



# SECURING THE INDO-PACIFIC: EXPANDING COOPERATION BETWEEN ASIA AND EUROPE

*Editors*

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Securing the Indo-Pacific: Expanding Cooperation between Asia and Europe  
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Authored by Yogesh Joshi, Ippeita Nishida and Nishant Rajeev

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# CONTENTS

<b>Introduction</b>	3
Yogesh Joshi, Ippeita Nishida and Nishant Rajeev	
<b>PART 1: EUROPE’S RESIDENT POWERS IN THE INDO-PACIFIC</b>	
<b>Securing the Indo-Pacific: What Role for the United Kingdom?</b>	13
Euan Graham	
<b>France’s Enduring Indo-Pacific Presence: More than a ‘Tilt’; Less than a ‘Shift’</b>	20
Emmanuel Puig	
<b>European Resident Military Powers in the Indo-Pacific: A Regional Perspective</b>	26
Michito Tsuruoka	
<b>PART 2: CONTINENTAL EUROPE AND THE INDO-PACIFIC</b>	
<b>The Netherlands and European Union Turn to the Indo-Pacific: Towards Meaningful Action</b>	32
Maaïke Okano-Heijmans	
<b>Germany’s Indo-Pacific Guidelines</b>	41
Christian Wagner	
<b>Europe’s Indo-Pacific Adoption: Two Southeast Asian Challenges</b>	50
Malcolm Cook	

**PART 3: REGIONAL PERCEPTIONS OF EUROPE'S PUSH INTO THE  
INDO-PACIFIC**

**The Quad Meets Europe in the Indo-Pacific Region:  
Fleeting Flirtation or Long-term Engagement?** 58  
Renato Cruz De Castro

**The European Union in the Indo-Pacific:  
ASEAN Perspectives** 66  
Sinderpal Singh

**ASEAN, the Quad and the European Union** 73  
Olli Pekka Suorsa

**About the Authors** 80

## Introduction

*Yogesh Joshi, Ippeita Nishida and Nishant Rajeev*

### Summary

*Europe holds the potential to play a significant role in the emerging geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific.*

*The rise of China and the other Asian countries has shifted the world's economic, military and geopolitical centre of gravity from the Atlantic Ocean to the Indo-Pacific. In view of this shift, the European powers have realised that the region is too important to be left either to the bipolar Sino-American contest or the Indo-Pacific's regional powers. Given its emergence as a normative pole in international politics and its advanced military capabilities, Europe holds the potential to play a significant role in the emerging geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific. However, structural challenges persist. Several European economies are intertwined with that of China. Russia, on the other hand, continues to pose the most immediate threat to Europe's physical security. This collection of papers, therefore, attempts to bring together several European and Indo-Pacific perspectives on Europe's tilt towards the region.*

*This introductory chapter provides the geopolitical context of Europe's tilt towards the Indo-Pacific region and an overview of the strengths and challenges facing this policy shift. It then goes over the three main themes of this edited volume: the engagement of Europe's two resident Indo-Pacific powers – Britain and France – with the region; the Indo-Pacific strategies of continental European Powers such as Germany and the Netherlands as well as the institution of the European Union (EU); and finally, expectations and anxieties in the Indo-Pacific regarding Europe's Indo-Pacific turn.*

The rise of China and the other Asian countries has shifted the world's economic, military and geopolitical centre of gravity from the Atlantic Ocean to the Indo-Pacific. Though the Indo-Pacific powers have been trying to grapple with the significant transformation in their neighbourhood over the last decade, Europe has finally realised that the region is too important to be left either to the bipolar Sino-American contest or the Indo-Pacific's regional powers. As residential

powers with territorial stakes in the region, Europe's engagement with the Indo-Pacific was for a long time principally led by France and the United Kingdom (UK). However, the rest of Europe finally turned a corner in 2020 with other continental powers such as the Netherlands and Germany and, most importantly, the EU embracing the geopolitical reality of the Indo-Pacific. Insofar as "[t]he Indo-Pacific region represents the world's economic and strategic center of gravity", as the EU's foreign policy chief Josep Borrell argued, Europe "has a big stake in the Indo-Pacific region and has every interest that the regional architecture remains open and rules-based."<sup>1</sup>

China's rise and its military, economic and diplomatic assertiveness have been primarily responsible for Europe's renewed interest in the region. The emerging contest for hegemony in Asia and the looming global bipolarity portend major geopolitical and geo-economic challenges for Europe. For one, just like America's allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific, bipolarity will reduce Europe's freedom of action in the region. Insofar as the contest over the Indo-Pacific is the "key to shaping the International Order in the 21<sup>st</sup> century",<sup>2</sup> Europe, just like many Indo-Pacific powers, would prefer the American-subsidised liberal order over the uncertainty of *Pax Sinica*. For the first time in modern history, Europe is confronting a great power outside its cultural and geographical construct. The Indo-Pacific becomes important because that is where global power is. Such systemic implications would have remained only academic concerns if not for the COVID-19 crisis. The pandemic brought China's belligerence to Europe's doorway. COVID-19 unleashed "an increasingly bellicose Beijing" not only upon the Indo-Pacific but also upon Europe.<sup>3</sup>

Europe's discomfort with China's use of economic coercion, its propagation of technological authoritarianism and its severe human

*The emerging contest for hegemony in Asia and the looming global bipolarity portend major geopolitical and geo-economic challenges for Europe.*

1 Josep Borrell, "The EU needs a strategic approach for the Indo-Pacific", European Union External Action Service, 12 March 2021, [https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/94898/eu-needs-strategic-approach-indo-pacific\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/94898/eu-needs-strategic-approach-indo-pacific_en).

2 "Policy guidelines for the Indo-Pacific", The Federal Government, August 2020, <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/blob/2380514/f9784f7e3b3fa1bd7c5446d274a4169e/200901-indo-pazifik-leitlinien--1--data.pdf>.

3 Garima Mohan, "A European Strategy for the Indo-Pacific", *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 43, No. 4 (2020), pp. 171-185.

rights violations have underlined the significance of creating a favourable balance of power in the Indo-Pacific. Such reorientation is greatly helped by the clarity in American strategy and purpose during the transition from the Donald Trump administration to the Joe Biden presidency. Trump could be credited for elevating the significance of the Indo-Pacific in the United States' (US) grand strategy and focusing Washington's strategic gaze firmly on China. However, his transactionalist foreign policy and ruinous domestic polarisation rendered American partnership both unpalatable and fickle. On the other hand, Biden's firm stand on China has signalled to the world that domestic upheavals notwithstanding, confrontation and containment of China is now national policy. Washington's political will has helped concentrate the minds of its European allies. Even the North Atlantic Treaty Organization – a purportedly Cold War alliance for trans-Atlantic security – now sees China as the most prominent emerging threat.<sup>4</sup>

*Geographically distant, internally divided, economically tied to China and threatened by Russian resurgence, the odds against Europe's meaningful contribution to the Indo-Pacific are indeed substantial.*

However, beyond such expressions of interest, the real question is one of potential: how and what can Europe contribute to the emerging dynamics in the Indo-Pacific? Geographically distant, internally divided, economically tied to China and threatened by Russian resurgence, the odds against Europe's meaningful contribution to the Indo-Pacific are indeed substantial. Under such circumstances, can Europe play an independent role there? For one, Europe's emergence as a normative pole in international politics, which aims to ensure that the states play by the established rules of international law and follow the global conventions on peaceful resolution of outstanding disputes, has great significance for the Indo-Pacific. As the Indo-Pacific becomes the primary battleground for emerging technological, connectivity and governance challenges in the world, Europe's contributions towards how the region's geopolitics and geo-economics shape and form can prove decisive.<sup>5</sup> Second, unlike its soft image in global politics, Europe is also home to some of the most modern and potent

4 Steven Erlanger and Michael D Shear, "Shifting Focus, NATO Views China as a Global Security Challenge", *The New York Times*, 14 June 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/14/world/europe/biden-nato-china-russia.html>.

5 Eva Pejsova, "Europe: A New Player in the Indo-Pacific", *The Diplomat*, 19 January 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/01/europe-a-new-player-in-the-indo-pacific/>.

military capabilities, with serious territorial and diplomatic interests in keeping the Indo-Pacific free of coercion and control from a single power.<sup>6</sup> If France, Britain and the Netherlands have already made some military commitments to the region, Germany has promised to do so in the near future. The crowding of the Indo-Pacific's waters by the Europeans will, therefore, add to the region's already intriguing geopolitical churning.

Europe's involvement in the Indo-Pacific is not without challenges. First, notwithstanding the renewed focus on challenging China's military, economic and diplomatic excesses, the European economy is deeply intertwined with the Chinese economy. China has also been able to create serious wedges within the EU; the economy of European states is deeply intertwined with that of Beijing.<sup>7</sup> Second, aside from securing southern borders from traditional and non-traditional threats emanating out of Africa and the Middle East, Russia remains the most proximate and threatening concern for Europe. Moscow may not enjoy the economic heft displayed by Beijing; but it does endanger European security, given its penchant for military coercion, either through conventional military means or by employing grey zone tactics such as cyber-attacks and disinformation campaigns. The Indo-Pacific, therefore, is observed to only have a secondary claim on Europe's attention and resources.<sup>8</sup> Third, Europe's entry into the Indo-Pacific is hardly taking place in a vacuum; not only does it have to contend with the memories of its colonial past, but it also encounters a region where China has made significant military and economic gains in the last one decade. China's rise has divided the region: whereas major middle powers like India, Japan and Australia have taken up the cudgels against China, smaller Southeast Asian states do not wish

*The Indo-Pacific, therefore, is observed to only have a secondary claim on Europe's attention and resources.*

6 Stuart Lau and Jacopo Barigazzi, "Europe's strategic long-shot: More warships in the Indo-Pacific", *Politico*, 18 April 2021, <https://www.politico.eu/article/europes-strategic-long-shot-more-warships-in-the-indo-pacific/>.

7 Insa Ewart, "China as a dividing force in Europe", *Merics*, 5 August 2021, <https://merics.org/en/analysis/china-dividing-force-europe>.

8 James Dobbins, Howard J Shatz and Ali Wyne, "Russia Is a Rogue, Not a Peer; China Is a Peer, Not a Rogue", *Perspectives*, RAND Corporation, October 2018, <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE310.html>.

to upset the apple cart which provides for their continued economic prosperity.<sup>9</sup>

Such divisions between states wanting to balance or bandwagon with China are also evident in the clash of established and emerging regional security institutions in the region. Whereas the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is the most visible, evolved and prominent regional institution, it has remained hesitant to engage with the idea of the Indo-Pacific lest it riles China's sensitivities. The overwhelming influence of Beijing on ASEAN, most reflective in the latter's inability to withstand Beijing's colonisation of the South China Sea, has created a crisis of confidence in ASEAN's ability to manage the negative externalities of China's rise.<sup>10</sup>

*Known as the Quadrilateral Security Initiative or the Quad, this new security institution claims its legitimacy from its capability to influence the region's balance of power.*

This has also resulted in an emerging alignment among the Indo-Pacific's major powers – India, Japan, Australia and the US – to balance China's rising power in the region. Known as the Quadrilateral Security Initiative or the Quad, this new security institution claims its legitimacy from its capability to influence the region's balance of power. Unlike ASEAN, the Quad pools some formative military capabilities.<sup>11</sup> It is also now taking a turn to geo-economics.<sup>12</sup> Europe's balancing act between the region's established and emerging institutions will be a tricky one – and not without reason. Whereas the ASEAN countries have been sceptical of Europe's diplomatic and particularly military engagement with the Indo-Pacific, the Quad countries are the loudest cheerleaders of European presence in the region.

As the basic idea of the Indo-Pacific gains traction, there are multiple conceptions of its scope and meaning, as well as strategies for

9 Mark J Valencia, "United Southeast Asian front against China unlikely", *East Asia Forum*, 29 February 2020, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2020/02/29/united-southeast-asian-front-against-china-unlikely/>.

10 Phar Kim Beng, "ASEAN Is Failing On The South China Sea Issue", *The Diplomat*, 26 October 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/10/asean-is-failing-on-the-south-china-sea-issue/>.

11 Dhruva Jaishankar, "The real significance of the Quad", *The Strategist*, Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 24 October 2018, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/the-real-significance-of-the-quad/>.

12 Yogesh Joshi, "Will the Quad's focus on vaccines, rare earths help it win friends in Asean?", *South China Morning Post*, 18 March 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/opinion/article/3125837/will-quads-focus-vaccines-rare-earth-help-it-win-friends-asean>.

promoting peace and prosperity in this vast littoral. Most countries in the region which have embraced the idea of the Indo-Pacific, particularly among the Quad countries, agree that there can be no single overarching framework to govern the region. Europe's arrival in the Indo-Pacific is set to make the debate on the Indo-Pacific's future more democratic and multifaceted. This volume of papers aims to understand the phenomena of Europe's arrival in the Indo-Pacific. In doing so, it aims to reflect on the following questions: What strategies and tools does Europe have to promote peace and prosperity in the region, and do all European powers share a common understanding of the Indo-Pacific? How are the European powers navigating the contradictions between their economic and geopolitical interests in the region? What military and diplomatic heft do the European powers bring to the Indo-Pacific bargain? How are the Indo-Pacific powers responding to Europe's renewed economic, diplomatic and military regional interests? How can the Indo-Pacific's regional powers collaborate with the European countries in technological development and connectivity?

*Europe's arrival in the Indo-Pacific is set to make the debate on the Indo-Pacific's future more democratic and multifaceted.*

Building upon three separate workshops hosted by the Institute of South Asian Studies at the National University of Singapore and the Sasakawa Peace Foundation, Japan, this collection of discussion papers brings together cutting-edge analyses by policymakers, analysts and academics from Europe and the Indo-Pacific to reflect on the above-mentioned questions.

## **Europe's Resident Powers in the Indo-Pacific**

The first set of papers discusses the engagement of Europe's two resident powers in the Indo-Pacific – Britain and France – with the ongoing geopolitical transition in the region. Euan Graham's article focuses on the British "tilt" towards the Indo-Pacific. After more than 50 years since Britain's decision to pull out its military commitments from the East of Suez, it is back in the region with the recently announced 'Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy'. Graham located the tilt in Britain's exit from the EU and the subsequent recasting of its economic, diplomatic and foreign

policy interests. He accepts the constraints on British capacity and resources in contributing to the regional balance of power, compared to the region's other major powers. However, as most of the papers in this volume argue, external presence in the region not only challenges China's power but also questions the legitimacy of its assertiveness in the region. Beyond natural financial constraints, Graham elucidates how the unstable domestic politics of the UK also unsettles London's strategic engagement in the Indo-Pacific.

Emmanuel Puig provides a bird's eye view of French interests, motivations and policies in the Indo-Pacific. France, without argument, boasts of the most formidable regional presence of any European country. Such presence is not only driven by its territorial interests but is also strategically thought-out, as was underlined first in the speech by French President Emmanuel Macron in May 2018 and subsequently outlined in various defence policy documents. French proactiveness comes from its first-hand experience of the Indo-Pacific's geopolitical transformation but also its proactive policy of engaging with other like-minded partners, particularly in the Quad group of countries.

*Tokyo has been an avid supporter of Europe's entry into the Indo-Pacific.*

If Graham and Puig offer the British and French perspectives respectively, Michito Tsuruoka's paper outlines the regional expectations from France and Britain in the Indo-Pacific. Tokyo has been an avid supporter of Europe's entry into the Indo-Pacific. Tsuruoka's paper discusses how the region's various actors perceive British and French military and diplomatic actions; describes how the region can avail of the benefits of their presence; and prescribes why the US, Japan and the other Quad countries should initiate a dialogue with European countries on the Indo-Pacific.

### **Continental Europe and the Indo-Pacific**

The second set of papers focuses on the Indo-Pacific strategies of continental European powers such as Germany and the Netherlands as well as the institution of the EU. It outlines the view of these strategic actors on the security and stability of the Indo-Pacific and their strategies to cope with the emerging strategic flux in the region.

It also focuses on the complementarities and contradictions in the strategies and policies of the other major powers in Europe with that of France and Britain. One of the major differences in emphasis between the resident powers and continental powers is the latter's focus on non-traditional security threats and norms as well as institutions as a method to balance China's rise in the region.

Maaïke Okano-Heijmans' analysis of the Netherlands and the EU's Indo-Pacific strategy underscores the very important point that the Indo-Pacific's balance of power cannot be reduced merely to a balance of military power; it must also include considerations of other sources of geopolitical and geo-economic influences. Connectivity – both physical and digital – may help reduce China's expanding footprint in the region, and Europe must engage with partners in the region to uphold norms of accountability and transparency.

Christian Wagner expounds on the German viewpoint and strategy on the Indo-Pacific. Compared to France and Britain, Germany, along with the Netherlands and the EU, are new to the Indo-Pacific game. Wagner argues that the major shift in German policy is that Berlin has transformed itself from being merely an observer to a participant in the Indo-Pacific's great game. The new Indo-Pacific strategy aims to diversify Germany's economic dependence on China, build security networks with regional stakeholders and uphold the liberal normative order. However, where Maaïke underlines the need for multilateralism in the European approach, Wagner emphasises the strategic requirement to move away from strict multilateralism to more practical alternatives of bilateral, trilateral and minilateral networks.

*The new Indo-Pacific strategy aims to diversify Germany's economic dependence on China, build security networks with regional stakeholders and uphold the liberal normative order.*

In the last paper in this section, Malcolm Cook outlines the challenges Europe will face in Southeast Asia as it embraces the concept of the Indo-Pacific. This is particularly interesting because, for a Europe that privileges multilateralism, ASEAN is the most obvious partner. Moreover, in some ways, the battle of the Indo-Pacific is largely a battle for Southeast Asia. First, ASEAN remains deeply uncertain about the Indo-Pacific, not only because of the fear of damaging relations

with China but also because of internal disagreements amongst the Southeast Asians. Second, the smaller states of Southeast Asia dislike any external involvement that may not only intensify the great power competition between the US and China but would also reduce their significance in this great power rivalry. Europe, therefore, has to tread carefully in the Indo-Pacific.

### **Regional Perceptions of Europe's Push into the Indo-Pacific**

*The battle lines between the Quad and ASEAN are now out in the open, as the two institutions have become increasingly sceptical of the other.*

The last set of papers explores how states in the Indo-Pacific view Europe's entry into the region and their expectations and anxieties regarding Europe's Indo-Pacific turn. It specifically focuses on the convergences and differences in the view of the Quad countries vis-à-vis the ASEAN countries over Europe's engagement in the region. The battle lines between the Quad and ASEAN are now out in the open, as the two institutions have become increasingly sceptical of the other. This is evident in the paper by Renato Cruz De Castro on the Quad's engagement with Europe in the Indo-Pacific and Sinderpal Singh's rendition on ASEAN's view of Europe's turn to the Indo-Pacific.

De Castro illustrates how Europe's entry helps the Quad's effort to adjust the balance of power in its favour. Though Singh argues that (in accordance with ASEAN's *realpolitik* tradition of ensuring that no single power dominates the region) Europe's involvement is a positive development. However, Europe's increased presence in the region may also lead to substantive divergences with ASEAN on issues ranging from democracy to human rights but more importantly on their approach to China. Whereas the Quad has welcomed Europe's military engagement, ASEAN's response has been quite mixed.

The last paper in this section by Olli Pekka Suorsa provides a European perspective on the contest between the Quad and ASEAN as the two most important security institutions in the region. In his critical analysis of Europe's Indo-Pacific turn, Suorsa highlights the limits of European involvement and outlines various challenges in its return to the region. First, Europe's economic interests and its core normative values and principles often clash in Southeast Asia. Second, even when

at an institutional level the EU favours ASEAN, it would have to cater for the emergence of the Quad as a force in the Indo-Pacific. Lastly, Europe would have to decide its position in the US-China regional conflict. The European inclination for strategic autonomy necessitates an independent attitude towards the challenges of the Indo-Pacific rather than being merely an addendum to US strategy.

## PART 1: EUROPE'S RESIDENT POWERS IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

### Securing the Indo-Pacific: What Role for the United Kingdom?

*Euan Graham*

#### Summary

*Coordinating its security engagement efforts with those of other European countries (France, in particular) will be critical to Britain's long-term prospects.*

*The current United Kingdom's (UK) policy focus on the Indo-Pacific matters primarily to the country as it seeks to reframe its post-Brexit national interests on the world stage. The recently announced 'tilt' to the region in the Integrated 'Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy' is suitably ambitious for a globally oriented middle power. However, it remains short on specifics and resource commitments. While there are limits to the UK's capacity as an actor in the region, it has the potential to play useful diplomatic, military and even geo-economic roles as part of a broader effort to counterbalance China's rising power. Coordinating its security engagement efforts with those of other European countries (France, in particular) will be critical to Britain's long-term prospects.*

#### Introduction

Among the European countries, the UK was late out of the starting blocks with its policy blueprint for the Indo-Pacific macro-region. France, the Netherlands and Germany issued their own national Indo-Pacific strategies or frameworks before London announced its 'tilt' to the Indo-Pacific as a two-page feature embedded within the 'Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy', released in March 2021.<sup>1</sup> Whitehall's heightened interest in

<sup>1</sup> "Global Britain in a competitive age: The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy", HM Government, 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).

region does not come out of the blue, however. Efforts by the British government to scale up official attention towards Asia go back more than a decade, in recognition of the region's growing economic heft and centrality to global security.

This impetus gained added relevance and urgency with the impending British exit from the European Union (EU). A requirement to diversify and trade globally has stacked the prosperity side of Britain's Indo-Pacific interest equation. A desire in the tilt to tap into Asia's economic vibrancy is, however, also tempered by a recognition of the potential for geopolitical instability to emanate from the region. Great Britain feels China's increasingly aggressive and coercive behaviour less directly than it does that of Russia. The 'Integrated Review' has reaffirmed that the Euro-Atlantic area and North Atlantic Treaty Organization will have the primary call among the UK's future defence and security concerns. But China is not an entirely over-the-horizon concern, as witnessed by the heightened attention recently devoted to it by the British government, parliament and media, and the range of bilateral friction points, ranging from Hong Kong and Tibet to 5G. No nation with global aspirations can afford a passive policy towards China. Balances further away must also be shaped before their impacts are felt at home.

*Great Britain feels China's increasingly aggressive and coercive behaviour less directly than it does that of Russia.*

## Outlines to the 'Tilt'

The tilt, while overdue and rather thin on detail, nonetheless represents an attempt to draw together the various strands of UK policy interest in the region, straddling trade and investment, diplomacy and defence, and to impose some cross-government coherence upon them. It commits the UK to the lofty goal of being "the European partner with the broadest and most integrated presence in the Indo-Pacific."<sup>2</sup> France is the aspirational benchmark here. The UK's vision is broad-based but includes provision for a persistent defence presence in the region and a modest modernisation of the

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 66.

port and refuelling facilities in Singapore, to which the Royal Navy has longstanding access.<sup>3</sup> A subsequent statement by the UK's First Sea Lord and Chief of Naval Staff Admiral, Sir Tony Radakin, has underscored Britain's intentions to maintain a naval presence in the Indo-Pacific, earmarking two patrol vessels for forward deployment in the region, above and beyond this year's eye-catching dispatch of a UK-led carrier strike group across a wide swath of the maritime Indo-Pacific. Singapore is likely to be a host location for at least one of these vessels, and there are plans to scale this up to a larger, Type-31 warship when these eventually enter service.<sup>4</sup>

*Defence cooperation features a strong maritime dimension, including a Maritime Security Arrangement between the Japanese and British navies.*

Among the Indo-Pacific countries, London's defence and security links are currently most mature with Japan.<sup>5</sup> The last "two-plus-two" meeting of defence and foreign ministers, held in February 2021, declared that, "Japan and the UK are each other's closest security partners in Asia and Europe respectively, with shared values and common strategic interests."<sup>6</sup> Defence cooperation features a strong maritime dimension, including a Maritime Security Arrangement between the Japanese and British navies. The visit to Japan of the carrier strike group will serve as the deployment's anchor leg and usher in new joint bilateral and three-way exercises, including the United States (US). The logical next step in the defence relationship would be to negotiate a visiting forces agreement, to complement the Defence Logistics Treaty inked in January 2017.

The centrepiece for closer relations with Southeast Asia is a bid for UK dialogue partner status with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to compensate for the UK losing its ability to engage the regional grouping under EU auspices. This bid was endorsed at the regional grouping's annual summit in Brunei in April 2021.<sup>7</sup> Formal

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p 73.

<sup>4</sup> "First Sea Lord Sea Power Conference Speech 2021", Royal Navy, 19 May 2021, <https://www.royalnavy.mod.uk/news-and-latest-activity/news/2021/may/19/210519-1sl-seapower-conf>.

<sup>5</sup> Euan Graham, "Europe and Regional Security", Regional Security Assessment 2020, International Institute for Strategic Studies, Singapore, May 2019.

<sup>6</sup> "UK commits to deeper defence and security cooperation with Japan", UK Ministry of Defence and Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, 3 February 2021, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-commits-to-deeper-defence-and-security-cooperation-with-japan>.

<sup>7</sup> Dian Septiari, "UK closes in on dialogue partnership with ASEAN", *Jakarta Post*, 5 May 2021, <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2021/05/05/uk-closes-in-on-dialogue-partnership-with-asean.html>.

acceptance as an ASEAN dialogue partner would be an early win for the tilt. A more important objective, for the prospect of sustaining high-level UK government and business attention in the Indo-Pacific, is to join the 11-member Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership. Progress on this and other economic aspects to the tilt could be protracted, given political headwinds and policy inertia among the UK's regional interlocutors. But the strategic case for the UK to seek expanded markets and new investment from the region is clear while there is goodwill from Asian partners like Japan. Regarding defence engagements in Southeast Asia, the UK is looking to enhance its commitment to the Five Power Defence Arrangement (with Australia, Malaysia, New Zealand and Singapore), which turns 50 years old in 2021. The UK also maintains a low-profile Gurkha battalion in Brunei, which is nonetheless Southeast Asia's largest foreign ground contingent.

On China, not surprisingly, the 'Integrated Review' strikes an ambiguous if not contradictory tone, symptomatic of the opportunity-plus-threat framing that characterises the UK's tilt to the Indo-Pacific. On one hand, China's "increasing power and assertiveness" poses a "systemic" and "competitive" challenge. On the other, the 'Integrated Review' aspires to "a positive trade and investment relationship with China."<sup>8</sup> Such contradictory impulses are not unique to the UK. The British government's approach towards China is in flux but has shifted to a notably more sceptical and cautionary stance since 2020, as bilateral friction has intensified over Hong Kong and Beijing's strident diplomacy and general overreach during the pandemic. The 'golden era' of UK-China relations from the David Cameron-George Osborne era in British politics has lost its lustre and will not return.

*The 'golden era' of UK-China relations from the David Cameron-George Osborne era in British politics has lost its lustre and will not return.*

## Capacity Constraints and Coordination

Britain's ability to contribute to a regular European naval presence in the Indo-Pacific is limited by the Royal Navy's overall capacity. However, the presence of the European naval ensigns, especially in the Western Pacific, makes it harder for China to paint freedom of

<sup>8</sup> Integrated Review, p. 22.

navigation and the South China Sea as exclusive security concerns of the US. Moreover, as one of only two European states possessing meaningful expeditionary capabilities, the UK's military contributions to regional security need not be entirely of a symbolic nature.

*The Indo-Pacific countries that are favourably disposed to a British presence would also like to see the European countries acting more in concert.*

The Indo-Pacific countries that are favourably disposed to a British presence would also like to see the European countries acting more in concert. To this end, although forged during the UK's fraught and conflictual exit from the EU, the tilt specifies a commitment to work more closely with European partners, such as France and Germany. The embedding of a Dutch frigate within the UK-led carrier strike group is a positive example of this being put into practice. Close cooperation with France is the key, as the only other European country that can independently project force to any significant degree into the Indo-Pacific.

French and British forces have operated jointly in the Indo-Pacific before. For example, a contingent of Royal Marines was embarked on a French amphibious vessel during a cruise to the region in 2018. What is needed at a basic level is a schedule of coordinated military and particularly naval deployments, spaced out to maximise an Anglo-French expeditionary presence. This includes land and air forces, but most significant British and French deployments are likely to be centred around aircraft carriers, amphibious ships, anti-submarine escorts and nuclear-powered attack submarines (SSNs). The latter are a particularly significant capability, since France and the UK are the only allies of the US that operate nuclear-powered attack submarines, with a combined inventory of 13 SSNs. A drumbeat of alternating UK and French submarine deployments to the Indo-Pacific would contribute to maintaining a favourable naval balance of power in the Indian Ocean, given the US navy's dwindling tally of SSNs in the latter part of this decade.<sup>9</sup> Britain and France can also be useful training partners for regional amphibious forces; they are in some ways more suited as counterparts than the US marines because they are better adapted to joint operations at a smaller scale.

<sup>9</sup> David Larer, "The US Navy, facing a shortfall, aims to ink an enormous attack sub contract next month", *Defense News*, 19 March 2019, <https://www.defensenews.com/naval/2019/03/19/the-us-navy-facing-a-shortfall-aims-to-ink-an-enormous-attack-sub-contract-next-month/>.

## Challenges to the Tilt

A UK Indo-Pacific security role is likely to face several other challenges in its execution phase. First, the UK conceives its regional security role, within the tilt, in terms of peacetime presence and manoeuvre. Yet, it would be prudent for Whitehall to develop contingency planning for a UK military involvement in a regional conflict, be it over Taiwan or some other flashpoint. The UK may be reluctant to commit to more than a token frontline role in such a scenario. However, the UK's capacity to provide indirect support to the US and its allies in case of a conflict with China could prove to be materially helpful, in terms of 'back-filling' for the US in other locations as well as intelligence cooperation.<sup>10</sup>

Second, there remains a serious question to be asked around the sustainability of a British focus on Asia, in resourcing terms. There is no hard commitment to resourcing the tilt in the 'Integrated Review'. Beyond a general uplift for the UK defence budget and the release of a Defence Command Paper, in the wake of the review, little extra money appears to be specifically earmarked for the Indo-Pacific. Thus far, there is a marked absence of detail to the tilt and, hence, lingering doubts about its seriousness.

Third, money is not the only resource that matters for successful policy implementation. Sustaining the attention of high-level decision-makers within the government is vital for continuity. Without a high-level sponsor within the government, policy naturally loses focus and direction. This is one area where the UK has consistently underperformed, particularly in defence, because of the short lifespan of ministers. Defence has suffered particularly badly from ministerial 'churn' in recent years. France enjoys a clear advantage over the UK in this regard, helping to account for France's steady focus on the Indo-Pacific and an impressive, integrated policy approach towards commerce and security.

*Sustaining the attention of high-level decision-makers within the government is vital for continuity.*

<sup>10</sup> Antoine Bondaz and Bruno Tertrais, "Europe Can Play a Role in a Conflict Over Taiwan. Will It?", *World Politics Review*, 23 March 2021, [www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/29515/europe-can-help-prevent-a-taiwan-war](http://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/29515/europe-can-help-prevent-a-taiwan-war).

Since Florence Parly became France's Minister for the Armed Forces in June 2017, she has had no fewer than four British counterparts to deal with (Michael Fallon, Gavin Williamson, Penny Mordaunt and Ben Wallace). Even her predecessor, Jean-Yves Le Drian served as Defence Minister from 2012 to 2017 when he became France's Foreign Minister. France's external policy enjoys enviable business continuity benefits and political 'top cover' as a result. In parliamentary democracies, ministers make the key decisions. Ensuring that they are briefed and 'read in' takes time. They conduct international policy at an inter-personal level with their counterparts. While personal rapport can be overstated, networks are social constructs that are strengthened by longevity in office. Whenever a new minister enters office, policy enters a holding pattern while the new incumbent familiarises themselves with the issues. The UK's tilt to the Indo-Pacific will inevitably suffer disruption unless this trend is corrected.

## Conclusion

*Britain's influence on Asian security can only be at the periphery, but that does not preclude it from playing useful diplomatic, military and even geo-economic roles.*

While the Indo-Pacific tilt matters (first and foremost, to the UK) it will never be on a scale that decides the Indo-Pacific's regional balance of power; that is unrealistic. Britain's influence on Asian security can only be at the periphery, but that does not preclude it from playing useful diplomatic, military and even geo-economic roles. From a British perspective, the tilt is worthwhile if it helps to stretch the country's post-Brexit strategic and economic horizons and keeps them extended. The acid test of the tilt's success in the region is whether it is valued as a meaningful, comprehensive contribution to security by the US and its allies and partners. That ultimately involves a judgement about the consistency and longevity of the UK's policy attention to the region and the degree to which it dovetails with the efforts of other European countries rather than duplicates them. The tilt is a good launching point, but it must be followed through.

## France's Enduring Indo-Pacific Presence: More than a 'Tilt'; Less than a 'Shift'

*Emmanuel Puig*

### Summary

*As a sovereign power of the Indo-Pacific, France has demonstrated its ambitions and the sustainability of its presence, put forward in its dedicated defence strategy in 2019. While part of a whole-of-government approach for the Ministry of Armed Forces, the Indo-Pacific is an area of operational responsibility, in which France's overseas territories play a key role. Three military commands and two presence forces structure a security continuum spanning from the coast of Africa to the Pacific Ocean. France's commitment to the region comes with the responsibility of being able to act in a changing security environment, as underlined in the recently published '2021 Strategic Review'. This translates into long-term investments to preserve its capability to deploy assets regularly, far from Europe, and to contribute to strategic stability in the region. France's approach is based on cooperation with its allies and partners, while promoting multilateral frameworks and supporting the interests of the European Union (EU).*

*France's commitment to the region comes with the responsibility of being able to act in a changing security environment, as underlined in the recently published '2021 Strategic Review'.*

### Introduction

When releasing publicly 'France's Defence Strategy in the Indo-Pacific' at the 2019 Shangri-La Dialogue, French Defense Minister Florence Parly underlined the fact that France's commitment to the region was entrenched in history. Lifting doubts about France's ambitions in the region and the sustainability of its Indo-Pacific policy, she declared:

"France is not going anywhere, because we are part of the region. We have territories here, we have more than 1.6 million inhabitants, several islands with different statutes, vast exclusive economic zones, and the responsibility that

goes with the territory. The evolving security order affects us too.”<sup>1</sup>

*Being a resident power in the Indo-Pacific, any regional instability and crisis will have an immediate impact on France’s political, economic and sovereign interests.*

The Indo-Pacific is today the theatre of profound strategic changes from the intensification of Sino-American competition, Sino-Indian and Pakistani-Indian tensions, the rise of a nuclear North Korea to the assertiveness of China in the South China Sea, not to mention transnational threats and the implications of climate change. Given that seven of the world’s top 10 defence spenders belong to the region, military competition is not only endemic but asymmetries of power also engender instabilities with global consequences. Both unresolved disputes and emerging rivalries may result in a breakdown of strategic stability or a lasting deterioration in the regional security environment. Being a resident power in the Indo-Pacific, any regional instability and crisis will have an immediate impact on France’s political, economic and sovereign interests.

In this context, France, as a sovereign power of the Indo-Pacific and a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), aims to defend its national interest and contribute to the regional stability by upholding a rules-based and multilateral international order. As underlined in the ‘2021 Strategic Review’, France, as a European nuclear power with global interests, cannot define its interests solely in terms of geographical proximity to the homeland. It must imperatively maintain a geostrategic reach in line with current developments and its ambitions, which are, first and foremost, to protect its citizens and territories but also to preserve its influence and freedom of action.

### **France’s Overseas Territories: Cornerstone and Guarantee of Commitment to the Indo-Pacific**

Considering this, France’s overseas territories play a key role in securing access to vital areas and routes that could otherwise come under

<sup>1</sup> French Defence Minister, Florence Parly’s speech at the Shangri La Dialogue, 1 June 2019, <https://in.ambafrance.org/French-Defence-Minister-Florence-Parly-s-speech-at-the-Shangri-La-Dialogue>.

threat, such as maritime straits. They provide safe platforms for power projection in the whole region, including in areas where France's allies and partners do not possess either capabilities or facilities. Therefore, France's overseas territories are assets for both itself as well as its allies and partners. The French Armed Forces are permanently stationed in three military bases located in La Réunion, New Caledonia and French Polynesia. Beyond the defence of French sovereign territories, the armed forces operate in regional environments where they commit troops in case of a crisis (humanitarian assistance/disaster response), provide safety guarantees to France's partners and maintain a defence cooperation based on reciprocal interests. The French Armed Forces in the Southern Zone of the Indian Ocean uphold the sanctity and safety of its sovereign territories and the Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) against piracy, illegal maritime activities or illegal immigration through surveillance, reconnaissance and active deterrence. In the South Pacific, the French Armed Forces in New-Caledonia (FANC) and French Polynesia also perform similar duties, even extending it to Melanesia and Polynesia. The FANC also fulfil regional missions, in close cooperation with Australia and New Zealand, and for the benefit of the Pacific Island countries. The French Armed Forces in the Pacific closely monitor the evolving regional strategic situation and changes in the defence environment. This analytical capacity fosters cooperation with its partners from the Pacific Quadrilateral Defence Coordination Group, or Pacific Quad, which includes Australia, New Zealand and the United States (US).

These sovereign forces also play a major part in regional security cooperation, as they participate in a large number of joint operations and trainings, especially with France's main Indo-Pacific partners like India, Australia, Japan and the US. The French permanent capabilities and facilities, as well as the unique expertise of its forces in both the Indian and Pacific Oceans, ensure the credibility of France's presence and sustainable contribution to security.

*The French Armed Forces in the Pacific closely monitor the evolving regional strategic situation and changes in the defence environment.*

## Contributing to Strategic Stability through a Multilateral Framework

As a stabilising power dedicated to peace and security, France promotes effective multilateralism that respects human rights, fundamental freedom and democratic principles. To ensure that their national interests prevail, or to modify the power hierarchy to their advantage, states are increasingly abandoning multilateralism with either bilateralism or balance of power strategies.

France, a permanent member of the UNSC, intends to use its operational expertise to contribute to reducing regional tensions, in coordination with its partners. Already active in multilateral organisations in the Indo-Pacific, such as the South Pacific Defence Ministers' Meeting, France seeks greater cooperation with other regional security forums such as the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus.

France specifically intends to fight against ballistic, nuclear, chemical and biological proliferation networks from its military platforms in the overseas territories and with its presence forces. The French Armed Forces uphold the current cooperation with their allies and partners in structures such as the G7, the Nuclear Supplier Group and the Proliferation Security Initiative, among others. The French Armed Forces will also occasionally deploy assets to support our allies' efforts, for instance, to implement the resolutions of the UNSC against North Korea.

*France's action in favour of freedom of navigation is framed by its commitment to safeguard a rules-based order.*

France will maintain its efforts to ensure the full integrity of the commons and to counter any destabilisation attempt. It will continue to support its allies and partners in such endeavours. In the areas where it has or shares jurisdiction, France will fight, together with its partners, against any disrupting initiatives coming from state or non-state actors aimed at undermining international law. France's action in favour of freedom of navigation is framed by its commitment to safeguard a rules-based order.

This objective implies an active contribution to the security of these common areas. France's operational involvement includes regular deployments from its overseas bases and increasingly from the metropolitan territory. This year, it deployed the nuclear attack submarine *Emeraude* and support ship *La Seine* across the Indian Ocean, the Pacific Ocean and the South China Sea. This mission called 'Marianne' testifies to the capabilities of the French navy to deploy strategic assets on all the seas of the globe, in cooperation with its main partners: Japan, Australia and the US. This mission is part of a larger framework of operational activities, such as the *Skyros* mission (February 2021) conducted by the Air and Space Force or the regular deployments of French navy ships in the Indo-Pacific. For instance, the amphibious task group *Jeanne d'Arc* participated in *Exercice La Pérouse*, which took place from 5 to 7 April 2020 in the Bay of Bengal, during which it led the maritime and air-sea units of Australia, the US, India and Japan, in an innovative 'Quad+1' format. It has also recently participated in *Exercice ARC 2021*, in cooperation with the Japanese, American and, for the first time, Australian armed forces.<sup>2</sup>

As a founding member of the EU and the sole EU member state that maintains a permanent military presence in the Indo-Pacific, France bears a special responsibility towards its partners. It will strive to ensure that international straits and gateways remain free and open and will oppose any changes or initiatives that could disrupt the sea lines of communication and induce vulnerability for the European countries. France will also encourage its European partners to contribute to that effort. The German and the Dutch 'Strategic Guidelines for the Indo-Pacific' are based on the same principles of multilateralism and respect for international law as that of France. All three strategies pursue a common goal, which is to preserve a rules-based multilateral international order in which French, German, Dutch and European interests are protected. The EU itself has the potential to embody

*All three strategies pursue a common goal, which is to preserve a rules-based multilateral international order in which French, German, Dutch and European interests are protected.*

<sup>2</sup> Exercise ARC21 brought together nine vessels from the National Navy, Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force, Royal Australian Navy and the US navy. These were the *PHA Tonnerre*, the *FLF Surcouf*, the amphibious vessel *Oosumi*, the aircraft carrier *Ise*, the frigates *Ashigara*, *Asahi* and *Kongo*, the amphibious vessel *USS New Orleans* and the Australian frigate *Parramatta*. For two days, the crews trained in different areas of warfare: anti-aircraft, anti-surface and anti-submarine.

an alternative option in the security realm, pending its capacity to articulate a coherent and distinct Indo-Pacific strategy.

## Conclusion

French control over the immediate environment of its overseas territories and the monitoring of its sovereign spaces require the deployment of means and expertise, which are specifically military. These efforts are complementary to those of other public administrations, which aim at monitoring and protecting French national territory. This endeavour complements the constant surveillance and protection of France's borders and the EEZ through which these more and more sophisticated activities take place.

*The regularity of such actions, in addition to illegal activities, may contribute to the erosion of the state's authority.*

Such missions may require the deployment of high-end capabilities, to address threats such as maritime terrorism or to counter the incursion attempts and recurrent transgression of France's territorial waters. In a context of changing regional balances, grey zone activities pursued by non-military or paramilitary actors become means of pressure and of contestation against France's sovereign prerogatives. The regularity of such actions, in addition to illegal activities, may contribute to the erosion of the state's authority. The French Armed Forces must, therefore, remain capable of signalling their willingness and resolve, supported by political will, to protect France's sovereign territories and areas against grey-zone operations or any act of coercion.

France will be able to carry out these missions and guarantee the integrity of its prerogatives only if it maintains a level of ground forces as well as a credible air-sea capability in these areas, in accordance with the orientations of the 2019 'France's Defence Strategy in the Indo-Pacific'.

# European Resident Military Powers in the Indo-Pacific: A Regional Perspective

*Michito Tsuruoka*

## Summary

*The United Kingdom (UK) and France, as resident military powers in the Indo-Pacific, have stepped up their engagement in the region. In the context of the global shift of power from the West to the East, their moves have been driven by both the ‘China factor’ – increasing concerns about China’s assertiveness – and the ‘United States (US) factor’ – desire to remain aligned with their most important ally. There are still many countries in the region that are sceptical of the merits of European engagement. Yet, regional states could use Europe to maintain their autonomy in view of US-China competition. European (the UK and France’s) military engagement in the Indo-Pacific region has the potential to enhance deterrence against China’s assertiveness, complicating Beijing’s strategic calculation and enhancing ‘plug-in’ capability to the US-led alliance activities. However, neither the US nor Japan has a clear idea on how they could fully make use of European engagement. There needs to be a new venue or mechanism to address those issues among the Asians, Europeans and Americans.*

An increasing number of European countries as well as the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization are expanding their engagement in the Indo-Pacific region. The UK and France stand out as the two countries that are most committed to the region. For France, it is, first and foremost, about defending its territories and citizens in the region as well as its vast Exclusive Economic Zone in the South Pacific. The UK is renewing its engagement here under the banner of ‘Global Britain’, not just by promoting trade and investment but also by expanding its strategic partnerships across the region.

*The UK and France stand out as the two countries that are most committed to the region.*

This paper will address how these latest developments are being perceived by the countries in the region, mainly Southeast Asia and Japan, and what sort of opportunities and benefits can be found, particularly in the security and defence domains.

## The UK and France as Indo-Pacific Powers

Neither the UK nor France is a newcomer to Asia. Both have a long – for better or worse – history of engagement in the region. While France has always been a resident power, the UK is returning to the region. The overall context within which the two European powers are enhancing their respective engagements has to do with the deepening connectivity between Europe and Asia. What happens in Asia affects Europe, a trend that is set to increase not only in trade and economic terms but also in political and security terms. In a broader context, it is also a result of the global shift of power from the West to the East, which forces Europe to adjust to the new reality.

*One of the purposes of the British and French naval deployments is to send a strategic message to Beijing that its assertiveness and challenges to global norms and the rules-based international order will not go uncontested.*

There are two additional factors driving London's and Paris' moves to enhance their presence in Asia or the wider Indo-Pacific region. The first is the 'China factor'. The European countries used to be extremely cautious about provoking China and not being drawn into tensions in the region – be it Sino-Japanese or Sino-American relations. Yet, they have become more vocal in expressing concerns about China, including its assertive behaviour in the South and East China Seas. Since the mid-2010s, Europe's perceptions of China have deteriorated sharply. One of the purposes of the British and French naval deployments is to send a strategic message to Beijing that its assertiveness and challenges to global norms and the rules-based international order will not go uncontested. While Tokyo warmly welcomes these moves in view of the challenges from Beijing, many countries in the region do not want to take sides in the US-China geopolitical contest. They are sceptical of extra-regional involvement and remain to be convinced of the virtue of European engagement.

Second, the 'US factor' is also at work. As Washington has shifted its strategic focus to Asia and the Indo-Pacific region, US allies also need to adjust their posture, at least to a certain extent. While Paris might still emphasise 'strategic autonomy' in its engagement in the Indo-Pacific, London's approach looks more straightforward, evidenced by the fact that the UK's carrier strike group deployment to the Indo-Pacific in 2021 is a truly UK-US joint venture. This is undoubtedly

positive news for US allies in the region like Japan and Australia. However, European support for American interests in the Indo-Pacific is not wholeheartedly welcomed by states who wish to avoid being “caught up in great power competition between the US and China.”<sup>1</sup>

Yet, involving additional powers in the management of the fallout of Sino-American tensions could still serve the interest of the Southeast Asian countries as well. European engagement in the region, as Singapore-based expert Kanti Bajpai suggests, “fits ASEAN’s strategy of having all the big powers be players, so they all offset each other to an extent.”<sup>2</sup> This can be seen as an Association of Southeast Asian Nations’ (ASEAN) way of “using” external powers in its bid to maintain strategic autonomy. Expectations for Europe seem to be high in Southeast Asia, evidenced by the *State of Southeast Asia* report by the ASEAN Studies Centre at ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute. When asked about ‘third parties’ to hedge against the uncertainties of the US-China strategic rivalry, the EU comes to the top at 40.8 per cent (plus the UK at 2.6 per cent) among the respondents in the ASEAN countries.<sup>3</sup> Evidently, Southeast Asians, while being wary of big powers’ impact on the region, still see some value in getting external powers involved in the region for their own interest.

*Evidently, Southeast Asians, while being wary of big powers’ impact on the region, still see some value in getting external powers involved in the region for their own interest.*

## **New Faces of Military Engagement by the UK and France**

The UK and France have, in recent years, strengthened their respective military activities in the Indo-Pacific region. There are two remarkable features of their presence in the Indo-Pacific.

First, they are stepping up their engagement both in qualitative and quantitative terms. The frequency of naval deployments and the number of ships to be sent have increased. Also, the deployments and

1 Noto Suoneto and Frederik Wrist, “The Prospects for ‘Global Britain’ in Southeast Asia”, *The Diplomat*, 20 April 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/04/the-prospects-for-global-britain-in-southeast-asia/>.

2 Katerina Ang, “Europe pivots to Indo-Pacific with ‘multipolar’ ambitions”, *Nikkei Asia*, 2 February 2021, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Asia-Insight/Europe-pivots-to-Indo-Pacific-with-multipolar-ambitions>.

3 *The State of Southeast Asia: 2021 Survey Report* (Singapore: ASEAN Studies Centre at ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, February 2021), p. 34.

their activities, including joint training and the exercises they conduct with the countries in the region, have become more substantial and serious.<sup>4</sup> London's flagship carrier strike group deployment in 2021 (CSG21), headed by HMS Queen Elizabeth, is a case in point. It is a group of nine surface vessels, a submarine and 18 F-35B stealth fighter jets, representing the largest and the most powerful European naval deployment to the region since the Second World War.<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, Paris has also stepped up its naval deployments to the Indo-Pacific, including the nuclear-powered attack submarine FS Émeraude. In a rather unusual move, the country's Armed Forces Minister Florence Parly revealed that the submarine sailed through the South China Sea.<sup>6</sup> The French navy sent Mission Jeanne d'Arc 2021 to the region and conducted a joint amphibious training with the Japanese and American forces in Japan as well as other training and exercises with other like-minded countries, including Australia and Singapore.

*Proving and enhancing the interoperability involving stealth fighter jets and an aircraft carrier in the region will be the prime goal of the deployment.*

Second, the level of US-UK and US-France operational cooperation has deepened in the Indo-Pacific, or more specifically, in the Western Pacific region. The UK's carrier strike group may be a symbol of 'Global Britain' in political and foreign policy terms, but the UK-US "jointness" is its most significant feature in military terms. Proving and enhancing the interoperability involving stealth fighter jets and an aircraft carrier in the region will be the prime goal of the deployment. On the flight deck of HMS Queen Elizabeth, there are more US fighters (10) than those from the UK (eight). The US navy has also worked together with the French navy, exemplified by US assistance to the submarine deployment and Jeanne d'Arc mission.

4 Michito Tsuruoka, "Making Sense of Europe's Military Engagement in Asia", *The Diplomat*, 23 March 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/03/making-sense-of-europes-military-engagement-in-asia/>.

5 Ministry of Defence (UK), "Record size and scope of Carrier Strike Group deployment announced", *News story*, Gov.uk, 26 April 2021, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/record-size-and-scope-of-carrier-strike-group-deployment-announced>.

6 See her tweet on 9 February 2021, [https://twitter.com/florence\\_parly/status/1358834851072380931](https://twitter.com/florence_parly/status/1358834851072380931).

## How the Indo-Pacific Region could use European Engagement

From the regional perspective, while the Europeans will not change the military balance of power vis-à-vis China, they could still make some difference in the Indo-Pacific region in two major ways. First, persistent if not permanent European presence in the region will make Beijing's strategic calculations more complicated because China will have to take into account other countries' military assets that could be in the region at any given moment. Both the UK and France face resource constraints, and whether they could continue the current level of frequent deployment to the Indo-Pacific region remains to be seen.<sup>7</sup> Yet, the European presence seems to be already part of the strategic landscape of the Indo-Pacific region.

Second, Europe's capability to 'plug-in' to US activities in the region, particularly those in the context of the Japan-US alliance and Japan-US-Australia cooperation, is remarkable and could still be improved. The joint amphibious training held in Japan among the Japanese, American and French forces in May 2021 demonstrated France's sophisticated capability to work with the US forces in the region – France was 'plugged in' to the US-Japan alliance. Australia has also been participating in several bilateral, trilateral and other minilateral training and exercises involving European militaries in the Indo-Pacific region. The French-led La Perouse exercise in April 2021 in the Bay of Bengal, involving France and the Quad countries – Australia, India, Japan and the US – was also seen as a good example of France's working with the US and its allies in the Indo-Pacific region.<sup>8</sup>

In this regard, there are two remaining hurdles. First, what military role the US expects Europe to play in Asia is unclear. While the US has

*Both the UK and France face resource constraints, and whether they could continue the current level of frequent deployment to the Indo-Pacific region remains to be seen.*

7 Ian Storey, "Can the UK Achieve Its Naval Ambitions in the Indo-Pacific?", *The Diplomat*, 7 November 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/11/can-the-uk-achieve-its-naval-ambitions-in-the-indo-pacific/>; Ben Barry, "Posturing and presence: the United Kingdom and France in the Indo-Pacific", *Military Balance Blog*, IISS, 11 June 2021, <https://www.iiss.org/blogs/military-balance/2021/06/france-uk-indo-pacific>.

8 "French Navy Exercise Combines Ships from 5 Navies on Short Notice", *USNI News*, 12 April 2021, <https://news.usni.org/2021/04/12/french-navy-exercise-combines-ships-from-5-navies-on-short-notice>.

*Washington needs to deliver a clear message as to what it expects Europe to do in Asia in military terms.*

strengthened cooperation with the visiting British and French vessels, there remains scepticism in some quarters about Europe's possible military role in Asia. "Better to have Europe play to its strengths in the Euro-Atlantic area rather than to vainly try to project meaningful military power to the Asia-Pacific", argues Elbridge Colby.<sup>9</sup> Given US President Joe Biden administration's wish to always work with allies and partners, the US is likely to expect more from Europe, including in the military domain in Asia. Washington needs to deliver a clear message as to what it expects Europe to do in Asia in military terms.

Second, Tokyo needs to formulate a clear strategy regarding its security and defence cooperation with Europe. Tokyo does not currently seem to have such a strategy. The short-, medium- and long-term goals Tokyo wants to achieve and the assets and resources it would be prepared and willing to allocate to cooperation with Europe remain unclear. Tokyo, as a result, tends to be reactive – more or less responding to what the UK or France proposes – rather than putting forward its own initiatives.<sup>10</sup> The Japan-US-France joint exercise in May 2021 was no exception.<sup>11</sup> While casual talks about 'countering China' were heard everywhere in the context of the joint training, serious discussions about how this could fit into the deterrence and defence posture of Japan, the Japan-US alliance and the region as a whole were lacking, or still at a very nascent stage.

Given that the UK and France are likely to increase or at least maintain their military engagement in the Indo-Pacific region in the coming years, there needs to be a new venue or mechanism to examine ideas about Europe's role in the region and how the rules-based international order in the Indo-Pacific region could be maintained and strengthened among the Asians, Americans and Europeans.

9 Elbridge Colby and Ian Brzezinski, "How NATO Manages the 'Bear' and the 'Dragon'", *Orbis*, Vol. 65, No. 1 (2021).

10 Tsuruoka, "Making Sense of Europe's Military Engagement in Asia", op. cit.

11 "As Europe's interest in the Indo-Pacific grows, is Japan ready to lead the way?", *Japan Times*, 18 May 2021, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2021/05/18/national/japan-europe-indo-pacific-leadership/>.

## PART 2: CONTINENTAL EUROPE AND THE INDO-PACIFIC

### The Netherlands and the European Union Turn to the Indo-Pacific: Towards Meaningful Action

*Maaïke Okano-Heijmans*

#### Summary

*In November 2020, the Netherlands became the third European Union (EU) member state to release an Indo-Pacific strategy, aiming to push forward a significant policy shift in Europe towards the Indo-Pacific. As competition intensifies over hard power projection, as well as influence over digital connectivity and leadership in standard-setting in new technologies and digital governance, the EU and its member states are increasingly adopting a foreign policy posture to reflect this emerging reality. With a focus on multilateral cooperation with like-minded partners, European actors hope to increase their involvement in ocean governance, traditional as well as digital connectivity projects, forge stronger economic ties, and safeguard liberal and democratic values in the Indo-Pacific.*

*As competition intensifies over hard power projection, as well as influence over digital connectivity and leadership in standard-setting in new technologies and digital governance, the EU and its member states are increasingly adopting a foreign policy posture to reflect this emerging reality.*

#### Introduction

In November 2020, the government of the Netherlands took a decisive step towards a more active Dutch and EU posture in the Indo-Pacific to defend and promote Dutch economic and political interests. The policy note ‘Indo-Pacific: Guidelines for Strengthening Dutch and EU cooperation with partners in Asia’<sup>1</sup> called for the Netherlands and the EU to step up their efforts in the Indo-Pacific and to develop a

<sup>1</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Indo-Pacific: Guidelines for Strengthening Dutch and EU Cooperation with Partners in Asia”, Government of Netherlands, 13 November 2020, <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/publicaties/2020/11/13/indo-pacific-eeen-leidraad-voor-versterking-van-de-nederlandse-en-eu-samenwerking-met-partners-in-azie>.

distinctive Dutch and EU vision of the region. It was the third such document released by an EU member state and, as such, an important building block towards the EU strategy that was announced six months later.

*The policy note was positively welcomed by officials and experts abroad.*

The policy note was positively welcomed by officials and experts abroad. In the Netherlands, however, it has thus far generated little debate beyond insiders in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Defence – a telling indication of the vast challenges that lie ahead for the Netherlands (and the EU and member states more generally) to really act on their stated intentions.

While most attention goes out to European action in the maritime domain, ultimately, the EU and its member states could offer more in the hotly contested high-tech and digital domains. They can contribute to an open, safe and inclusive digital connectivity and engage with the thriving digital economies in the Indo-Pacific.

### **European Interests in the Indo-Pacific**

As reflected in the Dutch Indo-Pacific Guidelines, increased engagement with the Indo-Pacific, the world's primary growth region, is needed to adequately promote European interests.

For the Netherlands, the region “extends from Pakistan to the islands of the Pacific”, while the shipping routes through the Indian and Pacific Oceans are considered central to the concept. This is narrower in scope compared to some others, including Japan and the EU, which also include the east coast of Africa in their geographical demarcation of the region.

The Indo-Pacific is vital for economic growth of the EU and its member states, as it is home to three out of the four largest economies outside the EU (China, Japan and India) and by 2030, 90 per cent of 2.4 billion

new middle income class members will come from the Asia Pacific region.<sup>2</sup>

Stability in the region is closely tied to stability within the EU. The stable and secure supply of critical goods depends on open maritime and trade routes. The strategic competition between the US and China that initially focused on tensions in the South China Sea has contributed to rising antagonism and a larger great power military presence, as well as intensifying economic and technological rivalry that is further heightening tensions in the region.

*The stable and secure supply of critical goods depends on open maritime and trade routes.*

In addition, cooperation with countries in the region is critical to tackling global challenges, such as climate, pandemics and poverty reduction. This also goes for a properly functioning international legal order.

Last but not least, the Indo-Pacific is a key region where standards are being set today – technological and market standards that shape the competitiveness of European companies as well as governance norms, where democracies increasingly compete with digitally empowered authoritarian states. For example, the secure and ethical use of smart city applications and data by authorities must be ensured, lest they contribute to far-going digital surveillance by states.

Thus, as per the Dutch Indo-Pacific Guidelines: “In a world where democracy, the rule of law, human rights, freedom, free trade and a properly functioning multilateral world order are increasingly under pressure, the Netherlands and the EU must join forces with like-minded countries in the Indo-Pacific region and with ASEAN [Association of Southeast Asian Nations].”<sup>3</sup>

2 Praneeth Yendamuri and Zara Ingilizian, “In 2020 Asia will have the world’s largest GDP. Here’s what that means”, World Economic Forum Annual Meeting, 20 December 2019, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2019/12/asia-economic-growth/>.

3 “Indo-Pacific: Guidelines for strengthening Dutch and EU cooperation with partners in Asia”, The Government of the Netherlands, 13 November 2020, <https://www.government.nl/documents/publications/2020/11/13/indo-pacific-guidelines>.

*The Netherlands' Indo-Pacific paper followed earlier official statements by the French and German governments.*

## Towards an EU Strategy

The Netherlands' Indo-Pacific paper followed earlier official statements by the French<sup>4</sup> and German<sup>5</sup> governments. In October 2020, these three countries pushed the debate in Brussels for an EU strategy by putting forward a confidential non-paper calling for EU engagement with the Indo-Pacific. In January 2021, Japanese Foreign Minister Toshimitsu Motegi addressed the EU's Foreign Affairs Council on the topic. An 'EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific' was subsequently announced in the 'EU Council Conclusions'<sup>6</sup> of April 2021, with a comprehensive 'Joint Communication of the EU High Representative and the European Commission' expected to follow in September 2021.

Thus, with unprecedented speed by EU standards, it is about to join the ranks of a growing list of countries that have adopted dedicated Indo-Pacific approaches in recent years.<sup>7</sup>

## Avoiding One Dominant Power in the Region

European engagement with the Indo-Pacific should be considered in its proper context. It may be thought of as the other side of the coin of the Europe's reorientation in a world in which China's political, economic and military influence has grown rapidly and is transforming the Indo-Pacific region as well as the global system.

Several years ago, the Netherlands was an EU frontrunner in reconsidering its China strategy. It was the first EU member state to put out a China

4 Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs, "France's Partnerships in the Indo-Pacific", Government of France, April 2021, [https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/en\\_a4\\_indopacifique\\_16p\\_2021\\_v4\\_cle4b8b46.pdf](https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/en_a4_indopacifique_16p_2021_v4_cle4b8b46.pdf).

5 Federal Foreign Office, "Germany – Europe – Asia: Shaping the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Together", Government of Germany, 1 September 2020, <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/blob/2380514/f9784f7e3b3fa1bd7c5446d274a4169e/200901-indo-pazifik-leitlinien--1--data.pdf>.

6 European External Action Service, "EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific", European Union, 19 September 2021, [https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/96740/eu-strategy-cooperation-indo-pacific\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/96740/eu-strategy-cooperation-indo-pacific_en).

7 Brigitte Dekker, Karthik Nachiappan and Maaïke Okano-Heijmans, "Fostering digital connectivity in and with the Indo-Pacific region: Opportunities for the EU", Scoping paper for the European External Action Service (European Commission), April 2021, p.9. [https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2021-04/Report\\_Digital\\_Connectivity\\_IndoPacific\\_April\\_2021.pdf](https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2021-04/Report_Digital_Connectivity_IndoPacific_April_2021.pdf).

policy note in May 2019, shortly after the publication of the ‘EU-China Strategic Outlook’.

If these documents set the contours of Europe’s policy of “dealing with China” directly, the Indo-Pacific guidelines may be considered a push for more comprehensive and assertive indirect China policy that seeks to balance and restrain – but not to constrain – China’s growing role and influence in the region as well as on the multilateral stage. After all, a concert of powers in the Indo-Pacific is also in Europe’s interests, as the EU’s economic growth, political and military stability is closely intertwined with that of the region.

The turning points for European engagement with the Indo-Pacific came in 2019 and 2020, when the concept was mentioned for the first time in an official EU document: ‘The EU-Japan Connectivity Partnership’. For the Netherlands specifically, the adoption by ASEAN of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific was instrumental, as it showed the possibility of engaging with the Indo-Pacific without a politicised or confrontational approach.

As such, what is really significant today is that the Netherlands and the EU are willing to accept the Indo-Pacific as a political construct. They were hesitant to do so earlier, when only France – with its particular set of assets, interests and capabilities in the region – started to engage with the concept and when the Japan-initiated Free and Open Indo-Pacific vision became more confrontational towards China as the United States (US) under President Donald Trump got on board with the concept.

While the Dutch and European approaches to engagement with the region are not conflicting, they are not value neutral. Both documents call for effective (rules-based) multilateralism and are generally inclusive in tone. But the specific approaches and actions mentioned show clear preferences. The Dutch Indo-Pacific Guidelines call for closer cooperation with like-minded democracies and countries with open market economies, stating that “partnerships will take different forms in different countries depending on the extent of

*Both documents call for effective (rules-based) multilateralism and are generally inclusive in tone.*

shared interests and the degree of like-mindedness.”<sup>8</sup> The Council’s conclusions state that this “renewed commitment to the region is inclusive of all partners wishing to cooperate with the EU”, and that the EU is to “build its cooperation according to specific policy areas where partners can find common ground based on shared principles, values or mutual interest.” Furthermore, the EU will deepen its engagement on the Indo-Pacific, in particular with those partners that have already announced Indo-Pacific approaches of their own of which China is obviously not one.

*All in all, the documents evidence a new phase in geopolitical thinking on the part of the EU and member states.*

All in all, the documents evidence a new phase in geopolitical thinking on the part of the EU and member states. The Netherlands and EU seek to protect their interests and strengthen their strategic position as balancing powers, while avoiding being forced into a binary choice between the great powers. Additionally, they are intent on assisting others to also maintain their ability to act autonomously. In doing so, they wish to present an alternative to what China and the US are offering, especially as divergences arise with the latter on digital governance and economic policies. However, Europe must ensure that it remains clear that there is no equidistance from the US and China, as the shared beliefs and strong political, economic and cultural links to the US run closer and deeper.

## What is New?

As with the Dutch-China policy note, the Indo-Pacific guidelines serve a key purpose of furthering debate – in the Netherlands, the EU and beyond – on the need for a new policy direction. The guidelines are innovative in tone as well as in action that is proposed. This is particularly evident in the following three points.

Firstly, there is clear and occasionally strong wording. For example, “The EU must also not be afraid of realpolitik. It should actively pursue its strategic interests, an endeavour in which power politics and principles can go hand in hand.”<sup>9</sup> This signals a fundamental shift

<sup>8</sup> “Indo-Pacific: Guidelines for strengthening Dutch and EU cooperation with partners in Asia”, op. cit.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

in Dutch thinking and action that will appeal to the countries in the region that have been confronted with a more assertive China for much longer.

Secondly, there is a call for greater engagement with the region, and for EU countries to speak out “more often and more forcefully” about international law (and breaches of international law), including with respect to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea and the South China Sea, either through the EU or as part of a smaller coalition, including Germany, France and preferably a number of other like-minded countries. In other words, there should be a more outspoken response to destabilising Chinese actions in the region, including incursions into the Exclusive Economic Zones of countries.

Thirdly, the EU and its member states have adopted a more active posture in regard to security concerns in Asia. This follows from the acknowledgement that “it is also in the interests of Europe, including the Netherlands, to work with the countries of the Indo-Pacific region in order to safeguard *peace and security*, reduce tensions on trade issues, promote maritime security and unhindered safe passage on shipping routes, and combat economic and cyber espionage and cyberattacks on vital infrastructure.”<sup>10</sup> Countries in the region, including India and Japan, have been calling for greater military presence of European countries, and the Netherlands is now seriously considering the possibilities for this.

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## Next Steps

Naval presence in the Indo-Pacific of the Netherlands and other European militaries or of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization remains contested. For one, the Dutch government decided to send the frigate HNLMS Evertsen to accompany a United Kingdom Carrier Strike Group on its mission to Japan – which departed in May 2021. This shows that the Netherlands’ Ministry of Defense is now also on board with Indo-Pacific engagement after initial hesitation. The decision to

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

contribute to “naval signalling” is based on the sober assessment that Europe will have to deliver where the demand is the greatest if its engagement with the Indo-Pacific is to be taken seriously.

*Expanding on the policies outlined in the EU-Asia Connectivity Strategy would greatly improve Europe’s presence in the region.*

While it is important that the EU promotes maritime security and unhindered safe passage on shipping routes, European actors have an interest in thinking beyond the maritime and traditional security realm as they consider actionable steps. The Netherlands and the EU can also do more to contribute to connectivity projects and infrastructure development in the Indo-Pacific to encourage sustainable development in the region. Expanding on the policies outlined in the ‘EU-Asia Connectivity Strategy’ would greatly improve Europe’s presence in the region. European actors also have plenty to offer in other highly contested domains – that is, on digital and high-technology. Even if globally operating European Big Tech companies are still relatively few, Europe’s influence in the digital sphere is significant. The extraterritorial effects of the General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR) have been surprisingly significant: many countries look at the GDPR as they devise data protection regulations domestically. The EU is now trying to repeat this success in the field of artificial intelligence regulation.

Digital connectivity is important, as China currently dominates the digital economy in the Indo-Pacific, which is expected to grow threefold in the coming five years. While this brings economic benefits to consumers, it also means that democratic norms, the rule of law, human rights, freedom, free trade and a well-functioning multilateral world order are under pressure. China has been active in exporting its brand of “digital authoritarianism” through programmes like the Digital Silk Road, and Western democracies should not overlook this crucial area of competition.

Therefore, as the EU embarks on its own distinctive strategic outlook to the Indo-Pacific region, it should look to contribute to open, safe and inclusive digital connectivity and engage with the region’s thriving digital economies to ensure democratic standards are upheld.

Considering the economic capacity and influence of Europe and the Dutch expertise in the cyber domain, action in the digital domain more broadly seems natural. The Dutch Indo-Pacific Guidelines call for the strengthening of cooperation and dialogue in the field of cyber (security) and digital connectivity, including digital development assistance. However, much more can and needs to be done in this field, for example, as concerns regulation of data in the platform economy. In the long term, a common digital market – to promote shared norms and standards – should be feasible because the technology conflict between the US and China is a shared concern, and the fast-growing digital economy a shared opportunity.

In addition to discussions with international partners, the Dutch's Indo-Pacific guidelines and the EU strategy must also promote discussions in various parliaments, and also with the public about the politically sensitive strategic choices that are required as the EU and its member states move from written intentions to meaningful action in the Indo-Pacific.

*However much more can and needs to be done in this field, for example, as concerns regulation of data in the platform economy.*

# Germany's Indo-Pacific Guidelines

Christian Wagner

## Summary

*The main message of Germany's Indo-Pacific Guidelines of September 2020 is that it is willing to change its position from a mere observer to an active player in the region. The guidelines spell out Germany's geopolitical and geo-economic interests, signalling a partial departure from its traditional foreign policy. First, the guidelines link Germany and Europe's prosperity with economic developments in the Indo-Pacific. Second, Germany wants to prevent bipolarity from emerging in the Indo-Pacific and to promote rules-based multilateral frameworks. Third, Germany is also willing to contribute to peace and security in the region. Germany will diversify its relations with the Asian countries both geographically and policy-wise. The guidelines have been criticised as being a collection of already existing projects rather than a strategy with a clear priority and agenda. However, the transformation into a proper strategy will meet different challenges. First, Germany needs to find new approaches to intensify minilateral collaboration with like-minded middle powers in the region. Second, the presence of the German navy will remain a symbolic measure because of Germany's other commitments and limited capacities. Finally, Berlin would need to increase its visibility in other areas to establish itself as a serious player in the Indo-Pacific.*

## Introduction

*Traditionally, Germany's foreign policy rested on the two pillars of transatlantic relations and European integration.*

The Indo-Pacific guidelines that the German government presented in September 2020 signal an interesting geopolitical and geo-economic shift in its foreign policy. Traditionally, Germany's foreign policy rested on the two pillars of transatlantic relations and European integration. As one of the leading export economies, the Asia-Pacific region has always been an important area for trade and investment. However, German governments have always been reluctant to formulate their larger geopolitical and geo-economic interests in this region.

The new Indo-Pacific guidelines reflect both the changing international constellations and debates in Europe and Germany. China's rise and the investments under its Belt and Road Initiative have been viewed in Europe in both positive and negative ways. The takeover of high-technology companies by Chinese firms, Chinese investments in critical infrastructure and the setting up of the '16 Plus One Format'<sup>1</sup> triggered a controversial debate in the European Union (EU) on its future relationship with China. Germany's new position towards China was expressed by the EU in 2019 when China was labelled as a cooperation and negotiating partner, an economic competitor and a systemic rival.<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, the EU's global strategy of 2016 and the aspirations of its new commission under Ursula van der Leyen to learn "the language of power" in 2019 underlined the EU's new geopolitical ambitions in the context of the emerging rivalry between China and the United States (US).

Berlin was especially affected by this debate because of its strong commitment towards the EU, its close political and economic relations with the US, and its economic ties with China, Germany's biggest bilateral trading partner. However, the rethinking on China was not only restricted to the political domain. In 2019, a report of the Federation of German Industries highlighted the growing concerns that German companies were facing in China. These developments indicate the growing awareness in Germany that China is not only an economic but also a political challenge.

*These developments indicate the growing awareness in Germany that China is not only an economic but also a political challenge.*

1 Since 2012, China has engaged 16 central and eastern European countries, including 11 EU member states and five Western Balkan countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Macedonia, Montenegro, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia and Slovenia) under the 16+1 cooperation format. In 2019, it became 17+1, with Greece joining the group. See, "China, the 16+1 format and the EU", European Parliament Briefing, [http://www.iberchina.org/files/2018-2/161\\_china\\_eu\\_parl.pdf](http://www.iberchina.org/files/2018-2/161_china_eu_parl.pdf).

2 European Commission, High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, *EU-China – A Strategic Outlook*, Strasbourg, 12 March 2019, <https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/communication-eu-china-a-strategic-outlook.pdf>.

## The Guidelines: Continuity and Change in Germany's Foreign Policy

The guidelines use a broad definition of the Indo-Pacific, which encompasses “the entire region characterised by the Indian Ocean and the Pacific.”<sup>3</sup> In the German understanding, the Indo-Pacific stretches from the East Coast of Africa to the West Coast of the Americas. The concept is ‘inclusive’ and not directed against any one country. Other countries in the region like India have a similar approach, whereas the US follows a more ‘exclusive’ Indo-Pacific strategy that is directed against China. The guiding principle of the document is to underline Germany’s aspiration to contribute to a rules-based order in the region.

The main new aspects are the recognition of geopolitics and geo-economics for Germany’s foreign policy. This is a remarkable change because relations with Asia were so far mostly looked at through the lens of economic relations, but less so in a strategic context. Germany has been a strong supporter of the concept of the Asia-Pacific, which represented the era of globalisation since the 1980s.

*The new geopolitical and geo-economic perspective forms the basis for the formulation of Germany’s interests.*

The new geopolitical and geo-economic perspective forms the basis for the formulation of Germany’s interests. This is also an interesting change because German foreign policy makers have long been reluctant to spell out specific national interests. Geopolitically, the main priorities are “peace and security”, “diversifying and deepening relations”, and “neither unipolar nor bipolar” structures. In the geo-economic field, “open shipping routes”, “open markets and free trade”, and “digital transformation and connectivity” are identified as main areas, followed by the two areas “protecting our planet” and “access to fact-based information”.<sup>4</sup>

3 The Federal Government, “Policy Guidelines for the Indo-Pacific, Germany – Europe – Asia. Shaping the 21st Century together”, Berlin 2020, p. 8. <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/aussenpolitik/regional-eschwerpunkte/asien/german-government-policy-guidelines-indo-pacific/2380510>.

4 Ibid., pp. 9-10.

In the geopolitical field, the German government recognises that the Indo-Pacific “is becoming the key to shaping the international order in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.”<sup>5</sup> The statement also underlines Germany’s strong commitment towards multilateralism and desires that the future order of the region should not be dominated by one or two major powers alone.<sup>6</sup> The need for a multilateral approach resonates with the emphasis to promote regional cooperation. Germany has traditionally been a strong supporter for regional cooperation in Asia to effectively address cross-border challenges like environmental protection, trade, arms control and the protection of human rights. The guidelines highlight the role of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) but also mention other regional organisations like the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), the Pacific Islands Forum and others.<sup>7</sup> Geo-economically, the guidelines link Germany’s prosperity with the Indo-Pacific. At present, around 20 per cent of Germany’s trade is with countries in the Indo-Pacific, with China being the largest trading partner.<sup>8</sup>

*Germany has traditionally been a strong supporter for regional cooperation in Asia to effectively address cross-border challenges like environmental protection, trade, arms control and the protection of human rights.*

As part of its new geopolitical and geo-economic commitments, the guidelines also emphasise Germany’s commitment to actively contribute to security and stability in the Indo-Pacific. This will be done by utilising traditional instruments like capacity building, military exchanges and participation in regional security dialogues. To underline its political will and to enhance its military presence, Berlin, in 2020, decided to send a frigate to the Indo-Pacific. However, this has been postponed to the second half of 2021. The shift is remarkable because, in 2010, German President Horst Koehler, a former director of the International Monetary Fund, stepped down after being criticised for having linked Germany’s economic interests with potential military engagements.

5 Ibid., p. 8.

6 Ibid., p. 9.

7 Ibid., p. 26.

8 Federal Foreign Office, “Europe needs a strategy for the Indo-Pacific”, 12 April 2021, <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/newsroom/news/maas-handelsblatt-indopacific/2453358>.

*The commitment for a larger German security engagement in the Indo-Pacific also has an important domestic dimension.*

A main direction of the guidelines' impact is to diversify Germany's relations with the Asian countries. The impression that Berlin's relations with Asia are dominated by China – to the detriment of other partners in the region – is a cause of constant criticism. The guidelines reflect these concerns when they highlight the need to avoid “overdependence on a single market, a source of essential goods or a single supplier.”<sup>9</sup> The economic diversification will be a challenge for German companies like Volkswagen (for which China is the largest market). China's dominance in political relations is reflected in the high number of meetings of the German chancellor and ministers with their Chinese counterparts, compared to other Asian countries. The commitment for a larger German security engagement in the Indo-Pacific also has an important domestic dimension. The guidelines have also been supported by Germany's Social Democrats who are traditionally more reluctant to get involved in military engagements abroad.<sup>10</sup>

### **Challenges: Adapting to a Complex Region**

The guidelines have been welcomed because they underline Germany's willingness for larger global engagement. But the document has also evoked a controversial debate. One of the main criticisms is that the guidelines are, to a large extent, a collection of existing and planned German activities in the region but not necessarily a strategy. This would require some form of prioritisation with appropriate financial and material capacities.

In the process of implementation, Germany will have to review and adapt some of its traditional foreign policy instruments and formats. So far, Germany's foreign policy is characterised by a strong multilateral approach as underlined by the Alliance for Multilateralism, which was launched in 2019. Many important aspects of Germany's foreign policy, for instance, trade, are dealt

<sup>9</sup> The Federal Government, “Policy guidelines for the Indo-Pacific”, Berlin 2020, p. 47.

<sup>10</sup> Hans Monath, Mit diesem Konzept will Maas die Außenpolitik radikal neu denken, *Der Tagesspiegel Online*, 2 September 2020, <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/politik/der-himalaya-plan-mit-diesem-konzept-will-maas-die-aussenpolitik-radikal-neu-denken/26151264.html>.

with by the EU. The joint statement of the Quad meeting in March 2021 put the emphasis on cooperation on areas like health, climate change, technology, connectivity and others.<sup>11</sup> The guidelines show that Germany is already well positioned in many of these areas.

The guidelines mirror this commitment for multilateralism by emphasising on regional cooperation with ASEAN, IORA, BIMSTEC and other institutions. However, except for ASEAN, Asia's open regionalism has remained relatively weak. Moreover, regionalism is suited to deal with cross-border issues from climate change to terrorism but has limits to cope with the challenges of emerging great power rivalries. Even a well-established regional organisation like ASEAN finds it difficult to formulate common positions on China and the Indo-Pacific.

*Even a well-established regional organisation like ASEAN finds it difficult to formulate common positions on China and the Indo-Pacific.*

However, if Germany wants to become a serious contributor to a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific, it has to broaden its traditional focus on multilateralism and regionalism to new formats of bilateral and minilateral cooperation with like-minded countries like Australia, India, Indonesia, Japan, Singapore, South Korea and others.

The future architecture in the Indo-Pacific will be characterised by different approaches, ranging from traditional military alliances like the hub and spokes system of the US with its allies, regional approaches like ASEAN to new forms of semi-formal groupings like the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) and issue-based minilateral formats among middle powers.

Hence, Germany would also require a stronger bilateral and minilateral approach which is already used by countries like France and the United Kingdom (UK) to become a major player in the region. This could include, for instance, more high-ranking political visits to the region and the expansion of intergovernmental consultations which Berlin holds with only two countries from the Indo-Pacific, that is, China and India.

<sup>11</sup> "Quad Leaders' Joint Statement: 'The Spirit of the Quad'", The White House, 12 March 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/03/12/quad-leaders-joint-statement-the-spirit-of-the-quad/>.

*There is also potential for Germany to work together with India and Japan to strengthen regional organisations like the IORA and BIMSTEC.*

Moreover, cooperation with like-minded partners in third countries will also be a useful instrument. India has already established new forms of cooperation and projects with the US and Japan in Afghanistan and Sri Lanka. India and Germany could identify joint projects for capacity building in Indian Ocean countries, for instance, to address the challenge of illegal fishing, for the protection of biodiversity or the promotion of the maritime environment. There is also potential for Germany to work together with India and Japan to strengthen regional organisations like the IORA and BIMSTEC.

Another challenge for Germany will be to become a more visible security actor in the region. A first step was undertaken with the new 'Two Plus Two' Dialogue between the foreign and defence ministers with Japan in April 2021.<sup>12</sup> However, Germany has a different foreign policy tradition compared to France and the UK. Due to its limited capacities and commitments in EU and United Nations (UN) missions, the German navy will not be able to have a military presence like other European powers.

The planned visit of the German frigate to the Indo-Pacific illustrates some of the inherent contradictions and challenges for which Berlin must prepare. On the one hand, the visit signals Germany's commitment to contribute to security in the region. The naval route and the planned activities would have also been a good opportunity for Germany to underline its commitments to main principles formulated in the guidelines like 'free and open sea routes' and 'respect for international law'. So far, the frigate will take part in the 'Atalanta' mission<sup>13</sup> will make port visits in India, Australia and Japan, and will participate in the UN sanction regime against North Korea.<sup>14</sup> However, on the other hand, the frigate will not have any interaction with naval deployments from the UK, France and the Netherlands. On

<sup>12</sup> "Japan, Germany's first '2 plus 2' dialogue shows extent of Tokyo's outreach amid China's rising assertiveness: analysts", *South China Morning Post*, 5 April 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3128366/japan-germanys-first-2-plus-2-dialogue-shows-extent-tokyos>.

<sup>13</sup> Atalanta is the first EU naval mission at the Horn of Africa. Its mandate includes anti-piracy operations and the protection of transports of the World Food Programme.

<sup>14</sup> Johannes Leithäuser, Germany sends frigates to East Asian waters, 2 March 2021, <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/inland/deutschland-entsendet-fregatte-in-indo-pazifik-raum-17224589.html>.

its way back, the frigate will visit Shanghai and will pass through the South China Sea respecting China's controversial maritime claims in this disputed area. Germany's Indo-Pacific is an inclusive concept that incorporates cooperation with China. However, the present navigation route seems to be a 'missed opportunity'<sup>15</sup> because it could have sent a strong signal for a closer security cooperation among Europeans and for Germany's commitment to the principles of a rules-based order as laid out in the guidelines.

## Prospects

The Indo-Pacific guidelines are an important document because they indicate a fundamental shift of putting geopolitics and geo-economics in the centre of Germany's foreign policy. Foreign Minister Maas has highlighted that the Indo-Pacific will remain a priority area in Germany's foreign policy.<sup>16</sup> The guidelines correspond with the forthcoming Indo-Pacific Strategy of the EU, whose main points have been published in April 2021.<sup>17</sup> The common aim that Germany shares with the EU, the US and its partners in the Indo-Pacific is to offer third countries a transparent and sustainable mechanism for investment and infrastructure projects in different fields.

The diversification of Germany's economic and political relations with the region will also bring new challenges. Germany has always been an important economic actor in the Indo-Pacific, although Germany's impact may not have been so visible compared to other European powers. The next government in Berlin will face the task of transferring the guidelines into a strategy so that Germany's profile in the region will also become more visible. The future political and security architecture of the Indo-Pacific will not only be shaped by regional

*The diversification of Germany's economic and political relations with the region will also bring new challenges.*

15 Hans Kundnani and Michito Tsuruoka, "Germany's Indo-Pacific frigate may send unclear message", *Chatham House Expert Comment*, 4 May 2021, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/05/germanys-indo-pacific-frigate-may-send-unclear-message>.

16 Hans Monath, Die Weltordnung von morgen; Warum die Bundesregierung den Indo-Pazifik zu einer Priorität der deutschen Außenpolitik erklärt, *Der Tagesspiegel*, 3 September 2020, <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/politik/der-himalaya-plan-mit-diesem-konzept-will-maas-die-aussenpolitik-radikal-neu-denken/26151264.html>.

17 "Indo-Pacific: Council adopts conclusions on EU strategy for cooperation", 19 April 2021, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2021/04/19/indo-pacific-council-adopts-conclusions-on-eu-strategy-for-cooperation/>.

institutions but more so by minilateral arrangements and different networks of middle powers. The biggest challenge for Germany will be to adapt its foreign policy instruments to the new formats that have emerged in the region.

# 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 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.<sup>1</sup> Germany released its 'Policy Guidelines for the Indo-Pacific Region' in September 2020, and the Netherlands an Indo-Pacific strategy report two months later.<sup>2</sup> Great Britain includes

*Over the last three years, a number of European countries have adopted their own Indo-Pacific regional concepts.*

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>; and "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>.

2 "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>.

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.<sup>3</sup> 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.

*These European states and the EU are the second group to adopt an Indo-Pacific regional concept in favour of the previously predominant Asia-Pacific one in the last decade.*

These European states and the EU 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 focused 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.

<sup>3</sup> *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); 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](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage_en/96741/EU%20Strategy%20for%20Cooperation%20in%20the%20Indo-Pacific).

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.<sup>4</sup> 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 rather than 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 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."<sup>5</sup>

*European capitals adopting an Indo-Pacific concept have not been spared China's vitriol.*

## 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. The 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 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.

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

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

### 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.*

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.<sup>6</sup> Yet, the 2019 Vietnam defence white paper continues to use the Asia-Pacific regional concept.<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup> The 'Philippines National Defense Strategy 2018-2022' and the preceding 'National Security Strategy' released in 2018 are without region, both focusing on the direct challenges to Philippine sovereignty and sovereign rights.<sup>9</sup>

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

6 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/>.

7 *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>.

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

9 *National Security Strategy*, Office of the President, Philippines, 2018, [https://apcss.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Philippines-National\\_Security\\_Strategy\\_2018.pdf](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](https://www.dnd.gov.ph/Files/ShowFile?url=/FilesUploaded/Ckeditor/file/NDS_7_August_2019.pdf).

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.<sup>10</sup>

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 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."<sup>11</sup>

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

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."<sup>12</sup>

Since the publication of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific, the document itself has become subject to the great power battle over

10 *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>.

11 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/>.

12 "ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific", ASEAN, 2019, [https://asean.org/storage/2019/06/ASEAN-Outlook-on-the-Indo-Pacific\\_FINAL\\_22062019.pdf](https://asean.org/storage/2019/06/ASEAN-Outlook-on-the-Indo-Pacific_FINAL_22062019.pdf).

*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 15<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the East Asia Summit.*

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 15<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the East Asia Summit.<sup>13</sup> The Chairman’s Statement of the 15<sup>th</sup> 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.”<sup>14</sup>

Indo-Pacific adopting European states and the EU may want to downplay the connection between their engagements with ASEAN and 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 the 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 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

13 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/>.

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

adopting states and the EU are doing so to curry favour with the US play to these Southeast Asian fears.<sup>15</sup>

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 (Quad) could be inferred as France wanting to become a Quad-plus country and a sign of French support for America's FOIP strategy. 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.

*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",<sup>16</sup> 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.<sup>17</sup>

15 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>.

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

17 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>.

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 effect asked China for permission, therefore strengthening rather than challenging Chinese claims over the South China Sea.”<sup>18</sup>

*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.*

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.

<sup>18</sup> 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>.

## PART 3: REGIONAL PERCEPTIONS OF EUROPE'S PUSH INTO THE INDO-PACIFIC

### The Quad Meets Europe in the Indo-Pacific: Fleeting Flirtation or Long-term Engagement?

*Renato Cruz De Castro*

#### Summary

*This paper examines the increasing interactions between the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) and several European states and non-state actors in the evolving Indo-Pacific region. It observes that the revival of the Quad, the formation of the Indo-Pacific region and the United States (US)-China strategic competition have attracted the attention of Europe. Europe currently projects its influence and clout into the Indo-Pacific region through three distinct actors: a) the principal European powers; b) the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO); and c) the European Union (EU). Europe's ability to play a significant strategic and diplomatic role in the region, however, is hampered by the reality that its influence is projected through separate and, often times, competing actors. Moreover, the EU's limited capabilities, its lack of common strategy and self-identity as a distant global security provider, coupled by the complexity of regional security challenges, have hampered Europe's role in Indo-Pacific security and geopolitics. Whether or not Europe can play a significant role in the region will largely depend on how the Quad would evolve and facilitate a larger and more meaningful European diplomatic and strategic presence in the Indo-Pacific.*

*Europe's ability to play a significant strategic and diplomatic role in the region, however, is hampered by the reality that its influence is projected through separate and, often times, competing actors.*

#### Introduction

Prior to the summit meeting of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in Manila in mid-November 2017, four Indo-Pacific powers – Australia, Japan, India and the US – revived the Quad, a loose security association. These four major powers had formed this

*American primacy in Asia gives way to an intensified geopolitical competition with China.*

association on the sides of the ASEAN Regional Forum summit in Manila in 2007. Its goal was to provide a platform for these four Indo-Pacific states to exchange views on regional security issues with a special focus on the rise of China and its implication for Asian security.<sup>1</sup> Its rebirth, in turn, gave rise to a new geopolitical region – the Indo-Pacific. The region covers all countries bordering the Indian and Pacific Oceans.<sup>2</sup> The formation of the Indo-Pacific region reflects the intensification of the US-China strategic competition, where three of the regional waterways – the South and East China Seas, and the Indian Ocean – become prominent arenas for their perilous contestations. American primacy in Asia gives way to an intensified geopolitical competition with China. However, Washington has a grand strategic interest in the development of friendly centres of power in the Indo-Pacific that are capable of sustaining a non-Sinocentric regional order.<sup>3</sup>

The above developments have caught Europe's attention. With unprecedented Eurasian connectivity brought about by China's emergence as a global economic power, its Belt and Road Initiative and the return of great power rivalry in the form of the US-China strategic competition, for many European states, the once-remote issue of Asian security is no longer a distant and abstract issue in a faraway continent. For them, Europe now is in a unique position to help shape an evolving and potentially perilous Indo-Pacific region. European outreach draws on soft and hard power instruments, and, more recently, building strategic networks at institutional levels to enhance the continent's power projection capabilities into the Indo-Pacific region.<sup>4</sup>

1 Kanwal Sibal, "The Value of the Quad Plus", in *The Quad Plus: Towards a Shared Strategic Vision for the Indo-Pacific* (eds.) Walter Lohman, Ravi K Sawhney, Andrew Davies and Ipeita Nishida (New Delhi: Wisdom Tree, 2015), p. 1.

2 Brahma Chellaney, "A New Order for the Indo-Pacific", *The ASPI Strategist*, 17 March 2018, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/new-order-indo-pacific/>.

3 Daniel Twining, "Building U.S. Partnerships for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: The Case of (and for) India", *U.S. Alliances and Partnerships at the Center of Global Power* (eds.) Ashley J Tellis, Abraham M Denmark, and Greg Chaffin, (Washington, DC: Donohue Group, 2014), p. 165.

4 Liselotte Odgaard, "European Engagement in the Indo-Pacific: The Interplay between Institutional and State-Level Diplomacy", *Asia Policy*, Volume 14, No. 4 (2019), p. 1.

The revival of the Quad in 2017 potentially provides an institutional platform where Europe would be expected to have an impact on Indo-Pacific security and the network of regional defence-related institutions. Consequently, Europe is no longer shying away from using its leverages to pursue its security relations with the US and members of the Quad in the face of China's growing power in the region.<sup>5</sup>

This paper examines the increasing interactions between the member states of the Quad and several European states and non-state actors in the evolving Indo-Pacific region. It aims to reflect on the evolving interaction between European states and the Indo-Pacific's major powers. In doing so, it answers several important questions. What are the relations between the Quad and the major European state and non-state actors in the Indo-Pacific? What developments led to the revival of the Quad in November 2017? What are the diplomatic/strategic implications of the revival of the Quad and the formation of the Indo-Pacific region? What are the interests of the European states and non-state actors in their interactions with the Quad? And, finally, what will be the future of these interactions?

## The Revival of the Quad and Europe's Rediscovery of the Indo-Pacific

Until recently, European regional organisations such as the EU have played a minor role in the politics and security agendas of the Indo-Pacific countries.<sup>6</sup> Since the end of the Cold War in the early 1990s, the European states have struggled to adapt to the shifting dynamics in Asia and assume a role that allows Europe to pursue its growing economic interests while also determining what sort of presence to have in the evolving regional security landscape.<sup>7</sup> The EU's primary focus was fostering partnerships with Australia, ASEAN, Japan and India on areas where it has vital interests and comparative advantages such as trade, human rights dialogues and substantial cooperation on

*Until recently, European regional organisations such as the EU have played a minor role in the politics and security agendas of the Indo-Pacific countries.*

5 Ibid., p. 4.

6 Ibid., p. 5.

7 Yong Deng, "The Role of the EU in Asian Security: Between Transatlantic Coordination Strategic Autonomy", *Asian Policy*, (January 2020) 15, 1, p. 109.

economic, commercial and development issues. It had usually shied away from security and political cooperation until the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

*These pressing security challenges from Asia are now forcing many European states and regional organisations to rethink Europe's minimalist approach to the region.*

China's growing power in the region and the former US President Donald Trump administration's disparaging view of both its Asian and European allies, however, had encouraged many European states and regional organisations, such as the EU and NATO, to maintain a broad array of connections with many Asian countries and multilateral institutions such as the ASEAN, and later, the Quad. These pressing security challenges from Asia are now forcing many European states and regional organisations to rethink Europe's minimalist approach to the region.

Given the return of great power rivalry in the form of the US-China strategic competition and the growing tension within the rules-based international order championed by the EU and its member states, this regional organisation and principal European powers are forced to stand up for their geopolitical and economic interests.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, the challenge for Europe may no longer be a matter of how it can best support the US and its allies and partners; instead, the primary thrust may be on how it can take the lead in certain areas in facilitating coordination on issues that affect both China and the US and its security partners in the Quad.

The European states, in general, support the continued preeminence of the US alliance system and its leadership role in the Indo-Pacific. The Quad and Europe share the fundamental goal of constraining Chinese influence where it is considered detrimental to underlying liberal economic and political principles. This stems from the fact that Europe believes that it shares core liberal-democratic values with the Quad and that these values must be protected from authoritarian states. It does protect these values from an independent position that advances its interest. In defending these values, however, Europe does not act

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8 Ibid., p. 8.

as a single entity speaking with a single voice on all issues.<sup>9</sup> Rather, its influence and power are projected in the Indo-Pacific region through three sets of actors: firstly, the principal European powers, particularly the United Kingdom (UK), France and Germany; secondly, via the NATO; and lastly, but more recently, the EU.

As far as the activities of the principal European powers are concerned, the UK and France have traditionally maintained a strategic presence in the Indo-Pacific region. Since 1971, the UK has maintained a security presence in Southeast Asia and the Western Pacific through the Five-Power Defense Arrangements (FPDA) with Australia, New Zealand, Singapore and Malaysia. The FPDA linked the security of two Southeast Asian states (Malaysia and Singapore) to consultative defence arrangements with Australia, the UK and New Zealand but it does not provide concrete security guarantees.<sup>10</sup> France has maintained 8,000 troops in its three overseas collectivities – New Caledonia, French Polynesia and Wallis and Futuna – all located in the Pacific Ocean.

France has recently been the driving force in projecting European naval presence in the Indo-Pacific. Since 2014, French naval vessels have regularly patrolled the South China Sea and made port calls in regional states.<sup>11</sup> The UK supports France's efforts to project European naval power in the region, as it announced that it will increasingly operate in combined formation and will be testing its combined joint expeditionary force with France. The HMS Queen Elizabeth recently led a carrier battlegroup that conducted freedom of navigation operations in the South and East China Seas, and naval drills with the US navy, South Korea's navy and the Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Force. A Royal Dutch frigate and a US navy destroyer accompanied

*France has recently been the driving force in projecting European naval presence in the Indo-Pacific.*

9 Liselotte Odgaard, "European Engagement in the Indo-Pacific: The Interplay between Institutional and State-Level Diplomacy", *Asia Policy*, Volume 14, No. 4 (2019), p. 1.

10 Ralf Emmers, "The Role of the Five Power Defense Arrangements in Southeast Asian Security Architecture", in *Bilateralism, Multilateralism, and Asia-Pacific Security: Contending Cooperation*, (eds.) William T Tow and Brendon Taylor (London; New York: Routledge, 2013), p. 95.

11 Liselotte Odgaard, "European Engagement in the Indo-Pacific: The Interplay between Institutional and State-Level Diplomacy", *Asia Policy*, Volume 14, No. 4 (2019), p. 9.

this carrier battle group as it projected the strong relations around maritime Asia following the UK's separation from the EU.

Since 2009, NATO has sought to become “the hub of a globe-spanning web of various regional cooperative-security undertakings among states with the growing power to act.”<sup>12</sup> With North America and Western Europe as the strategic core of this web, NATO's deliberations and decisions have given the alliance global strategic and diplomatic weight unrivalled by any multilateral forum. NATO has established global partnerships with two Quad members – Australia and Japan. In the light of shared values and common interests of NATO and its Asia-Pacific partners for mutual political and practical operations through their alliance in Afghanistan, off the Horn of Africa and Iraq, the Indian Ocean might be a particularly relevant area for future joint NATO-Japan-Australia-US naval operations, since it has been increasingly regarded as an integral part of the Indo-Pacific security system.<sup>13</sup>

*When it comes to regional security, the EU does not hide the fact that it supports US leadership and the preeminence of the hub-and-spokes system of alliances in the Indo-Pacific.*

Traditionally, the EU had played a minor role in the politics and security agenda of the Indo-Pacific states. In 2012, the EU signed a Treaty of Amity and Cooperation with ASEAN, paving the way for greater European participation in ASEAN-led regional institutions. Recently, however, the EU has initiated new initiatives and partnerships that allow it to contribute in new ways and areas in the Indo-Pacific. When it comes to regional security, the EU does not hide the fact that it supports US leadership and the preeminence of the hub-and-spokes system of alliances in the Indo-Pacific. Japan, India and Australia have become central partners cooperating with the EU on providing platforms for member states to pursue an initiative that creates a substantial, independent European footprint in the security and military realms in the Indo-Pacific.<sup>14</sup> Most significantly, the EU has embraced the Asian members of the Quad through its informal strategic dialogues with the US, Japan, Australia and India. This is part

<sup>12</sup> Stephen Fruhling, “Key to the Defense of the Free World: The Past, Present and Future Relevance of NATO for US Allies in the Asia-Pacific”, *Journal of Transatlantic Studies* (2019), Vol. 17, No. 4, p. 242.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 248.

<sup>14</sup> Liselotte Odgaard, “European Engagement in the Indo-Pacific: The Interplay between Institutional and State-Level Diplomacy”, *Asia Policy*, Volume 14, No. 4 (2019), p. 7.

of the EU's effort to complement its expanded relations with the Indo-Pacific democratic and market economy states.<sup>15</sup>

### **The Quad-European Encounter in the Indo-Pacific: Will it Last?**

Major developments such as China's emergence as an economic and military power, its efforts to effect its maritime expansion in the South and East China Seas and the current US-China strategic competition have attracted the attention of Europe to the Indo-Pacific region. Prominent European powers, NATO and the EU share many of the US' interests, including freedom of navigation in regional commons, multilateralism, respect for the institutions and norms of a rules-based international order, America's leadership role and the preeminence of the hub-and-spoke system in the Indo-Pacific region. This makes Europe a partner of the Quad in supporting a free and open Indo-Pacific.

*This makes Europe a partner of the Quad in supporting a free and open Indo-Pacific region.*

Europe's ability to play a significant strategic and diplomatic role in the region is, however, hampered by the reality that its influence is projected through separate and often competing actors: the principal European powers that are driven by their respective national interests; NATO, which values its bilateral defence discussions and ties with individual Quad members like Japan and Australia; and the EU that shares the Quad's goal of countering Chinese influence, since it is considered detrimental to fundamental liberal economic and political values. Moreover, the EU's limited capabilities, its lack of common strategy and self-identity as a distant global security provider, coupled with the complexity of regional security challenges, are hampering Europe's role in Indo-Pacific security and geopolitics.

Whether or not Europe can play a significant role in the region will largely depend on how the Quad could facilitate a more meaningful European strategic presence in the Indo-Pacific. This will, in turn, depend on how the Quad will evolve into an association that will

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

constrain China's pervasive influence in the Indo-Pacific region. Its goal is not yet the containment of China nor alliance formation. Rather, its goal is to ensure that the Asia-Pacific and the Indian Ocean remain free and open for multilateral trade and commerce. It emphasises the importance of a rules-based order, connectivity ventures that are not fueled by predatory financing and that territorial disputes are resolved peacefully and per international law.

*There are ongoing military-exercises and intelligence-sharing among its members.*

Instead of an alliance engaged in military activities, its members utilise the Quad as a venue to raise their collective voice about the importance of cooperation, especially when it concerns the freedom of navigation, maritime enforcement capabilities and the promotion of international standards in infrastructure and ports.<sup>16</sup> There are ongoing military-exercises and intelligence-sharing among its members. However, the Quad's primary contribution to Indo-Pacific security is still primarily diplomatic – conveying a forceful message to China that it should not underestimate its members' legitimate concerns about its strategic behaviour in recent years.<sup>17</sup> In the long run, a viable and dynamic security partnership between the Quad and the three European actors will put Europe in a unique situation in which it can “mitigate fragmentation of the global order and to assert itself in dealing with emerging threats while steering Asia toward an open-rules-based security architecture.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., pp. 2-3.

<sup>17</sup> James Curran, “All Shot and No Powder in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue,” *East Asia Forum*, 28 January 2018, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2018/01/28/all-shot-and-no-powder-in-the-quadrilateral-security-dialogue/>.

<sup>18</sup> Deng, “The Role of the EU in Asian Security”, p. 126.

# The European Union in the Indo-Pacific: ASEAN Perspectives

*Sinderpal Singh*

## Summary

*The Indo-Pacific, variously conceptualised as a (rediscovered) geostrategic unit, a geopolitical strategy or a re-ordering of global economic space, is a key site of geopolitical contestation. Different actors have attempted to articulate various visions of the Indo-Pacific, and the European Union (EU) is the most recent actor to articulate its own vision of the Indo-Pacific. Concurrently, a few individual EU member states have also articulated their national Indo-Pacific visions. The responses of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to these visions of the Indo-Pacific provide a crucial glimpse into this process of contestation over future regional order(s).*

*This paper will examine ASEAN's responses by making three main points. The first is ASEAN's broad collective view of the EU's role in the Indo-Pacific region. The second relates to specific issues/areas in which ASEAN and the EU have cooperated and are likely to cooperate in the near future. The third point discusses the possible divergences amongst the ASEAN states in the perceptions of the EU's role in the Indo-Pacific.*

## ASEAN Perceptions

As an organisation, ASEAN has been tentative about the notion of an Indo-Pacific region. This, to some extent, reflects differences amongst the ASEAN states about the implications of the Indo-Pacific, both as a strategic mental map and possibly as a strategy. While countries like Indonesia were early proponents of this term, other countries, such as Singapore, are wary of embracing it. The 'ASEAN Outlook on the

*As an organisation, ASEAN has been tentative about the notion of an Indo-Pacific region.*

Indo-Pacific' (AOIP) reflects this tension amongst its members.<sup>1</sup> With this qualifier, two broad observations can be made.

*The ASEAN states have welcomed the EU's move from predominantly providing development aid to articulating a clearer strategic role in the region.*

Firstly, increased EU attention to and presence in East Asia is viewed as a positive development. ASEAN's perennial quest for agency in managing the affairs of the region (from Southeast Asia in the Cold War to East Asia in the post-Cold War period) is predicated on no single power dominating the region. External powers (such as the EU) claiming a role in the region leads to a potentially more varied regional distribution of power. The ASEAN states have welcomed the EU's move from predominantly providing development aid to articulating a clearer strategic role in the region.<sup>2</sup>

Secondly, while ASEAN welcomes the EU's desire to play a larger role within the Indo-Pacific, perceptions vary about the individual visions of the different EU states. The EU has recently released its 'EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific', representing draft guidelines which require finalisation by the EU Commission later this year. Besides this draft set of guidelines, at this point, only France, Germany and the Netherlands have released, publicly, their respective national 'outlooks' in relation to the Indo-Pacific. The EU document, to a large extent, is broadly consistent with ASEAN's own AOIP document, seeking to emphasise a cooperative, inclusive regional architecture vis-à-vis China. This appears to contrast with the way the Quad grouping of countries (the Quadrilateral Security Initiative, comprising the United States [US], India, Japan and Australia) aims to deal with China in the Indo-Pacific.<sup>3</sup> ASEAN might probably find passing references to the promotion of democracy and human rights unnecessary, but overall, the EU's draft document does not stray too far from the key tenets of ASEAN's AOIP. This is an important point as ASEAN views the involvement of external powers in East Asia as

- 1 Pou Sothirak, "Re-think 'ASEAN Outlook on Indo-Pacific'", *Bangkok Post*, 20 July 2019, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/opinion/opinion/1715795/re-thinking-asean-outlook-on-indo-pacific>.
- 2 Vincent Piket and Igor Driesmans, "Asean at the heart of the EU strategy for Indo-Pacific", *The Straits Times*, 12 May 2021, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/asean-at-the-heart-of-the-eu-strategy-for-indo-pacific-jakarta-post-contributors>.
- 3 Rifki Dermawan, "Is the Quad's Revival a Threat to ASEAN?", *The Diplomat*, 18 March 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/03/is-the-quads-revival-a-threat-to-asean/>.

a delicate balance. These powers, in ASEAN's view, should maintain sufficient levels of engagement to offset China's dominance in East Asia. However, this commitment should not take the form of explicit anti-China coalitions, which increases the chances of great power conflict escalating in East Asia. Such great power conflicts will inadvertently drive the ASEAN states to choose sides, narrowing their strategic options.<sup>4</sup> In this regard, the February 2021 patrol by a French nuclear attack submarine in the South China Sea received mixed reactions from the ASEAN states. The reactions reflect this tenuous equilibrium – between promoting a balance against growing Chinese power in East Asia versus fears of escalating military tensions with China.<sup>5</sup> The ASEAN states differ on the equilibrium point in balancing these two imperatives, further complicating the ability to construct a clear and consistent ASEAN position on this issue.

*The ASEAN states differ on the equilibrium point in balancing these two imperatives, further complicating the ability to construct a clear and consistent ASEAN position on this issue.*

### **ASEAN-EU: Issues/Areas of Cooperation**

ASEAN and the EU reached a key milestone in December 2020 with the signing of a strategic partnership. This milestone seems to have been driven by the EU rather than ASEAN, the former increasingly being concerned about being left out of regional trade groupings such as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership as well as the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership. As a result, a large part of the strategic partnership pertains to growing economic co-operation as well as support for ASEAN economic integration. In addition, in line with ASEAN's AOIP, which views the Indian and Pacific Oceans not as contiguous but interconnected, much of this strategic partnership has a non-military dimension.<sup>6</sup>

4 Bilahari Kausikan, "Southeast Asia in the Age of Great-Power Rivalry", *Foreign Affairs*, 100(2), pp. 186-91.

5 "French submarine patrols South China Sea, likely angering Beijing", *The Straits Times*, 9 February 2021, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/east-asia/french-submarine-patrols-south-china-sea-likely-angering-beijing>.

6 Frederick Kliem, "ASEAN–EU Partnership: How 'Strategic' is Europe's Approach?", *RSIS Commentaries*, 5 November 2019, <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/CO19222.pdf>.

In relation to the Indo-Pacific specifically, except for Indonesia, the other ASEAN states (and these include Indian Ocean littorals) have little interest in the Western Indian Ocean. This contrasts with the EU, especially individual EU states, which have been highly active in building the capacity of small island littorals in the Western Indian Ocean in the realm of fisheries protection and maritime security, broadly defined.<sup>7</sup>

Given the above factors, co-operation between the EU – and even individual EU states – and ASEAN in the military realm will remain limited. The caveat to this trend is France (and to a lesser extent, Germany), which is increasingly engaged in various bilateral defence dialogues with some ASEAN states, Singapore being the most high-profile example.

### Individual ASEAN States and Divergences

*Individual ASEAN states base their perceptions of the EU's more recent moves to claim a presence in the Indo-Pacific on two factors.*

Individual ASEAN states base their perceptions of the EU's more recent moves to claim a presence in the Indo-Pacific on two factors. The first is the extent and manner in which the EU expresses concerns about human rights in the region, and the second is the EU's response to managing China's increased assertiveness in East Asia.

The EU's decision to withdraw duty free, quota free access for Cambodian exports into the region, in response to Prime Minister Hun Sen's alleged human rights violations, speaks to the first point.<sup>8</sup> From ASEAN's perspective, privileging human rights concerns towards an ASEAN member state viewed as increasingly sympathetic to China detracts from the EU's ability to play an effective role in the region. Similarly, ASEAN has had a dim view, historically, of the EU's response to developments within Myanmar, and the recent targeted sanctions against Myanmar's military by the EU elicit a similar view within

7 The Indian Ocean Commission and the European Union, European External Action Service (EAAS), [https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage_en). Accessed on 12 December 2021.

8 Shaun Turton, "Cambodia loses EU trade privileges as it rushes FTA with China", *Nikkei Asia*, 12 August 2020. <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Cambodia-plans-China-style-internet-firewall>.

ASEAN.<sup>9</sup> Like the Cambodia case, though with certain differences, the EU seems content with privileging human rights concerns over ceding diplomatic and strategic space to China vis-à-vis Myanmar.

Specific EU states, mainly France, have burgeoning defence relationships with specific ASEAN states. Indonesia, Singapore and Malaysia have a growing defence relationship with France. The status of France as a major weapons supplier has unsurprisingly increased its importance to these three states as they look to augment and diversify their weapon procurement processes.<sup>10</sup> The defence relationships with France, however, go beyond mere weapon sales, as attested by recent joint exercises and joint training arrangements between these three ASEAN states and France.<sup>11</sup> Germany is a newcomer to defence diplomacy in Southeast Asia but it has committed to a growing defence relationship with Singapore, comprising defence dialogues between the two defence ministers as well as joint training arrangements between the two defence forces.<sup>12</sup>

*Specific EU states, mainly France, have burgeoning defence relationships with specific ASEAN states.*

Palm oil has been a bone of contention between the EU and some ASEAN states, specifically Indonesia and Malaysia, since 2017, when the European Parliament called for an eventual ban on palm oil due to concerns about environmental sustainability.<sup>13</sup> Indonesia and Malaysia, the world's leading producers of palm oil (together they produce nearly 85 per cent of the world's palm oil – Indonesia producing 58 per cent and Malaysia 26 per cent of global supply), view the EU's attempts to impose restrictions on palm oil imports as

9 "Asean calls for summit on Myanmar as EU widens sanctions", *The Star* (Malaysia), 21 April 2021, <https://www.thestar.com.my/aseanplus/aseanplus-news/2021/04/21/asean-calls-summit-on-myanmar-as-eu-widens-sanctions>.

10 Prashanth Parameswaran, "New Delivery Highlights Malaysia-France Artillery Deal", *The Diplomat*, 13 March 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/03/new-delivery-highlights-malaysia-france-artillery-deal/>; and Natalie Sambhi, "France's burgeoning defence ties with Indonesia", *The Strategist*, 11 March 2021, <https://www.aspirstrategist.org.au/frances-burgeoning-defence-ties-with-indonesia/>.

11 Par Philippe Le Corre and Michael O'Hanlon, "France's Pivot to Asia: It's More than Just Submarines", *The National Interest*, 9 May 2016, <https://www.iris-france.org/76078-frances-pivot-to-asia-its-more-than-just-submarines/>.

12 "Singapore and Germany Strengthen Defence Ties through New Agreement on Defence Cooperation", Ministry of Defence, Singapore, 2 June 2018, [https://www.mindef.gov.sg/web/portal/mindef/news-and-events/latest-releases/article-detail/2018/june/02june18\\_nr4](https://www.mindef.gov.sg/web/portal/mindef/news-and-events/latest-releases/article-detail/2018/june/02june18_nr4).

13 "European Parliament resolution of 4 April 2017 on palm oil and deforestation of rainforests", European Parliament, 4 April 2017, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52017IP0098>.

an unfair trade practice and a contravention of the rules of the World Trade Organization (WTO). Accordingly, Malaysia has initiated a WTO dispute complaint against the EU, but this issue seems to have not significantly impacted other areas of the relationship with the EU and/or its member states for both Malaysia and Indonesia.<sup>14</sup>

*In this context, ASEAN states might have different views towards attempts by France and Germany to play larger strategic roles in the Indo-Pacific.*

Divergences over the notion of the Indo-Pacific demonstrate differences amongst the ASEAN states in managing China's increasingly assertive behaviour, arising from its growing military and economic power. The ASEAN states are situated along various points of the containment-bandwagoning continuum in relation to China, hedging being the predominant tendency, although such positions are both dynamic as well as situational.<sup>15</sup> In this context, the ASEAN states might have different views towards attempts by France and Germany to play larger strategic roles in the Indo-Pacific. Between France and Germany, the former has demonstrated a more visible military presence in the Indo-Pacific, with its submarine's patrols in the South China Sea being a clear display of its presence in East Asia. This has been viewed favourably by certain ASEAN states, which have continued to develop their defence relationships with France while other ASEAN states are more concerned about China's response towards states embarking on closer defence ties with France.<sup>16</sup>

As outlined earlier, however, ASEAN views the involvement of extra-regional powers as a delicate balance, and more recent French moves to signal its willingness to become the Quad's fifth member (or the first Quad 'Plus' member) has again drawn different responses from various ASEAN states.<sup>17</sup> The ASEAN states, while wary of Chinese reactions to them joining the Quad as full members, have, however,

14 "Malaysia takes WTO legal action against EU over palm biofuel curbs", *Reuters*, 16 January 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-malaysia-palmoil-eu-idUSKBN29L054>.

15 Sinderpal Singh, "The Dilemmas of Regional States: How Southeast Asian States View and Respond to India-China Maritime Competition", *Asian Security*, 15(1), pp. 44-59.

16 Prashanth Parameswaran, "Defense Dialogue Spotlights Vietnam-France Military Ties", *The Diplomat*, 9 July 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/07/defense-dialogue-spotlights-vietnam-france-military-ties/>.

17 Sreeram Chaulia, "France and sailing toward the 'Quad-plus'", *The New Indian Express*, 6 April 2021, <https://www.newindianexpress.com/opinions/2021/apr/06/france-and-sailing-toward-the-quad-plus-2286408.html>.

flirted with the notion of joining Quad Plus minilaterals in specific non-military functional areas. Vietnam's decision to join ad hoc 'Quad Plus' consultations (comprising the four Quad countries plus Vietnam, South Korea and New Zealand) on tackling the COVID-19 pandemic and post-pandemic economic recovery is a case in point.<sup>18</sup> The prospects of other ASEAN countries joining such Quad Plus minilaterals, however, seem dim presently but they will watch with keen interest France's relationship with the Quad and the way it impacts the balance of power in East Asia.<sup>19</sup>

## Conclusion

ASEAN's key objective is to prevent any state becoming the preponderant power in East Asia and dictating terms to the Southeast Asian states. To achieve this, ASEAN's strategy is not to keep great powers out of East Asia but to encourage all significant actors to have a stake in East Asia's relative stability and economic prosperity. In the pursuit of building that varied balance of power, which ASEAN continues to assert as the foundation of 'ASEAN centrality', the EU's interest in the Indo-Pacific is appreciated. ASEAN states welcome the EU's desire to play a more visible strategic role in East Asia, but the ASEAN-EU relationship remains predominantly economic in nature.

*ASEAN's key objective is to prevent any state becoming the preponderant power in East Asia and dictating terms to the Southeast Asian states.*

Individual EU states, France and Germany specifically, have signalled their desire to upgrade their military ties with individual ASEAN states, and there has been visible progress in this domain. The key issue remains ASEAN's discomfort with the notion of the Indo-Pacific, the latter viewed as a means of displacing the 'ASEAN Way' with overt great power balancing strategies against growing Chinese influence. Individual ASEAN states, however, diverge on specific strategies in managing China's rise in East Asia, increasingly complicating the ability to maintain a clear and consistent ASEAN position.

18 Hoang Thi Ha, "ASEAN Navigates between Indo-Pacific Polemics and Potentials", *ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute Perspective*, 20 April 2021, <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/iseas-perspective/2021-49-asean-navigates-between-indo-pacific-polemics-and-potentials-by-hoang-thi-ha/>.

19 Ivy Kwek, "The Quad's uneasy place in Southeast Asia", *The Interpreter*, 14 April 2021, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/quad-s-uneasy-place-southeast-asia>.

# ASEAN, the Quad and the European Union

Olli Pekka Suorsa

## Summary

*Lacking military power of its own, the EU seeks to use its economic and diplomatic weight to influence global politics.*

*In terms of its economic and normative power, the European Union (EU) is a significant global actor. The EU however remains a minor player in international security with few hard power tools at its disposal. Lacking military power of its own, the EU seeks to use its economic and diplomatic weight to influence global politics. In the ‘EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific’, published in April 2021, the EU member states had reached an unparalleled consensus over a region it identified as the most consequential of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The draft strategy struck a blueprint for the EU’s engagement with the Indo-Pacific – one that emphasises multilateralism, inclusiveness and cooperation over division and confrontation.*

*This paper takes a critical look at the EU’s stance towards the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the quadrilateral dialogue mechanism or the Quad. It highlights the limits of European engagement and continuing challenges that hamper stronger European security engagement in the Indo-Pacific as it comes to appreciate the region’s complexity. The paper concludes with considerations on the EU’s strategic choices, complementing and (sometimes) competing with the strategic choices of Europe’s own major powers — Britain, France and Germany — spearheading Europe’s ‘turn’ towards the Indo-Pacific.*

## Introduction

The EU aspires towards a greater role in global affairs. It seeks to strengthen a multipolar and multilateral global order based on common rules, norms and cooperation. Part of this new-found activism is the ‘EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific’, published on 16 April 2021, which focuses on “reinforc[ing] [Europe’s]

role as a cooperative partner in the Indo-Pacific”,<sup>1</sup> arguably the most consequential region of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The document is a draft of the EU Council’s deliberations and serves as a guideline for the EU’s Indo-Pacific strategy, which is scheduled to be published in September this year. The EU Council (inter-state-level) underscores Europe’s willingness to strengthen the many existing forms and avenues of cooperation within and with the region. The key foreign policy term for the EU’s engagement remains ‘inclusiveness’. Inclusiveness is an important caveat that opens the door for cooperation with China on issues and shared challenges that require Beijing’s weight and collaboration, like health, security and combating climate change. The EU will focus on like-minded partners with shared principles, values and mutual security concerns. It will boost partnerships with democracies in the Indo-Pacific, including India, Australia and Japan as the central pillars of the strategy. The EU’s Indo-Pacific draft strategy also emphasises the central role of the region’s multinational organisations like ASEAN, the Indian Ocean Region Association and the Pacific Islands Forum.

*The EU’s Indo-Pacific draft strategy also emphasises the central role of the region’s multinational organisations like ASEAN, the Indian Ocean Region Association and the Pacific Islands Forum.*

In support of its aspiration to empower regional multilateralism, the EU has sought to further strengthen the EU-ASEAN partnership. In December 2020, the two regional organisations elevated the relationship to a strategic partnership, reiterating the EU’s support for ASEAN centrality as well as the ASEAN vision for the Indo-Pacific – a free and open Indo-Pacific. With its strong normative approach to international affairs (support for human rights, democracy and the rule of law and free trade) the EU will need to reconcile the priorities of its liberal values with gaining regional access and acceptance in the region. Although failing to gain any direct attention in the draft strategy, the rapidly growing significance of the Quad amongst the United States (US), Japan, India and Australia poses a challenge of its own to the EU. The EU will need to address its position vis-à-vis the Quad sooner rather than later.

<sup>1</sup> “Council Conclusions on an EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific”, 7914/21, Council of the European Union, 16 April 2021, <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-7914-2021-INIT/en/pdf>. Accessed on 3 May 2021.

This paper approaches the EU's Indo-Pacific engagement through the European views of ASEAN and the Quad. It highlights the limits of European engagement and continuing challenges that hamper stronger European security engagement in the Indo-Pacific. Finally, in relation to its ability to strike a balance between ASEAN and the Quad, this paper concludes with an assessment of the EU's strategic choices as it turns to the Indo-Pacific.

## The EU and ASEAN

*The EU-ASEAN relationship is often characterised as multifaceted.*

The EU-ASEAN relationship is often characterised as multifaceted. In December 2020, the two regional organisations elevated their relationship to a strategic partnership.<sup>2</sup> The 'EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific' underscored the EU's "aim to promote effective rules-based multilateralism [and] reiterate its support for ASEAN centrality and looks forward to the ambitious realisation of its new EU-ASEAN Strategic Partnership."<sup>3</sup> This statement reiterates the December 2020 'Co-Chairs' Press Release of the 23<sup>rd</sup> ASEAN-EU Ministerial Meeting', which gave strong support to ASEAN's centrality, ASEAN-led regional architecture and acknowledged the importance of the 'ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific'.<sup>4</sup> Curiously, both the Co-Chairs' statement (2020) on the EU-ASEAN Strategic Partnership and the EU's draft strategy for the Indo-Pacific omit any references to human rights and democracy, which may suggest the EU's support for ASEAN's principles over its own and that it may need to strike compromises on its core values to make inroads into the region.<sup>5</sup> The documents' silence on these core values demonstrates the

2 "ASEAN-European Union Dialogue Relations", ASEAN Secretariat's Information Paper, December 2020, <https://asean.org/storage/Overview-of-ASEAN-EU-Relations-as-of-December-2020.pdf>.

3 "Council Conclusions on an EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific", Council of the European Union, 2021, p. 4.

4 "Co-Chairs' Press Release of the 23<sup>rd</sup> ASEAN-EU Ministerial Meeting", Council of the European Union, 1 December 2020, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2020/12/01/co-chairs-press-release-of-the-23rd-asean-eu-ministerial-meeting/>.

5 Laura Allison-Reumann and Philomena Murray, "The ASEAN-EU Strategic Partnership's Coherence Challenge", *East Asia Forum*, 16 February 2021, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2021/02/16/the-asean-eu-strategic-partnerships-coherence-challenge/>.

incoherence in the EU's position towards ASEAN and the individual states, and its own normative rhetoric.<sup>6</sup>

Human rights, democracy and rule of law remain the core European values and feature in the EU's engagement with existing partners and in forging new partnerships or sanctioning others. The EU's (as an institution as well as its member states) strong norms and values-based approach to international affairs and diplomacy will certainly run into difficulties in Southeast Asia, where democracy and human rights have been on a retreat for several years, not least in the Philippines, Thailand, Myanmar and Cambodia. This makes the EU's engagement and advancing of relations with most ASEAN members individually difficult. Therefore, promoting European norms and values through ASEAN may be considered more conducive and allow Brussels' positions to be voiced over the entire region more effectively.

*This makes the EU's engagement and advancing of relations with most ASEAN members individually difficult.*

In contrast, the growing EU-Vietnam partnership, including the free trade agreement of 2019 and identification of Vietnam as a crucial partner in the region, provides an interesting and controversial case study. Vietnam is often criticised for its poor human rights record; yet Brussels has identified Hanoi as a primary partner in the region. The case highlights the difficulty in striking a balance between the EU's economic interests and its core values. This may also demonstrate the EU's more strategic understanding of the region (or preference of certain member states like France) beyond the rhetoric of engaging 'like-minded' partners. It is clear that in several cases, the EU's own principles of engagement with regional partners do not align entirely with those of its most powerful member states, especially France or Germany, which are likely to put a lot of diplomatic pressure on the EU to accept Paris or Berlin's geo-economic and geostrategic interests in the region.

## The EU and the Quad

The EU's relationship with the Quad is significantly more complicated than the former's relationship with ASEAN. One reason for this is the

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

fact that there is little understanding and/or consensus in Europe about the Quad. The Quad is commonly viewed as a US-led coalition formed to compete with and constrain China. Conspicuously, the ‘EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific’ is silent about the Quad. Instead, the draft strategy reiterates the paramount need to cooperate with ‘like-minded’ partners with inclusivity in mind.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, it is crucial to understand that the draft document is intended to only complement, not replace, the EU’s strategies vis-à-vis the individual strategic partnerships and other partners in the Indo-Pacific, including with and specially concerning the Quad members. Indeed, like the major European powers’ Indo-Pacific visions, the EU’s draft strategy identifies Japan, Australia and India, among others, as some of the most critical partners in the region.<sup>8</sup>

*In this interpretation, the EU will find plenty of areas of convergence with the Quad but also areas of likely divergence.*

This underscores the much-touted European aspiration for strategic autonomy. Despite the absence of agreement on what is meant by Europe’s strategic autonomy, it is often cited as a reflection of Europe’s desire to become an increasingly active player in global affairs, commensurate to its own weight; strike a balance between economic and security interests between the US and China; diversify the subcontinent’s economic, diplomatic and security relations; and promote a multipolar international order.<sup>9</sup> In this interpretation, the EU will find plenty of areas of convergence with the Quad but also areas of likely divergence. For the EU, cooperation with the individual countries making up the Quad is thus politically easier and more conducive than seeking an EU-Quad dialogue. This is especially salient in issues related to regional disputes in which the EU’s tools to act are limited. That said, however, there are several ‘soft security’ or non-security-related functional areas of potential cooperation between

7 “Council Conclusions on an EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific”, 7914/21, Council of the European Union, 16 April 2021, <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-7914-2021-INIT/en/pdf>.

8 Ibid.

9 See, for example, Giovanni Grevi, “Strategic Autonomy for European Choices: The Key to Europe’s Shaping Power”, Discussion Paper, European Policy Centre, 19 July 2019, <https://www.epc.eu/en/publications/Strategic-autonomy-for-European-choices-The-key-to-Europes-shaping-p~213400>; and Niklas Helwig, Elina Sinkkonen and Ville Sinkkonen, “Strategic Autonomy and the Transformation of the EU: New Agendas for Security, Diplomacy, Trade, and Technology”, File Report 67, Finnish Institute of International Affairs, 28 April 2021, <https://www.fii.fi/en/publication/strategic-autonomy-and-the-transformation-of-the-eu>.

the EU and the Quad, including in devising new or contributing to an existing regional infrastructure investment and connectivity constructs (geo-economics), and frameworks to collaborate on vaccine donations and distribution, among others.

Addressing China's growing assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific, however, is an area that is unlikely to see any concrete or direct EU-level collaboration with the Quad as a grouping. Instead, the foreign policy choice of participating in the Quad, whether formally under a 'Quad Plus' framework or informally, is left for each of the EU member states to consider. This is also to reiterate the important distinction that the navies of the individual EU member states – France, Germany and the Netherlands – sail to the Indo-Pacific, primarily representing their own governments' interests in the region and not those of the EU. Therefore, any and all European powers' participation in naval exercises or other military engagement with one or more Quad members during their summer 2021 Indo-Pacific tours should not be viewed as the EU's security engagement but that of its individual member states, acting out of their individual interests.

### **Conclusions: Agency and Strategic Choices**

Since 2018, the EU has adopted an increasingly activist foreign policy outlook with a growing interest in the Indo-Pacific region. The 'European Union Global Strategy', published in 2018, identified China as a systemic rival for the first time. The 2021 'EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific', on the other hand, did not term China as a systemic rival. It avoided any explicit mention of China as a strategic competitor or source of security concern. Instead, the draft strategy identified China as a critical partner without which Europe cannot address some of the most salient global challenges like climate change, pandemics, et cetera. The EU promotes itself as an inclusive partner – one supporting a multipolar and rules-based global order, while renouncing unilateralism and bipolar tendencies. Therefore, the EU takes a 'multifaceted' approach toward the Indo-Pacific and its many actors, including China, ASEAN and the Quad. In so doing, the EU seeks to portray itself as a strategic alternative to the

*The EU promotes itself as an inclusive partner; one supporting a multipolar and rules-based global order, while renouncing unilateralism and bipolar tendencies.*

US and China – an important economic and normative power outside the false choice between the two antagonists.

There are many strategic dilemmas and challenges ahead for the EU. It needs to strike a difficult balance between engagement with China and pushing back on Beijing's growing assertiveness or risk compromising its much-valued strategic autonomy and join the Quad in a comprehensive attempt to constrain China, both in Europe and in the Indo-Pacific. The EU will also need to make difficult choices between engaging individually with selected partners in ASEAN and supporting ASEAN as a whole, regardless of several members' democratic and human rights retrenchment, and in accessing new markets and diversifying supply chains. This will require the EU to find a balance between its core values and its economic and strategic interests. In this light, the 'like-minded' countries that make up the Quad – the US, Japan, Australia and India – will prove to be some of the EU's most natural partners in the future.

*As the Sino-US competition is likely to intensify in the coming years, the EU's tools will remain limited.*

Similarly, only time will show how, if at all, the EU can find consensus between its own diverse membership in finalising its official Indo-Pacific strategy, which is hoped to be published in September 2021. Due to the EU members' varying geo-economic and geostrategic interests, and differing threat perceptions of China, reconciling the various positions will likely prove challenging and risk diluting the strategy close to its lowest common denominator – economic diversification at the expense of finding a strong political and security role for the EU. As the Sino-US competition is likely to intensify in the coming years, the EU's tools will remain limited. Instead of presenting a unified European front to call out Chinese malpractices, the EU's own divisions and interests regarding China and Chinese investment funds will ensure that it will remain in the sidelines of Sino-US confrontation. The future will also show whether the EU's economic, diplomatic and normative weight in the global affairs is sufficient to present the EU as a viable strategic alternative.

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