China. Today, China is the world's second-largest contributor to the United Nations. The EU also views China as a major development partner. The People's Republic is already the most important bilateral donor to developing countries, and holds around 21 per cent of all African countries' debt.<sup>12</sup> Other areas of cooperation between China and the EU include cultural and academic exchanges. The "China-EU School of Law" for example, established by the European Union and China, celebrated its 10th anniversary in 2018.

However, the will to cooperate goes beyond these classic approaches: To the displeasure of the US, in 2016, several European countries became founding

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10. Steffen Wurzel, ARD-Studio Shanghai. Chinas Staatschef lobt Merkel, 14 October 2021. (<https://www.tagesschau.de/ausland/asien/china-xi-merkel-105.html>).

11. European Commission. 2021. The EU strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific. ([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)).

12. The Washington Post. The pandemic has worsened Africa's debt crisis. China and other countries are stepping in, 26 February 2021. (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/02/26/pandemic-has-worsened-africas-debt-crisis-china-other-countries-are-stepping/>).

members of the China-initiated Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. Critical observers see the initiative as an attempt by China to challenge classic international institutions such as the International Monetary Fund. On the other hand, many member countries consider the opportunities that the new development bank potentially offers to the region.<sup>13</sup>

According to Reinhard Bütikofer, foreign policy coordinator of the Greens/EFA group in the European Parliament, the EU's new Indo-Pacific strategy contains only one surprise while it largely follows the Council conclusions published in April 2021: concerning the role of EU-Taiwan relations, "the new document strikes a more proactive tone."<sup>14</sup> For example, the document states that the EU will "pursue its deep trade and investment relationships with partners with whom it does not have trade and investment agreements, such as Taiwan," in spite of Beijing's growing attempt to isolate Taiwan.<sup>15</sup> China regards Taiwan as part of its territory. Xi Jinping has increasingly used military threats to underscore this claim and to call for a "peaceful reunification."

Time and time again, the EU and individual member states have demonstrated their readiness and willingness to cooperate with China when possible. But there is a growing concern in the EU that Chinese investments could increasingly lead to political interference. Hoping to attract Chinese investments, some countries have often resisted taking a critical stance towards China. When the Council of European Foreign Ministers adopted an EU-China strategy in 2016, the draft version included clear criticism of the Chinese military activities in the South China Sea that violated international law. However, the passage was eventually removed from the final version. Sinologist Martin Winter analyses the process as follows: China "cashed in for the first time on the political dividend on an investment in Europe, namely the purchase of the port of Piraeus. It was the Greek government, with the active support of the Hungarian government, that prevented the due criticism of China and the necessary calls to return to the customs of international law."<sup>16</sup> China's economic power is increasingly becoming a challenge for the EU and China is seizing the situation for its own benefit. In 2012, the so-called 17+1 initiative was launched

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13. Frank Sieren. *Asien emanzipiert sich vom IWF*. ChinaTable, 31 March 2021. (<https://table.media/china/analyse/asien-emanzipiert-sich-vom-iwf/>).

14. Reinhard Bütikofer. *EU's new Indo-Pacific strategy*, Press Statement, 16 September 2021. (<https://reinhardbuetikofer.eu/2021/09/16/eus-new-indo-pacific-strategy-press/>).

15. European Commission. 2021. *The EU strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific*. ([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)).

16. Martin Winter. 2019. *China 2049. Wie Europa versagt*. Süddeutsche Zeitung (edit.).

in Budapest. Officially, this initiative is intended to promote cooperation between China and the Central and Eastern European countries. Critics consider it a deliberate attempt by China to bypass the EU as a negotiating partner. Therefore, in early 2021 Lithuania decided to leave the initiative and urged the other 16 European members to follow suit.

China's coercive foreign and economic policies are making it more and more difficult for the EU to consider the country as a partner. China increasingly challenges both the European economy and Western values.

## COMPETITORS AT A CROSSROADS

China is challenging the Western-dominated international order and its institutions on multiple levels. Therefore, the new EU strategy points out that "the EU will continue to protect its essential interests and promote its values while pushing back where fundamental disagreements exist with China, such as on human rights."<sup>17</sup> The abolition of the remaining democratic freedoms in Hong Kong, the brutal repression of the Uyghurs and other Muslim minorities in Xinjiang province, growing tensions in the South China Sea, invasion threats against Taiwan – these are only some key points of contention between China and the EU. The EU has realised too late that the story of China's peaceful rise is merely a deceptive Chinese narrative.

China's leadership knows the country will only succeed in becoming a world power if it breaks away from its role as the extended workbench of the West and sets out on a path to the pinnacle of technological and industrial development. Six years ago, China announced its intention to take the technological lead in all key sectors with its "Made in China 2025" initiative. This has not yet been achieved in many crucial areas, such as the production of semiconductors. Nevertheless, the progress made in recent years is impressive. In Xinjiang province alone, some 1,400 technology companies have set up shop. Most of them are focusing on video surveillance, an area where China is already considered a leader. China is also considered a global leader in e-payment, AI, and Big Data segments. The Chinese manufacturer Da-Jiang Innovations Science and Technology (DJI) currently has a market share of almost 80 per cent of the global market for civilian drones. And Shenzhen, which is often compared with Silicon Valley in the United States, has long been regarded as the world capital of e-mobility: 16,000 e-buses are already on

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17. European Commission. 2021. The EU strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific. ([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 road. The People's Republic is thus attempting to achieve its self-imposed goal of becoming climate-neutral by 2060 through, among other things, the means of a green transport revolution.<sup>18</sup>

Also, due to ongoing US sanctions, China is striving economically to become more independent from the West. The "Dual Circulation" strategy, which the Central Committee announced at the end of October 2020, is aimed in particular at promoting the domestic market and becoming less dependent on foreign products. For example, the country aims to produce 70 per cent of its computer chips demand in four years. According to figures from the Chinese company database Qichacha, 17,500 new companies have already registered in the semiconductor segment in 2021.<sup>19</sup> However, whether China will reach the goal remains uncertain.

In the light of persistently impressive growth figures, numerous observers have already proclaimed that the 21st century will be the Chinese century. Actually, this is far from inevitable. But what would this scenario mean in terms of economic policy? It would mean that China would dominate trade routes and sources of raw materials, set global (technological) standards, bind other countries and regions to itself, and be militarily strong enough to secure this dominance.<sup>20</sup> China would only be able to assume such a role in the future if the West remains in its current state.<sup>21</sup> For example, neither the Trans-Pacific Economic Partnership (TTP) nor the Transatlantic Free Trade Agreement (TTIP) came into being. Had both agreements been concluded, the West would have set the standards in global trade for decades. Without the participation of the EU and the US, the 15 Asia-Pacific states made history in November 2020, creating what is now the world's largest free-trade zone with the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP).<sup>22</sup>

Even in the German business community, the mood has changed. Already in January 2019, the influential Federation of German Industry (BDI – Bundesverband der Deutschen Industrie) cautioned companies against becoming too dependent

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18. See: Frank Sieren 2021. Shenzhen: Zukunft made in China. Penguin Verlag.

19. Frank Sieren. Angriff auf die Chip-Giganten. ChinaTable, 7 July 2021. (<https://table.media/china/analyse/angriff-auf-die-chip-giganten/>).

20. Martin Winter. 2019. China 2049. Wie Europa versagt. Süddeutsche Zeitung (edit.).

21. See: Martin Winter. 2019. China 2049. Wie Europa versagt. Süddeutsche Zeitung (edit.).

22. For this argument drawn from Martin Winter also see: Martin Winter. 2021. Chinas Aufstieg — Europas Ohnmacht. Langen Müller Verlag GmbH.

on the Chinese market.<sup>23</sup> The BDI recently also warned that human rights violations in Xinjiang province and Hong Kong could harm business relations.

However, on a global scale, especially many developing countries depend on Chinese investments. Already in 2017, China was the main trading partner for 120 countries. Significantly, the West has so far hardly found any instruments to provide alternatives to the dominance of Chinese investments. Moreover, through the so-called “debt trap,” China has managed to secure important infrastructure outside of China, such as the port of Hambantota in Sri Lanka, which will be under Chinese control for the next 96 years.

So far, the EU has failed to compete with China in many respects. China has already taken the technological lead in some key sectors and has managed to bind other countries and regions to itself. The geostrategic consequences of this failure contribute to the growing rivalry.

## GROWING TENSIONS

China under the leadership of Xi Jinping poses a systemic challenge to Western democracies and like-minded countries all over the world, in particular in Asia. Therefore, the United States is currently lining up its allies to counter and contain China’s aggressive expansion in East and Southeast Asia, and its growing influence globally. While key allies in the Indo-Pacific region like Australia, India, and Japan, who are directly affected by China’s new course, are closing ranks with the United States, the European Union still refrains from following suit.

The European Union as a multinational actor always has to find a compromise that fits all member states. This is often – wrongly – perceived as a disadvantage. When it comes to dealing with China, it actually is an advantage. Since 2019, the EU has considered China as a partner, competitor, and systemic rival – a typical EU solution, acceptable for every member state because it leaves enough room for 26 nuanced national policies towards China, currently oscillating between Lithuania’s tough confrontational approach, Germany’s business-first policy, and Hungary’s China-friendly orientation. While one nation can only steer one course at a time, the EU has the advantage of being able to steer 26 different courses, thereby searching out the most suitable one. However, it looks like there is not much time left to steer independent courses, because both the United States and China are demanding

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23. BDI. 2019. Partner and Systemic Competitor – How Do We Deal with China’s State-Controlled Economy? ([https://www.wita.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/201901\\_Policy\\_Paper\\_BDI\\_China.pdf](https://www.wita.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/201901_Policy_Paper_BDI_China.pdf)).

that the Europeans choose sides in the looming new cold war, and the EU and its member states are not powerful enough to maintain an independent position between the two antagonistic great powers.

How is China systemically challenging Western democracies? There is no simple answer to this question. The challenge is comprehensive and multi-dimensional. According to Chinese propaganda, China's authoritarian state capitalism model is superior to any other political model in the world, including Western-style democracies. This narrative has the desired effect in many countries around the world, including G7 countries, because the old narrative of the decline of the West seems to have momentum once again in history.<sup>24</sup> China's economic and military rise in the past four decades since the late 1970s is undoubtedly impressive. The Communist regime challenges the West down its alley: global economic, technological, and military dominance. However, China's rise has only been possible because it was allowed to take advantage of the Western rules-based capitalist system of global trade. When China joined the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in December 2001, many Western countries expected it to become a liberal, open market economy within a couple of years. This misassumption was costly. Under Xi Jinping's leadership, China obviously feels strong enough to openly push back and undermine the liberal world order, aiming to replace it with a more authoritarian world order dominated and defined by the Chinese Communist Party. This paper cannot touch on every aspect of the systemic rivalry, but highlights a few key areas:

## International Law

China is not a nation of law in a liberal-democratic sense. It does not favour the Western concept of the rule of law, but domestically applies and internationally promotes an authoritarian concept of rule by law.<sup>25</sup> China deliberately undermines international law and other standards and tries to replace them with China's own standards. A good example is China's policy in the South China Sea: In the past years, China has built numerous air and naval bases in the South China Sea beyond its maritime border by claiming and fortifying tiny islets in international as well as territorial waters of neighbouring countries like Vietnam and the Philippines. This course of action intentionally undermines international law. China claims all

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24. On the history of this narrative see: Hermann, Arthur. 1997. *The idea of decline in Western history*. New York: Free Press.

25. Kempken, Daniel: *Rule by Law statt Rule of Law: Das chinesische Rechtsstaatskonzept als Herausforderung für Deutschland und Europa*. Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e.V. (<https://www.kas.de/de/analysen-und-argumente/detail/-/content/rule-by-law-statt-rule-of-law>).

territory in the South China Sea within the so-called “Nine-Dash Line”<sup>26</sup> and refuses to accept the UNCLOS Arbitration Tribunal’s decision in favour of the Philippines from 2016<sup>27</sup>. Therefore, the US and other countries regularly conduct freedom of navigation operations in these contested waters to confront China’s claims.

## Military

Military power has always been the backbone of the Chinese Communist Party. Concurrent with a rapidly growing economy, the Chinese military-industrial complex has also grown significantly in the past decades. In 2017, General Secretary Xi Jinping announced “that by the end of 2049, the PRC will field a ‘world-class’ military.”<sup>28</sup> This includes not only a massive military and nuclear buildup, but also a major, ongoing restructuring of the Chinese military including new conceptions on both the strategic and tactical level.<sup>29</sup> With about 2.19 million active soldiers, the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) already is the biggest military in the world by active-duty military personnel.<sup>30</sup> According to a US Department of Defense Report, since 2020, the People’s Republic of China also commands the world’s largest navy, coast guard, and maritime militia, and the Indo-Pacific region’s largest air force.<sup>31</sup>

## Economy & Technology

China’s rapid economic growth in the past four decades is unprecedented in history. Currently, China is generally ranked as the second-largest economy behind the United States, but according to the latest IMF report, it has already outranked

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26. See: Bhatt, Pooja. 2020. *Nine Dash Line: Deciphering the South China Sea Conundrum*, New Delhi: Kw Publishers Pvt Limited.

27. See: Thayer, Carl. 2021. Who Decided the Philippines Versus China Case? Was it the Arbitral Tribunal or the Permanent Court of Arbitration? *The Diplomat*. (<https://thediplomat.com/2021/07/who-decided-the-philippines-versus-china-case>).

28. U.S. Department of Defense. 2021. *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2021. A Report to Congress Pursuant to the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2000* (<https://media.defense.gov/2021/Nov/03/2002885874/-1/-1/0/2021-CMPR-FINAL.PDF>).

29. See, e.g.: Voskressenski, Alexei D. 2020. *Resources, Trends, and Goals of Chinese Military Modernization*. In: *China’s Infinite Transition and its Limits. Economic, Military and Political Dimensions*. Ed. by Alexei D. Voskressenski. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

30. Szmigiera, M. 2021. *The biggest armies in the world ranked by active military personnel in 2021*. Statista (<https://www.statista.com/statistics/264443/the-worlds-largest-armies-based-on-active-force-level>).

31. U.S. Department of Defense. 2020. *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2020 Annual Report to Congress A Report to Congress Pursuant to the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2000, as Amended*. (<https://media.defense.gov/2020/Sep/01/2002488689/-1/-1/1/2020-DOD-CHINA-MILITARY-POWER-REPORT-FINAL.PDF>).

the US when it comes to purchasing power parity.<sup>32</sup> China also aims for technological superiority, in particular in the field of artificial intelligence where it made huge progress in recent years.<sup>33</sup> According to Chinese propaganda, the rapid technological development and economic growth of the past decades, eventually becoming the largest economy in the world, proves the superiority of China's authoritarianism over Western liberal capitalism. As already outlined above, this claim is false because China's economic development is based on taking advantage of the Western liberal order.

## Global Infrastructure and Development<sup>34</sup>

In 2013, Xi Jinping launched the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) or New Silk Road. In this initiative, the government is bundling massive investments, primarily in the infrastructure of – according to the plan – more than 80 countries. In the Chinese 2021 white paper on development policy,<sup>35</sup> the Belt and Road Initiative for the first time is officially defined as a core element of the Chinese development cooperation strategy, even though it goes far beyond the scope of development cooperation and also includes numerous infrastructure investments in developed countries, including Germany and other EU countries<sup>36</sup>. China is thus exporting its development model to the world and systematically strengthening its geostrategic position under the premises of development cooperation and securing international trade routes<sup>37</sup>. For many developing countries, this initiative in particular is a double-edged sword because the extensive construction projects that they would not

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32. Allison, Graham. 2021. China Is Now the World's Largest Economy: We Shouldn't Be Shocked. The National Interest. (<https://nationalinterest.org/feature/china-now-world%E2%80%99s-largest-economy-we-shouldn%E2%80%99t-be-shocked-170719>).

33. Hsu, Sarah. 2021. China and Artificial Intelligence China has made technological strides in the AI field: Should that be viewed as a threat? The Diplomat. (<https://thediplomat.com/2021/04/china-and-artificial-intelligence>).

34. Most of this paragraph has been taken from the following publication: Herold, Heiko. 2021. A Double-Edged Chinese Sword: China's Development Cooperation as a Challenge and an Opportunity. Berlin: Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung. ([https://www.kas.de/documents/252038/11055681/Monitor+Entwicklungspolitik+Nr.+1\\_2021+-+A+Double-Edged+Chinese+Sword+-+China%E2%80%99s+Development+Cooperation+as+a+Challenge+and+an+Opportunity.pdf/bc458272-8276-d11c-092e-e0f7ca0a806e?version=1.1&t=1626938728577](https://www.kas.de/documents/252038/11055681/Monitor+Entwicklungspolitik+Nr.+1_2021+-+A+Double-Edged+Chinese+Sword+-+China%E2%80%99s+Development+Cooperation+as+a+Challenge+and+an+Opportunity.pdf/bc458272-8276-d11c-092e-e0f7ca0a806e?version=1.1&t=1626938728577)).

35. The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China. 2021. White Paper on China's International Development Cooperation in the New Era (<http://english.www.gov.cn/atts/stream/files/5ffa69cac6d0cc300eea77af>).

36. Ibid.

37. See among others: Hoering, Uwe. 2018. Der lange Marsch 2.0. Chinas Neue Seidenstraßen als Entwicklungsmodell, Hamburg: VSA Verlag.

otherwise be able to implement are usually financed with Chinese loans, and the main beneficiaries are in most cases Chinese state-owned enterprises. Some partner countries have already fallen into this debt trap and have become dependent on China as a result. For many years, Western countries have not responded to this challenge. Just recently, the G7 launched the Build Back Better World initiative, and the European Union the Global Gateway programme and the Blue Dot Network to counter China's Belt and Road Initiative.<sup>38</sup>

## OUTLOOK: A NEW ERA OF MINI-LATERALISM?

The European Union is willing to cooperate with China. In many respects, however, the EU is not in a position to compete with Beijing. In the field of advanced technologies (artificial intelligence, e-mobility, drones, video surveillance, etc.), the EU as an independent player has already lost the competition in many areas.

In his analysis of the new EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, Pepijn Bergsen, a Research Fellow in the Europe Programme at Chatham House, concludes that it is becoming increasingly difficult for the EU to focus only on economic relations with China, as these are increasingly mixed with security issues. "Given its limited toolkit and resources, the EU will struggle to find its role."<sup>39</sup> By itself, the EU is unable to confront China. In this regard, the new EU strategy is telling because it does not include a significant military role for the EU in the region.<sup>40</sup>

In the post-Trump world, many Europeans had hopes that the US would turn toward multilateralism. This is not the case, in particular when it comes to dealing with China. The US is increasingly relying on smaller alliances in the Indo-Pacific region such as AUKUS or Quad. This new form of mini-lateralism irritates the European partners. The AUKUS alliance angered France because it resulted in the termination of a lucrative submarine contract with Australia, but, in fact, it is a lesson in

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38. Lau, Stuart, Hanne Cokelaere. 2021. EU launches 'Global Gateway' to counter China's Belt and Road. Politico (<https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-launches-global-gateway-to-counter-chinas-belt-and-road/>); The White House. 2021. Fact Sheet: President Biden and G7 Leaders Launch Build Back Better World (B3W) Partnership. (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/06/12/fact-sheet-president-biden-and-g7-leaders-launch-build-back-better-world-b3w-partnership/>).

39. Pepijn Bergsen. In Search of an Indo-Pacific Role, 30 September 2021. ([https://ip-quarterly.com/en/search-indo-pacific-role?fbclid=IwAR2\\_vxYkfaVIm9Ej3g0fldsmBBxNXYdxj2WgvcP4cw9YolzFA2ahPvpjZQQ](https://ip-quarterly.com/en/search-indo-pacific-role?fbclid=IwAR2_vxYkfaVIm9Ej3g0fldsmBBxNXYdxj2WgvcP4cw9YolzFA2ahPvpjZQQ)).

40. Pepijn Bergsen. In Search of an Indo-Pacific Role, 30 September 2021. ([https://ip-quarterly.com/en/search-indo-pacific-role?fbclid=IwAR2\\_vxYkfaVIm9Ej3g0fldsmBBxNXYdxj2WgvcP4cw9YolzFA2ahPvpjZQQ](https://ip-quarterly.com/en/search-indo-pacific-role?fbclid=IwAR2_vxYkfaVIm9Ej3g0fldsmBBxNXYdxj2WgvcP4cw9YolzFA2ahPvpjZQQ)).

realpolitik for the Europeans. Obviously, the Biden administration has lost a lot of trust in Europe when it comes to the top priority of US foreign policy: countering China. However, it does not take a clairvoyant to predict that only a united West can permanently counter the Chinese challenge.

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

*Christian E. Rieck*

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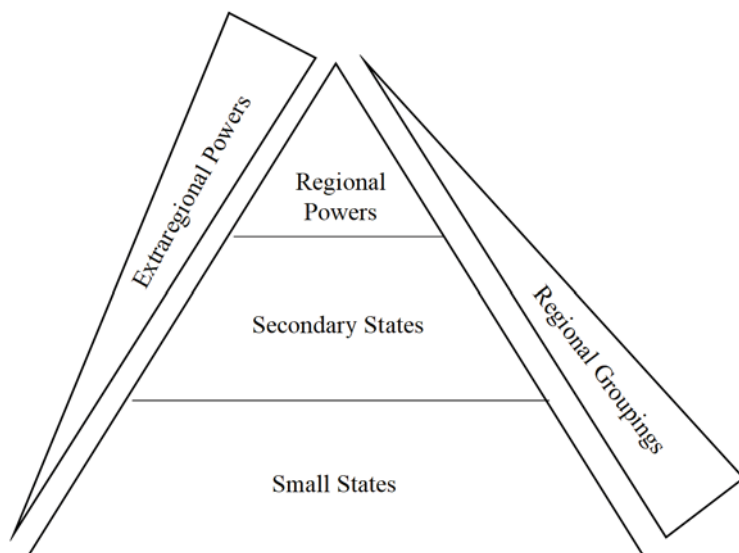
8. Ikenberry, G. John. 2020. *A World Safe for Democracy. Liberal Internationalism and the Crises of Global Order*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

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)).





# The EU Strategy on Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific: A Meaningful Regional Complement?

*Frederick Kliem*

## INTRODUCTION

On 16 September 2021, the European Union (EU) joined an exclusive but growing club of foreign policy actors that have published an Indo-Pacific strategy, with the release of “The EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific”.<sup>1</sup> The European Commission followed three EU member states (France, Germany, the Netherlands) whose national initiatives had been driving the process of a whole-of-EU engagement with the Indo-Pacific, and who feel more comfortable embedding their own national strategies within a broader EU framework.<sup>2</sup> Their influence on EU policy direction is palpable in the EU strategy, reiterating most of the national white papers’ principles, objectives, and agenda items.

This volume expertly discusses in various chapters individual aspects of the national and supranational European approach. Beyond that concrete content, the final questions remaining are: what is the EU seeking to accomplish by joining the Indo-Pacific bandwagon, and if and how Brussels can make a difference. This chapter will try to address these questions by situating the EU initiative within the broader conceptual Indo-Pacific discourse and its meaning and implications. It will ultimately be argued that the EU strategy, just like the national European strategies, is largely a reactive measure to externalities; an ultimately involuntary recognition of geopolitical shifts and new faultlines emerging between the two global superpowers – US and China – rather than an intrinsically motivated fundamental

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1. European Commission. 2021. The EU strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific. 16 September. ([https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/jointcommunication\\_indo\\_pacific\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/jointcommunication_indo_pacific_en.pdf)). Hereafter referred to as “EU strategy”.

2. Gudrun Wacker discusses the individual national strategies of EU member states in this volume. Gudrun Wacker. 2021. European Approaches to the Indo-Pacific: Same, Same, but Different. Panorama 01/2021.

recalibration of EU policy direction with regard to the Indo-Pacific region. Second, this chapter will address and discuss some of the EU strategies' concrete policy instruments and identify some more and less valuable contributions.

The final argument this chapter seeks to make is that the EU strategy, while listing very valuable policy proposals and initiatives, does not address the root cause of the Indo-Pacific discourse: the rise of China and its challenge to the US-led order in Asia. Without this fundamental strategic positioning, the EU Indo-Pacific strategy is not part of the current Indo-Pacific frame promoted by the US and its security partners in Asia. Nonetheless, it is a valuable policy agenda for European contributions to regional stability and prosperity, and to maintain European influence in key areas of regional development. The EU's real added value is building inclusive, rules-based multilateralism and providing economic, health, physical and digital infrastructure. In this light, one might view the EU Indo-Pacific strategy partly as a complement to and reinforcement of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP).

For Europeans, the strategy should be seen as a statement of intent for the region, and as an excellent starting point for European nations and the EU to engage in a deeper and more honest conversation as to where the EU and its member states want to position themselves amidst new geopolitical dynamics.

## **AN EU STRATEGY FOR COOPERATION IN THE INDO-PACIFIC**

Particular contents of the strategy are discussed in several chapters of this volume, but this analysis too must begin with a brief overview. Most obviously, the EU strategy appreciates the Indo-Pacific as a region of great social and economic importance to European foreign policy. As the strategy specifies, the region is home to more than half of the world's population, four of the EU's ten-largest trade partners (China, Japan, South Korea, and India) and six G-20 members – seven if one wants to include Russia. Over half of global gross domestic product (GDP) is generated there, and trade between the EU and the Indo-Pacific, as defined by the strategy, is the highest inter-regional volume in the world. With France's overseas territories, the Indo-Pacific de facto includes territory where both EU legislation as well as the rights and duties associated with EU membership apply.<sup>3</sup> Central to European notions of the Indo-Pacific is ASEAN, the Association of Southeast Asian

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3. The EU has nine overseas territories, called "outermost regions", two of which are located in the vicinity of the Indo-Pacific, as geographically defined by the EU strategy: the French territories Mayotte and Reunion Island.

Nations, which Brussels has long called a “natural partner”, and the 2020 upgrade of EU-ASEAN relations to the level of “strategic partnership” further deepens inter-regional ties.<sup>4</sup>

Unfortunately, the Indo-Pacific is home to one of the world’s greatest concentration of challenges with global implications, including political challenges, security and defence issues, and transboundary non-traditional security (NTS) threats. Specifically, these include questions about armament and arms racing, territorial conflicts, surge of authoritarianism and autocratic resilience, human rights violations and good governance issues, transboundary crime, ecological degradation and water conflicts, and much more. In logical consequence, the European Commission now identifies the Indo-Pacific as a key space for the economic and political future of Europe, for shaping the future post-hegemonic world order, and as a key partner to address increasingly pressing transboundary challenges, especially climate change. In short, “[the] futures of the EU and the Indo-Pacific are inextricably linked given the interdependence of the economies and the common global challenges”, as the strategy puts it.

Key foreign policy instruments specifically revolve around diversification and strengthening of partnerships with so-called like-minded partners, and, more specifically, plugging gaps in regional infrastructure, trading opportunities, investment programmes, and enhancing the resilience and diversity of supply chains. This chapter will discuss the merit and added value of specific individual policy measures at a later stage below. As one might expect, all bi- and multilateral partnerships must ultimately advance EU interests. In the European case, however, these interests differ – at times substantially – from many other national Indo-Pacific strategies, such as the US’ or Japanese, in that they are predominantly normative in nature. As specified in the EU’s main foreign policy document, the 2016 Global Strategy, as well as subsequent foreign policy guidelines, these interests include strengthening the rules-based order, tackling climate change, raising good governance and human rights standards, and realising a “green” and sustainable economic recovery post-Covid-19.<sup>5</sup>

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4. Although the concept of “strategic partnership” remains unspecified and ambiguous, it is the deepest form of relationship the EU knows beyond the membership process.

5. EU Commission. 2016. Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe. A Global Strategy for the European Union’s Foreign and Security Policy. ([https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/eugs\\_review\\_web\\_0.pdf](https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/eugs_review_web_0.pdf)).

## WHAT THE EU STRATEGY IS NOT: FOIP AND HEGEMONIC DENIAL

But the concept of the Indo-Pacific as such is at its core neither about the region's economic and/or social importance, nor a simple geographic definition of space. Actors such as Japan, the US, Australia, and even ASEAN, subscribe to the idea of the Indo-Pacific not to expand their trade relationships and partnerships but to redefine their strategic space and priorities amidst the end of the US-led liberal hegemonic order in Asia. The central characteristic of the Indo-Pacific notion is the global shift in the geopolitical centre of gravity, with the rise of an increasingly assertive China as the primary driver. More precisely, the Indo-Pacific is the unravelling of Asia's status quo order, underpinned by US liberal hegemony.<sup>6</sup> The Indo-Pacific has now marginalised previous conceptualisations of the region and their meaning, such as "East Asia" and "Asia-Pacific". These notions were closely tied to the ASEAN-Plus Three (APT) process and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum and were about the construction of a regional identity, pan-Asian solidarity, and the institutionalisation of economic interdependence, regional and inter-regional trade, and the broader sharing of prosperity. The Indo-Pacific debate is the unravelling of this. Embraced by regional stakeholders, most importantly former Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo and former US President Donald Trump, the "free and open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP) discourse specifically symbolised a strategic reorientation to fully concentrate resources on the challenges posed by Beijing's increasing confidence and assertive regional posture. For better or worse, the concept of the Indo-Pacific has become synonymous with new-age strategic great power competition.<sup>7</sup>

And as a result, Indo-Pacific policies are not primarily instruments to harness regional opportunities but to stymie Chinese power and influence. The decision by resident countries to join multilateral security arrangements, such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) between Australia, India, Japan, and the US, and AUKUS – a security arrangement between the US, Australia, and the UK – symbolise a seismic shift in the way in which regional stakeholders interpret their relationship with China. Simplified, an economic opportunity over time became

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6. John Ikenberry. 2004. American hegemony and East Asian order. *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 58(3), pp. 353-367.

7. Avery Goldstein. 2020. US-China Rivalry in the twenty-first century: Déjà vu and Cold War II. *China International Strategy Review*. Vol. 2, 48-62; Niall Ferguson. 2019. The New Cold War? It's with China and it has already begun. (<http://www.niallferguson.com/journalism/politics/the-new-cold-war-its-with-china-and-it-has-already-begun>).

a strategic threat, as Beijing's assertive regional foreign and security policy has fundamentally altered how its neighbours and the US perceive their own national security.<sup>8</sup> In sum, the Indo-Pacific debate is predominantly a strategic reset that prioritises hegemonic denial, attempting to curtail how much further China can extend its military and geoeconomic reach in the region.<sup>9</sup> The US and its regional partners seek to establish a new balance of power.

It is, therefore, highly noteworthy that a self-identified normative actor should engage in the Indo-Pacific debate, which is ultimately a strategic one. It is, of course, a legitimate EU interest to seek to strengthen and expand its market access in Asia, and the EU's many trading nations have an intrinsic interest in maintaining free and stable trading routes in the world's most crucial shipping lanes. But the EU had all the necessary partnerships, policies, and financial resources allocated to the region before. What has changed is that its most important member states, Germany and France, as well as some influential figures in the EU Commission and Parliament have recognised the inevitability of the ongoing shift in geopolitics' centre of gravity towards the Indo-Pacific. Not only does this warrant greater EU attention to the region per se, more importantly, the EU's and its members' security guarantor within the framework of NATO, the US, demands greater contributions to what Washington has identified as its strategic priority: the balancing of China. Without at least symbolic contributions to the great power competition, many Europeans fear the disintegration of their pivotal transatlantic ties.

But all European efforts in this regard remain unconvincing. Brussels tended to avoid participating in the Indo-Pacific debate altogether until recently. Now, the EU strategy goes as far as identifying China as a potential threat to European values, against which the EU will "push back" if necessary – a remarkable statement for usually reluctant Europeans. Nonetheless, the rest of the EU strategy in both language and policy measures seeks to distance itself from strategic competition with China by primarily seeking dialogue and cooperation with all partners, including China. The EU strategy, just like ASEAN's Outlook on the Indo-Pacific,<sup>10</sup> is essentially an inclusive counterpart to the exclusive, hegemonic denial FOIP visions.

The UK's membership of AUKUS confirms the UK as the only European power in the Indo-Pacific that takes part in the US' long-term effort to deny China regional

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8. Chang Liao N. 2018. Winds of Change: Assessing China's Assertive Turn in Foreign Policy. *Journal of Asian and African Studies*. Vol. 53:6; pp. 880-895.

9. Elbridge A. Colby. 2021. *The Strategy of Denial: American Defense in an Age of Great Power Conflict*. Yale University Press, New Haven.

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

hegemony. But this is, arguably, predominately a function of London's quest for a post-Brexit identity as "Global Britain", rather than because London intrinsically seeks to prevent Chinese hegemony in Asia. Likewise, the deployment of the German frigate *Bayern* to the Indo-Pacific is at least partially motivated by the desire to signal to Washington that Germany is listening to US requests to contribute more to the defence of the US-led order.<sup>11</sup> In fact, this deployment is a telling example of how limited EU member states' commitment is and will remain. One single frigate is, while highly welcome in the region, no more than symbolic appeasement of American pressure. Moreover, the *Bayern* eschewed controversial routes and even requested a port call in Shanghai in order to avoid being seen in Beijing as partaking in US (and British) balancing efforts. Even France, the EU nation with the greatest national interest to safeguard regional security and the most significant military presence in the region, is unlikely to commit to military confrontation with China. Paris sees its Indo-Pacific approach to the region more as part of an EU quest for strategic autonomy, not of an American-led strategic competition with China.

And how could it be otherwise? Unlike the case during the Cold War, virtually all states, resident or not, have to strike a careful balance between their often deep economic engagement with China and their security perceptions. China is deeply connected in a complex web of finance, trade, investment, and business-to-business ties with the rest of the world – over 140 countries share China as their largest trading partner. But, as I have argued elsewhere,<sup>12</sup> the balance of threat theory<sup>13</sup> is the best way to think about how and why some states react to Chinese assertiveness by pro-actively balancing it and others by remaining more reserved. Much simplified, states form alliances in order to balance the greatest perceived threat to their own national security, as defined by the aggressor state's proximity, amount of comprehensive power (economic and military), military's capabilities' offensive nature, and intentions. A combination and weightage of these factors will decide whether states ally and join balancing efforts, and to what extent, depth, and commitment.

With this in mind, the argument that China is indeed a top security concern in the Indo-Pacific but much less so in Europe is an easy one to make. In Asia, China's increasing assertiveness in the South China Sea, the Himalayas, Taiwan, and many

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11. Conversation with German Ministry of Defence officials in second quarter 2021.

12. Frederick Kliem. 2020. Why Quasi-Alliances will persist in the Indo-Pacific. The Fall and Rise of the Quad. *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs*, Vol. 7(3).

13. Stephen Walt. 1987. *The Origins of Alliances*. Cornell University Press, Ithaca.

other places, raises real concern in virtually every regional capital.<sup>14</sup> The situation in Europe is vastly different. China's assertive behaviour, its vast comprehensive power coupled with unapologetic authoritarianism, and unfair trade practices are reasons for great unease in most European capitals and Brussels. But unlike in Asia, where national security directly frames the China question, in Europe the rise of China is predominantly a normative concern, a fundamental dispute over good governance, international rules and norms, human rights, trade practices, etc.<sup>15</sup> China is not going to attack the European continent or any EU member state, a certainty China's regional neighbours do not have. The Chinese navy (PLAN) will possibly not even regularly pass through European waters in the foreseeable future. China is not going to cause a new refugee crisis in Europe, invade and annex parts of Eastern Europe, provide a safe haven for terrorists, or undertake any other activities that would threaten fundamental European conceptions of national security. China is at most a top-three or -four European security concern, trailing well behind Russia, the immediate EU neighbourhood, and perhaps even behind Northern Africa, Sahel, and the Middle East. In other words, China is a systemic challenge to international rules and norms, a disruption of the status quo, but not a matter of defence in any EU member state's national security planning.

Instead, seeing China as an economic opportunity still prevails among EU member states, often hidden behind fuzzy notions of neutrality and strategic autonomy.<sup>16</sup> This is a sentiment shared by many in the light of the immense importance of the Chinese economy to European prosperity while at the same time not being subject to most of China's coercion and military assertiveness. German business representatives especially often ask the question: why would anyone expect us to fight America's or Japan's fight?<sup>17</sup> It would, therefore, be illogical and ultimately futile to ask the EU to commit to US-led hegemonic-denial efforts. And thus, the EU strategy avoids the term FOIP and the very few hard power references the EU strategy does make remain light.

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14. Frederick Kliem. 2020. Why Quasi-Alliances will persist in the Indo-Pacific. *The Fall and Rise of the Quad*. *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs*, Vol. 7(3).

15. Pew Research Centre. 2021. Large Majorities Say China Does Not Respect the Personal Freedoms of Its People. (<https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2021/06/30/large-majorities-say-china-does-not-respect-the-personal-freedoms-of-its-people/>); Pew Research Centre. 2020. Report: Unfavorable Views of China Reach Historic Highs in Many Countries. (<https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/10/06/unfavorable-views-of-china-reach-historic-highs-in-many-countries/>).

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

17. Communication with several German industry representatives based in their respective regional head offices in Singapore in 2020 and 2021.

## EUROPE'S ADDED-VALUE: INCLUSIVE MULTILATERALISM AND REGIONAL CHOICES

In the wake of AUKUS, which prompted a brief diplomatic spat between France and the AUKUS parties, some argued that continental Europe's equidistant approach towards Indo-Pacific security and defence, and towards China on the one and the US on the other hand, is facing a reality check. The EU would eventually have to confront its lack of hard power and defence commitments or risk irrelevance.<sup>18</sup> Although the former is certainly correct, the latter does not capture the full picture of possible European contributions to stability. The argument presented thus far assumes that the objectives of the American-led FOIP are not shared by most Europeans and the EU. However, this does not mean in final consequence that the EU's Indo-Pacific engagement is futile or superfluous.

The question is: how can Europeans contribute meaningfully while not betraying their own strategic preferences or principles? Play to your strength, as the idiom goes. While hard power and the security and defence dimensions are most important in a region currently undergoing a recalibration in the balance of power, the EU is very limited in that space. As a normative actor in both self-perception and practice,<sup>19</sup> the EU's strengths lie elsewhere. Brussels primarily seeks to set and raise regional standards of good governance, equitable trade, and capacity building in a large number of NTS areas, and to advance ecological sustainability and high-quality infrastructure. The EU can leverage its great expertise and abundant resources.

### Maritime Safety and Security

The EU strategy does mention maritime security and speaks of a "meaningful European naval presence". This will be explored by coordinating and facilitating individual members' naval presence, through mechanisms similar to the EU Coordinated Maritime Presences (CMP) – an instrument that allows EU member states with assets in a specific maritime region to coordinate their national efforts and share analysis and information on a voluntary basis with all assets remaining under national command. But cooperation in the maritime domain is not exhausted by

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18. Tim Huxley and Ben Schreer. 2021. What does AUKUS mean for Europe's Indo-Pacific strategies? IISS Analysis, 27 September.

19. See, EU Commission. 2016. Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe. A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign And Security Policy. ([https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/eugs\\_review\\_web\\_0.pdf](https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/eugs_review_web_0.pdf)).



deployment of naval assets and freedom of navigation exercises, where Europeans cannot contribute meaningfully. There are some more or less integrated EU efforts to enhance its coordinated hard power capacity, such as the Permanent Structured Coordination (PESCO), and coordination initiatives such as the European Defence Fund. But the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) remains intergovernmental, and Brussels has no meaningful independent capabilities in that space.

And the European Commission in its strategy recognises its obvious limitations. The strategy, therefore, emphasises not naval power but predominantly “softer” maritime issues, including defence diplomacy, ocean governance for the sustainable management of maritime resources and safeguarding biodiversity, and building capacity, especially in the areas of maritime domain awareness, anti-piracy operations and cross-border crime. As Olli Pekka Suorsa argues in much greater detail in this volume,<sup>20</sup> the EU and its member states have accumulated great expertise in building local technical and legal capacities, improving maritime domain awareness, and setting up programmes for the sharing of information and best practices. The Commission's intent to extend the CMP model as well as the Critical Maritime Routes (CRIMARIO) programme to South and Southeast Asia will contribute to soft maritime security and safety, as will the decision to deploy military advisors to EU Delegations in the region. But even in these soft security spaces, the EU's impact will remain low compared to that of resident powers.

## Supporting Multilateralism

Henry Kissinger once remarked that a military definition of balance in Asia will eventually shade into conflict if not accompanied by a concept of partnership.<sup>21</sup> This is where actors such as the EU and ASEAN can make a difference. These organisations, though flawed, have built a reputation for being adept at mediating differences within multilateral formats. The difference between such institutionalised multilateralism and ad hoc minilaterals, such as the Quad, is that the latter are exclusive and targeted arrangements while the former come from a perspective of inclusivity and multi-stakeholder dialogue.

More precisely, the clue to the “EU Indo-Pacific Strategy for Cooperation” is in its name: cooperation. It emphasises partnerships and multidimensional coopera-

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20. Olli Pekka Suorsa. 2021. European Maritime Security Capacity Building Assistance in Southeast Asia: Promises and Pitfalls. Panorama 01/2021.

21. Henry Kissinger. 2015. World Order. Penguin Books, New York, p. 233.

tion, based on principled engagement. As is ASEAN's preference,<sup>22</sup> the EU strategy provides an alternative way to conceive of regional relations, seeing it neither as inherently anti- nor pro-China. Instead of contributing to the further polarisation of the region, the EU has a pivotal role to play in supporting the existing, ASEAN-based multilateral architecture by participating in and inviting all regional stakeholders to make better use of existing platforms for both dialogue and the provision of regional goods. While unilateralism tends to increase polarisation, multilateralism can help mediate estrangement among individuals, groups, and governments – the great powers especially.<sup>23</sup> It can provide a platform through which regional stakeholders manage their relationships, mitigate conflict, and, ideally, find a peaceful *modus operandi*. These contributions are difficult to quantify and are not reducible to measurable deliverables. But they are invaluable.

The EU is already lending ASEAN its full support, in line with the Global Strategy's objective of supporting "cooperative regional orders".<sup>24</sup> The EU is the largest contributor to ASEAN integration – larger than ASEAN members themselves – and a living example of the benefits of regional, rules-based multilateralism. The EU can at times serve as a valuable reference point, and Brussels has the power to bolster ASEAN's relevance by, for example, channelling the EU's material contributions to the Indo-Pacific through ASEAN.

## Functional Cooperation

Similarly, by proposing to focus on common challenges and capacity building, the EU presents an alternative to the FOIP's hard power focus. The EU adds to the region's "menu of choices", thereby further diluting the relative weight of either China or the US. Brussels promotes the regional non-military agenda by advancing economic integration and impacting standards and regulatory frameworks. It builds and supports high-quality infrastructure and promotes collaboration and connectivity in research, innovation, and digitalisation in areas such as pandemic preparedness. Jointly, "Team Europe" has significant financial resources at their disposal. The exclusive supranational power of the Commission to negotiate trade deals on behalf of the world's second largest economy, the EU single market, is a

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

23. James Der Derian. 1987. Mediating Estrangement: A Theory for Diplomacy. *Review of International Studies*, Vol.13(2), pp. 91–110.

24. EU Commission. 2016 Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe. A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign And Security Policy. ([https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/eugs\\_review\\_web\\_0.pdf](https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/eugs_review_web_0.pdf)).

most potent foreign policy instrument. This comes with significant regulatory power through setting trade, industrial, labour, and human rights standards, and its large market gives Brussels a great deal of political leverage in pursuit of its objectives. This is where the EU's real competitive advantage resides.

This is evident in several policy spaces. For example, the Commission seeks to build Digital Partnerships with partner countries in order to enhance reciprocal technical, policy, and R&D cooperation on key technologies, such as artificial intelligence, the digital transformation of business and public services, and the facilitation of digital trade. The main goal is to develop and entrench standards for emerging technologies in line with EU principles and values. It would be highly desirable to synchronise and synergise these efforts with the ASEAN Digital Masterplan 2025.

A similar regulatory objective applies to the increasing width and depth of trade agreements. In addition to several free trade agreements (FTAs) with key Indo-Pacific partners, such as Japan and Vietnam, already in place, Brussels seeks to conclude FTA negotiations with Indonesia, Australia, and New Zealand, and it will begin investment agreement negotiations with India. Although some serious obstacles must be overcome, EU negotiators are still assessing the possibility of the resumption of FTA negotiations with Malaysia, the Philippines, and Thailand, and perhaps even region-to-region with ASEAN. At a time when China is building on its already significant influence via participating in the world's largest FTA, the ASEAN-led Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), while simultaneously the US vacated that space by exiting the other regional mega-FTA, the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), it is important in the interest of fair, sustainable, and equitable trade rules that the EU maintains an impactful role.

In terms of connectivity, the case for the provision of alternatives is equally obvious. This includes "hard connectivity", such as physical transport and energy generation and transmission systems, as well as "soft connectivity", such as people-to-people exchanges and collaborative research and development (R&D) capacities. Brussels' great experience and technical know-how with EU neighbourhood development programmes and high-quality connectivity will both deepen the EU's network of regional partners and, more importantly, significantly contribute to the improvement of living and ecological standards in the Indo-Pacific.

Many EU officials – correctly – see this as a geopolitical lever that helps to promote European principles, norms, and standards, especially pitching it as a direct competitor to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).<sup>25</sup> The Indo-Pacific strategy

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25. Conversations with officials from EU Parliament and Commission in third quarter of 2020.

specifically points out that all EU approaches to connectivity building will have the main EU principles at their core. Burgeoning regional disillusionment with the BRI opens a window of opportunity for Brussels to lastingly affect the standards for infrastructure development in the region, not least making a great contribution to the EU's fight against climate change and human and labour rights violations. The recently announced European "Green Deal", the strong drive to readjust the entire European economy in line with decarbonisation and green technology objectives, is making significant progress as EU member economies emerge from the Covid-19 crisis. The Green Deal approach is directly applicable to the EU connectivity initiative in the Indo-Pacific. In the light of especially China's great resources, the EU will have to mobilise private investments and its member states' financial resources in order to offer a real alternative. The EU's Team Europe instrument, i.e., the horizontal connection of all EU institutions as well as all the vertical connections leveraging all member states' banks, private sector and credit agencies, etc., is a possible model.

Lastly, in the wake of the Covid-19 global pandemic, health infrastructure has become a key sector for regional cooperation. The weaknesses of regional health-care systems in the Indo-Pacific, the poor regional cooperation and the uneven distribution of vaccines and protective equipment stand in stark contrast to the EU's largely successful and coordinated pandemic management. Health is, therefore, a central focus of the EU's outreach to the Indo-Pacific region. Facilitating equal access to vaccines, ensuring stable supply chains, but also the building of trust and capacity to create an interoperable Covid-19 digital certificate system similar to the EU Digital Covid Certificate, add real value to the Indo-Pacific region's pandemic resilience. The EU has mobilised over EUR800 million to support Southeast Asia's fight against the pandemic, significantly more than any other partner, and it is laudable that Brussels has made its Digital Covid Certificate software publicly available as open source.

This is by no means an exhaustive list. But these selected examples demonstrate that the reduction of the Indo-Pacific discourse to matters of security and strategic balancing is a simplification of the debate and does not take tangible regional needs and developmental gaps into account. The Indo-Pacific is a concept of strategic reprioritisation and geopolitical change. But there are manifold ways to contribute to regional stability, dialogue, and prosperity. The EU strategy should be seen as precisely what the name suggests: a strategy to uphold and advance cooperation, prosperity, and acceptable standards amidst an increasing geopolitical polarisation of the region and "over-geopoliticisation" of regional inter-state coop-

eration. EU initiatives not only increase the European footprint in the Indo-Pacific, but also allow regional partners to diversify away from US-China competition.

## **IN LIEU OF A CONCLUSION: THE UNCOMFORTABLE CHINA QUESTION REMAINS**

Europe's already substantial contributions to the region are impactful, valuable, and necessary. But from a European perspective, its Indo-Pacific strategy should not just be seen as development cooperation, prosperity multiplier, and norm-entrepreneurship. Not least the AUKUS agreement confronts European powers with the question they least like to ask: where to position themselves vis-à-vis China? Member states view China pragmatically as an economic partner, but also simultaneously as a rival. The best way to manage this complex dilemma is to stay true to the intellectual basis of the Indo-Pacific strategy: engage but create alternatives. As far as EU-China relations are concerned, the EU must remain true to its core identity as a normative actor, but it must equally continue to engage and maintain dialogue with Beijing – and other regional autocratic states, such as Vietnam. For this to be possible, Europeans must reduce their dependency on choices made in Beijing by diversifying supply chains and restricting Chinese investments in Europe's strategic sectors, including telecommunication and digitalisation.

Most importantly, the Commission must note that there is no such thing as a united and coherent EU approach to China to date. EU member states' bilateral relations with Beijing are determined by their individual economic priorities. This must prompt the initiation of a joint, honest, and inclusive debate on how to position Europeans as a community of both values and interests vis-à-vis China. The Indo-Pacific strategy is an excellent start. Based on the strategy's premise that it is inclusive multilateralism where the EU can make a difference, there is now a need for a broad-based dialogue on the principles and conditionality of such an EU China policy. The European Council, under inclusion of the other institutions, should design a set of standards that can guide "principled engagement" and work towards a joint European position on very specific questions that arise with regard to China and develop a common script. These questions include joint EU positions on mechanisms such as AUKUS and Quad, but also on issues such as Taiwan, Hong Kong, and more. Asia's geopolitical reality will inevitably put these questions on the agenda soon. AUKUS serves as a reminder of how quickly and unexpectedly events in the Indo-Pacific can overtake European governments' capacity to react and manage them.

Contingency planning always includes some speculative elements. Nonetheless, it is wise to prepare for worst case scenarios and, at a minimum, to have a basic script in place regarding initial reaction. This mitigates the moment of surprise and ensures an initial sense of unity and coherence. For example, it is not unthinkable at all that, after many years of gradual increases in provocation and assertiveness, the People's Republic of China might attack Taiwan in an attempt at forceful unification, which, in turn, is likely to draw the US into a prolonged military conflict in the Taiwan Strait.<sup>26</sup> Washington will use the US Navy's Seventh Fleet, draw on its bases in Japan, and also very likely request allied support. AUKUS will almost certainly provide the basis for UK and Australian military participation, and Washington will also request Japanese and European support, in whatever form, militarily or with sanctions and diplomatic pressure. The US already seeks to expand NATO's narrow focus on Russia to include the balancing of China. It is even possible that the US would request at least French, and maybe even Dutch and German, naval support. For this, it is very wise to have a basic EU-wide understanding of possibilities, limitations, and red-lines, and what this would mean for European security, trade, and diplomacy.

This understanding begins with recognising such violent changes to the status quo as a distinct possibility and debating the strategic challenges that this might pose. This implicitly means accepting that the era of mutually beneficial trading relations with China while staying out of the more complex security elements of these relations is irrevocably over. Great power conflict is back and Europe cannot indefinitely keep this challenge at arm's length. In a first step, European NATO allies must rethink their commitments to and structures for their own defence against Russia and become less dependent on the US – not to reduce the US leverage over European security but to balance Russia on their own in order to free US resources and allow Washington to concentrate on its own strategic priorities in East Asia. With regard to China, Europe must continue on its path to diversify its economy away from over-dependence on decisions made in Beijing. In particular in strategic sectors, such as 5G technology, but also critical supplies, such as healthcare equipment, and important industrial goods, ranging from semi-conductors to raw materials, Europe must reduce China's influence on European economies.

Far from being a remote challenge, a US-China conflict is not unlikely in the long run, and it will significantly impact both the EU's security and its prosperity. It

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26. Oriana Skylar Mastro. 2021. The Taiwan Temptation. Why Beijing Might Resort to Force. *Foreign Affairs*, July/August.

is, therefore, incumbent on all EU institutions to put this on the agenda and begin the consultative process as to how a basic consensus can be reached in Europe, and how reluctant member states and the EU population at large can be sensitised and mobilised in support. The EU Indo-Pacific strategy is a welcome collection of policy measures that will make highly meaningful contributions to regional stability, sustainable development, and continued prosperity. But it does not address the most fundamental questions of all. With Washington's strategic reprioritisation, away from Europe and the Middle East towards the Indo-Pacific and China specifically, the EU's place in the world will not least be determined by great power competition. All EU institutions involved in foreign policy making, the European Council, Commission, and Parliament, should capitalise on the Indo-Pacific strategy's momentum and work towards a common EU position on the more fundamental questions as well as on concrete contingencies. The process of Europe's Indo-Pacific engagement has only just begun.

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# Indo-Pacific and Delhi's New Europolitik

*C. Raja Mohan*

## INTRODUCTION

Europe's turn to the Indo-Pacific is welcome in India for several reasons. Europe's new interest in the Indo-Pacific provides a concrete regional context for deepening the bilateral strategic partnership between Delhi and Brussels as well as between India and the key European states. Europe's strategic return to the East of Suez comes amidst the profound transformation of Asian geopolitics. The dramatic rise of China and its muscular unilateralism have triggered an equally significant US response that has evolved through the successive administrations of Barack Obama, Donald Trump, and Joe Biden. If Obama's Asian Pivot was widely seen as being too tentative, Trump presented the China challenge in stark terms and defined a new geography, the Indo-Pacific, to frame that problem. Trump also turned the moribund quadrilateral forum, the Quad, with Australia, India, and Japan, into an important institution to rebalance Asia. Although many within the US and beyond were sceptical of the moves by the Trump administration, the Biden administration fully endorsed the identification of the China challenge as well as the new initiatives on the Indo-Pacific and the Quad. Unlike Trump, Biden and his team put special emphasis on the importance of working with the traditional Asian and European allies in strengthening the US strategy towards the Indo-Pacific. Well before the Biden Administration took charge, key European powers as well as the EU had begun to turn their strategic gaze to the Indo-Pacific.

As Europeans reviewed their policies towards Asia and the Indian Ocean regions, the partnership with India inevitably emerged as an important component of that review. For India, too, Europe has begun to figure far more prominently in its economic and geopolitical calculus. This essay is in three parts. The first section reviews the sources of the estrangement between India and Europe in the second half of the twentieth century. The second part focuses on the efforts in the 21st

century to build a strategic partnership between India and Europe amidst a greater convergence of their interests, especially in the Indo-Pacific. The last section will examine the residual constraints on realising the full potential of the partnership between India and Europe.

## **ESTRANGEMENT TO ENGAGEMENT**

That independent India and Europe had difficulties in constructing an enduring partnership during the Cold War is widely recognised. Despite shared political values, the long presence of a European capital in India, and India's immense contribution to the Allied victory in the Second World War, the two sides struggled to build a solid partnership in the second half of the twentieth century. If Delhi found it hard to think strategically about Europe, Nehruvian India was a misfit in Europe's Cold War priorities.

Independent India's problems with Europe were conditioned by a number of factors. One was the tendency to see the continent through the eyes of the British. If India's Anglo-Saxon colonial heritage prevented the Indian security establishment from seeing the full possibilities with Europe, Delhi's growing alignment with the Soviet Union during the Cold War further distorted India's perspective on Europe. The Delhi establishment's tendency to view Europe either through the British or the Russian prism robbed all potential nuances from Delhi's approach.

As modern state-building began in India, Europe was a problem for the British Raj initially headquartered in Calcutta from the late 18th century onwards and then in Delhi in the early 20th. The securing of British primacy in India demanded the fending off of London's European rivals. It involved defeating the Europeans that had already set up their presence in the subcontinent. The Great Game that followed was about preventing France, Russia and Germany from breaching Fortress India, and if possible, to hold them back, far away from the subcontinent, in the Middle East and inner Asia.

This conflict between London and its rivals gave the Indian princes room to mobilise European powers to preserve their sovereignty and freedom of action; but the British eventually prevailed. That did not stop new threats from Europe emerging; Napoleonic France, Czarist Russia and Imperial Germany all had their eyes on India and continuously sought to find ways to undermine the Raj in India. And for the Raj and its state agencies, keeping an eye on European rivals was a permanent preoccupation.

By the turn of the 20th century, the emerging nationalist forces in India fighting the British inevitably turned to its European rivals. The first provisional government

of India in Kabul – headed by Raja Virendra Pratap Singh and Maulana Barkatullah Khan – was set up with Berlin's help in 1915.<sup>1</sup> Indian nationalists scattered in Europe during the inter-War period constituted themselves into the Berlin Committee in the effort to overthrow British rule.<sup>2</sup> The emergence of the Soviet Union saw the Indian revolutionaries turn to Moscow for help.<sup>3</sup> And as the Second World War unfolded, Indian nationalists like Subhas Chandra Bose turned to Germany in the west and Japan in the east for military assistance.

This complex geopolitical play between India and Europe turned into a crude binary in the Cold War years. In denouncing security alliances in Europe, and framing India's foreign policy as standing non-aligned between the East and the West, Delhi steadily lost all sense of Europe's own complex navigation of the Cold War and the possibilities for engaging Europe for India's national benefit. India also drew closer to the Soviet Union in the Cold War, in response to the Anglo-American alignment with Pakistan. As a result, Delhi's European perspective was increasingly shaped by Moscow. Proximity to Soviet Russia did give India privileged access to Eastern Europe. But Delhi could not make much of it, thanks to the constraints imposed by the bloc politics of the East. Regrettably, India did not seem too sensitive to the structural contradictions between the Central Europeans and the Soviet Union nor prepare for their resolution in favour of the former at the end of the Cold War.

The difficulties imposed by the East-West divide were compounded by the North-South conflict that emerged after the Second World War. India's anti-colonial tradition and the politics of non-alignment had meant that Delhi had actively opposed the role of former colonial powers in Asian security during the Cold War.<sup>4</sup> Delhi also actively campaigned against attempts by the European colonial powers to reclaim territories lost to Imperial Japan. It also mounted pressure on them to complete decolonisation in the small islands and other territories scattered around the world. This left little room for strategic cooperation of any kind between India and the European powers. To be sure, India frequently turned to major European powers for the supply of arms. It also found common cause with small and liberal

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1. See for example, Thomas G. Fraser. 1977. Germany and Indian Revolution, 1914-18. *Journal of Contemporary History* 12, no. 2 (1977): 255-72.

2. On the Berlin Committee, see, Saumya Sengupta. 2013. Indian Independence Committee: Some Aspects On Different Schemes And Group Rivalries. *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 74 (2013): 532-38.

3. John Patrick Haithcox. 1971. *Communism and Nationalism: M.N. Roy and Comintern Policy 1920-1939*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

4. See the classic work of Dietmar Rothermund. 2006. *Routledge Companion to Decolonization*. London: Routledge.

European states on such issues as arm control and disarmament. But that did not in any way alter the larger structural limitations on Delhi's political engagement with Europe.

Despite Britain's rivalry with other European powers, there was substantive accumulation of European commercial involvement in India in the colonial age. Many large European companies had developed extensive businesses in India at the time of its independence. But India's socialist policies, which saw the imposition of significant constraints on domestic and foreign capital, saw the weakening of these commercial ties with Europe. Rather than take advantage of Europe's post-War recovery and growth, Delhi became addicted to aid programmes from European states that did little to transform the Indian economy.

The end of the Cold War provided the conditions for a fundamental re-orientation of India's relations with Europe. First, the collapse of the Soviet Union compelled India to rethink its great power relations at the dawn of the 1990s. India discovered that its relations with the US, Europe, China, and Japan were all underdeveloped. Rebuilding relations with the West, re-engaging China, and salvaging ties with post-Soviet Russia lent a new dynamism to India's foreign policy.

India's new foreign policy was reinforced by a long-overdue reform and the opening up of the Indian economy in the 1990s that unleashed India's long-suppressed commercial energies. Europe was empathetic and supportive of India's new economic orientation. Major European powers, like France, were also interested in the prospects for India's diversification of its security partnerships in the post-Soviet world.

Yet, a number of factors continued to constrain the engagement between India and Europe. Despite the widened horizons of both India and Europe, both were tied down by their regional preoccupations. If Europe was focused on the project of constructing a Union, India was deeply distracted by the turbulence in its neighbourhood, marked by the rise of violent religious extremism that was bred in the jihad against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. India was also challenged by the emergence of a Pakistan that was armed with nuclear weapons and had the impunity to pursue its support of terrorism in India. All these challenges left little diplomatic bandwidth in Delhi to think strategically about Europe and engage it purposefully. While Europe was interested in the new openings of the Indian market, it was drawn like a magnet to the much larger opportunities that emerged in China as Deng Xiaoping ordered a new wave of reforms at the turn of the 1990s. If India's slow pace of change was frustrating to the Europeans, Delhi was perplexed by the rapid integration of Europe. Accustomed to dealing with individual European powers, Delhi struggled to cope with the rise of Brussels.

## INDO-PACIFIC CONVERGENCE

The halting and tentative engagement between India and Europe was marked by the launch of a formal strategic partnership between Delhi and Brussels in 2004.<sup>5</sup> But it was only in recent years that there has been a real momentum in the engagement between Delhi and Brussels. The government of Narendra Modi, which had brought new energy to the conduct of India's foreign policy, provided the basis for a fresh start in bilateral relations.<sup>6</sup> This in turn was reinforced by the political reconstruction of the Indo-Pacific geography that provided a more comprehensive basis for deeper Indian strategic engagement with individual European powers as well as the European Union. Before the EU came up with an Indo-Pacific strategy in the fall of 2021<sup>7</sup>, Brussels had begun to take a renewed interest in the strategic partnership with Delhi. Brussels issued an India strategy in 2018 and put Delhi at the top of its priorities in the connectivity strategy it had articulated in 2020.<sup>8</sup> Individual European countries like France, Germany, and the Netherlands too had all come up with their own guidelines for engaging the Indo-Pacific and India as part of it.<sup>9</sup>

The EU strategy identifies several areas for cooperation with its Indo-Pacific partners. They range from trade and investment to green partnerships, from the construction of quality infrastructure to digital partnerships, and from strengthening ocean governance to promoting research and innovation. Defence and security are important elements of the EU's Indo-Pacific Strategy, which "seeks to promote an open and rules-based regional security architecture, including secure

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5. Ummu Salma Bava. 2010. India and the European Union: From Engagement to Strategic Partnership. *International Studies*, Vol. 47, Nos 2-4, (2010), pp. 373-86.

6. See, Rakesh Sood. 2020. EU-India Relations: Time to chart a new course. Observer Research Foundation, 15 July 2020. (<https://www.orfonline.org/research/eu-india-relations-time-to-chart-a-new-course/>); Krzysztof Iwanek. 3 April 2019. Reviewing India's Foreign Policy Toward Europe Under Narendra Modi. *The Diplomat*. (<https://thediplomat.com/2019/04/reviewing-indias-foreign-policy-toward-europe-under-narendra-modi/>).

7. Joint communication on the Indo-Pacific. European Union External Action Services, Joint Papers 16 September 2021. ([https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/104126/joint-communication-indo-pacific\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/104126/joint-communication-indo-pacific_en)).

8. Elements for an EU strategy on India, Joint Communication To The European Parliament And The Council. European Commission, Brussels, 20 November 2018. ([https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/jc\\_elements\\_for\\_an\\_eu\\_strategy\\_on\\_india\\_-\\_final\\_adopted.pdf](https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/jc_elements_for_an_eu_strategy_on_india_-_final_adopted.pdf)).

9. For a recent review of European approaches, see James Bowen, ed. 2021. *Europe's Indo-Pacific Embrace: Global Partnerships for Regional Resilience*. Perth: KAS and Perth US Asia Centre.

sea lines of communication, capacity-building and enhanced naval presence in the Indo-Pacific".<sup>10</sup>

Although the EU strategy on the Indo-Pacific did not get much popular attention in India, the historic significance of the collective European approach to Indo-Pacific security was not missed in official Delhi. For the first time since the European colonial powers retreated from Asia amidst the surge of nationalist movements in the middle of the 20th century, Europe is returning as a geopolitical actor to Asia and its waters – the Indo-Pacific if you will. Delhi, which actively campaigned against European colonialism in the post-War period, is eager to herald Europe back into Asia.

Underlining this extraordinary shift is, of course, the profound shift in the Asian regional security environment. The rise of Asia in the 21st century has been debated mostly in terms of the shifting dynamic between the East and the West or in terms of the conflict between the US and China. Less understood in the West is the fact that Asia's rise has also been marked by sharpening internal contradictions.<sup>11</sup> If the collective rise of Asia is real, so is the fact that China has risen much faster than its Asian neighbours. China now towers over its Asian neighbours. The Chinese GDP, at about \$16 trillion, is now three times larger than Japan's and five times larger than that of India. Its annual defence expenditure, at about \$250 billion, is at least three times larger than that of India and five times larger than that of Japan.<sup>12</sup> China does not simply tower over its Asian neighbours, but is also seeking regional dominance. Beijing's ambition to construct a regional order led by it is not even hidden.

The structural change in the distribution of power in Asia has created a very different ideological context for India's foreign and security policies. Delhi no longer sees the principal contradiction as between Asia and the West. India, traditionally a champion of Asian unity and solidarity, is now at the receiving end of Chinese power. Unsurprisingly, it has sought balancing strategies that involve greater cooperation with the West. India's relationship with the US has never been deeper than it is today. There is growing military and security cooperation with the United States. India, which long shunned Western political groupings, is now

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10. Joint communication on the Indo-Pacific, European Union External Action Services, Joint Papers, 16 September 2021, p. 13. ([https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/104126/joint-communication-indo-pacific\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/104126/joint-communication-indo-pacific_en)).

11. Two important exceptions are, Bill Emmott. 2008. *Rivals: How Power Struggle Between China, India, and Japan Will Shape Our Next Decade*. London: Allen Lane; and Michael Auslin. 2018. *End of the Asian Century*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

12. Military Expenditure (current USD) - India, Japan, China. The World Bank. (<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/MS.MIL.XPND.CD?locations=IN-JP-CN>).

ready to join minilateral organisations including the United States and its allies.<sup>13</sup> In the East, it has become part of the Quadrilateral forum involving Australia, Japan, and the United States. Launched in 2007, the Quad has now acquired much political momentum under the Trump and Biden administrations.<sup>14</sup> In the Middle East, India has joined Israel, United Arab Emirates and the US to form a similar forum in October 2021.<sup>15</sup>

Although the US now looms large in India's Indo-Pacific calculus, Delhi is acutely conscious of the need to broad-base its strategic coalitions. India is also aware that there is more to the West than just the United States. As the deepening confrontation between the US and China begins to squeeze Southeast Asia, Europe is widely seen as widening the strategic options for the region. The perspective is similar in Delhi. Although much of Asia has experienced European colonialism, few in the region now view Europe with strategic suspicion. Many in Asia see Europe as a valuable partner. A survey earlier this year of policymakers and thought-leaders in the ASEAN region put the EU as the most trusted partner in the region, after Japan and ahead of the US.<sup>16</sup> China and India are way down the list. In India too, Europe has increasingly become an integral part of India's geopolitical calculus.

As External Affairs Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar puts it, India's strategy is to "engage America, manage China, cultivate Europe, reassure Russia, bring Japan into play".<sup>17</sup> For students of Indian foreign policy, the command to "cultivate Europe" is certainly new. Asked to explain his remarks on "cultivating Europe", at the Bled Strategic Forum in Slovenia in September 2021, Jaishankar admitted that Delhi had not devoted adequate attention in the past to Brussels amidst its preoccupation with the larger countries of Europe. Jaishankar added that Delhi was now focused on developing a strong partnership with Brussels and engaging all its 27

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13. Jamir Shea. 16 April 2021. India: the latest recruit to the alliances of the democracies. Friends of Europe. (<https://www.friendsofeurope.org/insights/india-the-latest-recruit-to-the-alliance-of-democracies/>).

14. Tanvi Madan, 16 November 2017. Rise, Fall and Rebirth of the Quad. War on the Rocks. See also, Tanvi Madan. 24 September 2021. Understanding the American enthusiasm for the Quad. Indian Express.

15. C. Raja Mohan. 20 October 2021. India and the new "QUAD" in West Asia. The Indian Express. (<https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/india-and-the-new-quad-in-west-asia-7578842/>).

16. Sharon Seah et al. 10 February 2021. The State of South East Asia 2021, Survey Report. ASEAN Studies Centre, ISEAS and Yusof Ishak Institute. (<https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/The-State-of-SEA-2021-v2.pdf>).

17. For a comprehensive view of India's new approach to great power relations, see the book by the Indian foreign minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar. 2020. *The India Way: Strategies for an Uncertain World*. New Delhi: Harper Collin.

members – big and small – individually.<sup>18</sup> Brussels has long been ready to dance with Delhi.

The EU's 2018 India strategy focuses on four themes – sustainable economic modernisation, promotion of a rules-based order, foreign policy coordination, and security cooperation. At the summit in Portugal in May this year, the EU and India agreed to resume free trade talks and develop a new connectivity partnership that would widen options for the world beyond the Belt and Road Initiative.<sup>19</sup> Above all, there is recognition in both Delhi and Brussels that the India-EU strategic partnership is crucial for the rebalancing of the international system amidst the current global flux marked by the Russian reassertion, Chinese muscle-flexing and America's recalibration of its global policies.

This abstract framework, however, needed a concrete regional context to promote wide-ranging strategic cooperation between India and Europe. That exactly is what the Indo-Pacific regional framework provides. As we noted earlier, regional cooperation with the former colonial powers of Europe was not part of the Indian foreign policy agenda. In fact, Delhi was ranged against Europe on most international issues during the Cold War. Within India's neighbourhood, the fault lines triggered by the Cold War left little room for collaboration. The post-War engagement largely focused on bilateral and global issues rather than regional cooperation. The first to break out of the old paradigm was France. President Emmanuel Macron's visit to India in 2018 saw the identification of shared interests in the Indo-Pacific and the laying out of a concrete agenda for strategic cooperation in the Western Indian Ocean, where Paris has had a historic presence and role in shaping the regional order.<sup>20</sup> Delhi, which in the past shunned the Europeans as extra-regional powers with colonial baggage, now was ready to see the advantage of working with France to secure its own interests, increasingly challenged by the projection of Chinese

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18. Jaishankar at Bled Strategic Panel – Partnership for a Rule Based Order in the Indo-Pacific. Ministry of External Affairs. 2 September 2021. ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=efM2\\_W1hq-c](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=efM2_W1hq-c) at 27 Minutes 30 Seconds).

19. Joint Statement on India-EU Leaders' Meeting. 8 May 2021. Ministry of External Affairs. ([https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/33853/Joint\\_Statement\\_on\\_IndiaEU\\_Leaders\\_Meeting\\_May\\_08\\_2021](https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/33853/Joint_Statement_on_IndiaEU_Leaders_Meeting_May_08_2021)).

20. For the Joint strategic vision on the Indian Ocean unveiled by Macron and Modi in 2018, see (<https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/29598/Joint+Strategic+Vision+of+IndiaFrance+Cooperation+in+the+Indian+Ocean+Region+New+Delhi+10+March+2018>).



naval power into the Indian Ocean. Soon after that India also ended its reluctance to engage with the EU on maritime security.<sup>21</sup>

The last few years have seen an entirely unanticipated convergence between India and Europe on an interesting idea traditionally associated with India – promoting a multipolar world.<sup>22</sup> After the Cold War, India's quest for a multipolar world has largely been associated with Russia. Moscow persuaded Delhi to join a triangular forum with Beijing in the 1990s in the so-called Russia-India-China forum (RIC) and the Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (BRICS) grouping in the early 2000s, which brought in Brazil and South Africa. The objective was to limit American unilateralism and promote a multipolar world. But there was another effort to promote multipolarity that did not really succeed. It was the French initiative to restrain the US hyperpower under president Jacques Chirac.<sup>23</sup> Paris was eager to draft Delhi into this effort, but they did not get very far despite the expanding partnership between the two since the 1990s.

India's strategic problems today are focused on the dangers of a unipolar Asia dominated by China. To make matters worse for Delhi, Moscow has become closer than ever before to Beijing. RIC and BRICS offer little relief to Delhi in addressing the principal challenge confronting it. That is where Europe could step in. With great economic weight, technological strength, and normative power, Europe promises to boost India's own quest for a multipolar world and a rebalanced Indo-Pacific. A stronger Europe with greater geopolitical agency is very welcome in Delhi. India is conscious that the EU and individual European actors like France can't match America's strategic heft in the Indo-Pacific. But a European partnership could significantly enhance India's capacity to shape future outcomes in the Indo-Pacific. It would also be a valuable complement to India's deepening ties with the Quad nations – Australia, Japan and the United States. The EU's Indo-Pacific strategy, in turn, sees room for working with the Quad in the Indo-Pacific, while stepping up security cooperation with a number of Asian partners, including India, Indonesia, Japan, the Republic of Korea, Singapore and Vietnam.

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21. See the EU-India Strategic Partnership: A Roadmap to 2025, issued at the 15th EU-India Summit in 2020. (<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/45026/eu-india-roadmap-2025.pdf>).

22. For a general discussion, see Bernd von Muenchow-Pohl. 2012. India And Europe In A Multipolar World. Carnegie Papers. Washington: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. (<https://carnegieendowment.org/2012/05/10/india-and-europe-in-multipolar-world-pub-48038>).

23. See Michael Duclos, 4 October 2019. Jacques Chirac – The Explorer of the Multipolar World. Institut Montaigne; see also Jean-Luc Racine. 2002. Indo-French Strategic Dialogue: Bilateralism and World Perceptions. *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol 25, No 2, 2002, pp. 157-91.

Equally interesting is the convergence on strategic autonomy. For India, strategic autonomy has been an enduring principle of its foreign policy. In operational terms it was about retaining its autonomy and avoiding an entangling alliance with the United States and more broadly with the West. The emphasis on strategic autonomy in the Indian foreign policy discourse in recent years has often dampened prospects for closer security cooperation with the US. But Delhi under the Modi government has managed to rise above that constraint to find a way to strengthen the strategic partnership with Washington. In Europe, the debate on strategic autonomy is about developing an independent security policy amidst the growing anxiety about the US leadership and Washington's temptations about unilateralism. Although they are coming from different directions – India from a tradition of non-alignment and Europe from an extended dependence on a security alliance with the United States – the convergence on strategic autonomy is a welcome development; but it is not without its share of problems.

The unprecedented US move to offer nuclear-powered submarines to Australia in partnership with the United Kingdom as part of the effort to cope with the Chinese challenge in the Indo-Pacific was a definitive moment in the regional military order. The AUKUS agreement on helping Australia acquire nuclear-powered submarines involved Canberra's cancellation of the prior "deal of the century" – worth nearly 50 billion Euros – with Paris to build 12 French submarines in Australia. The surprise announcement of the AUKUS in mid-September with little advance notice to Paris has inevitably generated political outrage in France.<sup>24</sup> At stake for Paris was a lot more than a lucrative contract and the breach of political trust. It was about the sudden breakdown of a critical pillar in its Indo-Pacific strategy. President Macron Emmanuel had chosen to pursue an ambitious Indo-Pacific strategy in partnership with Australia.

The AUKUS decision overshadowed the unveiling of the EU's Indo-Pacific strategy in more ways than one. Paris saw AUKUS as a setback not just for Paris, but for Europe as a whole; but it is not clear how deeply that sentiment is shared in the rest of Europe. But the AUKUS decision has certainly enhanced the clamour in France for strategic autonomy from the US. Washington has moved quickly to mollify the sentiments in Paris. In a joint statement issued after talks with French

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24. C. Raja Mohan. 22 September 2021. With AUKUS dividing Western block, is there a role for India? The Indian Express. (<https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/aukus-agreement-australia-new-defence-deal-nuclear-powered-submarines-france-7523389/>); C. Raja Mohan. 21 September 2021. An Expert Explains: Why the defence deal among US, Australia and UK has irked France. The Indian Express. (<https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/australia-united-states-united-kingdom-defence-deal-france-submarine-7520154/>).

President Emmanuel Macron on 22 September 2021, Joe Biden affirmed the “strategic importance of French and European engagement in the Indo-Pacific region, including in the framework of the European Union’s recently published strategy for the Indo-Pacific.”<sup>25</sup>

Although Delhi did not make any official statement either welcoming AUKUS or expressing reservations, it is quite clear that Delhi has no quarrel with the decision. The establishment view in Delhi is that AUKUS will help strengthen deterrence against China’s maritime assertiveness and naval power projection. And Delhi is not complaining about being excluded from AUKUS. Given India’s own growing number of security challenges with China across a broad range of domains, any deterrence produced by others is welcome in Delhi. The Modi government understood the sense of outrage in Paris and was quick to reach out to reaffirm the shared commitment to securing the Indo-Pacific. But there is no doubt that Delhi is deeply distressed by the prospect of a rupture within the West triggered by the AUKUS and its impact on the structuring of a stable balance of power in the Indo-Pacific. Delhi believes France and Europe have a critical role in the Indo-Pacific. It would like to see an early resolution of the dispute between France and the AUKUS states and the prevention of a breakdown of the emerging Western coalition in the Indo-Pacific. It would want to contribute in any way it can to facilitate that resolution.

The AUKUS crisis, however, pointed to the potential conflicts within the West and within Europe on engaging the Indo-Pacific. India can overcome this problem by pursuing expansive engagements with both the US and the EU as well as key individual European states. On the security front, India needs to end its reluctance to engage the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation as well as seek partnerships with the new security mechanisms, like Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), being created in Europe. While the quarrels within the West do not pose a fundamental threat to India’s interests in the Indo-Pacific, the potential divergence between Delhi and Brussels in the assessments of Beijing and Moscow presents a problem.

For now, Delhi appears closer to Washington than Brussels in assessing the problems posed by Beijing. The European formulation that China is a partner on global issues, a competitor in the economic domain, and a systemic rival on the political front is certainly interesting. But India worries that Europe might be tempted to underestimate the challenges presented by China. Distance from China and the absence of regional security commitments like the US certainly provide the basis

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25. Joint Statement on the Phone Call between President Biden and President Macron. The White House, 22 September 2021. (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/09/22/joint-statement-on-the-phone-call-between-president-biden-and-president-macron/>).

for a more relaxed attitude in Brussels. This problem applies in reverse to India's reluctance to acknowledge the challenges that Europe sees from Russia. Given Delhi's political inheritance from the Cold War and its continued dependence on military supplies from Moscow, India can often be tone-deaf to the regional security dynamics in Europe. Delhi's new engagement with Brussels, then, is a good moment to begin a comprehensive discussion of great power dynamics and to minimise the potential friction between their respective policies. It is also an opportunity to imagine the new strategic possibilities presented by a multipolar world. As Washington looks to greater defence burden-sharing in Europe and Asia, and Brussels looks to enhance its regional security role, Delhi could be an important part of the potential answers.

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# Europe's Strategic Approaches – A View from Japan

*Kyoko Hatakeyama*

## INTRODUCTION

Asia seems to be in a transitional period. Claiming what it sees as its historical rights to most of the South China Sea encircled by the “nine-dash line,” China unilaterally changed the status quo by reclaiming land and installing military bases in zones under dispute. Chinese assertiveness is of concern to many states in the region and has intensified tensions between China and littoral states that have also claimed sovereign rights over the shoals and reefs in the South China Sea.<sup>1</sup> In the East China Sea, China has repeatedly intruded into Japan's alleged territorial or contiguous waters near the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, which have been administered by Japan since the United States (US) returned them to Japan in 1972. Responding to Chinese assertiveness, Japan announced its Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy (FOIP), which emphasised the importance of the rules-based order and its willingness to contribute to the economic prosperity of the region.

Recognising the challenges posed by China, European states have begun to join the debate. In 2018, France announced “France's Indo-Pacific Strategy,” a modified version of “France and Security in the Asia-Pacific”, announced in 2014. Germany and the Netherlands also issued their Indo-Pacific policies in 2020, followed by the announcement of the EU's strategy in 2021. The UK also shifted its attention to Asia, in part to offset the impact of Brexit. It announced a Japan-UK Joint Declaration for Security Cooperation in 2017 and showed its support for a

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1. For instance, military standoffs between Vietnam and China over maritime resources increased in frequency; Vietnamese fishing boats often collided with Chinese Coast Guard boats. Tensions between Malaysia and China over oil exploration in regional waters also added to escalating tensions in the region. Similarly, Indonesia has experienced tensions with China over its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) around the country's Natuna Archipelago.

“rules-based international system” in the Indo-Pacific region.<sup>2</sup> This declaration heralded deepening security cooperation between the two states. The most symbolic event indicating deepening ties was the UK’s dispatch of its aircraft carrier HMS *Queen Elizabeth* to Japan through the South China Sea. These moves were remarkable given their hitherto reserved attitudes towards maritime security in Asia.

This article analyses how Japan perceives this European turn to the region. First, it overviews increased European engagement with the Indo-Pacific region. Second, it studies the deepening security ties between Japan and European states. Third, it analyses how Japan has perceived European states as actors in the region by delving into its policies and statements by its politicians. Fourth, it probes for any differences or similarities between Japan and its European counterparts in their approaches towards the regional order. In conclusion, it argues that Japan welcomes the European engagement in the region and that any differences in approaches will be no obstacle to cooperation between them. The paper concludes with policy implications for future cooperation between Japan and European states.

## INCREASED EUROPEAN ENGAGEMENT IN THE REGION

Since the 2000s, China has been increasingly assertive in the maritime domain. Despite growing concerns among regional states about China’s attempts to change the status quo by force or coercion, Europe did not take China’s challenge seriously at an early stage. Instead, most European states were eager to deepen economic ties with China to spur their economies. For instance, when China established the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), Europe hailed this Chinese economic initiative. The UK and Germany joined the AIIB as initial members. Other European states, including France and the Netherlands, followed suit despite US opposition. Japan and the US did not join the institution, while they agreed to offer the necessary assistance, including know-how. They considered that the Chinese initiative was strategic and political in nature and that the AIIB overlapped with the Asian Development Bank, in which Japan has held the presidential position since its inception in 1966. Likewise, Europe’s response was slow and ambiguous in 2016 when an international tribunal issued an epoch-making ruling that denied the Chinese claim on its historic rights to most of the South China Sea. The EU refrained from pressing China to accept the decision and instead urged the swift signing of an agreement

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2. UK Government. 2017. Japan-UK Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation. ([https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/641155/Japan-UK\\_Joint\\_Declaration\\_on\\_Security\\_Cooperation.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/641155/Japan-UK_Joint_Declaration_on_Security_Cooperation.pdf)).

on a Code of Conduct between China and ASEAN.<sup>3</sup> In particular, some states such as Hungary and Greece made it difficult for the EU to speak with one voice.<sup>4</sup> These states hoped to boost their economies by deepening relationships with China. Europe's slow and lukewarm response contrasted with Japan's prompt and definite announcement in Japanese, English and Chinese, which expressed strong support for the ruling. The Japanese government urged China to accept the decision, stating that "Japan strongly expects that the parties' compliance with this award will eventually lead to the peaceful settlement of disputes in the South China Sea."<sup>5</sup>

European attitudes, however, visibly shifted in the late 2010s. The EU as well as major European states began to increase their engagement with the Indo-Pacific region. France is one of the most active European states that stepped up its involvement in the region. France has overseas territorial extensions across the Indo-Pacific, such as Mayotte, Reunion, New Caledonia, and French Polynesia, as well as 7,000 soldiers and ships stationed in bases in the region. It also has a large Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) across the region. France is therefore more concerned with the fate of the regional security order and the protection of its sovereignty. The 2018 Indo-Pacific Strategy announced by President Emmanuel Macron at a naval base in Garden Island, Sydney, illustrated its growing concern regarding the security outlook in the Indo-Pacific region. In the strategy, France announced that as a full-fledged Indo-Pacific state, it would commit to maintaining the rules-based order to "ensure freedom of navigation and overflight, in full compliance with UNCLOS".<sup>6</sup> Likewise, French Minister of the Armed Forces Florence Parly promised that French vessels would "sail more than twice a year in the South China Sea" to preserve "free and open access to maritime lines of communication."<sup>7</sup> These statements accompanied a growing military presence. In addition to occasional patrols by its vessels through the South China Sea, France sent a nuclear-powered

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3. European Council. 2016. Declaration by the High Representative on behalf of the EU on the Award rendered in the Arbitration between the Republic of the Philippines and the People's Republic of China. (<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2016/07/15/south-china-sea-arbitration/>).

4. Reuters. 15 July 2016. EU's statement on the South China Sea reflects divisions. (<https://www.reuters.com/article/southchinasea-ruling-eu-idUSL8N1A130Y>).

5. Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan. 12 July 2016. Arbitration between the Republic of the Philippines and the People's Republic of China regarding the South China Sea. ([https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/press4e\\_001204.html](https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/press4e_001204.html)).

6. Government of France. 2018. France's Indo-Pacific Strategy. ([https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/en\\_a4\\_indopacifique\\_v2\\_rvb\\_cle432726.pdf](https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/en_a4_indopacifique_v2_rvb_cle432726.pdf)), p. 2.

7. Discours de Florence Parly. 1 June 2019. Ministre des Armées\_Allocation au Shangri-La Dialogue. ([https://www.defense.gouv.fr/salle-de-presse/discours/discours-de-florence-parly/discours-de-florence-parly-ministre-des-armees\\_allocation-au-shangri-la-dialogue](https://www.defense.gouv.fr/salle-de-presse/discours/discours-de-florence-parly/discours-de-florence-parly-ministre-des-armees_allocation-au-shangri-la-dialogue)).

submarine to the South China Sea in 2019 to reaffirm the freedom of navigation and the prevalence of international law. The La Pérouse joint naval exercises conducted in April 2021 with the four Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) partners (Japan, the US, Australia and India) was also symbolic.

Similarly, the UK has deepened its involvement in the Indo-Pacific region. As early as 2015, the UK had identified the erosion of the rules-based international order as one of the security threats to be addressed.<sup>8</sup> In response, it began strengthening its diplomatic language, arguing for the importance of the freedom of navigation.<sup>9</sup> It conducted a freedom of navigation operation (FONOP) in the South China Sea in 2018.<sup>10</sup> In August 2021, the UK dispatched HMS *Queen Elizabeth*, the new and most powerful warship in its fleet, joined by a Dutch frigate and a US destroyer, to the region to demonstrate its commitment to regional stability.<sup>11</sup> The strike group sailed through waters that included the contested South China Sea and participated in joint exercises with warships from Canada and Japan before docking in Japan. The visit was one of the most significant maritime dispatches for the UK since the 1982 Falklands War. The strike group's commander, Steve Moorhouse, said that the visit "embodie[d] (Britain's) tilt to the Indo-Pacific, [and] mark[ed] a return to the UK's enduring presence in the region."<sup>12</sup> The UK also decided to deploy warships in the Indo-Pacific permanently,<sup>13</sup> a decision that sent a strong message to China that the UK will not tolerate China's unilateral actions.

Although not as enthusiastically as the UK and France, Germany and the Netherlands joined the chorus amid the Covid-19 pandemic. Even before the pandemic, the European states had become increasingly concerned with growing Chinese assertiveness and behaviour that ran counter to liberal values such

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8. UK Government. 2015. National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review. (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-security-strategy-and-strategic-defence-and-security-review-2015>).

9. Liu Jin. 2020. Evolution, Drivers and Implications of the UK's South China Sea Policy. ([https://www.ciiis.org.cn/english/ESEARCHPROJECTS/Articles/202007/t20200715\\_3594.html](https://www.ciiis.org.cn/english/ESEARCHPROJECTS/Articles/202007/t20200715_3594.html)).

10. The Royal Navy's HMS *Albion*, a 22,000-ton amphibious transport dock, conducted a freedom of navigation operation (FONOP) in 2018 by sailing through the disputed Paracel Islands' territorial waters claimed by China. Ian Storey. 3 February 2020. Britain, Brexit, and the South China Sea Disputes. The National Bureau of Asian Research. (<https://www.nbr.org/publication/britain-brexit-and-the-south-china-sea-disputes/>).

11. UK Government. 2021. UK Carrier Strike Group flagship HMS Queen Elizabeth to Arrive in Japan. (<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-carrier-strike-group-flagship-hms-queen-elizabeth-to-arrive-in-japan>).

12. Mainichi Shimbun. 8 September 2021. (<https://mainichi.jp/english/articles/20210908/p2g/00m/0in/017000c>).

13. UK Government. 2021. Op. cit.



as democracy, freedom and human rights. China's failure to disclose information about the virus and its subsequent mask diplomacy, which took advantage of its position as a supplier of medical items, worsened the European perception of China. Although Germany had been eager to pursue deeper economic ties with China, in September 2020, the German government announced the "Guidelines on the Indo-Pacific, Germany-Europe-Asia: Shaping the 21st century together". In the Guidelines, the government used the term "Indo-Pacific" for the very first time.<sup>14</sup> Germany also dispatched a frigate to the region in August 2021 to demonstrate solidarity with like-minded partners in Asia such as Japan. Likewise, the Netherlands published its Indo-Pacific policy, entitled "Indo-Pacific: Guidelines for strengthening Dutch and EU cooperation with partners in Asia", in November 2020.<sup>15</sup>

The EU also stepped up its engagement. Labelling China a "systemic rival,"<sup>16</sup> the EU published a preliminary document, entitled the "EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific", in April 2021 followed by the Joint Communication on the EU's Indo-Pacific Strategy in September 2021. By highlighting the importance of democracy, the rule of law, the rules-based international order, and freedom of navigation, the document indicated the EU's willingness to increase its member states' naval presence in the region to protect the freedom of navigation as well as multilateral engagements with ASEAN.

## DEEPENING INSTITUTIONALISATION BETWEEN JAPAN AND EUROPEAN STATES

No substantial security cooperation between Japan and the European states had existed up to the 2000s. However, under the second Shinzo Abe government, which advocated the "proactive contributor to peace" thesis, Japan began strengthening its relationship with European states such as France, Germany and the UK.<sup>17</sup> As a gambit, in 2014, Japan started a 2+2 meeting (Foreign and Defence Ministers'

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14. Frédéric Grare. 16 October 2020. Germany's New Approach to the Indo-Pacific. *Internationale Politik Quarterly*, No. 4. (<https://ip-quarterly.com/en/germanys-new-approach-indo-pacific>).

15. Government of the Netherlands. 2020. Indo-Pacific: Guidelines for strengthening Dutch and EU cooperation with partners in Asia. (<https://www.government.nl/documents/publications/2020/11/13/indo-pacific-guidelines>).

16. European Commission and HR/VP Contribution to the European Council. 12 March 2019. EU-China: A Strategic Outlook. (<https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/communication-eu-china-a-strategic-outlook.pdf>).

17. Michito Tsuruoka. 29 September 2021. (Kenkyu report) Abe gaiko ni okeru yoroppa. shuryuka ha jitsugen shitanoka [Research report: Europe in Abe diplomacy: Has Europe become mainstream diplomacy?]. Japan Institute of International Affairs. (<https://www.jiia.or.jp/column/post-11.html#footnote>).

meeting) with France, the first European state to hold such a meeting with Japan. In the same year, Japan concluded a strategic partnership with the UK, followed by the first 2+2 meeting in 2015. Coincidentally, a series of events that occurred in 2016 encouraged Japan and its European counterparts to deepen their security relations. First, the UK's decision to leave the EU in 2016 pushed the country to look to Asia as a partner. Second, whereas the international tribunal denied the Chinese claim to its alleged historic rights to the South China Sea, China dismissed the ruling. Third, the Abe government announced its vision of the FOIP, demonstrating Japan's readiness to engage in the regional order. In the wake of these events, in August 2017, the UK and Japan announced a Japan-UK Joint Declaration, confirming their intention to deepen security and economic relationships between the two states. In addition to the start of joint training with these states, Japan also concluded an Acquisition and Cross Servicing Agreement with the UK and France in 2017 and 2018 respectively, with the aim of smoothing defence cooperation. In 2021, Japan also started a 2+2 meeting with Germany. Maritime security and China's assertiveness henceforth became one of the issues to be discussed in 2+2 meetings between the partner states.

At a multilateral level, the relationship between Japan and the EU also deepened. In 2018, Japan concluded an EU-Japan Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA), in which Japan and the EU declared that both sides "share[d] fundamental values such as democracy, the rule of law, human rights and freedom, and principles."<sup>18</sup> Their growing ties culminated in the EU's first-time invitation to Japan's Foreign Minister Toshimitsu Motegi to attend the EU's Foreign Affairs Council online in January 2021. In the meeting, Motegi explained Japan's FOIP and pointed out the challenges facing maritime security in the East and South China Seas and fundamental principles, including democracy and human rights. Motegi also raised debt issues associated with infrastructure development among regional states.<sup>19</sup> In the same year, Motegi visited Poland, Slovenia and Bosnia-Herzegovina and had meetings with six Eastern European states to solicit their support for the "free and open international order based on the rule of law".<sup>20</sup> As the 17+1 framework between China and 17 Central and Eastern European states shows, these states had been

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18. Ministry of Defence, Japan. 2021. Defence Minister Kishi's Attendance at the European Parliament (virtual format). (<https://www.mod.go.jp/en/article/2021/06/76a1995c77df2f3d7a9838af79427eea64520c56.html>).

19. Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan. 25 January 2021. Foreign Minister Motegi's Attendance at the EU Foreign Affairs Council (virtual format). ([https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/press1e\\_000168.html](https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/press1e_000168.html)).

20. Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan. 7 May 2021. Foreign Minister Motegi Visits Poland: The 7th "V4 plus Japan" Foreign Ministers' Meeting. ([https://www.mofa.go.jp/erp/c\\_see/page4e\\_001127.html](https://www.mofa.go.jp/erp/c_see/page4e_001127.html)).

attracted by the prospect of Chinese financial assistance and investment, and had thus blocked EU statements critical of China. Motegi therefore visited these states to convince them of the importance of the rule of law so that the coming EU strategy would not become a product of compromise.

## **JAPAN'S PERCEPTION OF EUROPE: A PARTNER IN ASIA**

The evolution of the security relationship in the 2010s between Japan and the EU and some European states was remarkable. During the Cold War period, both sides had never explored the option to establish a substantial security tie partly because due to geographical distance, no urgent need to develop a security relationship existed. Moreover, insurmountable obstacles had existed on the Japanese side. Even the existence of the Japanese Self-Defence Forces had been controversial, with the opposition parties opposing it as unconstitutional. Throughout the Cold War period, Japan instead devoted most of its resources to developing and deepening economic relationships with Asia and the US.

However, as early as the 2000s, Japan began eying Europe as a partner for its global diplomacy. For instance, since the publication of the 2006 Diplomatic Bluebook, the Japanese government has emphasised the importance of European states as Japan's partners sharing fundamental values such as human rights and freedom and democracy. The "Arc of Freedom and Prosperity" thesis announced by Foreign Minister Taro Aso in 2006 also highlighted the importance of liberal values such as human rights and democracy, and showed Japan's willingness to pursue values-based diplomacy. The following year, Prime Minister Abe proposed the Quad consisting of the US, Japan, India and Australia and argued for unity among these democracies. Japan's emphasis on the liberal values was driven by its desire to play a role as a major democracy and strengthen ties with European states and the changing security outlook including China's research activities within Japan's EEZ.<sup>21</sup> However, Japan's values-based diplomacy quietly disappeared without gaining much momentum, even domestically, and Abe, a cheerleader of the Quad, stepped down due to health reasons.

When Abe returned to the centre of the political stage in December 2012, he sought to pursue a more active involvement in international affairs for Japan by expanding its security roles. Concerned that the South China Sea was set to become

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21. Kaijo Hoancho. 2004. Kaijo Hoan report 2004. (<https://www.kaiho.mlit.go.jp/info/books/report2004/honpen/hp02010700.html>).

“Lake Beijing,” Abe emphasised the importance of cooperation among democracies and invited “Britain and France to stage a comeback in terms of participating in strengthening Asia’s security”. He also welcomed “their renewed presence” in Asia.<sup>22</sup> Japan’s search for a closer relationship with Europe was also illustrated by the 2013 National Security Strategy (NSS), adopted as a guideline for Japan’s security policy. Recognising the EU’s international influence as a normative power, the NSS stated:

“[The] EU has the influence to formulate international public opinions [and] the capacity to develop norms in major international frameworks and a large economy....[European countries] are partners for Japan which together take a leading role in ensuring the peace, stability and prosperity of the international community....At a time when the power balance of the international community is changing, in order to establish an international order based on universal values and rules, to effectively address global challenges and to accomplish Japan’s initiatives for a peaceful and prosperous international community, Japan will further strengthen its relations with Europe, including cooperation with the European Union (EU), the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE)”.<sup>23</sup>

Thus, Japan turned its eyes towards Europe as a partner in promoting its values-based diplomacy and ensuring the rules-based order in the region.

The factors driving Japan’s call for closer ties with European states lay not only in the EU’s increasing influence in international affairs as a unitary actor; it also lay in the fact that Japan faced an intensifying Chinese challenge in the East China Sea, including continuous intrusions by Chinese Coast Guard vessels into the territorial and contiguous waters off the Senkaku Islands. Japan also took China’s assertiveness and coercion in the South China Sea seriously. Since the Japanese government nationalised the Senkaku Islands previously owned by a Japanese individual in 2012, Chinese intrusions have dramatically increased. Although the Japanese government does not admit the existence of territorial disputes between the two states, China’s claim gives an impression that both states are in dispute over the islands. Japan’s position as a claimant made the country’s promotion of the FOIP, which emphasised the rule of law and economic prosperity, sound strategic, and even selfish.

22. Shinzo Abe, 27 December 2012. Asia’s Democratic Security Diamond. (<https://www.project-syndicate.org/onpoint/a-strategic-alliance-for-japan-and-india-by-shinzo-abe?language=english&barrier=accesspaylog>).

23. Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet. 2013. National Security Strategy. December 2013. ([http://japan.kantei.go.jp/96\\_abe/documents/2013/\\_icsFiles/afieldfile/2013/12/17/NSS.pdf](http://japan.kantei.go.jp/96_abe/documents/2013/_icsFiles/afieldfile/2013/12/17/NSS.pdf)).

Moreover, Japan has a historical legacy with China, which surfaces occasionally. For instance, whenever Japanese prime ministers worship at the Yasukuni Shrine, China brings up the issue without fail by arguing that such a visit nullifies Japan's past apologies, and even indicates Japan's return to militarism. By strategically referring to Japan's imperialist past, China thus censures Japan's behaviour and tries to label the country as a troublemaker in the region.<sup>24</sup>

Japan's fluctuating relationship with China thus makes Japan's support for the rules-based order and its criticism of China for ignoring international law appear strategic. In fact, articles published in the mid-2010s argued that the factor driving Japan to increase its involvement in South China Sea issues was its desire to defend its sovereignty over the Senkaku Islands.<sup>25</sup> Although this linkage is not groundless, the defence of the Senkaku Islands was not the sole reason for Japan's proactiveness. As the FOIP and capacity-building support of the regional states by the Japan Coast Guard indicate, Japan has been more concerned with China's assertiveness, which it sees as aiming to change the status quo by force.<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, the complicated picture of Japan's position as a stakeholder and a key US ally creates an impression that Japan's engagement is driven by sheer self-interest. Therefore, active involvement by the EU and major European states and close coordination between both sides are desirable since their engagement with the region in sustaining the rules-based order not only operates as pressure on China but also makes Japan's argument more legitimate.

Japan's readiness to work with European states was characterised by its positive response to deepening defence relationships with the European states. Foreign Minister Motegi's statements in relation to the 2021 EU Strategy also demonstrates the country's eagerness to align with them. Motegi welcomed the EU document, which announced its "strong intentions for engagement in the Indo-Pacific."<sup>27</sup> He stated that Japan and the EU had reached a common understanding in principle,

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24. Yee-Kuang Heng. 2018. Smart Power and Japan's Trouble-Shooting Approach to Southeast Asia. Mary McCarthy, ed. Routledge Handbook of Japanese Foreign Policy. Routledge.

25. James Manicom. 2010. Japan's Ocean Policy: Still the Reactive State? *Pacific Affairs* Vol. 83. No. 2; Michelle LeBaron. 2014. *Bridging Troubled Waters: Conflict Resolution from the Heart*. Jossey-Bass; Paul Midford. 2015. Japan's Approach to Maritime Security in the South China Sea. *Asian Survey* Vol. 55. No. 3. 525-547.

26. Kyoko Hatakeyama. 2019. A Middle Power's Roles in Shaping East Asian Security Order: Analysis of Japan's Engagement from a Normative Perspective. *Australian Journal of Politics and History*. Vol. 65. No. 3. pp. 466-481.

27. Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan. 20 April 2021. Press Conference by Foreign Minister Motegi Toshimitsu. ([https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/kaiken/kaiken6e\\_000032.html](https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/kaiken/kaiken6e_000032.html)).

even though minor differences in their perceptions of China existed.<sup>28</sup> He also commended the EU Strategy, which referred to Japan as a partner country for cooperation, because it “resonates with Japan’s views and efforts for a ‘Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP).’”<sup>29</sup> Defence Minister Nobuo Kishi also expressed Japan’s appreciation of the EU’s increased involvement in the Indo-Pacific region. By referring to similarities in the challenges posed by Russia and China in Europe and Asia respectively, he stressed that Europe and Japan “must align the strategic benefits and stand up together to face the challenges on a united front” and “fight against authoritarianism.”<sup>30</sup> Japan thus hailed the involvement by some European states and the EU.

Japan’s expanding military ties with some European states are one of the achievements pursued by Japan in the post-Cold War period. During that period, Japan attempted to increase its security role within the limits of its Constitution, which restricts its use of force beyond self-defence. By doing so, Japan hoped to take its place among an international group of like-minded states.<sup>31</sup> A series of efforts resulted in its enlarged security roles under UN auspices as well as the alliance with the US, and also deepened security ties with Australia. Admittedly, China’s assertiveness accelerated Japan’s search for deeper military cooperation with like-minded states, including European states.

## DIFFERENCES OR SIMILARITIES? A MIDDLE APPROACH OF EACH STATE

Despite the closer links detailed above, different degrees of concern and approaches exist among actors. Germany and the Netherlands argue that their interests lie in promoting economic links and the safety of sea lanes, and supporting the EU’s role in promoting a multilateral system with ASEAN as the centre.<sup>32</sup> By emphasising

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28. 204th National Diet of Japan. 12 May 2021. House of Representatives. Foreign committee. No. 12.

29. Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan. 16 September 2021. Joint Communication on the EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific (Statement by Foreign Minister Motegi Toshimitsu). ([https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/press6e\\_000331.html](https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/press6e_000331.html)).

30. Ministry of Defence, Japan. 2021. Defence Minister Kishi’s Attendance at the European Parliament (virtual format). (<https://www.mod.go.jp/en/article/2021/06/76a1995c77df2f3d7a9838af79427eea64520c56.html#1>).

31. Kyoko Hatakeyama. 2021. *Japan’s Evolving Security Policy: Militarisation within a Pacifist Tradition*. Routledge.

32. Lucas Alonso Butcher. 17 August 2021. *Assessing the EU’s Indo-Pacific Strategy*. (<https://eias.org/op-ed/assessing-the-eus-indo-pacific-strategy/>).

multilateralism, they maintain a distance from competition between the US and China.

For instance, despite the announcement of the Indo-Pacific Guidelines, Germany has been keen to deepen its economic relations with China. In fact, Germany had been hesitant to use the term “Indo-Pacific”, which it perceives as having the connotation of an anti-China grouping, because China has been the largest trading partner for the country since 2016.<sup>33</sup> As a result, while highlighting the importance of the rule of law, Germany’s focus has been to ensure the safety of the sea lanes. Its emphasis on advancing its economic interests was also well illustrated by the announcement of the EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment in December 2020, amid concerns over China’s growing influence in EU politics, its human rights abuses in Xinjiang and its cracking down on Hong Kong’s democracy. The agreement aimed to provide European and Chinese companies with better access to each other’s markets. Despite US opposition, German Chancellor Angela Merkel secured a deal before she stepped down as president of the Council of the EU.<sup>34</sup> Germany’s emphasis on economic ties with China was also illustrated by German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas’s statement that denied the country’s intention to decouple from China. Rather, Maas showed the country’s willingness to maintain close coordination and communication with China.<sup>35</sup> Despite dispatching a frigate to the Indo-Pacific and conducting joint exercises with Japan at Japan’s request in 2021,<sup>36</sup> the frigate also planned to visit Shanghai before entering the South China Sea to dilute any symbolic significance of its dispatch regarding the rules-based order during its voyage.<sup>37</sup> Meanwhile, France and the UK have been keen to increase their military presence in the region and play a significant role in ensuring the rules-based order. Both states are eager to participate in joint trainings with regional states and impress their military presence by dispatching vessels to the region.

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33. Destatis. The People’s Republic of China is Again Germany’s Main Trading Partner. (<https://www.destatis.de/EN/Themes/Economy/Foreign-Trade/trading-partners.html>).

34. Toshiya Nakamura. 2021. Doitsu no indo taiheiyo senryaku [Germany’s Indo-Pacific Strategy]. Kokusai Anzenhosho, Vol.48. No.4. p. 13.

35. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China. 21 April 2021. State Councillor Wang Yi and German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas Hold a Video Consultation. ([https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/zxxx\\_662805/t1870759.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1870759.shtml)).

36. Ministry of Defence, Japan. 13 April 2021. Japan-Germany Foreign and Defence Ministers’ Meeting (“2+2”). (<https://www.mod.go.jp/en/article/2021/04/aa9ac5d279ca488488a60a5983f0320dfe9d99cd.html>).

37. Ibid. However, the proposed visit by the German frigate was rejected by the Chinese government. (<https://www.jiji.com/jc/article?k=2021091501216&g=int>).

Europe's turn to the Indo-Pacific therefore does not mean a complete alignment with Japan or the US. The European Indo-Pacific strategies are characterised as inclusive, thus leaving room for cooperation with China provided the latter respects rules and norms.<sup>38</sup> While emphasising the rules-based order, the Europeans focus on fostering a multilateral, multipolar, rules-based order.<sup>39</sup> The pursuit of "multifaceted engagement with China" stressed in the 2021 EU strategy<sup>40</sup> indicated its desire to ensure the rules-based order while engaging with China.

Such an approach to a middle way is not incompatible, albeit not identical, with Japan's. Japan has outspokenly criticised China's intrusions and its attempts to change the status quo by force. It has also strengthened the security relationships with like-minded states by reviving the Quad 2.0 in 2017. Furthermore, at the 2021 summit meeting with US President Joe Biden, Japan's Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga referred to Taiwan's peace and stability to show their strong concerns about developments in Taiwan. Notably, this was only the second time that the two countries referred to Taiwan's stability after 1969.

Yet, given its proximity and the two countries' economic interdependence, Japan wishes to maintain a positive relationship with China. In fact, China has been Japan's largest trading partner since 2007. In 2020, China accounted for 22 per cent of Japan's total exports while the US, its second-largest partner, accounted for 18 per cent. China also accounted for 25 per cent of Japan's total imports, with the US accounting for 11 per cent.<sup>41</sup> Given its close economic relationship with China, Japan does not want to risk damaging its economy by confronting China. That is, while Japan champions a rules-based order, it hopes to preserve a good relationship with China. This desire is aptly illustrated by its failure to impose sanctions on China for its human rights abuses in Xinjiang. Japan justified its inaction by stressing the need to promote a dialogue with China while the EU and other G7 states did otherwise.

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38. Veerle Nouwens and Garima Mohan. 24 June 2021. Europe Eyes the Indo-Pacific, but Now it's Time to Act. (<https://warontherocks.com/2021/06/europe-eyes-the-indo-pacific-but-now-its-time-to-act/>); Rahul Roy-Chaudhury. 2021. Understanding the UK's "tilt" towards the Indo-Pacific. (<https://www.iiss.org/blogs/analysis/2021/04/uk-indo-pacific-tilt>).

39. Céline Pajon. 2021. The EU-Japan Partnership in the Indo-Pacific: Opportunities and Challenges. ([http://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/wps/portal/riecano\\_en/contenido?WCM\\_GLOBAL\\_CONTEXT=elcano/elcano\\_in/zonas\\_in/europe/ari31-2021-pajon-the-eu-japan-partnership-in-the-indo-pacific-opportunities-and-challenges](http://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/wps/portal/riecano_en/contenido?WCM_GLOBAL_CONTEXT=elcano/elcano_in/zonas_in/europe/ari31-2021-pajon-the-eu-japan-partnership-in-the-indo-pacific-opportunities-and-challenges)).

40. European Union. 16 September 2021. Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council. The EU strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific. ([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)).

41. JETRO. 2021. Sekai to nihon no boueki toukei shiryō [Statistic and Data regarding Japan's trade in the world]. ([https://www.jetro.go.jp/ext\\_images/world/gtir/2021/shiryō.pdf](https://www.jetro.go.jp/ext_images/world/gtir/2021/shiryō.pdf)).



This “separation of politics from the economy” is not a new approach but rather a traditional one, which was also adopted at the time of the 1989 Tiananmen Square incident. Abe’s visit to China in 2018 also illustrates the continuity of this policy. During that visit, the two countries concluded 52 memorandums of cooperation to boost their economic ties. Abe also attended the Forum on Third Country Business Cooperation to promote Japan-China cooperation in infrastructure development programmes in such countries. Although eventually unsuccessful, Abe was eager to invite Chinese President Xi Jinping to visit Japan as a state guest.

Japan has been more confrontational and critical of China than its European counterparts because it has faced direct Chinese challenges. Yet both Japan and some European states have strongly supported the rule of law, human rights and democracy, and increased military cooperation between them to counterbalance the growing Chinese military presence in the region. Meanwhile, they have tried to preserve good relationships with China, albeit minor differences in their approaches existed. Both similarities and differences have existed in their middle approach.

## **CONCLUSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS: TOWARDS CLOSER COOPERATION?**

This article demonstrated that Japan has welcomed European engagement as well as its commitment to sustaining the rules-based order in the region. Japan has eyed the European states as partners in promoting liberal values such as democracy, freedom and human rights since the 2000s. Yet, these states were keen to strengthen their economic relationships with China despite the latter continuing to change the status quo by force and coercion in the South China Sea. While geographical distance enabled Europe to remain aloof from the security challenges occurring in Asia, China’s growing assertiveness and its behaviour that ran counter to liberal values concerned some European states, encouraging them to step up their involvement in the region. This Asian turn was welcomed by Japan, leading to deepening defence relationships between them.

Japan’s European counterparts are neither allies, nor do they have direct stakes in the East and South China Seas. Europe’s security situation is therefore different from that of Japan. Yet this does not necessarily present an obstacle to promoting security cooperation between these states. Though not identical, both Japan and the European states have taken a middle way approach in part because they do not want to relinquish economic benefits they derive from China. Whereas Japan cannot concede on the Senkaku issue, it does not wish for a total confrontation with China. This desire is illustrated by its traditional policy of “separation of politics

from the economy,” which makes a contrast with its unequivocal criticism of China’s unilateral actions. Since Japan hopes to avoid being entrapped by competition between the US and China, it expects the European states to advocate the rules-based order by becoming vocal and showing their presence in Asia. Their involvement will not only dilute an element of a binary confrontation between the US and China but also strengthen Japan’s middle approach by making Japan’s argument sound more legitimate. Given deepening economic interdependence among states, a middle approach to China rather than all-out confrontation is realistic.

How, then, can Japan and the European states promote cooperation to ensure peace and effectively navigate the region? In a survey conducted in ASEAN, 61.2 per cent of respondents chose Japan as the most-trusted power to do “the right thing,” with the EU accounting for 38.7 per cent as the second-most-trusted power.<sup>42</sup> As regards the US-China competition, both the EU and Japan ranked as most favoured strategic partners for ASEAN.<sup>43</sup> Such trust should enable both Japan and the EU to navigate the discussion and consolidate their views about a desirable regional security order. Meanwhile, ASEAN has faced difficulties in choosing between security and economy and refused to take sides between the US and China.<sup>44</sup> Japan and European states are also less keen to confront China squarely. This puts these states in a strong position for initiating a third way to sustain the rules-based regional order.

First, taking advantage of their economic strength, Japan and European states need to provide alternatives to ASEAN, a major stakeholder. While ASEAN is concerned with China’s assertiveness in the maritime domain, it is also attracted by Chinese money to promote their economies. The EU, the largest investor in the world<sup>45</sup>, and Japan should cooperate in providing economic assistance and investment to ASEAN so as to prevent ASEAN from overly depending on China and

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42. Yusof Ishak Institute. 2020. The State of Southeast Asia 2020 Survey Report. ([https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/pdfs/TheStateofSEASurveyReport\\_2020.pdf](https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/pdfs/TheStateofSEASurveyReport_2020.pdf)).

43. Yusof Ishak Institute. 2021. The State of Southeast Asia 2021 Survey Report. (<https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/The-State-of-SEA-2021-v2.pdf>).

44. Prime Minister’s Office, Singapore. 2019. PM Lee Hsien Loong Gave the Keynote Address at the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) Shangri-La Dialogue Opening Dinner on 31 May 2019 at the Shangri-La Hotel Singapore. (<https://www.pmo.gov.sg/Newsroom/PM-Lee-Hsien-Loong-at-the-IISS-Shangri-La-Dialogue-2019>).

45. See, European Union. 16 September 2021. Questions and Answers: EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific. ([https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/QANDA\\_21\\_4709](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/QANDA_21_4709)); TheGlobalEconomy.com. Percent of world FDI - Country rankings. ([https://www.theglobaleconomy.com/rankings/share\\_world\\_fdi/](https://www.theglobaleconomy.com/rankings/share_world_fdi/)). The UK, Germany, France, Italy and Spain accounted for more than 40 per cent of the world’s Foreign Direct Investment as of 2018.

falling into Chinese debt traps. For instance, by using the framework of the Japan-EU Connectivity Partnership concluded in 2019, both could provide high-quality infrastructure to ASEAN states. Capacity-building support would also constitute adequate assistance since enhancing ASEAN's law enforcement capability will deter China from conducting activities that do not comply with international law or conventions such as UNCLOS, and thus ensure the rules-based order.

Second, as stated in the EU document adopted in September 2021, establishing a reliable and resilient supply chain is indispensable. This move coincides with the Supply Chain Resilience Initiative launched by Japan, Australia and India, which was established in response to the supply chain disruptions that occurred during the Covid-19 pandemic. The initiative aimed to diversify the supply chains of strategic materials such as semiconductors and rare earth, which had previously been overly dependent on China. The US is also keen to diversify its supply chain. Cooperation among these states on advanced technologies would facilitate restructuring the supply chains and prevent China from using its economic muscle as leverage.

Third, Japan and the EU need to continuously articulate the importance of maintaining the rules-based order and denounce China's non-compliance with international law. Both Japan and the EU are so trusted as powers by Asian states that they can present a persuasive argument and thus shape and strengthen the current norms underpinning international law. Even if the effectiveness of such narratives is not visible, it is vital to continue arguing for the rule of law so that narratives will not be distorted and shaped by a bigger voice.

Fourth, Japan and European states such as France and the UK can contribute to sustaining the sea lines of communication and the freedom of navigation by advertising their military presence. Although Japan's scope for military action beyond self-defence is limited, both sides can contribute to sustaining the rules-based order by increasing their military presence and thus sending a message to China that they will not tolerate unilateral attempts to change the status quo by force.

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# European Strategic Approaches in the Indo-Pacific: A View from Southeast Asia

*Nazia Hussain*

## INTRODUCTION

The international system is undergoing transition and so is the Asia-Pacific economic and security architecture, conceptually giving way to a multipolar Indo-Pacific construct. The US-led liberal order that came about in the immediate aftermath of World War II is now being challenged by different conceptions, dynamics, and visions, raising implications not just for the regional landscape and ASEAN's central role within it, but also for strategic engagement by both regional and extra-regional powers with ASEAN.

While linking the Indian and the Pacific Oceans is not a new geostrategic concept,<sup>1</sup> its prevalence in geopolitical discourse has been propelled primarily by the rapid rise of China and India with their increasingly ambitious economic and strategic outlooks on regional affairs. The narrative of an Indo-Pacific region, however, is not one solely of the rise of China and India, but of the competing interests of regional and external, major as well as middle, powers alike – Japan, Australia, United States, South Korea, ASEAN, the European Union and its member states.

In fact, the idea of an Indo-Pacific region may be traced back to when former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe addressed the Indian Parliament in 2007 where he spoke of the “Confluence of the Two Seas.”<sup>2</sup> The Indo-Pacific concept made the news again in November 2017 when the revived Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) – comprising the US, Australia, Japan and India – reconvened around the

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1. Hussain, Nazia, and Tan Ming Hui. 21 August 2018. The Indo-Pacific: Clarity, Inclusivity and ASEAN Centrality. The Asia Dialogue. (<https://theasiadialogue.com/2018/08/21/the-indo-pacific-clarity-inclusivity-and-asean-centrality/>).

2. Abe, Shinzo. 22 August 2007. Confluence of the Two Seas. Parliament of India. (<https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/pmv0708/speech-2.html>).

idea of a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” region.<sup>3</sup> The US followed up by renaming the US Pacific Command to the US Indo-Pacific Command in May 2018 and the Pentagon released its Indo-Pacific strategy report, which declared the Indo-Pacific “the single most consequential region for America’s future”.<sup>4</sup>

Countries around the region subsequently pitched in with their own narrative of what the Indo-Pacific concept entails – Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced that the core of the Indo-Pacific region will be ASEAN, even as the Indian Ocean holds the “key to India’s future”.<sup>5</sup> Australia’s 2017 foreign policy white paper established that Canberra held a bipartisan view of the country’s strategic interests in the Indo-Pacific and that security could be enhanced through partnerships with other maritime democracies in the region.<sup>6</sup> As a resident Indo-Pacific power with substantial interests in the region, France was the first European Union (EU) member state to put forward its Indo-Pacific strategy, which is based on multilateral cooperation — in particular with ASEAN, Australia, India, and Japan.<sup>7</sup>

Not to be left behind in shaping the narrative of a region where it wields a central role, ASEAN released the “ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific” (AOIP) at the 34th ASEAN Summit in Bangkok in June 2019. The AOIP offers the vision of an inclusive Indo-Pacific region with ASEAN centrality as the underlying principle for promoting cooperation and ASEAN-led mechanisms such as the East Asia Summit (EAS) providing platforms for dialogue and implementation of this cooperation.<sup>8</sup>

As the Indo-Pacific narrative began unfolding with more stakeholders involved in shaping the regional order, a widely held assumption was that Europe does not have a major strategic interest in the Indo-Pacific, and that whatever interest

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3. Hussain, Nazia, and Tan Ming Hui. 21 August 2018. The Indo-Pacific: Clarity, Inclusivity and ASEAN Centrality. *The Asia Dialogue*. (<https://theasiadialogue.com/2018/08/21/the-indo-pacific-clarity-inclusivity-and-asean-centrality/>).

4. The Department of Defense. 2019. Indo-Pacific Strategy Report. (<https://media.defense.gov/2019/Jul/01/2002152311/-1/-1/1/DEPARTMENT-OF-DEFENSE-INDO-PACIFIC-STRATEGY-REPORT-2019.PDF>).

5. MEA.gov.in. 1 June 2018. Prime Minister’s Keynote Address at Shangri La Dialogue. (<https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/29943/Prime+Ministers+Keynote+Address+at+Shangri+La+Dialogue+June+01+2018>).

6. Medcalf, Rory. 2019. Indo-Pacific Visions: Giving Solidarity a Chance. *Asia Policy* 14. (<https://doi.org/10.1353/asp.2019.0043>).

7. Nicolas, Françoise. 12 December 2019. France’s Indo-Pacific strategy: inclusive and principled. *East Asia Forum*. (<https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2019/12/12/frances-indo-pacific-strategy-inclusive-and-principled/>).

8. Hussain, Nazia. 17 July 2019. The Idea of Indo-Pacific: ASEAN Steps In. *RSIS Commentaries*. (<https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/rsis/the-idea-of-indo-pacific-asean-steps-in/#.YVLw3GaA7DL>).

there may be was largely driven by economic considerations.<sup>9</sup> This sentiment has prevailed in the way ASEAN perceives the EU – a “peripheral player”, a reliable economic and development partner at best, but with scepticism of the prospect of the EU playing any major security role in the region. Josep Borrell, High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, acknowledged prevailing perceptions regarding the EU: “If we want to be a geopolitical actor, we also have to be perceived as a political and security actor in the region, not just as a development cooperation, trading or investment partner.”<sup>10</sup>

While the EU has not been actively involved in regional security issues, its first European Security and Defense Policy mission in Asia – the 2005 Aceh Monitoring Mission in Indonesia – was considered a success for the EU but one which many ASEAN countries often fail to recall as a demonstration of the EU’s role as a security actor.<sup>11</sup> Perhaps it is the geographical reality of a distant Europe or its limited security presence in the Indo-Pacific – the UK and France are the only European countries to have an established military presence in the region – which falls short in comparison to other powers with a more robust agenda for security cooperation with ASEAN. Considering that the Indo-Pacific is primarily seen by some quarters as a burgeoning defence and security concept, countries in the region may not appreciate the EU as a key strategic partner in an evolving regional order increasingly defined by geopolitical tensions and great power rivalry. Moreover, the EU’s preoccupation with internal issues and Brexit also contributed to the perception that the regional organisation may not have the bandwidth to be actively involved in shaping the Indo-Pacific regional order.

Whatever the prevailing perceptions and realities may be, a multipolar regional order is in the making and both ASEAN and the EU are reimagining a narrative of a mutually beneficial partnership. The two blocs have finally elevated their relationship to an “EU-ASEAN Strategic Partnership” on 1 December 2020,<sup>12</sup> providing

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9. Mohan, Raja C, and John J. Vater. 2019. *Europe in the Indo-Pacific: Moving from Periphery to the Centre?* Institute of South Asian Studies, Singapore. (<https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Europe-Indo-Pacific-South-Asia-Discussion-Papers-Complete-Report.pdf>).

10. Borrell, Josep. 5 June 2021. *Why I went to Jakarta and why the Indo-Pacific matters for Europe*. European External Action Service. ([https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/99613/why-i-went-jakarta-and-why-indo-pacific-matters-europe\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/99613/why-i-went-jakarta-and-why-indo-pacific-matters-europe_en)).

11. Gare, Frederic. 2019. *Defining New Grounds for Cooperation between the EU and ASEAN*. Institute of South Asian Studies, Singapore. (<https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Europe-Indo-Pacific-South-Asia-Discussion-Papers-Complete-Report.pdf>).

12. EEAS.europa.eu. 1 December 2020. *Co-chairs’ press release of the 23rd ASEAN-EU ministerial meeting*. (<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2020/12/01/co-chairs-press-release-of-the-23rd-asean-eu-ministerial-meeting/>).

a framework for deepening engagement in the Indo-Pacific region. As the top EU official Josep Borrell rightly observed, the “EU-ASEAN partnership is no longer a luxury but a necessity.”<sup>13</sup> Outside the EU’s ambit, a post-Brexit United Kingdom is also proactively engaging the region in order to substantiate its vision for a “Global Britain”, becoming ASEAN’s 11th Dialogue Partner earlier this year and thus ending the regional bloc’s 25-year moratorium on new dialogue partners.<sup>14</sup>

As Europe gears up to engage Southeast Asia in the Indo-Pacific region with the release of individual and EU-level Indo-Pacific strategies, this paper will conceptualise ASEAN’s expectations and concerns regarding great power behaviour in the region, and provide a Southeast Asian perspective of European strategic approaches in the Indo-Pacific.

## I. ASEAN EXPECTATIONS VIS-À-VIS GREAT POWER BEHAVIOUR

An ASEAN-centric regional architecture has been a sustained fixture in the Asia-Pacific since the end of the Cold War, with the major regional multilateral institutions being ASEAN-led, including the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meeting (ADMM)-Plus and the East Asia Summit (EAS). Today, the emergence of both contending visions of regional order as well as normative challenges to an established ASEAN-centric regional order requires ASEAN to have a fresh narrative to keep itself in the centre of the fluid situation and to stay relevant as a valuable partner and interlocutor for the major powers. ASEAN welcomes engagement with external partners via the various ASEAN-led mechanisms, with an expectation that partners acknowledge ASEAN Centrality and respect the principles of the “Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia” (TAC). The TAC has since emerged as the basic normative framework for ASEAN to engage the major powers: “Through the TAC, ASEAN asserted the basic rules of the game for international relations in Southeast Asia, including respect for national independence, sovereignty and territorial independence, freedom from external interference, subversion or

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13. Borrell, Josep. 20 September 2020. Strengthening EU-ASEAN partnership, an urgent necessity. European External Action Service. ([https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/85434/strengthening-eu-asean-partnership-urgent-necessity\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/85434/strengthening-eu-asean-partnership-urgent-necessity_en)).

14. Septiari, Dian. 6 August 2021. UK becomes ASEAN’s newest dialogue partner, ending 25-year moratorium. The Jakarta Post. (<https://www.thejakartapost.com/seasia/2021/08/06/uk-becomes-aseans-newest-dialogue-partner-ending-25-year-moratorium.html>).



coercion, and commitments to the peaceful resolution of disputes and the non-use of force.”<sup>15</sup>

Moreover, ASEAN requires countries seeking to join the EAS – the only leaders-led platform that includes all relevant players in the Indo-Pacific, and which has the potential to become the premier Track 1 forum for Indo-Pacific cooperation – to accede to the TAC. Besides ASEAN member states, the consent of 27 countries, including major powers (China acceded to the TAC in 2003, followed by the US in 2009 and the EU in 2012), to the TAC indicates ASEAN’s status as a pivotal actor, so much so that these powers pledge respect for regional norms and pay “ritual obeisance to ASEAN Centrality.”<sup>16</sup> ASEAN nevertheless reserves concerns about how committed these TAC signatories really are when it comes to actually recognising ASEAN centrality in practice.

The United States under the Trump administration did not instil confidence that they pay heed to ASEAN Centrality. Not only did the US withdraw from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), but despite declaring the Indo-Pacific “the single most consequential region for America’s future” in the Pentagon’s Indo-Pacific strategy report, Washington sent a relatively low-level delegation to the annual ASEAN Summit in 2019 where discussions on the Indo-Pacific were set to be a priority.<sup>17</sup> To ASEAN, this was testimony to the fact that the US cannot always be relied upon to show up in support of ASEAN Centrality.

The other major power in the region, China, is not too enamoured with ASEAN Centrality. While Beijing is happy to express support for ASEAN – so long as ASEAN member states do not explicitly challenge Chinese interests – it is also aware that ASEAN member states have diverse interests and do not speak in a single voice. ASEAN continues to see China as the most influential political-strategic power in the region albeit with a fair share of anxiety about it.<sup>18</sup>

Regardless of ASEAN’s concerns pertaining to the intentions of major powers in the region, the regional grouping is not interested in keeping great powers at

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15. ASEAN Briefs. 2019. ASEAN and Indo-Pacific: Beyond the Outlook. The Habibie Center. (<http://habibiecenter.or.id/img/publication/e6046e0b1b2a3b367653955508bd71f7.pdf>).

16. Kausikan, Bilahari. 30 December 2020. Will ASEAN Survive Until 2030? Australian Institute of International Affairs. (<https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/will-asean-survive-until-2030/>).

17. Hussain, Nazia. 11 November 2019. Next ASEAN Summit: How Will Vietnam Lead? RSIS Commentaries. (<https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/cms/next-asean-summit-how-will-vietnam-lead/#.YVMPgmaA6IY>).

18. ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute. 2021. The State of Southeast Asia: 2021 Survey Report. (<https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/The-State-of-SEA-2021-v2.pdf>).

bay either and recognises that the presence of external partners helps maintain the strategic balance in the region.<sup>19</sup> As ASEAN looks to mitigate increasing reservations regarding the US commitment to ASEAN-led institutions and counter China's expanding footprint in the region, European presence collectively gives ASEAN an additional card to play in times of geostrategic uncertainty.

Europe is largely deemed to be more supportive of ASEAN Centrality given its familiarity with ASEAN diplomatic patterns and its experience in working with ASEAN to achieve mutual objectives of rules-based multilateralism. However, ASEAN's collective memory of the EU's top-down approach in the early stages of the relationship – the EU's self-perception of a “normative power” and ASEAN relegated to being a norm recipient of EU-promoted norms such as democracy, human rights and good governance – still resonates within ASEAN circles. Concerns over human rights, democracy and the rule of law prompted the EU to suspend high-level contacts with ASEAN during the 1990s, especially after Laos, Myanmar and Cambodia became ASEAN member states.<sup>20</sup> It is telling that the ASEAN-EU Dialogue Partnership took 43 years to be elevated to the level of a Strategic Partnership.

ASEAN today is more astute, and unlike during the Cold War, the regional grouping has multifaceted goals and interests to manage and pursue, stemming from their own domestic populations' aspirations as well as the more complex international environment.<sup>21</sup> In their capacity as strategic partners, ASEAN expects a partnership of equals with the EU and for the EU to accept differences in norms and standards since ASEAN has not had the years of sovereignty and growth that the EU has had to arrive at a certain standard to the liking of Europe.

ASEAN still harbours doubts about whether the EU can move past the asymmetrical donor-recipient nexus: “There is a broader sentiment among ASEAN representatives – at both track one and two levels – that the EU still displays residues of a condescending, somewhat moralistic attitude towards ASEAN; whether in trade, good governance, or human rights.”<sup>22</sup> ASEAN is also wary of an ASEAN-EU agenda that is skewed towards how the EU can assist ASEAN rather than also

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19. ASEAN Briefs. 2019. ASEAN and Indo-Pacific: Beyond the Outlook. The Habibie Center. (<http://habibiecenter.or.id/img/publication/e6046e0b1b2a3b36765395508bd71f7.pdf>).

20. Xuechen, Iris Chen. 2018. The Role of ASEAN's Identities in Reshaping the ASEAN-EU Relationship. *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 40. (DOI: 10.1355/cs40-2c).

21. Ng, Joel. 8 July 2021. Presentation at the Embassy of France-RSIS Panel Webinar on France as an Indo-Pacific Nation: Security and Multilateralism in Challenging Times.

22. Kliem, Frederick. 5 November 2019. ASEAN-EU Partnership: How “Strategic” is Europe's Approach? RSIS Commentaries. (<https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/cms/asean-eu-partnership-how-strategic-is-europes-approach/#.YVMsnWaA6IZ>).

identify what ASEAN can teach the EU – a patronising stance that leads to a sense of EU condescension across Southeast Asian capitals.<sup>23</sup>

The EU needs to be conscious of and rectify its overly normative approach towards ASEAN. Not only for ASEAN’s sake but also for the successful implementation of the EU’s own initiatives in the Indo-Pacific which need ASEAN buy-in if it is not simply going to be dictating terms to the region.<sup>24</sup> Being a pivotal actor, “ASEAN provides the tipping point where its support can give vital momentum to any initiative in the region, and this is an open platform for external powers to harness.”<sup>25</sup>

The EU and European countries would do well to understand the need to be flexible in its engagement with ASEAN and arrive at solutions acceptable to all, akin to the “ASEAN Way” – characterised by informal dialogue, moving at a pace comfortable to all, and with all decisions based on consensus,<sup>26</sup> much in contrast to the EU’s binding agreements and regulatory frameworks. More importantly, the EU will have to come to terms with its own identity dilemma of being a strategic actor versus a normative power.<sup>27</sup>

## II. ASEAN PERSPECTIVE OF EUROPEAN ENGAGEMENT IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

As the global political and economic centre of gravity shifts to the Indo-Pacific, Europe is reimagining its engagement with the region in order to maintain an open and inclusive architecture conducive to European interests. In fact, European countries as well as the EU have released their respective Indo-Pacific strategies which recognise ASEAN as a pivotal actor and a natural partner given the bloc’s propensity for rules-based multilateralism. France led the way in 2019, followed by the German Policy Guidelines for the Indo-Pacific Region and the Dutch Indo-Pacific Strategy Report in 2020. The UK emphasises an Indo-Pacific “tilt” in its post-Brexit

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23. Ibid.

24. Ng, Joel. 8 July 2021. Presentation at the Embassy of France-RSIS Panel Webinar on France as an Indo-Pacific Nation: Security and Multilateralism in Challenging Times.

25. Ng, Joel. 17 August 2020. ASEAN as Pivotal Actor: Balancing Centrality and the Indo-Pacific. RSIS Commentaries. (<https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/cms/asean-as-pivotal-actor-balancing-centrality-and-the-indo-pacific/#.YVMuu2aA6IY>).

26. Yates, Robert. 2016. ASEAN as the “regional conductor”: understanding ASEAN’s role in Asia-Pacific order. *The Pacific Review* 30. (<https://doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2016.1264458>).

27. Kliem, Frederick. 5 November 2019. ASEAN–EU Partnership: How “Strategic” is Europe’s Approach? RSIS Commentaries. (<https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/cms/asean-eu-partnership-how-strategic-is-europes-approach/#.YVMsnWaA6IZ>).

Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy released earlier this year.<sup>28</sup>

While there are variations in the individual European strategies with regard to national aspirations – France being an Indo-Pacific resident power, Germany and the Netherlands are big trading nations, and the UK has significant historical ties to the region – these European approaches strike a similar note: one of inclusivity, multipolarity, defence of multilateralism and preservation of a rules-based order. Moreover, France, Germany and the Netherlands share the assessment that a consolidated EU Indo-Pacific strategy would provide better leverage to defend their national interests and gain more influence in this contested region.<sup>29</sup> The three countries have been the driving force behind the “EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific” which was adopted in April 2021.

Since the release of the EU Indo-Pacific strategy, EU top official Josep Borrell has been doing the rounds of Southeast Asian capitals driving home the EU’s basic message: that the EU will work with its partners in the Indo-Pacific to respond to emerging dynamics that are affecting regional stability.<sup>30</sup> In a thinly veiled jibe at the major powers turning Southeast Asia into a theatre of competition and rivalry, Borrell presented a picture of the EU as a reliable neutral partner: “We are perhaps not as flashy as other partners, but we also do not zig-zag. We have no hidden agenda. What you see is what you get. We are reliable and predictable. We can and do commit for the long-term.”<sup>31</sup>

Borrell’s words are surely welcomed by ASEAN elites who have long complained about the fickleness of the US’s presence and commitment to the region. With Europe facing many of the challenges emanating from China’s unilateral posturing in the South China Sea – something ASEAN countries have long had to grapple with – the two regional organisations see an opportunity to enhance their partnership in the Indo-Pacific region.

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28. Cook, Malcolm. 17 May 2021. Europe’s Indo-Pacific Adoption: Two Southeast Asian Challenges. ISAS Insights. (<https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/papers/europes-indo-pacific-adoption-two-southeast-asian-challenges/>).

29. Esteban, Mario, and Ugo Armanini. 10 March 2021. European Indo-Pacific strategies: convergent thinking and shared limitations. Elcano Royal Institute. ([http://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/wps/portal/rielcano\\_en/contenido?WCM\\_GLOBAL\\_CONTEXT=/elcano/elcano\\_in/zonas\\_in/europa/ari30-2021-esteban-armanini-european-indo-pacific-strategies-convergent-thinking-and-shared-limitations](http://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/wps/portal/rielcano_en/contenido?WCM_GLOBAL_CONTEXT=/elcano/elcano_in/zonas_in/europa/ari30-2021-esteban-armanini-european-indo-pacific-strategies-convergent-thinking-and-shared-limitations)).

30. EEAS.europa.eu. 4 June 2021. The EU approach to the Indo-Pacific: Speech by High Representative/ Vice-President Josep Borrell at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). ([https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/timor-leste/99556/eu-approach-indo-pacific-speech-high-representativevice-president-josep-borrell-centre\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/timor-leste/99556/eu-approach-indo-pacific-speech-high-representativevice-president-josep-borrell-centre_en)).

31. Ibid.

In terms of ASEAN and its member states' perspectives of the different Indo-Pacific approaches of individual European states, the response to Europe's renewed focus on the Indo-Pacific is going to be assessed according to the domestic interests of ASEAN member states, as well as their perceptions of the agendas of the European states.<sup>32</sup> Nonetheless, the EU Indo-Pacific strategy strikes a few right notes for ASEAN to positively welcome European presence in the region.

## A. An Inclusive Strategy for the Indo-Pacific

A crucial element of the EU Indo-Pacific strategy which closely aligns with ASEAN's own "ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific" (AOIP) is the emphasis on inclusiveness. The EU Indo-Pacific strategy aims to deepen regional integration and is inclusive for all partners in the region, including China, in recognition of the need to engage on issues of common interest. Brussels' diplomats reiterate: "We do not aim to create rival blocs or force countries to take sides."<sup>33</sup> Individual European countries that released their own Indo-Pacific strategies too take a more inclusive and nuanced approach towards China. The French and German Indo-Pacific documents barely mention the US, and the few times they do is mostly to highlight the differences between the inclusive elements of the European vision for the region versus the exclusive China-containment narrative of Washington's FOIP.<sup>34</sup>

This suits ASEAN well since the AOIP also stresses on inclusivity, steering clear from adopting the US-driven Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) or approaches conceived by other big powers. Although not overtly stated, the buzzword "free" already defines the conditionality associated with the FOIP concept. Thus, it may not be easy for China to be part of the FOIP even if Beijing wished to be included.

Despite China's assertive unilateral actions in the South China Sea, which have increasingly frustrated both ASEAN and the EU, the two regional organisations are keen to avoid being seen as siding with any overtly anti-China strategy. As ASEAN's largest trading partner, China has deeply entrenched trade relations and large-

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32. Ng, Joel. 8 July 2021. Presentation at the Embassy of France-RSIS Panel Webinar on France as an Indo-Pacific Nation: Security and Multilateralism in Challenging Times.

33. EEAS.europa.eu. 4 June 2021. The EU approach to the Indo-Pacific: Speech by High Representative/Vice-President Josep Borrell at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). ([https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/timor-leste/99556/eu-approach-indo-pacific-speech-high-representativevice-president-josep-borrell-centre\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/timor-leste/99556/eu-approach-indo-pacific-speech-high-representativevice-president-josep-borrell-centre_en)).

34. Heiduk, Felix, and Nedim Sulejmanović. 2021. Will the EU take view of the Indo-Pacific? Comparing France's and Germany's approaches. German Institute for International and Security Affairs. ([https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/arbeitspapiere/WP\\_EU\\_Indopacific\\_Heiduk\\_Sulejmanovic.pdf](https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/arbeitspapiere/WP_EU_Indopacific_Heiduk_Sulejmanovic.pdf)).

scale investment projects with the regional grouping.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, China is the EU's second-largest trading partner and a major investor – 18 EU member states have joined China's Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).<sup>36</sup> Hence, the emphasis on inclusivity is a welcome attribute for both sides to engage each other in the region while tacitly keeping an eye on Beijing.

## B. A Multilateral Approach Utilising ASEAN-led Mechanisms

As ASEAN navigates the emerging multipolar order, the EU and European states can play a constructive role in partnering with the regional bloc to revive and strengthen the multilateral system, especially now under the framework of an elevated Strategic Partnership. The EU Indo-Pacific strategy declared its intent to support the ASEAN-led regional architecture and acknowledged ASEAN's centrality within it.<sup>37</sup> It also invited all stakeholders to better utilise the existing multilateral architecture for open dialogue to address differences and mediate great power discord.<sup>38</sup> In fact, the EU insisting that ASEAN provides the most effective platforms for the regional architecture is by itself a show of support for the ASEAN integration process and has been very welcome in this regard.<sup>39</sup>

It does not come as a surprise, therefore, that the EU is seeking a more active participation in ASEAN-led platforms, applying for observer status at the ADMM-Plus and the East Asia Summit. The EU has also been supporting ASEAN to chair the ARF intersessional meeting on maritime security, alongside Australia and Vietnam, during the 2018 to 2022 term.<sup>40</sup>

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35. Kliem, Frederick. 27 August 2020. A China management strategy with ASEAN at its centre. East Asia Forum. (<https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2020/08/27/a-china-management-strategy-with-asean-at-the-centre/>).

36. Singh, Anita Inder. 10 May 2021. A breadcrumb trail as Europe responds to a rising China. The Interpreter. (<https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/breadcrumb-trail-europe-responds-rising-china>).

37. Piket, Vincent, and Igor Driesmans. 6 May 2021. ASEAN at the heart of the EU strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific. The Jakarta Post. (<https://www.thejakartapost.com/academia/2021/05/05/asean-at-the-heart-of-the-eu-strategy-for-cooperation-in-the-indo-pacific-.html>).

38. Kliem, Frederick. 3 May 2021. EU Indo-Pacific Strategy: More than Meets the Eye. RSIS Commentaries. (<https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/rsis/eu-indo-pacific-strategy-more-than-meets-the-eye/#.YVMYD2aA6IZ>).

39. Ng, Joel. 8 July 2021. Presentation at the Embassy of France-RSIS Panel Webinar on France as an Indo-Pacific Nation: Security and Multilateralism in Challenging Times.

40. Yong, Deng. 2020. The Role of the EU in Asian Security: Between Transatlantic Coordination and Strategic Autonomy. Asia Policy 15. (<https://doi.org/10.1353/asp.2020.0001>).

No doubt, the EU's inclusion to the EAS and ADMM-Plus would be a strong symbol of closer cooperation going forward. Although long talked about, the EU's inclusion to the EAS still has some challenges to overcome, not least of which is the need to build a consensus internally first within the EU on not making human rights the centrepiece of their Asian diplomacy, or at least go about it softly. ASEAN values the EU's commitment to its regional integration. After all, ASEAN changed one of its core treaties – the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC) – to allow for accession by regional organisations. Almost a decade later, the EU remains the only regional organisation to have signed the TAC.

### C. Europe as a “Third Way” for ASEAN

Southeast Asia is hardly new to navigating major power relations, attuned as it is to balancing US-China contestation as the region is often viewed by Beijing as a testing ground to launch its role as a big power in the international order.<sup>41</sup> However, increasingly heightened US-China tensions today threaten to break up ASEAN along the fault lines created by its member states' external affiliations. The consequences of a rupture would not only be economic but strategic. ASEAN has to maintain its strategic relevance in managing the regional architecture. It has to develop a viable public position of not taking sides in the competitive dynamics between China and the US. These two major powers have accepted that ASEAN has a role to play and they want to have ASEAN on their respective sides. Therefore, ASEAN has to refurbish its existing mechanisms urgently, but this task will not be easy as China and the US expect ASEAN to favour their separate strategic calculus.

The escalating US-China rivalry in the region has created complications for traditional ASEAN diplomacy. As Southeast Asian countries seek to hedge between Beijing's assertiveness and Washington's uncertainty,<sup>42</sup> alternative initiatives put forward by other major powers would serve to provide ASEAN member states the chance to offset their economic and financial dependence on China. As experts have pointed out, “[a]n engaged EU would easily slot into the region's security archi-

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41. Stromseth, Jonathan. 2019. Don't make us choose: Southeast Asia in the throes of US-China rivalry. Foreign Policy at Brookings. ([https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/FP\\_20191009\\_dont\\_make\\_us\\_choose.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/FP_20191009_dont_make_us_choose.pdf)).

42. Kuik, Cheng-Chwee. 2016. Variations on a (Hedging) Theme: Comparing ASEAN Core States' Alignment Behavior. Korea Economic Institute. (<https://keia.org/publication/variations-on-a-hedging-theme-comparing-asean-core-states-alignment-behavior/>).

tecture [...]. It fits ASEAN's strategy of having all the big powers be players, so they all offset each other to an extent."<sup>43</sup>

The EU could provide the counterbalance that ASEAN needs as a neutral actor. In fact, according to a 2021 survey conducted by the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute in Singapore, the EU emerges as the clear front-runner as a partner for ASEAN in the strategic hedging game, with 40.8 per cent of the respondents choosing the EU, followed closely by Japan (39.3 per cent).<sup>44</sup> Both ASEAN and the EU do not want to choose sides amid the new dynamic created by the US-China rivalry. As such, ASEAN could work with Europe towards a "third way" – there should be enough substance in the ASEAN-EU partnership for deeper collaboration, to develop more trust, and in the process keep from choosing sides. The EU's reliability and consistency will be increasingly valued assets as ASEAN carves out a "third way".<sup>45</sup>

## D. Trust in EU Actorness

ASEAN regards the EU as one of its most trusted external partners. The surveys conducted by the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute saw the EU's trust rating in the region jump in rankings – although Japan continues to be Southeast Asia's most trusted major power in 2021 (67.1 per cent), the number of respondents voting for confidence in the EU to "do the right thing" has increased from 38.7 per cent in 2020 to 51.0 per cent in 2021, while the share of distrust has dropped from 36.9 per cent to 29.6 per cent.<sup>46</sup> These trends hold true across both mainland and maritime Southeast Asia. Moreover, the report showed that respondents place their strongest confidence in the EU to maintain the rules-based order and uphold international law (32.4 per cent).<sup>47</sup> The number of ASEAN member states choosing the EU as their top choice in this respect has increased from six to nine in 2021,<sup>48</sup> indicating a growing agreement within the bloc on the EU's reliability.

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43. Ang, Katerina. 2 February 2021. Europe pivots to Indo-Pacific with "multipolar" ambitions. *Nikkei Asia*. (<https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Asia-Insight/Europe-pivots-to-Indo-Pacific-with-multipolar-ambitions>).

44. ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute. 2021. *The State of Southeast Asia: 2021 Survey Report*. (<https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/The-State-of-SEA-2021-v2.pdf>).

45. Borrell, Josep. 6 December 2020. *An EU-ASEAN Strategic Partnership: how did that happen and what does it mean?* European External Action Service. ([https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage\\_en/89962/An%20EU-ASEAN%20Strategic%20Partnership:%20how%20did%20that%20happen%20and%20what%20does%20it%20mean?](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage_en/89962/An%20EU-ASEAN%20Strategic%20Partnership:%20how%20did%20that%20happen%20and%20what%20does%20it%20mean?)).

46. ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute. 2021. *The State of Southeast Asia: 2021 Survey Report*. (<https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/The-State-of-SEA-2021-v2.pdf>).

47. *Ibid.*

48. *Ibid.*



The EU's strong principles vis-à-vis the rule of law make a good case for it not being easily swayed by special interests and having the ability to rise above the geopolitics of the US-China rivalry. This trust in EU actorness will go a long way in paving the "third way" for ASEAN. ASEAN perceives European partners as considered and cautious, having gone through the process of community building and regionalisation themselves. The EU comes across as responsible, possessing a certain understanding of regulatory measures, and a champion of the rules-based order.

### III. AVENUES FOR CONVERGENCE AND COOPERATION

A multipolar Indo-Pacific allows for constructive partnerships among stakeholders across areas of converging interests. Both the EU and ASEAN Indo-Pacific documents identify maritime security and connectivity as two key areas for collaboration.

#### Maritime Security

While the EU may have limited military capabilities in the region, Brussels is currently exploring options on how to enhance its maritime presence in the Indo-Pacific – "The High-Level Dialogue on Maritime Security Cooperation later this year should come forward with concrete proposals, including on the presence of our naval assets."<sup>49</sup> ASEAN will undoubtedly follow this development closely as freedom of navigation, especially in the contested waters of the South China Sea, remains a major security concern for Southeast Asian states. Therefore, concerted efforts by Europe and like-minded countries will help ASEAN send a strategic message to Beijing that its destabilising actions in the region shall not go unnoticed.

Moreover, ASEAN favours the EU's experience, as a global normative power, in non-traditional security (NTS) issues such as Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) fishing, good ocean governance, capacity building in maritime domain awareness, information sharing and beyond.<sup>50</sup> The ADMM-Plus would be an ideal forum for further engagement in these NTS domain issues. In December 2020, an EU High

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49. EEAS.europa.eu. 3 June 2021. Intervention by High Representative/Vice-President Josep Borrell at the meeting with ASEAN CPRs. European External Action Service. ([https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/association-southeast-asian-nations-asean/99541/intervention-high-representativevice-president-josep-borrell-meeting-asean-cprs\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/association-southeast-asian-nations-asean/99541/intervention-high-representativevice-president-josep-borrell-meeting-asean-cprs_en)).

50. Pejsova, Eva. 26 June 2019. Increased Relevance for EU Policy and Actions in the South China Sea. ISEAS Perspective. ([https://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/pdf/ISEAS\\_Perspective\\_2019\\_52.pdf](https://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/pdf/ISEAS_Perspective_2019_52.pdf)).

Representative was invited for the first time to the ADMM-Plus forum, which engages key regional players such as China, Japan, India, Australia, New Zealand and the US. This may suggest ASEAN possibly recognising the EU's potential as a security partner given that the ADMM-Plus brings together defence ministers of ASEAN and the "plus" countries to discuss regional security issues.

## Connectivity

ASEAN leaders emphasise the importance of partnerships in implementing the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity (MPAC) 2025 and promoting greater synergies amongst the various connectivity strategies.<sup>51</sup> The EU Connectivity Strategy with Asia could complement ASEAN's MPAC 2025, thus addressing the huge infrastructure deficit in ASEAN member states. The Asian Development Bank (ADB) estimates that about US\$210 billion a year in infrastructure investments from 2016 to 2020 are required for Southeast Asia to maintain its growth momentum.<sup>52</sup>

Europe's connectivity initiatives could also alleviate the sustainability and environmental concerns of some ASEAN countries that had signed up for BRI projects. The EU's focus on transparency, local ownership, and fiscal and environmental sustainability with regard to its connectivity and infrastructure projects are welcome attributes under the current climate of suspicion surrounding some of the BRI projects in the region.<sup>53</sup> Normative attributes aside, whether the EU will follow through later this year in allocating 60 billion Euros at the upcoming budgetary cycle 2021 to 2027 toward investments in connectivity<sup>54</sup> will be a deciding factor in establishing the EU's commitment to enhancing connectivity between Asia and Europe.

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51. ASEAN.org. 2 August 2021. Joint Communique of the 54th ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting. (<https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Joint-Communique-of-the-54th-ASEAN-Foreign-Ministers-Meeting-FINAL.pdf>).

52. SME.asia. 24 June 2019. Japan Still Leads Southeast Asia's Infrastructure Race. (<https://sme.asia/japan-still-leads-southeast-asias-infrastructure-race/>).

53. EEAS.europa.eu. 4 June 2021. The EU approach to the Indo-Pacific: Speech by High Representative/Vice-President Josep Borrell at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). ([https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/timor-leste/99556/eu-approach-indo-pacific-speech-high-representativevice-president-josep-borrell-centre\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/timor-leste/99556/eu-approach-indo-pacific-speech-high-representativevice-president-josep-borrell-centre_en)).

54. EC.europa.eu. 19 September 2018. Explaining the European Union's approach to connecting Europe and Asia. ([https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/MEMO\\_18\\_5804](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/MEMO_18_5804)).

## CONCLUSION

ASEAN and Europe share a common strategic vision for the Indo-Pacific defined by a rules-based multilateral order, free and open markets, and a region inclusive for all. Despite this shared vision, the way ahead for any substantial strategic and security partnership beyond that of being reliable trade and development partners will not be without its challenges. First, the question is whether ASEAN and Europe can come to terms with the values debate. The general feeling in Southeast Asia is that Europe tends to be overly caught up in promoting values it deems most important, such as democracy and human rights, which does not always sit well with the region. In fact, unless Europe pays some consideration to the nuances of the economic and developmental situation of individual ASEAN member states, norm promotion alone will prove insufficient and even counterproductive to the EU's stated desire of being perceived as a strategic partner.

Brussels' view of a democratic backslide in Cambodia and human rights abuses in Myanmar has opened up the possibility of a revocation of duty-free market access under the Everything But Arms (EBA) scheme, prompting tensions with the two countries.<sup>55</sup> ASEAN and the EU also differ on environmental issues – the EU's plan to phase out crude palm oil from its sources of biofuel by 2030 has not been well received by Indonesia and Malaysia. These issues still remain unresolved. Going forward, ASEAN and the EU need to agree on flexible and pragmatic cooperation, underscoring the fact that there will be differences in norms and principles. Having an understanding of each other's sensitivities and limitations is important, for which continued dialogue and consultation is key.

Second, is the issue of coherence, the lack of which may give mixed signals as to where the EU stands on strategic issues important to the region. Europe needs to be coherent in its approach to ASEAN, especially since several EU member states have released their own Indo-Pacific strategies, which are bound to come with certain national strategic interests of engaging with ASEAN. These varying national interests and possible prompting from external partners – the US, China or Russia – may act as a cause of divergence when it comes to the EU taking a stand as a whole on

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55. Kliem, Frederick. 5 November 2019. ASEAN–EU Partnership: How “Strategic” is Europe's Approach? RSIS Commentaries. (<https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/cms/asean-eu-partnership-how-strategic-is-europes-approach/#.YVMsnWaA6IZ>).

strategically important issues.<sup>56</sup> For instance, coherence in the EU's position vis-à-vis Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea (SCS) – an issue of serious concern for ASEAN member states with competing claims in the SCS. Following the award of the arbitration tribunal on the SCS, the EU failed to reach a consensus on criticising Chinese unilateral actions, with Hungary and Greece supporting Beijing's position.<sup>57</sup> Both countries benefit from BRI infrastructure projects. Moreover, a recent survey conducted by the European Council on Foreign Relations reveals that the EU is still torn when it comes to a coherent approach to China. Breaking with the EU's own Indo-Pacific strategy that emphasises inclusiveness, five countries – Belgium, Bulgaria, Latvia, Portugal, and Romania – define the Indo-Pacific strategy as being at least partly an anti-China tool.<sup>58</sup> If the EU and ASEAN are to have a meaningful long-term engagement as security partners, both sides need to adopt a coherent approach to the China question.

ASEAN and Europe have come a long way since relations were first formalised in 1977. As the regional architecture evolves, the two sides need to remain consistent in their political will to substantiate their relationship. A successful conclusion of an ASEAN-EU Free Trade Agreement will be a litmus test in the next chapter of this strategic partnership.

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56. Kugiel, Patryk. 2019. The European Union's Strategic View toward the Indo-Pacific. Institute of South Asian Studies, Singapore. (<https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Europe-Indo-Pacific-South-Asia-Discussion-Papers-Complete-Report.pdf>).

57. Gerstl, Alfred. 26 October 2018. The EU's interest and policy towards East Asia maritime security. Maritime Issues. (<http://www.maritimeissues.com/politics/the-eu39s-interest-and-policy-towards-east-asia-maritime-security.html>).

58. Grare, Frederic, and Manisha Reuter. 13 September 2021. Moving closer: European views of the Indo-Pacific. European Council on Foreign Relations. (<https://ecfr.eu/special/moving-closer-european-views-of-the-indo-pacific/#analysis-by-country>).

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

*Olli Pekka Suorsa*

## 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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# Bolstering India-EU Development Partnership on Sustainable Development in the Indo-Pacific

*Swati Prabhu*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

As the world inches towards the target year of 2030 for fulfilling the targets of the Sustainable Development Agenda, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the pandemic has reconfigured the increasing geopolitical impulses, particularly in the Indo-Pacific. Even before Covid-19 became a part of our realities, this region has been facing the brunt of severe climatic regression (SDG 13) and posing risks to the sustainable use of the oceans (SDG 14), pushing it back in its SDG milestones<sup>1</sup>. In addition, over the past few decades, the Indo-Pacific region has grabbed eyeballs from every quarter of the international community, becoming the centre of political and economic gravity<sup>2</sup>. Besides environmental concerns, the increasing influence imposed by Beijing is also one of the primary driving factors behind this region gaining fast traction among major powers, including the European Union (EU) and India. Although Europeans have been aloof with regard to this region for a long time, they are now forced to pay attention and act “strategically” in their approach. The recently released Joint Communication by the European Commission laying out a Strategy on the Indo-Pacific is a case in point<sup>3</sup>. Considering the urgency of fulfilling the sustainability targets in the “decade of action”, what is the potential role of the EU in the Indo-Pacific? This is the central question that this paper seeks to address.

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1. UNESCAP. 2021. Asia and the Pacific SDG Progress Report 2021. ([https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/d8files/2021-03/Highlights\\_Brochure\\_ESCAP\\_Asia\\_and\\_the\\_Pacific\\_SDG\\_Progress\\_Report\\_2021.pdf](https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/d8files/2021-03/Highlights_Brochure_ESCAP_Asia_and_the_Pacific_SDG_Progress_Report_2021.pdf)).

2. Grare, Frédéric and Reuter, Manisha. 2021. Moving Closer: European Views of the Indo-Pacific. European Council on Foreign Relations. (<https://ecfr.eu/special/moving-closer-european-views-of-the-indo-pacific/>).

3. European Commission. 2021. Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council. The EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific. ([https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/jointcommunication\\_indo\\_pacific\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/jointcommunication_indo_pacific_en.pdf)).

First, it outlines the status of Agenda 2030 unfolding in the Indo-Pacific and the development cooperation initiatives taken by the Union in this geographical space. It then goes on to describe the aspirations of the Asian partners, particularly India, and the ways in which the Union and its member states, either collectively or individually, could possibly engage in this region. It envisions a potential merging of the development cooperation capacities of the EU and India in certain sectoral areas, such as disaster resilient infrastructure, renewable energy, capacity-building and resource sharing to cope with the challenges faced, especially by the island nations of the Pacific. Finally, the paper addresses the challenges that could possibly crop up in this kind of development partnership.

## **2. UNPACKING THE NEXUS BETWEEN AGENDA 2030, THE EU AND THE INDO-PACIFIC**

Although the Indo-Pacific occupies no more than one-quarter of the globe's land area, it houses roughly half of the world's population, and accounts for almost 40 per cent of global GDP. Even to casual observers, the population's dependence on agriculture, fisheries or tourism for their livelihoods is apparent. Moreover, the hybrid economies of the island states, their varying topographies, and the accompanying environmental drivers make them susceptible to extreme socio-economic and ecological changes<sup>4</sup>. Being highly exposed to both natural and man-made disasters, the urgency of realising the Sustainable Development Agenda for the region, particularly SDG 2 (Zero Hunger), SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-Being), SDG 7 (Affordable and Clean Energy), SDG 13 (Climate Action), SDG 14 (Life below Water), SDG 15 (Life on Land) and SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals), becomes crucial. While there do exist geo-political and strategic imperatives for the renewed focus on the region, viewing the Indo-Pacific from a broader lens of sustainability is thus essential, particularly during the current global pandemic. The issues plaguing this region, such as vulnerability to climatic risks, loss of biodiversity, ecosystem disruptions, cascading natural disasters and an eroding economy post the Covid-19 pandemic, will implicate the futures of not just the nations directly affected, but rather the international community as a whole.

Several nations, such as the United States, Australia, Japan, and India, have shown keen interest towards this region by fostering maritime cooperation,

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4. Some of the countries are more economically advanced as compared to others; some of them are mostly covered with forests whereas others are situated next to oceans, thus having an increased vulnerability to natural disasters.

economic security, and diplomatic engagements under the umbrella of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad). Created in the aftermath of the Indian Ocean tsunami in 2004, it is a free grouping rather than an official alliance<sup>5</sup>. Besides, these countries too have released their individual strategies over the past few years, with an eye towards intensifying their engagement in various sectors, such as connectivity, energy, trade, technology, cybersecurity, counter-terrorism, etc. As one of the priorities of its development cooperation, Japan released its “Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy” (FOIP) in 2017<sup>6</sup>. On the other hand, India has been advocating for FOIP under its broader *Act East Policy*, Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) and the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative. In 2018, at the Shangri-La Dialogue, India enunciated its Indo-Pacific Strategy through the SAGAR doctrine<sup>7</sup>. The US followed suit in 2019 by announcing “their shared vision for FOIP”<sup>8</sup>.

Europeans, on the other hand, had been quite reserved and had kept themselves distant from this geographical domain<sup>9</sup>. In 2018, France became the first EU member state to identify the region’s significance towards addressing some of the pressing global challenges, including climate change and biodiversity<sup>10</sup>. It also emphasised regional multilateralism, with a view towards deepening its engagements with regional organisations such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Germany<sup>11</sup> and the Netherlands<sup>12</sup> followed the French footsteps by establishing their own individual strategies in 2020. Considering these developments,

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5. Smith, Shiela A. 2021. The Quad in the Indo-Pacific: What to Know? Council on Foreign Relations. (<https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/quad-indo-pacific-what-know>).

6. Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan. 2017. Priority Policy for Development Cooperation FY 2017. ([https://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/oda/page23e\\_000434.html](https://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/oda/page23e_000434.html)).

7. Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. 2021. Foreign Secretary’s Introductory Remarks at the India-France-Japan Workshop on the Indo-Pacific. ([https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/33397/Foreign\\_Secretarys\\_Introductory\\_Remarks\\_at\\_the\\_IndiaFranceJapan\\_Workshop\\_on\\_the\\_IndoPacific](https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/33397/Foreign_Secretarys_Introductory_Remarks_at_the_IndiaFranceJapan_Workshop_on_the_IndoPacific)).

8. Department of State, United States of America. 2019. A Free and Open Indo-Pacific: Advancing a Shared Vision. (<https://www.state.gov/a-free-and-open-indo-pacific-advancing-a-shared-vision/>).

9. Swati Prabhu. 2021. Examining the EU’s Indo-Pacific Strategy. In Pratinashree Base (ed.) Brass Tacks: Unpacking the Indo-Pacific Template. New Delhi: ORF and Global Policy Journal.

10. France Diplomacy. 2021. The Indo-Pacific Region: A Priority for France. (<https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/asia-and-oceania/the-indo-pacific-region-a-priority-for-france/>).

11. Federal Foreign Office, Germany. 2021. Germany-Europe-Asia: Shaping the 21st Century Together: The German Government Adopts Policy Guidelines on the Indo-Pacific Region. (<https://rangun.diplo.de/mm-en/themen/politik/-/2380764>).

12. Government of the Netherlands. 2020. Indo-Pacific: Guidelines for Strengthening Dutch and EU Cooperation with partners in Asia. (<https://www.government.nl/documents/publications/2020/11/13/indo-pacific-guidelines>).

it was but natural that Brussels was forced to shed its lackadaisical approach towards the Indo-Pacific. The result was the Council Conclusions on EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific promulgated in April 2021, in which it out rightly stated its commitment towards bolstering *sustainable development* in this region<sup>13</sup>. Besides identifying the region as spanning from the “east coast of Africa to the Pacific island states”, the Council tasked the Commission to come up with an official EU Strategy without further ado. In September 2021, the EU officially presented its strategy to the world by stating that “the Union and the Indo-Pacific are natural partners” and how it aspires to intensify its engagement by building partnerships and addressing global challenges<sup>14</sup>. Furthermore, the strategy, in a way, reiterated the commitment expressed by Ursula von der Leyen in 2019 when she took over as the European Commission President, of leading a “geopolitical Commission to reinforce the EU’s role as a relevant actor in giving a better shape to the global order”<sup>15</sup>. In the same vein, it is worth noting that von der Leyen, in her State of the Union Address in September 2021, stressed on how the Union needs to “focus on the next generation of partnerships so as to become a more active global player”<sup>16</sup>. In this context, it is essential to understand the Union’s participation, as a development cooperation provider, in the Indo-Pacific before the strategy was released.

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13. Council of the European Union. 2021. Indo-Pacific: Council Adopts Conclusions on EU Strategy for Cooperation. (<https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-7914-2021-INIT/en/pdf>).

14. European Commission. 2021. The EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific. ([https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/eu-indo-pacific\\_factsheet\\_2021-09\\_final.pdf](https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/eu-indo-pacific_factsheet_2021-09_final.pdf)).

15. European Parliament Think Tank. 2020. The von der Leyen Commission’s Priorities for 2019-2024. ([https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document.html?reference=EPRS\\_BRI\(2020\)646148](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document.html?reference=EPRS_BRI(2020)646148)).

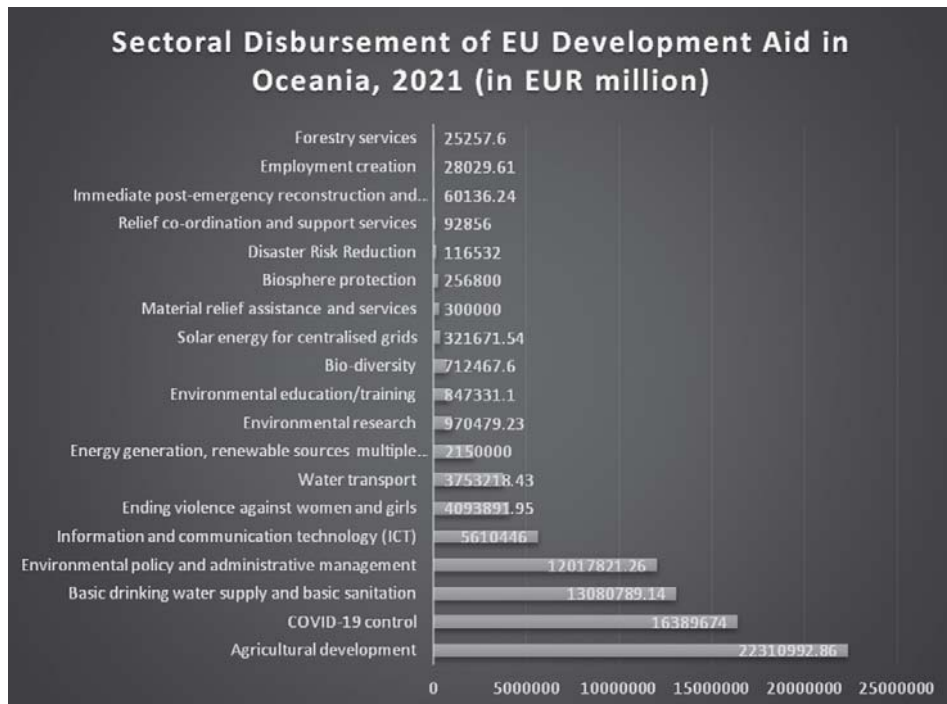
16. Ursula von der Leyen. 2021 State of the Union Address by President von der Leyen. ([https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH\\_21\\_4701](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH_21_4701)).

## 2.1 Deconstructing EU development cooperation in the Indo-Pacific

Underlining the significance of geopolitical partnerships, DG-DEVCO (Directorate-General for International Cooperation and Development) was renamed as DG-INTPA (Directorate-General for International Partnerships) by the von der Leyen Commission in 2021<sup>17</sup>. We will focus on the *Oceania* region, consisting of the Pacific islands and Southeast Asia, to appraise the EU development cooperation initiatives.

Defining Oceania as the islands of the southern, western and central Pacific Ocean, including Micronesia, Melanesia and Polynesia, the EU and its institutions have contributed around EUR 2.84 billion in development aid over the past decade<sup>18</sup>. In 2021, the Union extended around EUR 64.62 million in the sectoral areas of health, rural development, climate adaptation, strengthening food production capacity and resilience, water and sanitation, technical cooperation, etc. (Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Sectoral Disbursement of EU Development Aid in Oceania, 2021 (in EUR millions).**



17. EU Monitor. Directorate-General for International Partnerships (INTPA). (<https://www.eumonitor.eu/9353000/1/j9vvik7m1c3gyxp/vimjj87bjxnr>).

18. Data retrieved from EU Aid Explorer.

It has been observed that from 2010 to 2020, the EU disbursed almost EUR 2.25 billion to this region, with Papua New Guinea receiving EUR 250.19 million, Fiji EUR 161.02 million, Solomon Islands EUR 92.92 million, Vanuatu EUR 92.4 million, Samoa EUR 90.43 million, Tonga EUR 34.9 million, Kiribati EUR 34.39 million and Tuvalu EUR 13.03 million. Deconstructing this through the lens of the SDGs, it exhibits that Brussels provided almost EUR 83.88 million towards SDG 13, EUR 46.18 million on SDG 2, EUR 27.68 million for SDG 3, EUR 21.58 million on SDG 14, EUR 19.91 million for SDG 15 and EUR 31.88 million on SDG 7. In fact, the EU and its institutions' "aid to environment" is channelled under the wider umbrella of the Global Climate Change Alliance (GCCA), now upgraded to GCCA+ in 2014 as part of the 2014-2020 Multiannual Financial Framework<sup>19</sup>. The idea behind this alliance was to advance dialogue, cooperation and mainstreaming of climate change, especially in the least developed countries (LDCs) and small island developing states (SIDS). The EU also shares a special association with the Pacific Islands through the ACP-EU partnership agreement or the Cotonou Agreement. Involving the African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) states, it is one of the earliest development cooperation programmes of the Union, falling under its external action activities, covering areas of trade, investment, capacity-building, energy, promotion of human rights, etc.

Table 1 lists some of the projects undertaken by EU development cooperation from 2010 to 2020 and their accompanying SDG ambitions.

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19. Global Climate Change Alliance+ official website. (<https://www.gcca.eu/>).

**Table 1: Selected EU development initiatives in Oceania from 2010 to 2020 & their SDG ambitions.**<sup>20 21 22 23 24</sup>

Nature of Cooperation	Description	Country	SDG Coverage
ACP-EU Building Safety and Resilience in the Pacific (2012-2020)	To strengthen the capacity of the islets towards climate change adaptation	Pacific Island Countries (PICs)	SDG 13
Pacific Plan for Strengthening Regional Cooperation and Integration <sup>20</sup>	Fostering economic growth, sustainable development, governance and security	Pacific Island Countries	Covers all the 17 SDGs
Regional Indicative Programme (RIP) <sup>21</sup>	Enhancing marine governance, countering illegal fishing, fostering sustainable management of natural resources, gender equality	Pacific Island Countries	SDG 14, SDG 13, SDG 7, SDG 5
EIB-Vanuatu Wind Farm (2010) <sup>22</sup>	First and only wind farm promoting renewable energy	Vanuatu	SDG 7
Building Safety and Resilience in the Pacific	Towards real-time disaster information and management. Establishing two Provincial Emergency Operation Centres (PEOCs) <sup>23</sup>	Vanuatu (Malampa and Sanma)	SDG 13
EU-Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) Adaptation to Climate Change and Sustainable Energy <sup>24</sup>	Facilitates climate change adaptation and reducing dependence on fossil fuels	15 Pacific countries of the ACP (Niue, Kiribati, Solomon Islands, Republic of Marshall Islands, Papua New Guinea, Republic of Palua, The Cook Islands, Republic of Nauru, Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, Samoa, Vanuatu, Timor-Leste, The Kingdom of Tonga, Tuvalu)	SDG 13, SDG 7
Pacific Response to Disaster Displacement	Assisting national and regional efforts to reduce the risk on displacements caused by disasters	Fiji, Republic of the Marshall Islands, Solomon Islands, Tonga and Vanuatu	SDG 13

Source: Author's own.

20. European Commission. Pacific Islands- EU Relations: Focus on Climate Change.

21. European Commission. European Union-The Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat. Pacific Regional Indicative Programme for the period 2014-2020.

22. European Investment Bank. 2009. Vanuatu: 650 million Vatu for Renewable Energy.

23. Pacific Community. 2018. Vanuatu Opens Two Provincial Emergency Operation Centres in Malampa and Sanma. (<https://www.preventionweb.net/news/vanuatu-officially-opens-two-provincial-emergency-operations-centres-malampa-and-sanma#:~:text=This%20week%2C%20Vanuatu%20Prime%20Minister,total%20cost%20of%20%E2%82%AC700%2C000.>).

24. EU-GIZ ASCE Adapting to Climate Change and Sustainable Energy Official Website. (<http://acsepacific.org/projects/>).

Placed towards the eastern part of Oceania and the Pacific, the Southeast Asian nations are also equally prone to a number of socio-economic and sustainability challenges, preventing their smooth progression towards fulfilling the SDGs. Occupying a primary portion of the Indian Ocean, several of the nations are now alarmingly regressing in their environmental goals<sup>25</sup>. As per the 2021 UNESCAP SDG Progress Report, this region is lagging behind severely in climate action (SDG 13), preserving the marine resources and fisheries (SDG 14), and rampant damage to biodiversity (SDG 15), thereby resulting in a domino effect on the other SDGs<sup>26</sup>.

Given the swift rise of the “Asian century”<sup>27</sup>, the EU is striving to secure its place in this part of the world. For Brussels, Asia forms a critical piece of the geopolitical strategic puzzle that it has been seeking to shape for a long time and its call for rules-based multilateralism can only be realised if it collaborates with Asia. For instance, its 2003 European Security Strategy stressed the integration of its development cooperation programmes with the regional partners, such as ASEAN, South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) or ACP, to promote effective multilateralism.

Over a period of time, its development assistance initiatives, particularly in Southeast Asia, have gradually begun to centre on promoting a decarbonised economy, giving due credence to environmental impact assessments and other associated standards<sup>28</sup>. In 2020, this region received around EUR 315.6 million, with Cambodia (EUR 78.45 million), Vietnam (EUR 53.76 million), and Mongolia (EUR 29.86 million) being the top three recipients<sup>29</sup>. However, in the face of the coronavirus pandemic, the Union’s total development assistance stooped to an all-time low last year (in 2019, it stood at EUR 2.57 billion).

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25. UNESCAP. 2021. Asia and the Pacific SDG Progress Report 2021. (<https://www.unescap.org/kp/2021/asia-and-pacific-sdg-progress-report-2021>).

26. Khalid, Haniza. 2021. Sustainable Development Goals in South-East Asian Countries. UNDP Malaysia, Singapore & Brunei Darussalam. (<https://www.my.undp.org/content/malaysia/en/home/blog/2021/sustainable-development-goals-in-south-east-asian-countries.html>).

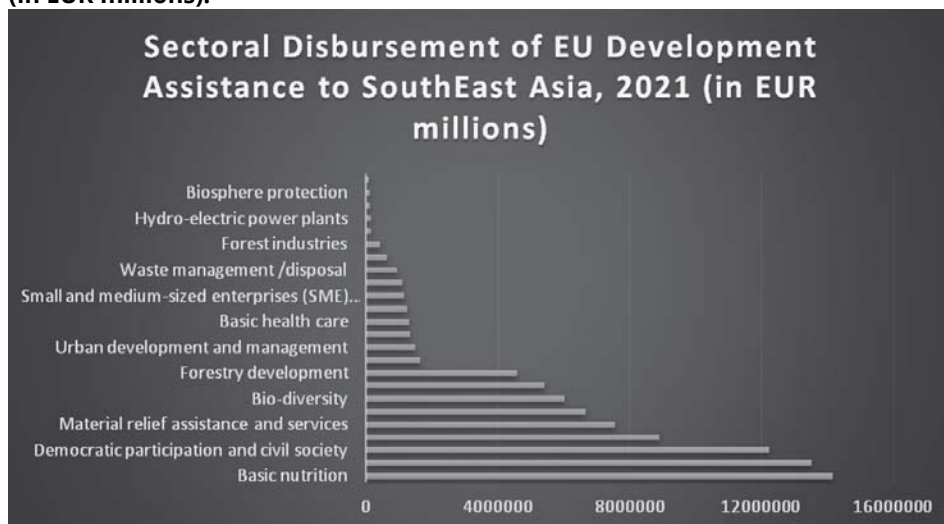
27. Mckinsey Global Institute. 2019. The Asian Century. Discussion Paper. (<https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/future-of-asia/topics/the-asian-century>).

28. As per the Communication released by the Commission titled “Connecting Europe and Asia-Building Blocks for an EU Strategy” at the 12<sup>th</sup> Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) Summit, 2018.

29. As per the EU Aid Explorer. ([https://euaidexplorer.ec.europa.eu/content/explore/recipients\\_en](https://euaidexplorer.ec.europa.eu/content/explore/recipients_en)).



**Figure 2: Sectoral Disbursement of EU Development Aid in Southeast Asia, 2021 (in EUR millions).**



Source: Author's own.

In 2010, the EU established the Asia Investment Facility (AIF) under the aegis of the European Investment Bank (EIB) to promote investments in the region through infrastructural development with a specific focus on sustainable development and reducing inequality. SWITCH-Asia is one of the EU's flagship initiatives that aim to promote sustainable development and economic prosperity, with an overarching target of poverty reduction. As far as its contribution to climate change mitigation and adaptation is concerned, it was reported in 2017 that out of its 53 projects, around 43 focussed on climate change, either directly or indirectly<sup>30</sup>. Although it has been observed that the EU has fallen short in developing a coherent regional approach, its development cooperation and the regional policy dialogues have been mutually reinforcing, giving Brussels leverage in key socio-economic, environmental and political fields<sup>31</sup>.

30. SWITCH-Asia. Where We Work. SWITCH-Asia Official Website. (<https://www.switch-asia.eu/switch-asia/where-we-work/>).

31. OECD. 2014. Evaluation of the European Union's Regional Cooperation with Asia. Volume 1.

### 3. RECONFIGURATION OF THE GLOBAL SYSTEM: WHAT DOES INDIA EXPECT FROM THE EU?

As the world stands today amidst a deadly pandemic, global power equations have been enormously reconfigured, especially in the domain of global aid architecture. The divide between the North and the South in aid structure is gradually waning as we see the arrival of emerging economies on the scene, such as India. Furthermore, the rampant disruption of global supply chains, moving away from China, has also changed the narrative of the global system. Keeping this in mind, the Indo-Pacific is touted to be the new strategic playground, especially in the context of the failure of globalisation and a freefalling multilateralism<sup>32</sup>. Developing countries are now taking the lead in manufacturing life-saving drugs; for instance, India has been actively taking part through its campaign *Vaccine Maitri*. The present scenario has also caused a serious dent on the sustainability conversation, not to say that SDGs have taken a backseat.

The time is now ripe for the developed actors to collaborate with these developing economies and harness their capacities towards resolving the larger challenges of sustainability. In the Indo-Pacific, India in particular is one of the successful examples of a nation providing development cooperation in a number of sectors and also being a preferred regional partner. For instance, in 2019, India announced a USD 150 million Line of Credit (LOC) to the Pacific islands for projects related to climate action<sup>33</sup>. However, it fares poorly when it comes to finance and visibility, owing to the competing interests portrayed by China in this region. On the contrary, the EU is a long-established development partner, quite popular for its benevolence, even though it follows its economic interests vigorously. By now, it has been asserted repeatedly by several scholars that the Union can definitely ensure three things: norms, technical know-how and finance. India's own advantage and familiarity of being a developing nation itself has helped it in building a viable platform where it is successfully sharing its knowledge and capacity-building programmes, such as the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC). Building positive synergies between these two actors in the Indo-Pacific could further the

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32. Aaron Friedberg. 2020. The United States Needs to Reshape Global Supply Chains. *Foreign Policy*. (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/05/08/united-states-reshape-global-supply-chains-china-reglobalization/>).

33. The Hindu. 2019. PM Modi Announces \$150 mn Line of Credit to Pacific Island Nations for Climate-related Projects. (<https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/pm-modi-announces-150-mn-line-of-credit-to-pacific-island-nations-for-climate-related-projects/article29507764.ece>).

dialogue on sustainable development, which is especially relevant considering the region's appalling environmental progress.

#### **4. LIMITATIONS & OPPORTUNITIES: INDIA-EU DEVELOPMENT PARTNERSHIP IN THE INDO-PACIFIC**

As a geo-strategic and geo-economic platform, it is necessary to look at the Indo-Pacific through the lens of economic diplomacy underwriting the objectives of maintaining a rules-based order. In this context, the Indo-Pacific presents a great opportunity for cooperation among nations, particularly for revamping North-South cooperation. It is important to note that several of the island nations are severely vulnerable to sea level rise, storm surges and extreme natural disasters. Furthermore, their physical disadvantages of remoteness and dispersion, in a way, limit their opportunities for economic and sustainable development. Here, it is important to underline that a majority of the global South, particularly in the Indo-Pacific, lack the wherewithal for addressing uncertainties concerning climate change mitigation and adaptation or the wider sustainability issue. This provides an entry point to development cooperation in the form of knowledge sharing, technical expertise, capacity-building, etc. A joint India-EU development partnership in the Indo-Pacific could just be the answer that the Indo-Pacific is looking for.

With the rise of India as a key development partner and the EU as the largest provider of development cooperation in the world, a collaborative canvas could possibly be painted by the two in this region<sup>34</sup>. In fact, the attainment of the SDGs in this decade of action, so urgently needed, could potentially be realised if Brussels and New Delhi could team up towards making it an *Indo-Pacific decade*. India's outreach to the PICs gains further significance against the backdrop of the prevalent assertion that "the Pacific is generally underappreciated and misunderstood by the wider world, and such lack of insight has triggered many diplomatic blunders and failed attempts at cooperating with the regions"<sup>35</sup>. On the other hand, the EU is already one of the biggest trading partners in the Indo-Pacific. Undoubtedly, its intentions of giving its engagements a meaningful drive involve a host of stakes and challenges. Nevertheless, its approach of "not following the Chinese political and

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34. Swati Prabhu. 2021. Envisioning an India-EU Development Partnership in the Indo-Pacific. ORF Expert Speak. (<https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/envisioning-an-india-eu-development-partnership-in-the-indo-pacific/>).

35. Patrick Walsh, 2017. "A Guidebook on Pacific Diplomacy: India looks to the 'Far East'" ORF Occasional Paper.

economic values”, as stated by European Council President Charles Michel, easily makes it an attractive and safe partner to collaborate with<sup>36</sup>. In addition, building new and stable partnerships in the region could also lay the foundation of a level playing field for pursuing sustainable development, as rightly stated in the Council Conclusions of the EU Indo-Pacific Strategy. There are two important sectors where an India-EU development collaboration could facilitate consolidation of the SDGs in the coming years.

## **(A) Disaster resilient infrastructure**

SDG 13 target 1 “stresses on the need to strengthen resilience and adaptive capacity to climate-related hazards and natural disasters”. This becomes extremely relevant in the case of the PICs and also the island nations located in the Indian Ocean. In 2019, India led a global initiative, the Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure (CDRI), with a clear-cut goal of achieving sustainable development in the long run<sup>37</sup>. As mentioned earlier the PICs are sitting right at the heart of natural calamities and climatic risks. The same is the case with several of the island nations in Southeast Asia, such as Indonesia or the Philippines, owing to their location in the Pacific Ring of Fire. As a recent positive move, Brussels has joined hands with CDRI earlier this year, although there are no concrete reports on project outputs or plans as such. The EU has been quite quick to demonstrate its interest in working with CDRI on a trilateral set up in the SIDS which could possibly open doors for a development partnership with India. If Brussels could join hands with New Delhi to work in the PICs and the southeast region to leverage efforts towards empowering communities to tackle disaster-related displacement, preventing conflicts, and providing appropriate technical training and skill development in building natural early warning systems, it will certainly facilitate the national governments’ efforts to respond better in the long run and fast-track their sustainability pathways.

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36. Charles Michel. 2020. A Stronger and More Autonomous European Union Powering a Fairer World- Speech by President Charles Michel at the UN General Assembly. (<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2020/09/25/a-stronger-and-more-autonomous-european-union-powering-a-fairer-world-speech-by-president-charles-michel-at-the-un-general-assembly/#>).

37. Ministry of Home Affairs. 2019. Prime Minister Announces Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure at UN Climate Action Summit 2019. Press Release. (<https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseIframePage.aspx?PRID=1586051>).

## (B) Renewable energy

Both the EU and India are intensely committed to energy transition to reduce their dependencies on fossil fuels. India views renewable energy through the lens of gaining economic and political traction at international fora. Take for instance its global leadership, with France, in the International Solar Alliance (ISA), which has been making waves since 2015. Its recent achievement of crossing the 100 GW milestone of installed renewable energy capacity needs to be applauded; however, the glass is yet to be filled. It is now targeting to achieve about 450 GW of installed renewable capacity, a majority of which, 280 GW, relies on solar power. However, its rising Greenhouse Gas (GHG) emissions do not quite match up with its international political will to be a green economy leader<sup>38</sup>. Conversely, through the European Green Deal, Brussels has been popularising climate neutrality by 2050 and urging other countries to step up their efforts towards reducing their emissions, particularly in the context of the Glasgow COP26 Summit.<sup>39</sup> The island nations occupy “large swaths” of the Pacific, making them naturally rich in energy resources. As per the data released by the International Energy Agency (IEA) in 2018, about 45 million people in Southeast Asia still live without access to electricity. This creates an avenue of cooperation for India and the EU to effectively utilise their capacities and technical expertise, and strengthen joint efforts to tackle the issue of energy poverty. Decentralisation of renewable energy can give an impetus to the much-discussed blue economy, generate employment and thereby empower and rebrand their image on the larger geopolitical map. Germany, with its specialisation in manufacturing high-quality solar panels, and India, popular for its low-cost renewable energy, can put together a feasible development initiative in the Indo-Pacific.

These avenues of collaboration, however, could face certain limitations or road-blocks. First, although both India and the EU have been quite vociferous regarding mitigating climate change and augmenting sustainability, efforts have been quite feeble. Time and again, a trilateral set of engagement between the two parties has been vocally expressed but no tangible efforts are visible from the leadership. A sense of scepticism on undertaking joint collaborative efforts in third countries remains. These are low-hanging fruits which neither Brussels nor New Delhi seems keen to pluck. Second, the EU appears to be on a sticky wicket on the China

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38. van Schaik, Louise, Ramnath A. and Anand, H.S. 2021. Better Together: EU-India Cooperation in Addressing Climate Risks. Planetary Security Initiative and the IPCS. (<https://www.planetarysecurityinitiative.org/news/better-together-eu-india-cooperation-addressing-climate-risks>).

39. Ursula von der Leyen. 2021 State of the Union Address by President von der Leyen.

challenge. China's growing footprints in the digital sector, its building of coal-based plants in Europe, the presence of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in Europe, and transgressions in the Indo-Pacific are worrying the EU. It has been trying its best to appease Beijing and New Delhi, not turning against either. However, with the initiation of its new connectivity strategy, the Global Gateway Partnerships, Brussels is upfront in its approach of creating links and not dependencies. This is an outright counterattack against the Chinese BRI. Brussels is now embracing a new kind of realism, which was long overdue, thereby aiming to establish a "trusted brand" of its own. It needs to be seen how viable this project turns out to be in the coming years. Third, in order to succeed in winning partners in the Asian region, Brussels must strengthen its participation in the regional organisations, such as ASEAN or the BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation). Cooperating in the sectoral areas of energy, climate change, digital connectivity, or disaster management could potentially open effective opportunities for engagement in the Indo-Pacific.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

The rise of the Indo-Pacific as a geo-economic and geopolitical centre of gravity in recent years has closely affected the sustainability debate. Influenced equally, both India and the EU have huge stakes in this geographical space. On one hand, New Delhi has been charting a somewhat successful passage on development partnerships, and on the other, we have the Union as the largest provider of development assistance. The Indo-Pacific is the site of a plethora of environmental risks and sustainability challenges which these two actors can help tackle through a joint collaboration, particularly in sectoral areas of disaster-resilient infrastructure and generating capacities for renewable energy. Although there have been talks on the merging of their respective partnership plans in third countries, nothing substantial has taken place till date. The recent release of the EU Indo-Pacific Strategy has now made the geopolitical game more intriguing. Its realist approach towards the Chinese BRI, exhibition of strategic interests in the Indo-Pacific and vocal advocacy of climate neutrality are noteworthy. With the international community racing against time to fulfil the sustainable development agenda topped up by the pandemic, this is a crucial juncture for New Delhi and Brussels to pool their resources in the PICs and the island nations of Southeast Asia to prevent and prepare for the climatic onslaught in the coming years.

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# Covid-19: EU Engagement in Southeast Asia

*S. Nanthini*

## INTRODUCTION

The ongoing Covid-19 global pandemic has proven to be much more formidable than previous zoonotic illness such as the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) and the H1N1 influenza virus. More than 231.5 million cases and 4.7 million deaths have been reported globally as of September 2021.<sup>1</sup> The first region affected by the Covid-19 pandemic outside of China – Southeast Asia – saw its first case in Thailand on 13 January 2020.<sup>2</sup> While most countries in the region have been able to gain a measure of control over the pandemic, others have not. As of September 2021, the number of known Covid-19 cases in ASEAN countries has exceeded 11.7 million with the currently dominant Delta variant causing surges of cases, even in countries which had previously had control of the outbreak.<sup>3</sup> Since Covid-19 began its reign of terror over the world, its effects have exceeded its original status as a public health emergency, turning into a full-blown humanitarian crisis – one which has affected almost every part of modern life, making any one-note/single-sectoral approach response ineffective. After all, in Southeast Asia, a region with one of the highest incidences of natural disaster events, any response to the pandemic will necessarily have to take into account the likelihood of concurrent disasters – a likelihood which, as can be seen by volcanic eruptions, typhoons, floods and other disasters which

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1. World Health Organisation. 2020. WHO Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Dashboard. (<https://covid19.who.int>).

2. WHO. 29 January 2021. Timeline of WHO's Response to COVID-19. (<https://www.who.int/news-room/detail/29-06-2020-covidtimeline>).

3. Center for Strategic & International Studies. 2021. Southeast Asia Covid-19 Tracker. (<https://www.csis.org/programs/southeast-asia-program/southeast-asia-covid-19-tracker-0#ASEAN>).

have occurred over the duration of the pandemic, is relatively high.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, as clearly highlighted in the 2021 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report, disasters in the region are likely to further increase in frequency and intensity as a result of climate change and environmental degradation.<sup>5</sup> As such, it is of utmost importance that a multi-sectoral approach be taken by not just ASEAN, but also its various partners in managing Southeast Asia's response to Covid-19 and its broader crisis management system. As a long-time dialogue partner, key trading partner and recent strategic partner of ASEAN, the European Union (EU) has naturally been actively involved in Southeast Asia's Covid-19 response, pandemic preparedness and overall disaster cooperation activities. Instead of being limited by sectoral silos, the EU should thus adopt a nexus approach to bridge the sectoral silos in its activities – in particular, between the health and disaster management systems – in order to reinvigorate its own activities in the region and maintain the relevance of the ASEAN-EU relationship.

## SOUTHEAST ASIA AND COVID-19

Since the Covid-19 outbreak, it has become clear that the pandemic poses a significant non-traditional security threat. The nature of a pandemic presents a multi-dimensional security threat, as highlighted by its impacts having gone far beyond public health, to other sectors, including human livelihood and mobility.<sup>6</sup> In Southeast Asia, a region which relies heavily on tourism, manufacturing, international trade and labour migration, such a crisis in which human mobility is limited could have catastrophic long-term consequences for the region.<sup>7</sup>

In Southeast Asia, the first region to be affected outside of China, there have been over 10 million cases and nearly 250,000 deaths (as of September 2021).<sup>8</sup>

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4. United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP). 2020. The Disaster Riskscape across South-East Asia: Key Takeaways for Stakeholders. (<https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/d8files/IDD-APDR-Subreport-SEA.pdf>).

5. IPCC. 2021. Climate Change 2021: The Physical Science Basis. ([https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg1/downloads/report/IPCC\\_AR6\\_WGI\\_Full\\_Report.pdf](https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg1/downloads/report/IPCC_AR6_WGI_Full_Report.pdf)).

6. Kliem, Frederick. 13 March 2021. ASEAN and the EU amidst COVID-19: overcoming the self-fulfilling prophecy of realism. *Asia Europe journal*, 1-19. (doi:10.1007/s10308-021-00604-8).

7. Asian Development Bank. December 2020. The Impact of COVID-19 on Developing Asia: The Pandemic Extends into 2021. ADB Briefs. (<https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/656521/impact-covid-19-developing-asia-extends-2021.pdf>).

8. Center for Strategic & International Studies. 2021. Southeast Asia Covid-19 Tracker. (<https://www.csis.org/programs/southeast-asia-program/southeast-asia-covid-19-tracker-0#ASEAN>).

Overall, the pandemic has cost the global economy between USD\$4.8 trillion and USD\$7.4 trillion in 2020, with a likely additional impact of between USD\$3.1 trillion and USD\$5.4 trillion in 2021.<sup>9</sup> With around 28 percent of these losses incurred by developing countries in Asia and the global extreme poverty rate increasing for the first time since 1998 due to the likelihood of between 71 million and 100 million people being pushed into extreme poverty in 2020, Covid-19 is threatening years if not decades of hard-won developmental and economic progress in the region.<sup>10</sup>

As part of the region's response to Covid-19, the pandemic was securitised early on at the national level, if not at the regional level. While the extent and timing vary, most ASEAN countries imposed some pandemic restrictions, including lockdowns, mobility restrictions and border closures, relatively early in the timeline of the pandemic, which in turn helped to control the pandemic to some extent.<sup>11</sup> With their previous experience of the 2003 SARS outbreak, ASEAN had already realised the importance of a coordinated early regional response, particularly in areas such as reporting and information-sharing. As such, the organisation convened a Special ASEAN Coordinating Council (ACC) on Covid-19 in February 2020 and shortly after, the ACC Working Group on Public Health Emergencies (APCCWG – PHE), whose members consisted of representatives from the various Sectoral Bodies of ASEAN's Community Pillars.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, with countries in the region having significant differences in the capacity of their medical systems, there was a need for countries to compensate for each other bilaterally and/or regionally. As the operational arm of ASEAN's disaster management system, the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management (AHA Centre) opened its warehouses of relief stockpiles for ASEAN member states, upon the request of their National Disaster Management Organisations (NDMOs) to fill the supply gaps in their national responses.<sup>13</sup>

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9. Asian Development Bank. December 2020. The Impact of COVID-19 on Developing Asia: The Pandemic Extends into 2021. ADB Briefs, December 2020. (<https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/656521/impact-covid-19-developing-asia-extends-2021.pdf>).

10. World Bank. 8 June 2020. Projected poverty impacts of COVID-19 (coronavirus). (<https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/461601591649316722-0090022020/original/ProjectedpovertyimpactsOfCOVID19.pdf>).

11. Kliem, Frederick. 13 March 2021. ASEAN and the EU amidst COVID-19: overcoming the self-fulfilling prophecy of realism. *Asia Europe Journal*, 1-19. (doi:10.1007/s10308-021-00604-8).

12. ASEAN Secretariat. July 2020. Annual Report 2019-2020 – ASEAN 2020: Cohesive and Responsive. (<https://asean.org/storage/2020/09/Annual-Report-ASEAN-2019-2020-Web-Version-v2.pdf>).

13. Ina Rachamawati. Mobilising DELSA Relief Items For Covid-19 Response. *The Column*, vol 61. (<https://thecolumn.ahacentre.org/posts/highlight/vol-61-mobilising-delsa-relief-items-for-covid-19-response/>).

Covid-19 has pushed the region to realise the importance of a cohesive co-ordinated response. Although ASEAN had many sectoral mechanisms, including the ASEAN Emergency Operations Network and the ASEAN Risk Assessment and Risk Communications Centre, the need for a single body to coordinate the region's health governance in the face of public health emergencies was clear. In line with this need to institutionalise public health governance in Southeast Asia, the establishment of the ASEAN Centre for Public Health Emergencies and Emerging Diseases (ACPHEED) is a good first step. Similar to the AHA Centre and its role in disaster management, this body will enable ASEAN to not only improve the coordination among member states, but also enhance their regional capacity to respond to public health emergencies.<sup>14</sup>

On the other hand, while the region's prior experience with SARS in 2003 helped to prepare them somewhat, the scale of Covid-19 has dwarfed previous pandemics, especially with recent waves of the now-dominant Delta variant leading to record cases across the region. This more transmissible variant has ripped through the world, even overwhelming early leaders in the region, such as Singapore and Vietnam, where some modicum of control over Covid-19 had been established. Moreover, with relatively low vaccination supplies and rates across the region, it is harder for countries to get any kind of a handle on the current pandemic situation. For example, in Southeast Asia, other than Cambodia at 82.6 percent of its population fully vaccinated, Malaysia at 79.7 percent, Singapore at 89.3 percent, and Brunei at 71.2 percent (as of November 2021), the rest of the region have less than half of their populations vaccinated – still short of any possible attempts at herd immunity.<sup>15</sup>

## **EU ENGAGEMENT IN SOUTHEAST ASIA DURING COVID-19: WHAT HAS IT DONE?**

Transboundary disasters such as pandemics inevitably need a multilateral response for any hope of a long-term resolution. In line with this realisation, the leaders of ASEAN held video conferences with its external partners as early as March 2020.

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14. ASEAN Secretariat. 14 October 2020. ASEAN, Japan Enhance Cooperation towards Post-Pandemic Recovery. (<https://asean.org/asean-japan-enhance-cooperation-towards-post-pandemic-recovery/>); Prime Minister of Australia. 2020. Investing in our Southeast Asian partnerships. Media Release, 14 November 2020. (<https://www.pm.gov.au/media/investing-our-southeast-asian-partnerships>).

15. Center for Strategic & International Studies. 2021. Southeast Asia Covid-19 Tracker. (<https://www.csis.org/programs/southeast-asia-program/southeast-asia-covid-19-tracker-0#ASEAN>).



as seen by Germany's contribution of €5 million to the ASEAN Covid Response Fund.<sup>22</sup>

Part of the EU's engagement in the region also includes collaborating with ASEAN on matters of technical expertise and institutional support. For example, the EU participated in a series of EU-ASEAN Experts' Dialogues on Covid-19 Vaccines, held on 8 December 2020 and 25 May 2021, respectively. These dialogue sessions provided an opportunity for two-way engagement, allowing both regional organisations to collaborate in exchanging views on a myriad of pandemic-related issues, including the emergence of new Covid-19 variants as well discussion of best practices in Covid-19 responses, vaccine rollouts and the scaling up of manufacturing capacities.<sup>23</sup>

In line with its reputation as a multilateral actor, the EU seems to be also generating some of its assistance through not the EU itself, but other coordinated multilateral projects, as demonstrated by its €20-million "Southeast Asia Health Pandemic Response and Preparedness" project. Although the EU is funding this project, the project will be implemented by the World Health Organisation (WHO) to enhance coordination of ASEAN's regional Covid-19 response and strengthen the capacity of public health systems in Southeast Asia in preparation for potential future health emergencies.<sup>24</sup> Other multilateral projects include the UN Multi Sector Response Plan and, in particular, Covid-19 Vaccines Global Access, the global vaccines sharing scheme better known as COVAX. In fact, the major part of the EU's global contribution has been through the COVAX scheme.

As the vaccine pillar of the Access to Covid-19 Tools (ACT) Accelerator, the aim for COVAX was to "accelerate the development and manufacture of Covid-19 vaccines, and to guarantee fair and equitable access for every country in the world".<sup>25</sup> Particularly important for the non-self-financing governments who are likely to have limited financial capabilities to purchase the vaccines directly from the manufacturers, this scheme provides an opportunity for them to ensure doses for at least 20 percent of their populations.<sup>26</sup> As part of "Team Europe", the EU, its associated

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22. EU Mission to ASEAN. 2021. EU ASEAN STRATEGIC PARTNERS: Blue Book 2021. (<https://euinasean.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Blue-Book-2021.pdf>).

23. ASEAN Secretariat. 25 May 2021. ASEAN, EU experts hold second dialogue on COVID-19 vaccines. (<https://asean.org/asean-eu-experts-hold-second-dialogue-on-covid-19-vaccines/>).

24. European External Action Service. 2 June 2021. EU and ASEAN launch "Southeast Asia Health Pandemic Response and Preparedness" project. ([https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/lebanon/99404/eu-and-asean-launch-southeast-asia-health-pandemic-response-and-preparedness"-project\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/lebanon/99404/eu-and-asean-launch-southeast-asia-health-pandemic-response-and-preparedness)).

25. WHO. 2021. COVAX. (<https://www.who.int/initiatives/act-accelerator/covax>).

26. Ibid.

bodies and member countries have contributed €2.2 billion to the COVAX Facility, allowing them to secure 1.3 billion doses of vaccines for 92 low- and middle-income countries, including ASEAN member states of that category.<sup>27</sup>

## EU and Vaccine Diplomacy

As countries ramp up their inoculation drives to cope with the rapidly shifting Covid-19 pandemic and its myriad of virus variants, securing sufficient vaccines for their populations in a timely manner has become their top priority. With the ongoing global supply crunch, vaccines have become regarded as a commodity with its access and availability depending on the purchasing power of a country. This is clear when looking at a global map of vaccination rates: the percentages of vaccinated populations in developed countries are generally ahead of that of populations in developing countries, with some developed countries even having started “booster shots”.<sup>28</sup> Even in Southeast Asia, the difference is stark, with Singapore having vaccinated over 80 percent of its population while Myanmar has only vaccinated 15.5 percent of its population.<sup>29</sup> With vaccines now regarded as a strategic commodity that enables a country not just to safeguard its population but also potentially reopen its bleeding economy, global powers are taking the opportunity to donate vaccines to other countries as a form of “vaccine diplomacy”, not least in an effort to gain goodwill among populations.

While the terms “vaccine diplomacy” and “disease diplomacy” may have only recently emerged onto the public consciousness when countries began their global vaccine donation programmes, it is not a new concept. Instead, it is related to the concept of “disaster diplomacy”, in which disaster-related activities, including the distribution of relief supplies during public health disasters, are used to pursue a country’s foreign policy goals.<sup>30</sup> However, while these disaster-related activities may sometimes catalyse or bolster short-term outcomes for which there is already a pre-existing foundation, there is limited evidence that these can shape new,

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27. European External Action Service. 2 June 2021. EU and ASEAN launch “Southeast Asia Health Pandemic Response and Preparedness” project. ([https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/lebanon/99404/eu-and-asean-launch-southeast-asia-health-pandemic-response-and-preparedness"-project\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/lebanon/99404/eu-and-asean-launch-southeast-asia-health-pandemic-response-and-preparedness)).

28. Josh Hodler. 13 September 2021. Tracking Coronavirus Vaccinations Around the World. The New York Times. (<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/world/covid-vaccinations-tracker.html>).

29. Center for Strategic & International Studies. 2021. Southeast Asia Covid-19 Tracker. (<https://www.csis.org/programs/southeast-asia-program/southeast-asia-covid-19-tracker-0#ASEAN>).

30. Charlie Whittaker et al. 2018. A disaster diplomacy perspective of acute public health events. *Disasters*, 42, S2(2018): S173–S195.

long-term diplomatic outcomes, particularly when there are pre-existing political complications which may hinder these endeavours.<sup>31</sup> As such, a pre-existing foundation to a relationship is needed.

In the current pandemic context, China was the first major power to offer and deliver large quantities of its vaccines to developing countries – while most of the developed world was still engaged in nationalist vaccine procurement activities.<sup>32</sup> Unlike the EU, which has been donating vaccines through the multilateral route of COVAX as the second biggest contributor after the US, China has explicitly linked its vaccine donations to the “Health Silk Road” and thus, its Belt and Road Initiative and broader foreign policy agenda.<sup>33</sup> With the EU’s multilateral approach, while in line with its role as a champion of multilateralism in the global system, it has also reduced the visibility of their efforts. Already suffering from what Igor Driesmans, the Head of EU’s Mission to ASEAN, refers to as a “visibility deficit” in the region, this method further limits public exposure, inhibiting “good press”.<sup>34</sup> On the other hand, the EU also provides public, direct support for ASEAN’s Covid-19 response in the form of financial assistance, resource support as well as technical assistance for capacity-building.<sup>35</sup> This support is likely to contribute to the strengthening of the EU’s foundation in the region, paving a route for the EU to achieve its goal of playing a bigger role in the region.

## FUTURE EU ENGAGEMENT IN ASEAN

With ASEAN having upgraded its relationship with the EU to a “strategic partnership” during the 23rd EU-ASEAN Ministerial meeting on 1 December 2020, the

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31. Ibid.; Ilan Kelman. 2019. Do Health Interventions Support Peace Through “Disaster Diplomacy?” *Peace Review* no. 31, 2 (2019):158-167.

32. Laura Zhou. 10 September 2021. Southeast Asia a priority for Chinese vaccines as Delta fuels surge in Covid-19 cases, Vice-President Wang Qishan says. *South China Morning Post*. (<https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3148306/southeast-asia-priority-chinese-vaccines-delta-fuels-surge>).

33. David Hutt. 23 March 2021. Coronavirus: Why EU lags behind China and Russia in ASEAN vaccine diplomacy. *DW*. (<https://www.dw.com/en/eu-china-asean-covid-vaccines/a-56960283>); Luisa Evangelista Chainferber. 5 May 2021. Vaccine Diplomacy: Who is Leading the Race? *Diplomatic Envoy*. (<https://blogs.shu.edu/thediplomaticenvoy/2021/05/05/vaccine-diplomacy-who-is-leading-the-race/>).

34. David Hutt. 13 November 2020. “The EU is ready to seize the future opportunities to engage with the US on ASEAN matters,” says EU ambassador to ASEAN. *Watching Europe in Southeast Asia*, 13 November 2020. (<https://europeinseasia.substack.com/p/the-eu-is-ready-to-seize-the-future>).

35. European External Action Service. 2 June 2021. EU and ASEAN launch “Southeast Asia Health Pandemic Response and Preparedness” project. ([https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/lebanon/99404/eu-and-asean-launch-southeast-asia-health-pandemic-response-and-preparedness-project\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/lebanon/99404/eu-and-asean-launch-southeast-asia-health-pandemic-response-and-preparedness-project_en)).



question now arises: What does this mean for the EU's engagement with ASEAN?<sup>36</sup> This question is particularly pertinent in the current context, with this upgrade taking place against the backdrop of a global crisis. By moving from a donor-recipient relationship to a more equitable partnership, a "mutually beneficial" relationship, this new strategic partnership is the consolidation of the EU's various cooperative activities and programmes in the region, which run the gamut from climate change to maritime cooperation to Covid-19 response. This idea of a "mutually beneficial" relationship has also been reflected in the EU's new Indo-Pacific strategy, which lays out the bloc's continued engagement with the region.

Moreover, the global Covid-19 outbreak has clearly highlighted the consequences of a multi-dimensional crisis which cannot be met with a single-sectoral response. With Europe eager to make its presence more visible in the region, the effectiveness of its new strategy and programmes are therefore vital. By using a multi-sectoral nexus approach, the EU would be able to increase this effectiveness and therefore, visibility in the region, particularly in the area of pandemic preparedness and response.

## **Nexus Approach as a Framework for European Engagement**

Put simply, the nexus approach is a multi-sectoral approach requiring collaboration among various actors or sectors. By considering the long-term implications of any project across multiple sectors, this approach centres on a diverse range of actors working towards a collective outcome. As such, it allows for the balancing of multiple perspectives – including social, economic and environmental – which is particularly apt for such a complex issue as pandemic preparedness and response where sectoral boundaries can be amorphous.<sup>37</sup> Rather than continue to be stymied by sectoral silos, the EU should invigorate its relationship with ASEAN with the use of a nexus approach as the framework for engagement with ASEAN.

Moreover, the nexus approach is not new to the EU. This approach has been operationalised in the form of the "Humanitarian Development Nexus" as part of the conclusions of the Council of the European Union in 2017 in the face of

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36. Delegation of the European Union to ASEAN. 2021. The EU and ASEAN. (<https://euinasean.eu/the-eu-asean/>).

37. Alistair D. B. Cook and S. Nanthini. 1 July 2021. Disasters in COVID-19: Implications for Nexus Governance. NTS Insight. (<https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/nts/disasters-in-covid-19-implications-for-nexus-governance/#.YVaKRS0Rqv5>).

protracted crises.<sup>38</sup> What is Covid-19 but another protracted crisis – except on a global scale? By adopting the nexus approach as its framework for engagement in the region, European actors will be able to move beyond sectoral silos and tap on their previous projects in the region – particularly those in the development and disaster management sectors. This also allows them to overcome the silo-ed nature of health/disaster sectors in areas such as pandemic preparedness which do not strictly adhere to one or the other.

There are several pathways to how the EU can put this approach into practice in its pandemic preparedness and response activities in the region. First, there is a need to establish a framework for EU engagement in this area by tying together the disparate individual programmes, assessments and activities into a coherent whole. Questions that should be asked when creating such a framework include: What are the goals for the EU? What are the various programmes that are related to pandemic preparedness? What are the pre-existing programmes in ASEAN, and how can the EU contribute? Is this building resilience over the long term? Before the creation and prioritisation of specific programming approaches for responding to the impacts of Covid-19 as well as building ASEAN's pandemic preparedness and response, it is important to first identify if there are existing programmes and if so, how to adapt or scale up.<sup>39</sup>

One existing framework in ASEAN directly related to the regional Covid-19 response is the ASEAN Comprehensive Recovery Framework (ACRF). Adopted at the 37th ASEAN Summit in November 2020, this framework, together with its implementation plan, serves as the region's consolidated exit strategy from the Covid-19 crisis.<sup>40</sup> Not only does it lay out ASEAN's response to the currently ongoing Covid-19 crisis, but the framework also charts out the different stages of recovery. By focusing on the areas and people most affected by the pandemic in the region, it charts particular strategies and identifies focused measures based on their needs as well as the priorities of the sector and overall region.<sup>41</sup> Importantly, in order to maintain the flexibility to keep up with the constantly shifting crisis, the implementation plan

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38. European Commission. 1 March 2021. Resilience and Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus. ([https://ec.europa.eu/echo/what/humanitarian-aid/resilience\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/echo/what/humanitarian-aid/resilience_en)).

39. Sarah Dalrymple. 8 April 2020. Looking at the coronavirus crisis through the nexus lens – what needs to be done. Development Initiatives. (<https://devinit.org/blog/looking-at-the-coronavirus-crisis-through-the-nexus-lens-what-needs-to-be-done/?nav=more-about>).

40. ASEAN Secretariat. 2020. ASEAN Comprehensive Framework Plan. ([https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/ASEAN-Comprehensive-Recovery-Framework\\_Pub\\_2020\\_1.pdf](https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/ASEAN-Comprehensive-Recovery-Framework_Pub_2020_1.pdf)).

41. Ibid.

is a living document that will be constantly updated based on the changing conditions in the region.<sup>42</sup> In order for the EU to establish its own framework for pandemic preparedness, the ACRF, particularly its strategies on “Enhancing Health Systems”, “Strengthening Human Security” and “Advancing Towards a More Sustainable and Resilient Future”, must be taken into account, allowing the EU to fill in the gaps and scale up where there is space.

The creation of a framework for EU engagement in pandemic preparedness should also consider the region’s sophisticated disaster management eco-system. Due to the high prevalence of natural hazards in the region, ASEAN has understandably prioritised its management of natural disasters over that of other disasters such as pandemics. It has built a strong institutional capacity for dealing with such disasters, including the creation of a legal instrument, the ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response (AADMER) in 2005, the development of work programmes, including the recent 2021-2025 AADMER Work Programme, and the establishment of the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management (AHA Centre) in 2011.<sup>43</sup> However, this prioritisation has led to uneven development in other governance areas – in particular, the pandemic preparedness and response sector, as has been highlighted during this outbreak.<sup>44</sup>

With the EU already involved in disaster management in the region such as through the 2020 Integrated Programme in Enhancing the Capacity of AHA Centre and ASEAN Emergency Response Mechanisms, and its funding contributions to ASEAN mechanisms and ASEAN member states, this would be an opportunity to further build resilience in this space.<sup>45</sup> Part of its future engagement should therefore be to continue to support local mechanisms where they exist, such as via direct financial contributions, resource provisions or technical expertise using EU experts and mechanisms. In particular, the EU should look at collaboration with ASEAN

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42. ASEAN Secretariat. 2020. ASEAN Comprehensive Recovery Framework: implementation plan. (<https://asean.org/book/asean-comprehensive-recovery-framework-implementation-plan/>).

43. Mely Caballero-Anthony. 2019. Negotiating Governance on Non-Traditional Security in Southeast Asia and Beyond. New York: Columbia University Press, 146-50; Angela Pennisi di Floristella. 2016. Dealing with Natural Disasters: Risk Society and ASEAN: A New Approach to Disaster Management. *The Pacific Review* 29, no. 2 (2016): 296-297.

44. Lina Gong and S. Nanthini. 2020. The COVID-19 Catalyst: Implications for Disaster Governance in ASEAN. *NTS Insight*. (<https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/nts/the-covid-19-catalyst-implications-for-disaster-governance-in-asean/#.YVbfri0Rqv5>).

45. Ina Rachmawati and Dipo Summa. 2020. THE AHA CENTRE AND EUROPEAN UNION ANNOUNCE SUPPORT FOR HUMANITARIAN AND EMERGENCY RESPONSE IN ASEAN. *The Column*. (<https://thecolumn.ahacentre.org/posts/highlight/vol-58-the-aha-centre-and-european-union-announce-support-for-in-asean-humanitarian-and-emergency-response-in-asean/>).

mechanisms directly related to pandemic preparedness, such as ACPHEED, which once established will become the operational arm of ASEAN's regional health security, sustaining preparedness and resilience to public health emergencies in the region – similar to the AHA Centre and disaster management.

## The EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific: Health and Pandemic Preparedness

The EU Strategy for Cooperation is a good first step in the EU's attempts to expand its influence in this region, particularly for ASEAN. With its description of ASEAN as an “increasingly important partner for the EU”, and its constant reference to several of its mechanisms, ASEAN seems to be the linchpin of its strategy – in line with previous EU approaches to the region. Published in September 2021, the EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, in the wake of the EU's relationship upgrade with ASEAN, highlights the bloc's increased interest in engagement with and within the region.<sup>46</sup> While there does not seem to be any specific references to a nexus approach in the strategy, as seen by its multiple priority areas, there is nonetheless an implicit acceptance of the need for a multi-sectoral strategy in order to properly engage with a region still in the grip of the Covid-19 crisis.

Of relevance to this article is its priority area of human security – which focuses specifically on the area of health and disaster management. Current projects in the region include their contributions to the COVAX facility as well as their various individual projects as part of the EU's “Team Europe” package. The strategy also highlights areas of future cooperation, including the issue of securing medical and health-related supply chains – a key need for ASEAN as mentioned in the ACRF – an area that is likely to be of significant interest to the region, considering the still significant gaps in vaccine and medical resource availability. Beyond purely “health” issues, the issue of interoperability was also clearly a key concern for the bloc with the mention of the public availability of their interoperable “Covid-19 certificate systems”, which ASEAN could use within its own member states.

While the EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific is a milestone for its foreign policy and provides a useful outlook as to the future pathway of EU engagement in this region, it seems a little too broad. Particularly in the area of human security, there is little mention of *how* and with *whom* this cooperation is taking place. Is the EU planning on taking advantage of mechanisms such as ACPHEED? While there is mention of “supporting disaster management capacity building” with

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46. ([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)).

pre-existing mechanisms such as the AHA Centre, there is little specificity about the direction this support will take. There is limited new information about its future engagement with the region, with this strategy seemingly a continuation of the current EU policy, at least in terms of its approach towards health and pandemic preparedness. Nevertheless, with its focus on building on and strengthening established partnerships, this strategy will likely allow the EU to improve its visibility in the region, thereby enabling them to play a bigger role in the geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific.

## CONCLUSION

After 43 years as dialogue partners, ASEAN and the EU upgraded their relationship to “strategic partners” in December 2020, an important step forward for the two most sophisticated regional organisations today. The timing of this upgrade is of particular significance, clearly highlighting the importance of inter-regional collaboration and cooperation during times of crises. The current global crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic has proved to be a significant shock to the international system and its many constituent elements. It has strained resources all over the world, causing countries to turn towards nationalist policies at a time when multilateralism is needed the most.

After an initial inward turn at the beginning of the Covid-19 outbreak in Europe, the EU has aggressively moved towards a multilateral solution as the way out of this crisis. This is evident in its “Team Europe” package. Worth over €20 billion, this package has been aimed at responding to the immediate public health crisis caused by Covid-19 and its resulting humanitarian needs, with specific goals of strengthening the capacities and preparedness of partner countries to not only deal with the pandemic, but also mitigate the immediate social and economic consequences. Team Europe’s assistance to Southeast Asia has reached over €800 million and has taken the form of financial assistance, resource support and mobilisation as well as technical expertise.

In order to deal with the complexity of the effects of Covid-19, particular in terms of pandemic preparedness and response, the EU should use a multi-sectoral approach in its development of a framework for its engagement with the region. The nexus approach is one such approach. With the outbreak highlighting the need to be better prepared for a more complex and uncertain future, the nexus approach considers the short-, medium- and long-term implications for programmes across multiple areas – making it particularly apt for use in protracted crises, as has been done by the EU. After all, with Covid-19 unlikely to fade away in the short term

and the probability of infectious diseases increasing, the ASEAN-EU relationship in this regard is set to continue to be significant in the future. After all, a transboundary problem needs transboundary solutions.

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

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**Germany and the EU's New Indo-Pacific Strategy: China at the Centre of Europe's Engagement?**

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