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## European Union Strategies on Indo-Pacific: Concerns and Implications

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### ABSTRACT

With the increasing economic and strategic importance of the Indo-Pacific region coupled with maritime disputes, piracy and Chinese assertions in the region, the European Union (EU) is concerned about its impact on secure, open and free passage and rule based global order. Distinguished from the hard foreign policy measures of the US, the EU strategy is to engage China through discussions and negotiations and at the same time to increase its depth of relations on wide ranging issues with the countries of the region to deny unilateral advantage to China. Pursuance of this parallel course of action is a challenging task as not all EU member states share common perception about China and very the design of the EU preventing its 'actorness' in external relations. With apparent exclusive and inward looking policies of the US under Trump 2.0, War in Ukraine and impact of refugee crisis affecting the EU attention towards Indo-Pacific, the EU role as a credible actor is likely to be further affected unless the EU addresses the host of internal and external issues and challenges while performing the balancing act between its preferred "strategic autonomy" and alignment and active engagement with others with cautious approach towards China. The EU need to work closely with like-minded countries like India which broadly share EU's views on rule based global order and stable, inclusive, free and secure Indo-Pacific region.

**Keywords:** Indopacific; European Union; EU strategy; EU-China

## INTRODUCTION

The Indo-Pacific region stretching from the eastern coast of Africa to the Pacific Islands has become the center of global attention due to its growing economic and geopolitical significance.<sup>1</sup> The region is a major highway

in the global transportation chain, comprising countries such as the US, India, China, Australia and Japan with robust manufacturing, trade and technological bases and contributing substantially to the global GDP. It is ecologically important as it is home to diverse and fragile ecosystems, including coral reefs and marine diversity and, climate change, overfishing and marine pollution raising concern over its impact on the environment of the region. Equally important, is the global concern over the freedom of navigation, maritime disputes in the region, especially in the South China Sea and the implications of the increasing role and assertiveness of China in the region. Apropos, the

<sup>1</sup>The German scholar Karl Haushofer first used the word "Indo-Pacific" in the 1920s in his writings on geography and geopolitics. In recent times the Japanese Prime Minister Shinzō Abe referred to the "confluence" of the Indian and Pacific Oceans in his speech to the Indian Parliament in August 2007. Since 2010 the word has acquired a strategic and geopolitical connotation. However, the countries differ in their understanding of the extent of the region. For instance, Indian policymakers envision the Indo-Pacific as a vast expanse extending from East Africa to the Americas. See, Walter Ladwig, "The Indo-Pacific in Indian Foreign Policy", *RUSI* (London), 30 April 2024, <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/policy-briefs/indo-pacific-indian-foreign-policy>. EU countries like Hungary view it as a region from India through south-east Asia to South Korea and Japan, including China. Others like Ireland, Latvia, Netherlands and Slovakia understand it as a region from Pakistan to the islands of

Pacific. But majority of countries like Austria, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Estonia, Czech Republic, France, Greece, Lithuania, Malta, Romania and Spain view it as a region from eastern coast of Africa to the western coast of the Americas while Denmark, Finland, Italy, Luxembourg and Portugal view it as stretching from eastern coast of Africa to the Islands of the Pacific. See reference<sup>1</sup>



global powers are actively pursuing strategies to maintain or expand their spheres of influence in the region. This article intends to understand the response and strategies pursued by European Union (EU), a major global economic player performing increasingly security and political roles.

## THE EU AND THE INDO-PACIFIC

The EU has recognized the increasing significance of the region and the need to engage with the region for its benefit. Today almost 90% of the EU's external freight trade is seaborne. Much of this trade passes through maritime chokepoints in the Indo-Pacific region such as the South China Sea and the Malacca Strait. With €1120 billion in imports and €645 billion in exports in 2022, the Indo-Pacific region is increasingly becoming important for the EU.<sup>2</sup> Given the importance of maritime trade and the region's important trading partners, EU is concerned about the secure, open and free passage in the Indo-Pacific region's maritime route. As a strong advocate of multilateralism, global governance and the rule of law, the EU is alarmed about the threats to its interests and normative and rule-based posturing of the global order by piracy, maritime disputes and rising geo-political tensions in the region, especially with China's assertions and the US's efforts to counter it. In the Trump 2.0 era, the EU is apprehensive of the unconditional support of the US to the European security and also not wanting to be drawn into US-China rivalry on US's terms, the EU has realized that it need to have its own framework and strategy to achieve the goals of a rule-based international order. The EU considers the rule of law as vital for global security, especially in the background of Russia's invasion of Ukraine that has threatened notion of territorial integrity.

Although the EU is not a major actor in the Indo-Pacific region, considering the significant share of the region in the EU's trade and its profound preference for rule of law, China's actions are a matter of concern to the EU. However, given the trade ties with China and its 'civilian' approach, the EU avoids confrontation or provocation of China. Instead, it prefers a balancing act and has sought to engage positively with the region to ensure open access and freedom of navigation by strengthening its long-term relations with its countries without adversely affecting its relation with the US. In its alignments, rather than to ride piggyback on US, it has preferred to align independently with the 'concert of Indo-Pacific countries led by the US'.<sup>2</sup>

### *EU strategy towards Indo-Pacific:*

EU was deeply involved in the Western Indian Ocean region (WIO) since 2008 through its counter piracy

operation such as ATLANTA. It has invested sufficient resources in the WIO sub-region to ensure maritime security. Its "Critical Maritime Routes in the Indian Ocean" (CRIMARIO) I (2014) programme was created to enhance maritime domain awareness through information sharing, capacity building and training in the Western Indian Ocean region. The CRIMARIO II (2020) expanded the geographical scope of the project towards South and Southeast Asia as well as to the Pacific with an aim to inter-connect the Indo-Pacific, through cross-sectoral, inter-agency and trans-regional cooperation providing a holistic framework to maritime security.<sup>4</sup> However, in the changing geo-political scenario in the region such as the increasing Chinese footholds and assertions, the EU has sought to develop its own approach to the region to protect its interests.

In pursuance of its objectives, the EU periodically evolved strategies for dealing with Indo-pacific. This includes a Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific in 2021 which emphasized seven priority areas in dealing with Indo-Pacific such as sustainable and inclusive prosperity, green transition, ocean governance, digital governance and partnerships, connectivity, security and defence, and human security.<sup>5</sup> The EU's attention in the region was thus broad based and diversified although the security concerns for unhindered trade was certainly a top in priority. Following 2021 strategy was The Strategic Compass for Security and Defence, an ambitious plan of action adopted in March 2022 for strengthening the EU's security and defence policy by 2030. This provided a shared assessment of the strategic environment in which the EU is operating. The Strategic Compass recognized the global competition emerging in the Indo-Pacific "where geopolitical tensions endanger the rules-based order in the region and put pressure on global supply chains" and "The EU has a crucial geopolitical and economic interest in stability and security in the region".<sup>6</sup>

To "promote an open and rules-based regional security architecture, including secure sea lines of communication, capacity-building and enhanced naval presence in the Indo-Pacific" the EU has sought to work closely with ASEAN and "like-minded partners through operational cooperation on the ground" including a series of joint naval exercises and port calls" as worked out with Japan, Republic of Korea, Djibouti and India.<sup>6</sup> While such exercises are seen to become standard practice, the EU has sought to "pursue dialogue and consultation with China... especially on issues such as respect for the international law of the sea, peaceful settlement of disputes and a rules-based international order and human rights."<sup>6</sup> Concerned of Chinese assertions on South China sea and echoing the EU sentiments, the ASEAN Leaders had already in their Vision Statement on a Cohesive and Responsive ASEAN (2020) reaffirmed the "importance of maintaining and promoting peace, security, stability, safety and freedom of navigation and over-flight above the South China Sea,...conclusion of an effective and substantive

<sup>2</sup>Giulio Pugliese argues that "from the very conception, the Indo-Pacific was meant to be a counter narrative charged with strategic connotations, to balance, contain or simply dilute China's regional footprint...". See reference<sup>3</sup>



Code of Conduct in the South China Sea (COC), consistent with international law.”<sup>7</sup>

With mutuality of interests and recognizing the significance of bilateral Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (PCAs) which EU already had with many of its partners in the region and with negotiations for a new Partnership Agreement with the African, Caribbean, and Pacific (ACP) countries in the final stage, the EU showed interest in new PCAs with Thailand, Malaysia and Maldives. The EU has indicated that it would “deepen its engagement with partners that already have Indo Pacific approaches of their own - ASEAN, Australia, India, Japan, New Zealand, the Republic of Korea, the United Kingdom and the United States”.<sup>8</sup> Joint projects are underscored with Japan and India, EU’s first two “Connectivity Partners”.<sup>8</sup> The EU focus in dealing with the Indo-Pacific region was to address varied issues involving economic, political, environmental, digital, and security aspects, that bound the EU with countries of the region closely.

### ***EU alignment with South East Asia:***

Translating strategies into practice, the blueprint for closer relation with ASEAN was crafted in the ASEAN-EU Plan of Action (2023-2027), which focused on series of promotional measures like strategic dialogue and maritime cooperation for Political and Security cooperation and Economic cooperation.<sup>9</sup> Among others, security cooperation included collaboration, exchange of best practices and/or capacity building in new fields such as cyber security and combatting disinformation, evident in the ‘Enhancing Security Cooperation in and with Asia (ESIWA)’ project under the Commission’s Foreign Policy Instrument mechanism, led by the development and international cooperation agencies of France and Germany.<sup>3</sup> Regular Summits of the EU and ASEAN are held as follow-up of the EU-ASEAN partnership, besides EU participation in ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). EU representatives participate in the annual security conference, Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore. Evidently, the security aspects constitute important component in the bilateral negotiations between EU and South East Asian countries.

On 14 December 2022, EU officially signed PCA with Thailand and Comprehensive Partnership and Cooperation agreement with Malaysia. This is besides a large number of cooperation agreements on diverse areas that EU had with South East Asian countries.<sup>10</sup> This includes PCA with Phillipines (2012) and Singapore (2018).<sup>10</sup> Japan is the EU’s closest strategic partner in the Indo-Pacific region and a key ally for the implementation of the EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific.<sup>11</sup> Both have an Economic Partnership agreement since 17<sup>th</sup> July 2018 and on 2<sup>nd</sup> November 2024 new dimension was added with the signing of a New Security and Defence Partnership in which they sought to “deepen exchanges on maritime security,

aiming at promoting an open and rules-based maritime regional security architecture, including secure sea lines of communication and freedoms of navigation and over flight, in accordance with international law, in particular United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)”.<sup>12</sup>

Similarly, EU has built a close relation with India that happens to be EU’s strategic partner since 2004 and shares broadly its commitment to effective multilateralism and rule-based global order. Besides, having several trade and cooperation agreements and Joint Action framework in place and, in tune with the EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, the collaboration between the EU and India is steered by the EU-India Strategic Partnership: A Roadmap to 2025 (an offshoot of EU-India Summit on 15<sup>th</sup> July 2020) that among others seek to “enhance convergences and work together to maintain peace, stability, safety and security, especially in the Indian Ocean and the Pacific, by cooperating to preserve freedom, openness and an inclusive approach in the maritime domain...Work together on maritime initiatives for mutually-beneficial cooperation in the Indian Ocean and the Pacific”.<sup>13</sup>

### ***EU and China:***

With China the EU position has been of engagement but with caution. While EU has an active economic cooperation and diplomatic engagement with China, it was also watching with concern the growing influence and assertions of China and its larger impact. The EU’s China policy is defined in the ‘Elements for a new EU Strategy on China’ (2016) and ‘Council Conclusions EU Strategy on China’ (2016) which were reviewed in 2019 in the ‘EU-China Strategic Outlook’. The latter clearly states that “based on clearly defined interests and principles, the EU should deepen its engagement with China to promote common interests at global level’ and ‘The EU should robustly seek more balanced and reciprocal conditions governing the economic relationship.”<sup>14</sup> At the same time, the EU admits that “China’s maritime claims in the South China Sea and the refusal to accept the binding arbitration rulings issued under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea affect the international legal order and make it harder to resolve tensions affecting sea-lanes of communication vital to the EU’s economic interests.”<sup>14</sup>

The EU is aware that China is pursuing its ambitious foreign policy embedded in its economic bait with such projects like Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) with debt trap implications, and aggressive military postures especially in the South China Sea. Already China’s aggressive diplomacy and threatening military actions in its neighbourhood, its gross human rights violations in Xinjiang, arbitrary application of the national security law in Hong Kong, interference in Taiwan’s internal politics and the Covid-19 pandemic have created a negative perception about China in the EU member-states.<sup>15</sup> The EU is also not comfortable



with the China's insistence on technology transfer, handling of IPRs or investments in critical areas like 5G with potentialities for espionage and barriers to entry of EU products besides China's disregard for human rights.

But at the same time, China is the EU's second largest trading partner for goods after the United States, with bilateral trade reaching €739 billion in 2023.<sup>16</sup> The EU is dependent on China, particularly in critical sectors like rare earth minerals, semiconductors, and green technology. So given the importance of trade and economic relations of the EU with China, the EU seek to maintain good relations with China with dialogue mechanisms addressing global issues like trade, climate change, UN, WTO etc. but with a focus on overcoming asymmetries in relation and avoidance of unilateral strategic advantages to China and, establishing a norm-based global order with a call to its member states to have a "responsibility to ensure consistency with EU law, rules and policies", underscoring the importance of unity and consistency in dealing with China.<sup>16</sup> The alternatives to China's projects are also explored. Notable is the India-Middle East Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) that was launched at the G20 Leaders' Summit in New Delhi on 9 September 2023 which was envisioned as a transformative infrastructure and investment initiative and to accelerate economic growth by enhancing connectivity and trade across regions.<sup>17</sup> Although the IMEC does not explicitly attribute IMEC initiative to China factor, the move was certainly prompted by the countries like India that were not comfortable with Chinese alluring projects. The IMEC has found a ready backing by the EU that is keen on avoiding dependence on China.

### ***EU's China gamble:***

Notwithstanding the apprehension, the EU is not able to take a consistent unified position on China. Countries like Germany, France and the Netherlands consider the region as crucial for geo-political and economic purposes and have their own national guidelines for the Indo-Pacific. They are also concerned about growing Chinese influence in the region. Others are cool on developments in Indo-Pacific, and smaller countries like Malta, Luxembourg do not see security as priority area in the Indo-Pacific region. Some other EU members like Greece and Portugal are the recipients of Chinese BRI projects/ investments and are opposed to targeting China. Similarly, Hungary is part of the Budapest-Belgrade Railway, which is regarded among the BRI's flagship projects in Europe.<sup>15</sup> The early 17+1 initiative institutionalizing cooperation between China and seventeen Central and East European Countries (CEES) highlight the prominence that China enjoy among these countries. But countries like Lithuania exited from 17+1 grouping and has openly and vocally criticised China, especially over the Chinese treatment of Uyghur minorities and actions on Taiwan and even allowed Taiwan to open its office in

its capital Vilnius, leading to rift between China and the EU.<sup>15</sup> Countries like Germany increasingly focus on de-risking while pursuing trade agenda but for others, including many Central European countries issues of human rights are particularly important.<sup>18</sup>

Quite contrary, for many, prominently the Central European and Baltic states, supporting the US globally in order to ensure the US's continued commitment to Europe's security is of central importance. It was also observed by the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) research that different EU member-states have different understanding of the aim of the EU's Indo-Pacific strategy, with some like Finland, Sweden, Netherlands, Ireland, Czech Republic and Slovakia viewing it as a way to show Europe's strategic autonomy by pursuing an independent European approach to the region, others like Belgium, Lithuania and Latvian policy makers view it as tool against China, and some others like Estonia, Latvia, Poland as a means to manage the transatlantic relationship and more or less explicitly align with the US.<sup>1</sup>

This divergence in perspectives has largely affected the EU's common position on the region, particularly the nature of relation with China. Nonetheless, EU has refused to be drawn into US-China friction and has sought to pursue its own independent soft power approach even though the internal divergence with regard to China has made the EU common position difficult. In this balancing act, while cooperation exists with China on global issues like climate change, the EU is watching with concern the Chinese actions in the Indo-Pacific region and its impact on rule-based global governance. It is pursuing a challenging task of engaging China in its own terms through dialogues and discussions but avoiding of confrontation. Therefore, despite the consideration of issues in Pacific Ocean such as Taiwan Strait, the South China Sea and the East China as the security challenges in the region, the EU has not intrusively entered the South Eastern region in security related issues. In Asia Pacific its modest presence is more focussed in the Indian Ocean region. In the North West Indian Ocean it has established a framework called Co-ordinated Maritime Presence (CMP) to Co-ordinate EU member-states' existing naval assets that are already present in the region.<sup>18</sup> But by not going beyond this region prominently in security domain the EU appear to avoid confrontation with China even while maintaining a reasonable and cautious relation with it.

This balancing act is a complex and a challenging task. There is already a power struggle in the Indo-Pacific with both the US and China signalling pursuance of their hard positions in the region with their own world-views. Given the EU's divergent views on China's outreach activities in and outside the Indo-Pacific region, lack of significant military strength of its own in the region, dependence on the US for military support and balancing equation with





regional powers like India, Australia and Japan on one hand and with China on the other, whether the EU will be successful in projecting its power and influence in the region is to be seen. Further, EU's position as organisation of states and dependence on its member states for continued action restricts its 'actorness' of the state and furthering of effective policies, especially when member states do not follow EU mechanism for their own perceived interests. There is already an apprehension of US's ability to continue as a security provider for Europe and the perception appears to have witnessed upward swing with assumption of power by Trump as the US President for the second time. Coupled with this is the likely focus of the US on China to the neglect of European interest elsewhere. The war in Ukraine and migration issues has already impacted the EU's attention towards the region that at the minimum at present. While its progress in its Indo-Pacific strategy cannot be disregarded, addressing the host of internal and external issues and challenges is important for EU to sustain as a credible actor in the region and the EU has a tough task of maintaining a balance between its preferred "strategic autonomy" in the region, and alignment and active engagement with others in the region. On a different note, the EU's preference for rule based global order, multi-dimensional and inclusive growth and "network of partnerships" is likely to have a positive impact on strengthening of EU-India relations and common search for an inclusive, stable, free and secure Indo-Pacific region.

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