

Assessing the EU's new Indo-Pacific strategy

The EU has unveiled a new Indo-Pacific strategy which aims to strengthen cooperation with countries in the region. Garima Mohan assesses what the new strategy might mean for Indo-Pacific states and how it could impact on relations between the EU and China.

Joining a growing list of countries and actors around the world, the EU formally released its [Indo-Pacific strategy](#) on 16 September. Over the last two years, European policy has transitioned rapidly, from barely even using the term Indo-Pacific to reaching an EU-wide consensus that “the economic and political weight of the region makes it a key player in shaping the international order” and that Europe needs to quickly reassess its engagement strategy.

For those who wonder why Europe should engage with a distant region on the other side of the world, the strategy's opening paragraphs make clear that the “futures of the EU and the Indo-Pacific are inextricably linked given the interdependence of the economies and the common global challenges”. Aimed mostly at a European domestic audience which might question why resources are being allocated to the Indo-Pacific when Europe faces many challenges in its own neighbourhood, the strategy makes clear that trade between the two regions is higher than anywhere in the world. The EU is the top investor and one of the largest trade partners for Indo-Pacific economies, and the region is the second largest destination for EU exports. As a result, the strategy argues, Europe has a stake in the region and needs to do more to “strengthen its strategic reach and its supply chains.”

A key challenge in the Indo-Pacific however is the role an increasingly assertive China will play in the region. The strategy implicitly recognises China's attempts to alter the regional status quo, mentioning “tensions around contested territories and maritime zones”, and a “significant military build-up including by China”. It argues that crises in regional hotspots like the South and East China Seas and the Taiwan Strait may have “a direct impact on European security and prosperity”.

How exactly then does the EU plan to engage with the Indo-Pacific? There are three key instruments mentioned in the strategy: diversifying and strengthening partnerships with “like-minded partners”; making sure the EU's existing engagements in the region serve Europe's interests and align with the goals of its key regional partners; and finally, contributing not just to security and stability but also regional needs around infrastructure investments, resilient supply chains, and emerging technology where a lot of competition in the Indo-Pacific is unfolding.

The EU's Indo-Pacific strategy marks a departure in its approach to the region, as it stresses diversifying partnerships beyond China. While Japan and the ASEAN have traditionally been Europe's partners of choice in Asia, the strategy also shows how far the Europe-India partnership has come, and it makes several references to Taiwan, Australia, the US, Canada and South Korea as other “like-minded” partners.

Although the EU takes an “inclusive” and “cooperation based” approach to the Indo-Pacific, stressing the need to work with China on common challenges, it adds one important qualifier. The EU will pursue “multifaceted” engagement with China, encouraging it to play a peaceful role in the region. At the same time, the EU will “continue to protect its essential interests and promote its values” and will push back “where fundamental disagreements exist, such as on human rights”. This is remarkable because almost no other European Indo-Pacific strategy has explicitly highlighted these tensions in Europe-China relations.

An important dimension of the Indo-Pacific is the emergence of flexible coalitions among like-minded partners, particularly the Quadrilateral between the US, India, Japan and Australia. While outlining its approach to China, the EU strategy also opens the possibility and willingness to work with other partners and coalitions. It explicitly mentions working with Quad working groups on vaccines, climate change and emerging technologies.

Finally, the EU mentions areas where it would like to work with these like-minded partners, and where Europe seeks to contribute to Indo-Pacific stability. This includes security and defence where the European focus seems to be on ensuring a “meaningful” European naval presence and making sure there is more intra-European coordination particularly through mechanisms like [Coordinated Maritime Presences](#). It also mentions increasing joint naval activities including joint exercises, port calls, reinforcing EU naval diplomacy and participating in multilateral exercises.

Security in the Indo-Pacific is about more than just deploying frigates, where European navies face obvious limitations and resource constraints. The EU also wants to make sure its existing capacity building programmes function more strategically. The strategy mentions many projects around maritime domain awareness and information sharing, such as the decision to expand the [CRIMARIO project](#) to Southeast Asia and the South Pacific, and working with regional information fusion centres.

The EU also wants to step up its defence diplomacy, deploy military advisors to EU delegations, and set up security and defence dialogues with more partners, including on challenges like counterterrorism, cyber security, maritime security and non-proliferation. It has already started pilot programmes to explore closer security cooperation with India, Indonesia, Japan, Korea, Singapore and Vietnam. The EU also explicitly mentions doing more in the Indian Ocean, which is in its near neighbourhood and constitutes a “gateway to the Indo-Pacific”.

However, the EU can have the most impact on questions of economic security in the Indo-Pacific. Here the strategy takes a broader approach, going beyond concluding more free-trade agreements and aiming to work towards resilient and diversified supply chains, stronger rules against unfair practices such as economic coercion and forced technology transfers, and addressing strategic dependencies in supply chains (e.g. in relation to semiconductors) by working with partners like Japan, Korea and Taiwan.

There are other areas where the region is looking for alternatives to Chinese investments and technology, and where Europe has something to contribute. The strategy for example mentions creating digital partnerships, including the recently concluded one with India which focuses on AI, 5G and quantum technologies. On infrastructure connectivity, the EU has just announced its “Global Gateway” to provide alternatives to China’s Belt and Road Initiative. Indo-Pacific partners like Japan and India have been the first to conclude a connectivity partnership with the EU, and it also wants to plug into and seek complementarity with existing initiatives by Australia, Korea, the US and Canada.

Similar to the Quad working groups, which seek to provide public goods in the region and deal with global issues, the EU strategy also focuses on climate change, ocean governance, health, and the response to Covid-19, including better access to and distribution of vaccines.

While it remains to be seen whether the new strategy will have a major impact, for Europe’s partners, the strategy does provide some clear answers on where Europe stands on key Indo-Pacific debates. It also gives some insight into the EU’s approach to dealing with China and the potential for the EU to work with like-minded partners and in flexible coalitions.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: [European Council](#)
