

Europe's Indo-Pacific Adoption: Two Southeast Asian Challenges

Malcolm Cook

Summary

The European Union and a growing number of European states are adopting the Indo-Pacific regional concept. This puts them ahead of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and most Southeast Asian states, despite the region's central location in the Indo-Pacific. Europe's Indo-Pacific adopters need to understand Southeast Asian concerns with the Indo-Pacific when engaging with regional states and ASEAN.

Introduction

Southeast Asia is at the geographical centre of the Indo-Pacific region, and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and ASEAN-led mechanisms are the most developed, accepted and inclusive formal regional multilateral institutions in this region. Indo-Pacific tilts, policy guidelines, strategic reports and strategies from outside Southeast Asia that do not find favour in Southeast Asia and with ASEAN will find it hard to realise their ambitions.

Over the last three years, a number of European countries have adopted their own Indo-Pacific regional concepts. France did so first when French President Emmanuel Macron launched the country's new Indo-Pacific strategy at a Royal Australian Navy base in Sydney harbour in May 2018.¹² Germany released its Policy Guidelines for the Indo-Pacific Region in September 2020, and the Netherlands an Indo-Pacific strategy report two months later.³ Great Britain includes an Indo-Pacific "tilt" in its post-Brexit Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy released in March 2021, and the European Union (EU) published the EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific in April 2021.⁴ The geographically and conceptually broader Indo-Pacific framework comes closer to Europe's borders than the more exclusive Asia-Pacific one that kept India, South Asia and Africa's Indian Ocean littoral states out, and that the Bill Clinton administration in the United States (US) used as an economic diplomacy play against the EU in global trade talks.

¹ "Christopher warns Europe on trade", United Press International, 15 November 1993, <https://www.upi.com/Archives/1993/11/15/Christopher-warns-Europe-on-trade/9727753339600/?spt=su>.

² "Discours à Garden Island, base naval de Sydney", 3 May 2018, <https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2018/05/03/discours-a-garden-island-base-navale-de-sydney>.

³ *Policy guidelines for the Indo-Pacific region*, The Federal Government, Germany, September 2020, <https://rangun.diplo.de/blob/2380824/a27b62057f2d2675ce2bbfc5be01099a/policy-guidelines-summary-data.pdf>.

⁴ *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; and *EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific*, 19 April 2021, https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage_en/96741/EU%20Strategy%20for%20Cooperation%20in%20the%20Indo-Pacific.

These European states and institution are the second group to adopt an Indo-Pacific regional concept in favour of the previously predominant Asia-Pacific one in the last decade. Australia replaced the economically focussed Asia-Pacific regional concept with the more strategically concerned Indo-Pacific one in official documents from 2013, followed by Japan and then the US in 2017. Literally the 'Indo' in the Indo-Pacific, India does not need to adopt this framework that is partially defined by India's own position as a major global power. South Korea has chosen not to adopt the term for its regional policy.

The European Indo-Pacific concepts share many key public and less public elements with the earlier enunciated American, Japanese and Australian ones. These include the acceptance of the secular and likely irreversible shift of economic and strategic power to the Pacific and Indian Oceans (away from the Atlantic Ocean) and China; growing concern with China's coercive use of its mounting economic, diplomatic and military power; the need to respond in a coordinated manner to destabilising and unlawful Chinese behaviours; acknowledgement of ASEAN's central diplomatic role; and recognition of India's status as a major global power.

The Donald Trump administration, taking a phrase coined by Japan, adopted the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP) concept in October 2017 in preparation for President Trump's inaugural visit to Asia and sole participation in the annual ASEAN-US Summit.⁵ The current administration of President Joe Biden has maintained the same language and concept. America's adoption of the concept at a time of mounting systemic rivalry with China immediately and irreversibly transformed the concept into a key rhetorical weapon in this contest.

After the US became an Indo-Pacific not Asia-Pacific superpower, China's reaction to this new concept became clearer and more adversarial. European capitals adopting an Indo-Pacific concept have not been spared China's vitriol. The Communist Party of China's English language mouthpiece, *Global Times*, threateningly disparaged President Macron's May 2018 Indo-Pacific speech in Sydney as "playing petty tricks," which it said "will cause no damage to China, but such a speech flies against the favorable impression held of France by Chinese people."⁶

Two Southeast Asian Challenges

The Indo-Pacific term and concept's absorption into the vortex of the US-China structural rivalry has affected how Southeast Asian states – and through them, the consensus-constrained ASEAN – respond to the term and the so-named concepts and related official documents adopted by a growing number of non-regional states. Southeast Asian states are much less willing to adopt language (including the Indo-Pacific term) and behaviours that China deems provocative than the first two sets of Indo-Pacific adopting states. This is despite, or because of, China's aggressive violation of the maritime and sovereign rights in

⁵ Rex Tillerson, "Defining our relationship with India for the next century", speech at CSIS, Washington D.C., 18 October 2017, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/defining-our-relationship-india-next-century-address-us-secretary-state-rex-tillerson>.

⁶ "Macron's opportunistic show in Indo-Pacific", *Global Times*, 3 May 2018, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1100663.shtml>.

the South China Sea of half of the states of Southeast Asia. This difference over how to deal with China lies at the centre of two Southeast Asian challenges facing Europe's Indo-Pacific adoption.

Southeast Asia's Indo-Pacific Ambivalence

These four European states and the EU, while geographically separate from the Indo-Pacific, are well ahead of the Southeast Asian states when it comes to adopting the Indo-Pacific regional concept. No Southeast Asian state, with one partial exception, has adopted the Indo-Pacific, and ASEAN's adoption, as shown by the 2019 ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific, is partial and contested.

Vietnam, due to its centuries-old tense relationship with China, is regularly presented as the Southeast Asian state that is the most welcoming of the reorientation from the Asia-Pacific to Indo-Pacific.⁷ Yet, the 2019 Vietnam defence white paper continues to use the Asia-Pacific regional concept.⁸ Malaysia's 2017 defence white paper treats the Asia-Pacific region and the Indian Ocean as two separate strategic arenas in direct opposition to the focus on their interconnectedness at the core of the Indo-Pacific.⁹ The Philippines National Defense Strategy 2018-2022 and the preceding National Security Strategy released in 2018 are without region, both focussing on the direct challenges to Philippine sovereignty and sovereign rights.¹⁰

Indonesia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs was one of the earliest Indo-Pacific adopters with Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa calling in May 2013 for an Indo-Pacific Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation based on ASEAN principles and institutions. Since then, the Indonesian foreign ministry has been the strongest Indo-Pacific proponent in Southeast Asia and ASEAN, and was the key instigator of the 2019 ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific. Without the Indonesian ministerial push led by Natalegawa's successor as foreign minister, Retno Marsudi, it is likely that ASEAN would not have an Indo-Pacific document today. However, showing the ministerial rather than national adoption of the Indo-Pacific in Indonesia, two years after Natalegawa's call for an Indo-Pacific treaty, Indonesia's 2015 defence white paper maintained the Asia-Pacific regional concept.¹¹

The name of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific and its contents reflect Southeast Asia's ambivalence towards the Indo-Pacific concept. The original title of the outlook document

⁷ William Chhon, "The ASEAN Way: Zen and the art of great power maintenance", *Fulcrum*, 10 May 2021, <https://fulcrum.sg/the-asean-way-zen-and-the-art-of-great-power-maintenance/>.

⁸ *2019 Viet Nam National Defence*, Ministry of National Defence, Socialist Republic of Vietnam, <http://news.chinhphu.vn/Home/Viet-Nam-National-Defense-WHITE-PAPER-2019/201912/38323.vgp>.

⁹ *Defence White Paper*, Ministry of Defence, Malaysia, <http://www.mod.gov.my/images/mindef/article/kpp/DWP.pdf>.

¹⁰ *National Security Strategy*, Office of the President, Philippines, 2018, https://apcss.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Philippines-National_Security_Strategy_2018.pdf; *National Defense Strategy 2018-2022*, Department of National Defense, Philippines, 2019, https://www.dnd.gov.ph/Files/ShowFile?url=/FilesUploaded/Ckeditor/file/NDS_7_August_2019.pdf.

¹¹ *Defence White Paper 2015*, Defence Ministry of the Republic of Indonesia, 2016, <https://www.kemhan.go.id/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/2015-INDONESIA-DEFENCE-WHITE-PAPER-ENGLISH-VERSION.pdf>.

was reportedly the more direct “ASEAN Indo-Pacific Outlook”. The last-minute re-ordering and lengthening of the title, “yanks the term ‘Indo-Pacific’ away from its cosy position beside ASEAN and places it at a discernible distance. It further dilutes the significance that the Indo-Pacific holds for ASEAN, situating it as an external object that is seen from the viewpoint of ASEAN more as a spectator than a proprietor.”¹²

The ASEAN Outlook mirrors the 2017 Malaysian defence white paper by treating the Indian Ocean and Asia-Pacific regions as separate, stating that:

“Southeast Asia lies at the centre of these dynamic regions and is a very important conduit and portal to the same. Therefore, it is in the interest of ASEAN to lead the shaping of their economic and security architecture and ensure that such dynamics will continue to bring about peace, security, stability and prosperity for the peoples in Southeast Asia as well as in the wider Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean regions or the Indo-Pacific.”¹³

Since the publication of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific, the document itself has become subject to the great power battle over this term. Reportedly, China and Russia successfully lobbied for the Indo-Pacific term, including mention of this Outlook itself, to be excluded from the Ha Noi Declaration on the 15th Anniversary of the East Asia Summit.¹⁴ The Chairman’s Statement of the 15th East Asia Summit that Vietnam, as ASEAN chair in 2020, had more latitude over than the consensus Ha Noi Declaration document, refers to the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific “as a guide for ASEAN engagement in the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean regions to contribute to peace, stability, freedom and prosperity”.¹⁵

Indo-Pacific adopting European states and the EU may want to downplay the connection between their engagements with ASEAN and with some Southeast Asian states and their Indo-Pacific strategies, guidelines and tilts. It would be better, when in the region, to present these engagements as primarily or solely for the deepening of relations with particular Southeast Asian states, the Southeast Asian region and ASEAN respectively, without reference to any broader regional concepts.

Southeast Asia as Focus, Not Arena

The Southeast Asian states and ASEAN’s ambivalence towards the Indo-Pacific, particularly after the term became part of the US-China rivalry, also stems from Southeast Asian states’ historically informed fears of themselves becoming pawns and the region as a whole an arena of great power competition. Any sign, implied or more usually inferred, that an

¹² Hoang Thi Ha and Glenn Ong, “Revised title ‘ASEAN Outlook’ on the Indo-Pacific hints at ambivalence”, *ISEAS Commentaries*, 28 June 2019, <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/media/commentaries/revised-title-asean-outlook-on-the-indopacific-hints-at-ambivalence-by-hoang-thi-ha-and-glenn-ong/>.

¹³ “ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific”, ASEAN, 2019, https://asean.org/storage/2019/06/ASEAN-Outlook-on-the-Indo-Pacific_FINAL_22062019.pdf.

¹⁴ Hoang Thi Ha and Malcolm Cook, “Is the East Asia Summit suffering erosion?”, *ISEAS Perspective* 2021/61, 3 May 2021, <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/iseas-perspective/is-the-east-asia-summit-suffering-erosion-by-hoang-thi-ha-and-malcolm-cook/>.

¹⁵ “Chairman’s Statement of the 15th East Asia Summit” Vietnam, 14 November 2020, <https://asean.org/storage/45-Final-Chairmans-Statement-of-the-15th-East-Asia-Summit.pdf>.

external power's engagement in the region is driven primarily by this power's relations with other extra-regional powers stokes these deep Southeast Asian fears. Southeast Asia's persistent calls for the US and China not to make them choose is a call for the US and China not to treat Southeast Asian states as pawns in their rivalry but to engage Southeast Asian states and ASEAN for bilateral and regional reasons. Chinese suggestions that Indo-Pacific adopting states and the EU are doing so to curry favour with the US play to these Southeast Asian fears.¹⁶

Three recent European announcements and activities deriving from their Indo-Pacific strategies, guidelines and tilts could inadvertently cause and bolster such unhelpful inferences. The recent La Perouse exercise between the French navy and the navies of the four members of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (the Quad) could be inferred as France wanting to become a Quad-plus country and a sign of French support for America's FOIP strategy. President Biden's decision to elevate the Quad to the leaders' level and to use it as a main mechanism to support US Asia policy simply adds to the likelihood of such inferences. It is hard to see any Southeast Asian navy being willing to join an exercise with the navies of the US, Japan, India and Australia and these four navies alone.

Great Britain's Integrated Review claims that the country will have "a greater and more persistent presence than any other European country" in the Indo-Pacific. The planned visit this year by a British aircraft carrier strike group, "the largest fleet of Royal Navy warships to deploy internationally since the 1982 Falklands War",¹⁷ to Southeast Asia will be read in Southeast Asia and promoted by London as part of Great Britain's Indo-Pacific tilt. The fact that the British fleet will be accompanied by a US navy destroyer (and Dutch frigate) and that the British aircraft carrier will be carrying 10 US-deployed fighter jets, will again likely lead to inferences that this deployment is predominantly about the US-United Kingdom alliance. Reported plans for Australian naval ships to join the British deployment in Singapore will add to this likelihood.¹⁸

The planned deployment of a German frigate to Southeast Asia that has been delayed by the COVID-19 pandemic could face the problem of being seen to be guided by Germany's relationship with China. Beijing has warned Germany about this deployment, and after this warning from Germany's most important single-country trading partner, it is reported that the frigate's deployment may be revised in light of Chinese concerns:

"The Bayern will now also make a port visit to Shanghai, and, because this is scheduled to take place before the Bayern enters the South China Sea, some officials worry that it could actually convey the impression Germany has in

¹⁶ Zhang Hui and Zhao Yusha, "UK tilting toward Indo-Pacific to counterweight China 'immature' decision" *Global Times*, 16 March 2021, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202103/1218586.shtml>.

¹⁷ Andrew Chuter, "British name enormous carrier strike group heading for the Indo-Pacific", 26 April 2021, <https://www.defensenews.com/global/europe/2021/04/26/british-name-enormous-carrier-strike-group-heading-for-the-indo-pacific/>.

¹⁸ Andrew Tillett, "Australian navy to join UK carrier in regional show of strength", *Australian Financial Review*, 11 February 2021, <https://www.afr.com/politics/federal/australian-navy-to-join-uk-carrier-in-regional-show-of-strength-20210210-p57150>.

effect asked China for permission, therefore strengthening rather than challenging Chinese claims over the South China Sea.”¹⁹

Europe’s Indo-Pacific adopters need to be aware and wary of these Southeast Asian fears of being pawns and the arena for great power competition, as Southeast Asia was in World War II and the Cold War. Emphasising the direct Southeast Asian elements of European activities and downplaying their Indo-Pacific dynamics may help moderate these fears and the inferences that flow from them.

Southeast Asia is at the centre of the Indo-Pacific region. However, the more powerful states that surround Southeast Asia, as represented by the four Quad members on one side and China and Russia on the other, are more committed proponents and opponents of this particular mapping of the world. Southeast Asia’s Indo-Pacific ambivalence is easy to understand given this strategic reality. Europe’s Indo-Pacific adopters need to understand this as well in their engagements with Southeast Asian states and ASEAN.

.

Dr Malcolm Cook is a Visiting Senior Fellow at the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore. He can be contacted at malcolm_cook@iseas.edu.sg. The author bears full responsibility for the facts cited and opinions expressed in this paper.

¹⁹ Hans Kundani and Michito Tsuruoka, “Germany’s Indo-Pacific frigate may send unclear message”, *Chatham House*, 4 May 2021, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/05/germanys-indo-pacific-frigate-may-send-unclear-message>.