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## **Europecraft in the Indo-Pacific Region: Towards Pragmatic or Principled Partnership?\***

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### **Abstract**

This article argues that European statecraft, or Europecraft, in the Indo-Pacific is fundamentally shaped by, and thereby juggling between, the bifurcation of contending positionalities, namely its economic partner (pragmatic power) and principled player (normative power). This article first addresses and analyses the EU's Indo-Pacific Strategy through key concepts, namely Preferences, Priorities, Policies, and Principles. Overall, the ultimate aims of

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Brussels are to strengthen comprehensive partnership with like-minded regional players particularly ASEAN and to build its resilience, robustness and relevance in the Indo-Pacific region. The article concludes with the challenges and ways forward for the EU, especially under Spain's presidency of the Council of the EU during the second half of 2023, starting in July.

## **Introduction**

“The Indo-Pacific region and the European Union are neighbors. You would say: “Neighbors? No, they are very far away”. Well, economically, we are neighbors. We are so interlinked that economically – certainly – we are neighbors. And not only economically, but also from the geopolitical point of view and from the security point of view, we are very close ... Cooperation between us and the Indo-Pacific must be a two-way relationship.”<sup>1</sup>

— Josep Borrell, EU High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/ Vice-President of the European Commission

The Indo-Pacific is an enlarged geographical region which encompasses a vast maritime area from the east coast of Africa to the Pacific Islands and the west coast of America. However, it is a highly contested geopolitical concept.<sup>2</sup> This is largely because different actors have framed this strategic narrative differently. For the AUKUS and Quad countries, the Indo-Pacific is first and foremost about a geostrategic discourse to manage regional anxiety instigated by the rising and assertive China. This culminates in the value-laden lens of “free and open” Indo Pacific (FOIP) Strategy and therefore explains why Beijing is skeptical of this normative concept. In contrast, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations has promulgated its ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific

(AOIP) in 2019 seeking to conceptualise the Indo-Pacific region in terms of inclusivity and mutual benefits.

At the same time, the Indo-Pacific is crucial to the European Union's goal of securing "a stronger Europe in the world". In 2021, Brussels released its own "EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific".<sup>3</sup> On the one hand, the re-entry of Europe into the Indo-Pacific is steered by regional dynamics and uncertainty, in particular great power competition, maritime security challenges, de-globalisation and economic decoupling, tensions on critical supply chains, and technological disruption. Their ramifications directly affect European security and prosperity. On the other hand, the EU's geographical stretch is related to its potential to play a more active role in the region on many fronts, especially economic and maritime security.

This article argues that European statecraft, or Europecraft, in the Indo-Pacific is fundamentally shaped by, and thereby juggling between, the bifurcation of contending positionalities, namely its economic partner (pragmatic power) and principled player (normative power). This article first addresses and analyses the EU's Indo-Pacific Strategy through key concepts, namely Preferences, Priorities, Policies, and Principles. Overall, the ultimate aims of Brussels are to strengthen comprehensive partnership with like-minded regional players particularly ASEAN and to build its resilience, robustness and relevance in the Indo-Pacific region. The article concludes with the challenges and ways forward for the EU, especially under Spain's presidency of the Council of the EU during the second half of 2023, starting in July.

## **Preferences**

First of all, the EU's Indo-Pacific Strategy is manifested by different national preferences. In many issue areas, the EU with the 27-member states has not spoken with one single voice. Although it has shared a convergence of liberal principles, Europe in general has a

divergence of perspectives and preferences. France, Germany, United Kingdom, the Netherlands and Italy have their own visions of Indo Pacific.

As a resident power in the Indo-Pacific, France under Emmanuel Macron is the first EU country that announced a strategy towards the Indo-Pacific. Drawing from various presidential speeches since 2018, Paris formally published its version of Indo-Pacific Strategy in 2022, which called for a stable multipolar world order in general, and “open and inclusive” region in particular. Consolidating its strategic autonomy in Europe and beyond, France has positioned itself as a resident power in the region. It highlights four pillars of cooperation with the region, namely (1) Defence and Security, (2) Economy, Connectivity, Research and Innovation, (3) Multilateralism and Rule of Law, and (4) Climate Change, Biodiversity, Sustainable Management of Oceans.<sup>4</sup>

Unlike France’s emphasis on defence diplomacy, Germany has focused on economic tilt toward the Indo-Pacific. It announced the Indo-Pacific Policy Guideline in September 2020. According to the Guideline, Berlin “has a great interest in participating in Asia’s growth dynamics and in being involved in shaping the Indo-Pacific region, as well as in upholding global norms in regional structures.”<sup>5</sup>

Subsequently, Germany deployed military engagement with the region, such as the navy’s deployment of the frigate Bayern in 2021 and the air force’s participation in Australia’s Exercise Pitch Black in August–September 2022. In July–August 2023, the German army will take part in for the first time in Australia’s Exercise Talisman Sabre.

European middle powers such as the Netherlands and Italy also declared their own Indo-Pacific guidelines. Released in November 2020, the Dutch Indo-Pacific guideline documented that the Indo-Pacific should not become “a plaything between the great powers” but still emphasise the value-laden approach to Indo-Pacific, which should be free and open.<sup>6</sup> Holland also promised to deploy a naval ship to the Indo-Pacific every two years. For example, in 2021, the Royal

Netherlands Navy frigate Evertsen joined the UK-led Carrier Strike Group in support of freedom of navigation.

More recently, Italy proclaimed its intentions to support the EU's Indo-Pacific Strategy with the main focus on economic dimension, specifically sources of raw materials and an export market for goods. With this pragmatic approach to Indo-Pacific, Rome can hedge with China. As Undersecretary for Foreign Affairs Giorgio Silli stated, "Our inclusive vision of the Indo-Pacific allows us to continue to cultivate dialogue even with China".<sup>7</sup>

After Brexit, UK's tilt to the Indo-Pacific aims at repositioning itself as a global Britain. It is imperative for Britain to stretch beyond Europe. It has developed its own menu of Indo Pacific while strengthening a special relationship with the US and steering geopolitical ties with the Anglosphere via its membership in the AUKUS trilateral security pact. In March 2023, UK announced the AUKUS "pathway", indicating that rotational deployments of British nuclear submarines to Australia could begin as early as 2027.<sup>8</sup>

Despite the common EU's Indo-Pacific Strategy, different European players have different takes on the region. One recent example of divergent preferences is the joint trip to Beijing by Macron and EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen. Shortly after the visit, the French President said that Europe should reduce its dependency on the US to prevent Europe from "getting caught up in crises" – such as a potential conflict over Taiwan – "that are not ours". This statement was not compatible with Brussels and other EU member states. In contrast, Josep Borrell, EU High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/ Vice-President of the European Commission, declared that European navies should continue to patrol the Taiwan Strait and promote freedom of navigation in the South China Sea.<sup>9</sup>

This incident is indicative of the diplomatic misalignment between France and Brussels on China and Taiwan<sup>10</sup> and divergence of interests among European nations in defending the rules-based order regionally.

With the contending preferences among European members, ASEAN is likely be interested to hear whether EU's Indo-Pacific Strategy heralds a long-term European presence – or permanence of presence – in the region.

### **Priorities and Policies**

Despite some national differences, the EU as an intergovernmental, if not supranational, organisation has sought to juggle between two positionalities, namely the EU as an economic partner and principled player in the region. This is central to EU's Indo-Pacific Strategy, which revolves around a persisting puzzle whether the EU is a pragmatic or normative power.

Let's begin with the EU's pragmatic power, especially economic power. From this point of view, the EU's Indo-Pacific Strategy is nothing new. Its economic interests in the region can be traced back to the 1994 European Commission white paper, "Towards a New Asia Strategy", which was updated in 2021 to "Europe and Asia: A Strategic Framework for Enhanced Partnership".

Nowadays, the security paradigm espoused by the EU's 2021 Indo-Pacific Strategy also emphasises the significance of EU's maritime security. As a global trading power, it is imperative for the EU to maintain a free, safe and stable maritime environment. On March 10, 2023, Brussels released its new Maritime Security Strategy – an updated and enhanced version of its first maritime strategy from 2014 – in order to increase European overall strategic footprint in the region.

The 2023 Strategy highlights the Indo-Pacific as a region of "intense geopolitical competition" that has a "direct impact on European security and prosperity". Against a

deteriorating maritime security environment, the Strategy aims to “promote a more coherent engagement in external conflicts and crisis.”<sup>11</sup>

This new maritime security strategy is related to EU’s naval diplomacy. Firstly, member states’ navies – in particular those from the three EU member states (France, Germany and the Netherlands) – are the main actors in European naval diplomacy. Since its anti-piracy deployment off the coast of Somalia in 2011, European naval deployments – including port calls, joint naval exercises, joint surveillance and information sharing in the protection of critical maritime infrastructure in both bilateral and multilateral settings – demonstrate the willpower and capabilities of Europe in the region. This European *modus operandi* would not only enhance the maritime awareness of all EU member states but also increase interoperability among partners and reassure the EU’s commitment to regional security.<sup>12</sup>

Though not being explicitly hard, naval power per se, the EU’s naval diplomacy can contribute to soft maritime security and safety, such as in the areas of maritime domain awareness, anti-piracy operations and ocean governance.<sup>13</sup>

Second, institutionally, Brussels has several maritime security cooperative mechanisms. Under the Coordinated Maritime Presence (CMP) concept, the EU’s new maritime strategy broadens the so-called “Maritime Areas of Interest” towards the Northwest Indian Ocean (NWIO) and the Indo-Pacific in general.

During his visit to India in February 2023, Ambassador Michael Pulch, the EU’s CMP coordinator, said that “the European Union needs to engage with the outside world more than ever before, especially post Russia’s war on Ukraine and must engage closer with the Indo-Pacific, economically, politically and on some security matters.”<sup>14</sup>

Another institutional mechanism is EUNAVFOR Operation Atalanta, which coordinates political and security cooperation at sea. Since 2021, the EUNAVFOR Atalanta and the Japanese

Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF) conducted three joint naval exercises in the Arabian Sea while pursuing joint naval exercises with India (June 2021), South Korea (October 2021), and India and Indonesia (August 2022), respectively.

Furthermore, Brussels appointed a liaison officer at the Information Fusion Center in Singapore in August 2022. Its defence commitment is to hold an annual EU naval exercise, possibly from 2024 onwards. The EU also promises to step up cooperation with regional organisations such as ASEAN and seek to develop a Dialogue Partner with the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA).<sup>15</sup>

Consequently, it is likely to see more European naval presence in the Indo Pacific region in the near future. Together with maritime security, naval diplomacy is a way to strengthen EU's non-resident Indo-Pacific posture.

Nevertheless, prioritisation is key to any strategy. The ongoing war in Ukraine has raised questions about EU's priority – especially how Brussels plans to strengthen regional economic and defence engagement. This priority is related to time, capacity, capabilities and policy/ priority areas.<sup>16</sup> This is a major tradeoff that the EU is going to make urgently with regard to Europe and the Indo-Pacific.

EU's visionary narrative eventually has to be supported by consistent practices and commitments on the ground. Otherwise the EU would run the risk of irrelevance and losing effectiveness as an Indo-Pacific player.

## **Principles**

This leads to the last point about principles. That is to say, the EU from the outset has positioned itself as a principled normative power in the world. Drawing from Ian Manners' concept of "Normative Power Europe", it presents the EU as an ideational power commonly shared by



liberal principles and norms. European foreign policy is henceforth geared toward the promotion and protection of the liberal rules-based international order. In general, the normative power approach positions the EU as a principled security player in the Indo-Pacific. In the article, we can see that there are both the divergence and convergence of principles between the EU and ASEAN.

For the divergence of principles, European normative power is not fully compatible with so-called “ASEAN Way” of non-interference in internal affairs, exemplified in “quiet diplomacy” in the case of Myanmar under the military junta. Unsurprisingly, with its commitment and determination to uphold the liberal rules-based international order and free and open Indo Pacific, the EU’s promotion of democracy, rule of law, human rights and fundamental freedoms, and international law is antithetical to ASEAN’s conservative positionality and authoritarian regimes in the region. Nevertheless, European normative power is not only crucial to the EU political development but also as a contribution to its long-term strategic interests in the Indo-Pacific region.

As aforementioned, maritime security is also part of European normative power. The EU endorses freedom of navigation, maritime multilateralism and rules-based order at sea. Simultaneously, Brussels addresses marine environmental degradation in the Indo-Pacific, which is caused by global warming, pollution and illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing. With regards to the latter, the EU has since 2010 initiated the “carding scheme”, which is a key mechanism for tackling IUU fishing. Accordingly, the EU has banned seafood exports to European markets for non-cooperative countries. Perhaps, the fight against IUU fishing as a European norm is currently one of the thorniest issues in ASEAN-EU relations.

However, it does not mean that EU and ASEAN are normatively diverging and could not work effectively together. For one, the EU does not explicitly consider China as a strategic threat, but rather pragmatically, a strategic opportunity and economic partner with which they should be working together. The EU is currently undergoing a recalibration with China, culminating in the

China-EU Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI) and the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) process of which Beijing is part. This threat perception or in fact its lack thereof shared a common ground with ASEAN and a number of Indo-Pacific states.

In other words, despite its “free and open” approach to Indo-Pacific, the EU like ASEAN has emphasised on the inclusiveness of the regional architecture, which should work with all partners including China. The inclusive approach is recently addressed at the second EU Indo-Pacific Ministerial Forum in Stockholm in May 2023.<sup>17</sup> Still, with the AUKUS and Quad looming large in the Indo-Pacific region, there is the uneasy and uncomfortable question of where the EU and European countries stand in the evolving Sino-US strategic rivalry.

In addition, the EU and ASEAN have agreed upon non-traditional challenges and concerns affecting the regional stability and resilience. The four areas outlined in the AOIP – namely, maritime cooperation, connectivity, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and economic and other possible areas of cooperation – are compatible with EU’s Indo-Pacific Strategy and its main priority areas.<sup>18</sup>

Other normative agendas such as promoting UN sustainable development goals, sustainable ocean governance, gender equality, green partnership (supporting the Paris Agreement) and post-COVID recovery are mutual areas of cooperation.

Last but not least, the EU’s Indo-Pacific is not similar to the American approach, which is bolstering minilateral frameworks such as Quad, AUKUS, Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) and the likes, thereby implicitly bypassing ASEAN Centrality. On the contrary, Brussels has engaged with ASEAN-led multilateral institutions as well as within the ASEM process.

Despite its norm entrepreneurship, the EU is able to cooperate with ASEAN on flexible and pragmatic basis. However, the positional bifurcation of EU’s pragmatic and normative power, to a certain extent, instigates the incoherence and inconsistency in European common policy towards

the Indo-Pacific region. Though in the long-term perspective, the EU should address and advocate ASEAN Centrality in order to strengthen its comprehensive partnership with ASEAN and sharpen its permanence of presence in the region.

### **Peroration: It's Geopolitics, Stupid?**

Against this backdrop, all resident and non-resident players are inevitably going to navigate the intense geopoliticisation of the twenty-first century Indo-Pacific region. Spain will hold the presidency of the Council of the EU during the second half of 2023, starting in July. As the incoming President of the Council of the EU, Madrid has a crucial role in advancing the EU's policy responses not only to the situation in Ukraine but also geopolitical competition in the Indo-Pacific. Whatever the result of general elections in the country on 23 July, Spain will become an indispensable partner for the Indo-Pacific states including China on the European stage in the next half of this year.

The key challenges for Europecraft in the Indo-Pacific region are at least threefold, as follows:

- (1) how to deemphasise and downplay geopolitical rivalry among great powers. That is, how to “de-risk” the Indo-Pacific region and diversify relationships in order to avoid the trap of choosing sides in the emerging US-Chinese bipolar system.<sup>19</sup>
- (2) how to demonstrate and strengthen multilateral cooperation through the existing and expanding ASEAN-centered institutional architecture.
- (3) how to develop the 3M principles, namely Mutual Trust, Mutual Respect and Mutual Benefit. These principles are based on the framework of ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific.

Having said that, the EU and ASEAN have shared common concerns for the future prospects of Indo Pacific region. What is really needed is a joint vision and robust action plan for engagement and implementation in the region.

To paraphrase Josep Borrell, EU High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/ Vice-President of the European Commission, the Indo-Pacific region and the EU are very close “neighbors” from the economic, geopolitical and security points of view. To effectively manage the intense geopolitical contestations, intercontinental cooperation between them should be mutually pragmatic and principled, largely based on “a two-way relationship”. This is one of key tests for the EU’s robustness, resilience and relevance in this neighborly region in the near future.

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