



# Maritime Road to 2030: EU's Indo-Pacific Footprint and India

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December 2022



## Summary

Europe's role and presence in the Indo-Pacific has become a matter of great strategic importance in the current global politics. China's disruptive role in the region, especially with its hardening stance towards Taiwan and burgeoning relations with Russia, have forced a shift in the European Union's (EU) outlook towards the Indo-Pacific. With the Indian Ocean being a gateway to the region, the EU's Indo-Pacific outlook and Maritime Security Strategy (MSS) require careful scrutiny.

This policy paper looks at the EU's policy frameworks – like the MSS, Strategic Compass and the Indo-Pacific strategy – to understand their complementarities and impact on its presence in the Indo-Pacific domain. Through a review of such an integrated EU approach, which emphasizes regional maritime multilateralism alongside bilateral frameworks, the paper outlines key trends that Brussels will need to contend with over the coming decade, including dissonance over the China factor and collaboration with regional middle powers.

The paper highlights that moving forward, the EU must focus on broadening partnerships in the Indian Ocean, and collaboration with states like India, as well as greater participation in regional multilateral forums, is critical. India-EU maritime diplomacy is at a nascent stage and requires continued impetus; the paper outlines key policy recommendations for such India-EU cooperation. The EU's Indo-Pacific approach is constructive, inclusive and non-confrontational. Whether it moves beyond its limited scope and translates into meaningful action remains to be seen.<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

The ascent of Maritime links have been historically significant to the development of Europe. The unprecedented economic growth of the 21<sup>st</sup> century saw the emergence of new economies in Asia and Europe benefitted immensely from the flourishing network of global maritime trade flows. However, over the last two decades, the maritime domain has been facing a number of traditional and non-traditional security threats, from both non-state and state actors. This is nowhere more evident than in the Indo-Pacific—a “region of flash points”, which has simultaneously emerged as the world's economic, political, and strategic centre of gravity, making it a strategic focus for Europe.

Europe's strategic turn to Asia first began in 1994 with the release of the European Commission's communication “Towards a New Asia Strategy”, which was updated in 2001 as “Europe and Asia: A Strategic Framework for Enhanced Partnerships”. However, these frameworks were largely trade and investment-centric looking to

strengthen “mutual awareness” between the two regions, as well as deepen political dialogues for regional security. Maritime engagement with Asia remained off the table for a long time, largely due to a lack of European political will to develop a strategic direction towards the region. Even the European Union Maritime Security Strategy (EUMSS) adopted in 2014 did not provide specific details because of the assertion at the time was that the EUMSS was unlikely to engage with Asia-Pacific because of the “geographic division of labour” within the transatlantic relationship and the US's growing pivot to Asia.

Moving forward, the EU's lack of a credible naval presence in the Indo-Pacific and its disinclination to take sides in the then brewing US-China hegemonic competition made it favour boosting bilateral ties between member states and third countries over involvement in regional cooperation per se. This enabled a greater bonhomie with China and what the European countries saw as a mutually beneficial arrangement since they did not envisage China's swiftly growing footprint in their

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<sup>1</sup> Cover image source: Prime Minister's Office (GODL-India)

own backyard of the Arctic and Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). Nonetheless, the EU's absence in the maritime security architecture of Asia was contended as not so much a "conscious strategic choice" but a compulsion.

In 2016, the global strategy for the EU's foreign and security policy highlighted the "direct" connection between European prosperity and Asian security suggesting that Europe was gearing towards upping its security role in the region. Energised by the isolationist foreign policy pursued by former US President Donald Trump, and the rapidly intensifying US-China strategic competition, calls for EU strategic autonomy necessitated an independent approach to the Indo-Pacific's security needs.

Thus, in 2018, the EU stepped up its proactive engagement with the region through its connectivity strategy, finally recognising the increasing threat from an openly belligerent China. Importantly, the EUMSS action plan was also revised in the same year taking into consideration the rapidly changing geopolitical landscape and the need to stake a claim as an emerging and potentially credible maritime actor in the (re)shaping of the security architecture in Asia.

In short, the 2016 global strategy for the EU's foreign and security policy foreshadowed the European intent to pursue economic cooperation with China whilst leveraging enhanced diplomacy with local partners such as India, Japan, and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) states, especially in the maritime security arena. These are now policy features of the EU's Indo-Pacific strategy, meaning it was not an abrupt intervention but the culmination of a slow build-up that began in the 1990s.

However, Europe now faces a difficult balancing act between the Indo-Pacific and its own regional security. Will the already financially burdened member states support the EU's foray into a geographically distant region when their own neighbourhood is experiencing the gravest security crisis in years with the ongoing Ukrainian crisis?

The far-sighted response would have to factor in China's menacing manoeuvres in the Taiwan Strait, especially post the US House of Representatives' Speaker Nancy Pelosi's controversial Asia trip. The EU is officially committed to the "one China" policy while "preserving peace and the status quo in the Taiwan Strait", but the on-ground reality is firmly rooted against Chinese military manoeuvres in the Taiwan Strait as the Ambassador to China, Jorge Toledo, made it clear the EU would unequivocally support the US-led allied response. The EU also signed the G7 statement that condemned militarisation and destabilising actions in the region, calling out China for using the visit as a "pretext" for aggression. With China lodging diplomatic complaints against the G7-EU statement, and expectations that Xi will increase assertive actions now the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)'s 20<sup>th</sup> National Congress (held in October 2022) is out of the way, the relationship between the EU and China is likely to suffer further in 2023 and beyond.

As the EU prepares to update its MSS and action plan, it is worthwhile to look into the current political trends that may influence the EU's emergence as a maritime actor in the Indo-Pacific in the coming years.<sup>2</sup> What are the prospects of cooperation with Indo-Pacific states such as Australia, India, Japan, and South Korea? How would the EU tackle China's maritime influence given the increasing tensions in the South and East China Seas and its limited security capabilities? Can the EU utilise the French, German, and Dutch maritime capabilities to supplement the bloc's lacunae? In what ways can the EU-India maritime diplomacy be strengthened and revitalised to protect their Indian Ocean interests?

This paper attempts to outline the EU's maritime diplomacy trajectory for the Indo-Pacific in the near future (up to 2030) by first briefly examining the recent relevant policy revisions for the Indo-Pacific cooperation strategy (2021) and the EUMSS and its action plan (2018). It then postulates a few foreign policy trends that could determine future updates on the regional maritime strategy. It asserts that the EU must consistently

<sup>2</sup> In June 2022, the European Commission launched a public consultation including maritime security experts and the general public as part of its upcoming revision of the EUMSS and its action plan. See [https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-](https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/have-your-say/initiatives/13491-Update-of-the-EU-maritime-security-strategy-and-its-action-plan/public-consultation_en)

[regulation/have-your-say/initiatives/13491-Update-of-the-EU-maritime-security-strategy-and-its-action-plan/public-consultation\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/have-your-say/initiatives/13491-Update-of-the-EU-maritime-security-strategy-and-its-action-plan/public-consultation_en)



pursue its multilateral approach aimed at economic exchanges, development and capacity building to succeed in fully engaging Indo-Pacific partners and supporting its balancing act. The paper also explores the challenges and obstacles in the EU's engagement with the Indian Ocean, and looks at the special case of EU-India maritime cooperation, before providing policy recommendations until 2030. The paper concludes by summarising the EU's comprehensive approach in the Indo-Pacific.

### Growing Strategic Attention: Advancing Complimentary Strategies?

The EU as a global trading power is critically dependent on the existence of a free, open, and safe maritime domain: 90 percent of its external and 40 percent of its internal trade is via the sea. Hence, the Indo-Pacific, through which 50 percent of the global trade passes, is a “natural partner” and an inexorably vital region for the EU. The EU's relatively recent embrace of the Indo-Pacific construct has allowed the bloc to move beyond the obvious economic and development aims into the strategic arena. Its stress on maritime security is a prime example. The intensified military build-up and instability in the region has compelled the EU to enhance its presence in order to protect its interests and secure free and open maritime supply routes in the South China Sea, for instance.

The slated aligning of the upcoming revised EUMSS with other EU policies such as the Strategic Compass will pave the way for enhanced maritime diplomacy in the Indo-Pacific too, providing concrete outcomes for the EU's Indo-Pacific strategy. The following sections briefly look at the scope of these maritime goals.

#### **Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific**

The release of the EU's strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific in September 2021 marked the beginning of a new European approach to the region. Even as the EU continues to focus on investment and trade—as seen with the launch of its Global Gateway strategy that will mobilise €300 billion in investments between 2021 and 2027—the EU's Indo-Pacific strategy shows that Brussels has also become increasingly attentive

to the region's geo-security environment. The strategy pins down the EU's decision to step up its strategic engagement in the Indo-Pacific region primarily on the high-level of interconnectedness between the regions. Particularly, as the “intense geopolitical competition” (referring to the US and China) that has emerged in the region is threatening to derail the EU's trade and security interests, the EU has been compelled to take appropriate independent actions.

The strategy covers a wide range with its seven key priority areas, namely sustainable and inclusive prosperity; green transition; ocean governance; digital governance and partnerships; connectivity; security and defence; and human security. However, its focus on security and defence takes on added importance, especially as ties between the EU and China continue to deteriorate. Further, the focus on building a “free and open Indo-Pacific for all while building strong and lasting partnerships”—in line with the vision of “like-minded” partner states of India, Japan, the US, and Australia (together also referred to as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue or Quad)—is aimed at ensuring its interests in the Indo-Pacific and its potential role in the region.

For the security and defence of this region, therefore, the EU's strategy has outlined an action plan, which aims to advance an open and rules-based regional security design, look to secure SLOCs, promote capacity building, and upgrade its maritime presence via EU member states. Most importantly, to show its active presence, the EU will look to lead more joint exercises and port calls with Indo-Pacific partners, including multilateral exercises with the key focus of fighting piracy and safeguarding freedom of navigation operations, as well as intensify dialogue mechanisms with partner states.

It is important to note that the EU's Indo-Pacific strategy is ultimately one that is driven by cooperation. Looking to build on “principled and long-term” engagement, the EU has charted a set vision to oversee its engagement with Indo-Pacific partners that seeks to “level the playing

field”, “reinforce its role as a reliable partner”, and “reinforce cooperation with multilateral and regional organisations” such as ASEAN. The centrality of ASEAN and focus on the Indian Ocean as the gateway for EU in the Indo-Pacific have further highlighted Brussels’ attempts to engage in the region to protect geo-economic interests, opening room for bilateral and multilateral linkages with states like India, Japan, and South Korea.

However, although the EU categorically supports the ASEAN-led process for an effective and legally binding code of conduct for the South China Sea, in the past, divisions between EU member states on such issues due to Chinese clout have projected a weak image. As the present circumstances including the Ukrainian war and the Taiwan situation have dented China’s influence even in CEE countries and are changing the overall European threat perception of China, potentially allowing for a less ambiguous security response in the region too.

Above all, strengthened strategic dialogue and cooperation with its Indo-Pacific partners at multiple levels, as well as greater internal coordination between its member states, will ultimately determine the fate of the EU’s new direction in the region.

### **EUMSS**

The EU’s Indo-Pacific strategy draws from the EUMSS, the action plan for which was adopted in 2014 and revised in 2018. Touted as a “forward-looking maritime security strategy”, the EUMSS seeks to “protect the EU’s global maritime interests and promote the EU as a strong contributor to global maritime security” by entering into “more effective and credible international partnerships”. Its action plan also contributes to the implementation of the EU Strategic Agenda (2019-2024).

The EUMSS pays heed to the EU-ASEAN partnership, too, via its outlook for the Indian and Pacific Oceans: The EU’s strategic approach to cooperation with Asian partners on maritime security is based on “neutrality and expertise”. The EU-ASEAN Plan of Action (2018-2022) was adopted with an aim to enhance dialogue and cooperation over maritime security and defence

matters in the ASEAN-led security architecture, such as maritime security, peacekeeping, counterterrorism, and humanitarian assistance. However, the currently valid action plan does not mention engagement with wider regional states (there is an absence of the now used Indo-Pacific terminology) and hence the intent to develop an “EU strategic approach to (maritime) security in Asia” remains unfulfilled, which the updated EUMSS will certainly revise.

Nonetheless, as part of the EU’s evolving maritime security initiatives, in February 2022, the European Council launched the implementation of the Coordinated Maritime Presences (CMP) concept in the north-western Indian Ocean, building on the effectiveness of this concept in the pilot case in the Gulf of Guinea (launched last year). The newly announced expansion of the CMP, which had been in the air for some time, will strengthen the EU’s maritime diplomacy, by complementing the activities of both the EU and its member states in the region, while respecting the mandate and chain of command of the EU Naval Force (EUNAVFOR) Operation Atalanta, which is within the framework of the European Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). Implementing the CMP in the Indo-Pacific will ensure a wider European presence and enhance the EU’s image as an international guarantor of the rule of law.

Further, an important aspect of the EU’s vision for the Indo-Pacific is to strengthen ocean governance, in order to protect against the degradation of maritime resources by pollution or overfishing by pursuing blue economy activities, in compliance with international laws such as United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and deeper engagement with frameworks like the ASEAN Regional Forum. The sustainable development of maritime resources was identified in the EU’s Blue Growth Strategy and contributes to the achievement of the European Green Deal. The updated EUMSS will likely align with the 2022 joint communication on international ocean governance, which is an integral part of the EU’s implementation of the UN’s 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

### **Measures for Increasing Maritime and Naval Presence—Countdown to 2030**

Europe's role in the Indo-Pacific must involve a credible naval presence that "reassures partners in the region and acts as a deterrent". With Europe's limited capacity to project its naval strength in a distant region, its strategy to develop such a credible naval presence will require a smarter policy framework that focuses on pooling resources and working with Indo-Pacific partners by rotating forces in designated zones of responsibility. To mitigate inconsistencies with the Strategic Compass and other more recent policy turns, the updated EUMSS will look to strengthen the framework outlook in view of the increasing threat perception and risks in the maritime domain today. For example, the EU can ensure a more assertive maritime presence and project an increased credibility quotient by:

- improving the interoperability of the EU's naval forces through live exercises;
- organising regular naval exercises with member states and other relevant actors (e.g. Quad states) to enhance capacity building and maritime resilience/readiness;
- collaborating with partners, including regional actors and EU member states, to hinder unlawful acts at sea, such as piracy, trafficking, excessive claims on disputed areas, access denial, and hybrid threats;
- enhancing capabilities (e.g. increasing civil-military information sharing and developing critical technological solutions) to protect maritime resources and critical infrastructure;
- strengthening the EU's maritime security awareness mechanisms;
- developing cutting-edge technology in naval platforms (e.g. unmanned and autonomous vehicles); and
- Strengthening dialogue as well as corresponding joint actions on defence and security with Indo-Pacific partners, with emphasis on middle powers.

Thus, the EUMSS (upcoming revised version) and the EU strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific are a part of the EU's integrated approach, with an emphasis on regional maritime multilateralism alongside bilateral frameworks. Undoubtedly, regional multilateralism has

equipped the EU to successfully combat non-traditional threats in the Indo-Pacific, and not just respond to the rising geo-political tensions. For instance, EUNAVFOR's Operation Atalanta, which has conducted successful joint naval activities with Indo-Pacific partners like Japan, India, and Djibouti, is primarily committed to peacekeeping and anti-piracy. The regional maritime multilateralism-security vision will also enable the EU to focus more on the ASEAN security frameworks like the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM+) and the East Asia Summit. Such consolidated actions will not only promote the development of a regional maritime security architecture, but also allow the EU to emerge as a greater maritime actor in the Indo-Pacific.

### **Parsing Major Trends for EU—Prospects for 2030**

The US-China strategic competition is still the predominant factor shaping the Indo-Pacific security architecture. However, the region's middle powers such as India and Japan are showcasing increasing assertiveness in their foreign policies and are projecting greater power ambitions by extending their regional and global outreach. The increasing security intervention through minilaterals like the Quad and the controversial Australia-UK-US (AUKUS) defence pact, as well as potential trilaterals (e.g. India-EU-Japan) will allow the EU and its member states to develop tie-ups at a regional level and ensure a balanced, enhanced maritime presence. For example, the EU's CMP could allow for a multinational naval presence for political signalling, naval diplomacy, and information gathering; also, its Critical Maritime Routes programme could promote extended outreach and cooperation with local partner naval forces.

#### **Changing China calculus**

Even though the China-EU relationship is not entirely adversarial yet, especially compared to the China-US equation, the post-COVID pandemic dependency fallout, the Ukraine war, and the latest Taiwan situation post Pelosi's visit are hardening the European's stance against China. The EU while acknowledging its deteriorating relations with China has continued to champion the economic partner angle: China's

trade with the EU is on the rise—both exports to and imports from China reached their peak in 2021 (€223 billion and €472 billion, respectively). However, for the EU, China's burgeoning relations with Russia amid war in Europe (or what the EU Chief Diplomat Josep Borrell calls “pro-Russian neutrality”) will hinder the extent of cooperation in areas such as investment (e.g. the stalled Comprehensive Agreement on Investment, CAI), blue economy, and climate action.

The EU stresses on “principled diplomacy”, so outright embrace of China (as prevalent pre-2019) has already been replaced by conditional cooperation; post-2019, China has become the EU's partner, competitor, and systemic rival. However, the present exigent circumstances may necessitate a more concrete paradigm shift—from systemic rival to *ideological adversary*—in the coming years.

The EU is no longer unwilling to “compartmentalise” its equation with China into neat brackets: ignoring differences with China owing to the latter's unpalatable Ukraine war stance or human rights violations while riding on positive outcomes such as increasing trade. The recent EU-China summit (April 2022) with its lack of a joint statement or deliverables is evidence of the creeping but concrete divergence between the two. If the present scenario continues or gets exacerbated, for the EU, in the fight between principled geopolitics and economic benefits, the former will hold sway.

Thus, a trend towards greater transatlantic convergence vis-à-vis China and enhanced presence in the sea courtesy of Indo-Pacific partners and EU member states is likely, primarily due to the Chinese strengthened attempts to change the status quo in the Taiwan Strait by seeking to normalise its intensive military activities in and around the region. Notably, the work report of the recently concluded 20<sup>th</sup> National Congress of the CCP highlighted the Party's aim to build China into a “strong maritime country” with a focus on strengthening capacity for ensuring its national security in the maritime domain. Overall, the report indicated the continuation of the assertive foreign and security

policies that have become Xi Jinping's hallmark. In this context, the EU (and the world) can expect to see Beijing persist with its aggressive maritime posture in the region and efforts to further build-up their naval strength. The EU will showcase greater urgency to resist China's “excessive” claims in the East and South China Seas and oppose the “new normal” around the Taiwan Strait, as well as proactively find ways to hinder growing Chinese influence in the Indian Ocean.

### **Growing Affinity with Indo-Pacific Middle Powers**

The EU is already engaged in bilateral maritime security frameworks with the regional like-minded middle powers. For example, several Indo-Pacific partners have participated in the CSDP missions and operations. The EU has also finalised Framework Participation Agreements (FPAs) with Australia, South Korea, New Zealand, and Vietnam, which scales up its defence and security cooperation. In addition, the EU's project on Enhancing Security Cooperation in and with Asia (ESIWA) supports security and defence (counter-terrorism, cyber security, maritime security, and crisis management) through “tailor-made cooperation” with middle powers like India, Japan, South Korea, and Vietnam, while holding out scope for deeper collaboration with the Quad.

Moreover, the EU and Japan have a strategic partnership, which features maritime security cooperation. Japan's Maritime Self-Defence Force (JMSDF) also frequently conducts joint naval exercises with the EUNAVFOR, such as the trilateral EU-Japan-Djibouti anti-piracy exercise in May 2021. Both India and Japan are also partners in the EU's Critical Maritime Routes in the Indian Ocean (CRIMARIO) project, a capacity-building initiative to enhance Maritime Domain Awareness in the western Indian Ocean. The project's possible extension to the South China Sea would boost joint deterrence measures.

Similarly, Australia has contributed to EUCAP NESTOR, an EU-led maritime capacity building mission in the Horn of Africa and western Indian Ocean. The EU's plans to expand its CRIMARIO project to the southern Pacific will extend its

cooperative maritime security ambit with Australia, which courtesy the FPA is qualified to participate in the CSDP missions and operations. However, there are lingering questions about the alignment of visions and values with the diverse Indo-Pacific partners, as well as the lack of interest within several EU member states to deepen engagement in a geographically distant region. Many Southeast Asian states, for instance, are uncomfortable with the inflexible universal ethic that is associated with the EU: The EU's influence is seen through "intrusive", "conditional" political lens, as compared to ASEAN's non-interfering, inclusive albeit inefficient, model.

Moreover, in the event of a Taiwan contingency, a nuclear fallout in East Asia, or an India-China standoff in the IOR, the EU's free and open rhetoric will need to be fleshed out. But these are still early days; as the EU's maritime strategy in the Indo-Pacific crystallises, the coming years will witness better coordination and enhanced interaction between EU and these regional powers.

Notwithstanding the differences in normative understanding, the regional powers are keen to diversify their security cooperation due to the increasingly tedious new cold war situation in the Indo-Pacific amid their growing need to protect national interests, raise their global profiles, and move towards a multipolar order to balance the noxious effects of the continuing bipolar narrative peddled by the US and China.

The EU should utilise this ennui of unending geopolitical conflict in wider Asia, and try to pursue a balanced, inclusive, and cooperative approach, as laid out in its Indo-Pacific frameworks. The deepening of ties with the middle powers will also help gain traction in building outreach with smaller developing countries, as well as in regional forums like ASEAN and Quad, through which meaningful actions can be initiated. For example, the EU's engagement with the India-Australia-Japan-led Supply Chain Resilience Initiative (SCRI) via the Global Gateway would be a timely endeavor to offset Europe's overdependence on Chinese supply chains

### **Seeking Greater Complementarities with Member States**

Before the latest EU strategy was announced, Europe had already embraced the Indo-Pacific construct with three of its major member states, namely France (2018), Germany (September 2020), and the Netherlands (November 2020) successively outlining their goals and presence in the Indo-Pacific. Out of the three, only France is a "resident power" with territories in the region, which become a central part of its strategy; for the other two, trade and investment and the security concerns arising out of economic security remain key. Hence, the EU's strategy draws from the security of overseas territories, economic concerns, and the geopolitical dynamics.

Notably, the geographical definitions vary, as follows:

- EU: spanning from the east coast of Africa to the Pacific Island states
- France: extending from the eastern shores of Africa to the Pacific
- Germany: entire region characterised by the Indian Ocean and the Pacific
- Netherlands: countries around the Indian and Pacific Oceans, including the South China and East China Seas, extending from Pakistan to the islands of the Pacific

This small but significant variation could influence the degree and extent of maritime security cooperation, but as the shipping routes that link Europe are central to all concepts, it will be imperative to fight common challenges threatening European prosperity and security together.

The EU and these member states are also keen to deepen partnerships with ASEAN and "like-minded" Indo-Pacific states, particularly Australia, India, Japan, and New Zealand. As the economic powerhouse South Korea is a recent convert to the concept and with North Korea's increasing nuclear ambitions, in the coming years, the bloc and its member states will certainly look to enhance engagement in East Asia, too.

The China factor may cause some dissonance, as France and Germany are still not too keen to label



China a “threat”, in contrast to Europe’s clear-cut adversarial position on Russia today. The collusion narrative between Russia and China is surprisingly absent, particularly as Germany continues to be “soft” on China. Nonetheless, both France and Germany are recalibrating their economic overdependence on China, as also strengthening their maritime presence via patrols and exercises.

In 2022, French, German, and Dutch forces also participated in the biennial Pitch Black air force exercise hosted by Australia that included the usual regional partners like India, Japan, and South Korea, among others, strengthening the EU member states’ new security intent. The French participation is also evidence that the AUKUS’s controversial impact will not overshadow its Indo-Pacific endeavours.

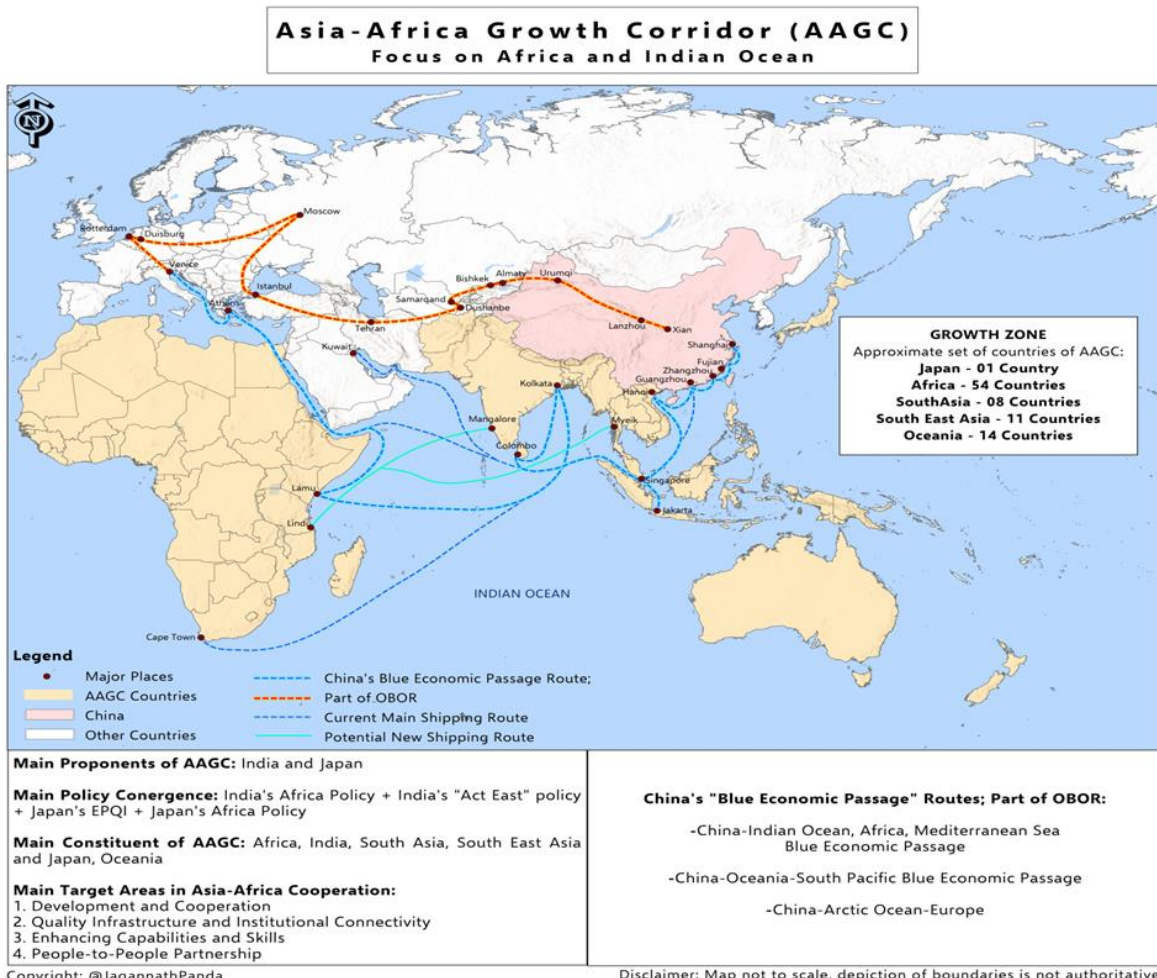
Overall, the EU’s Indo-Pacific strategy and ensuing initiatives will positively reinforce the maritime presence as well as protect the interests of these member states, and vice versa.

Raising the EU’s, as well as the members’ own, profile as a security actor and extending outreach are common goals. Thus, a veracious future trajectory will include the member states’ liaising with the EU to advance common interests; recognising that partnerships in the Indo-Pacific must take cognisance of the region’s diversity (varying degrees of like-mindedness); and forwarding a realpolitik approach

### Finding Strength in Minilaterals

In the absence of efficient, effective multilateral institutions along with the rise of systemic threats and the US-China hegemonic rivalry in the Indo-Pacific, the trend towards minilaterals and trilaterals has been a productive alternative to maintain a multipolar, rules-based world order. The EU shares with the Indo-Pacific states the need to foster multipolarity by building a multidirectional security architecture including bilaterals, minilaterals, and “renewed” multilateral ventures that are in tune with the times.

In this context, there is immense potential for cooperation through small groupings with like-



mindful local partners either through association with existing forums like the Quad, which now has wide ambit, or creating new groupings, outside the US and China leadership, with highly compatible and strong maritime states like India and Japan. Such cooperation can also enable other tailored partnerships in Southeast Asia, East Asia, and even Africa, strengthening a case like the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC). The envisioned AAGC (see the Map) is primarily an India-Japan envisioned concept which has not seen much headway. Materialising such a plan would and must require EU's involvement. Overall, minilateral linkages will not only improve outreach to Asian sub-regions but also identify common avenues of strategic interest, such as humanitarian access, climate action, ocean governance, digital and trade connectivity, and maritime infrastructure.

Notably, such partnerships with trustworthy democratic local partners will help integrate the EU's normative agenda (e.g. promotion of peace and democracy, especially in fragile states) into the wider regional geopolitics where authoritarian practices are accelerating.

## EU in the Indian Ocean: Gathering Steam?

The Indian Ocean has over the years transformed from a trade thoroughfare to an area of immense geoeconomics and geostrategic value, especially with the embrace of the Indo-Pacific construct, which has reconfigured the world's geopolitical goals. This transformation has brought to the fore the importance of the sea routes linking the diverse economies to the natural resources-rich areas of interests, as well as the environmental and security challenges inherent in such a scenario largely encompassing the projection of power—from rising China and emerging India to extra-regional powers seeking to build bigger stakes, besides the smaller littoral states getting caught in the bigger power tussle. The EU defines the Indian Ocean as the principal “gateway” into the Indo-Pacific, which explains the bloc's continued efforts towards strengthening its presence in the region, be it through states like India or regional organisations like the Indian Ocean Commission (IOC), the

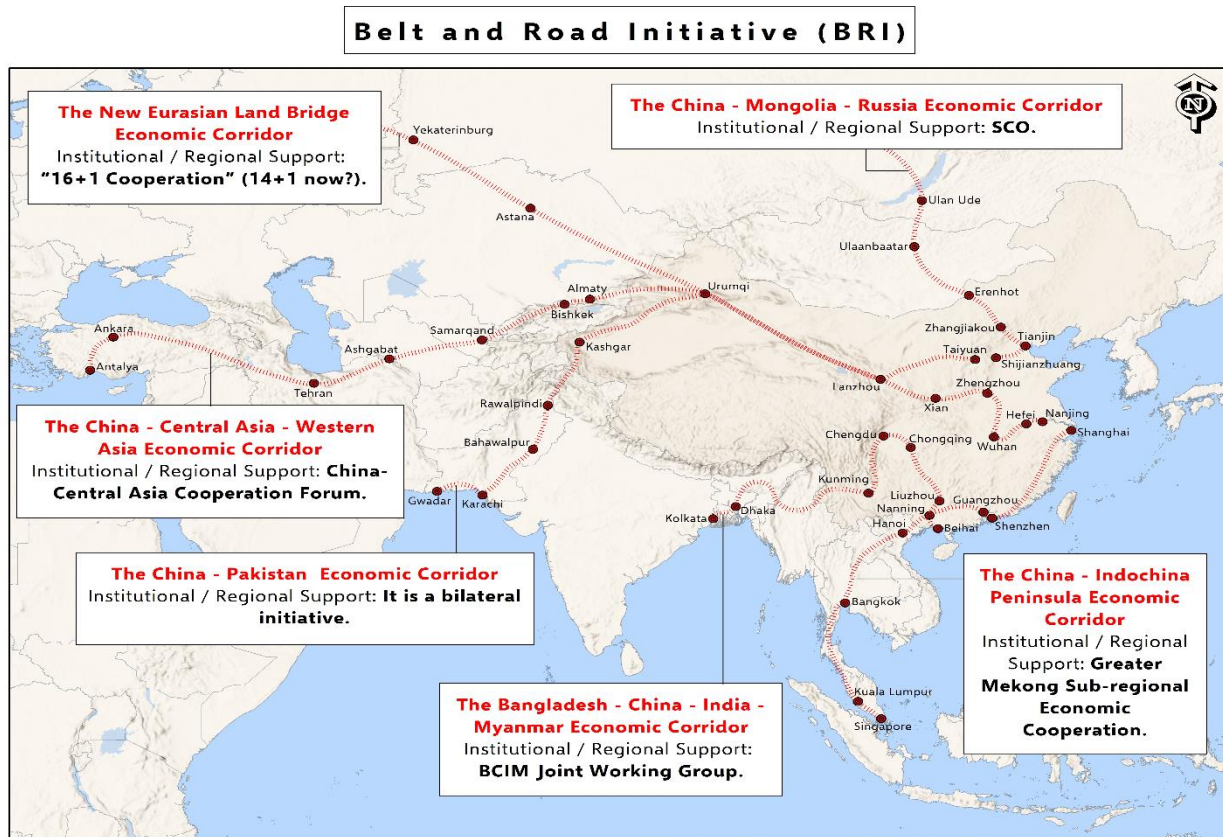
Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), or the African Union (AU).

EUNAVFOR's Operation Atalanta, whose mandate will end on December 2022, is the core tool of the EU's diplomacy in the Indian Ocean with the primary task of deterring, preventing, and repressing of acts of piracy and armed robbery piracy off the Horn of Africa and in the Gulf of Aden. The EU has stepped up operational capabilities in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and helped coastal development through capacity-building programmes via the Maritime Security (MASE) and CRIMARIO initiatives. For example, the online platform for maritime coordination, communication, and crisis management called the Indo-Pacific Regional Information Sharing (IORIS) enables participant countries to build domain awareness and coordinate emergency and rescue operations at sea.

Although the EU's primary region of activity so far has been the western Indian Ocean, but efforts are on to extend the reach. For example, the scope for CRIMARIO II (2020-2024) covers all Indian Ocean rim countries and Southeast Asia. Besides enhancing maritime situational awareness, the project is also focusing on communication among law enforcement agencies and judiciary at national, international, and regional level and compliance with international regulations, which will benefit in the long term (e.g. by helping strengthen littoral states in rebutting excessive and coercive claims by stronger actors).

Further, the Indian Ocean with its multiple choke points (Mozambique Channel, Bab el Mandeb, Suez Canal, Strait of Hormuz, Malacca Straits, Sunda Strait, and Lombok Strait) presents the EU a formidable challenge in protecting its SLOCs for sea-borne energy and minerals trade, as well as for uninterrupted freedom of navigation. In heightened, tense situations, such as the continuing India-China tensions along with the escalating Cross-Strait instability, the magnitude of such a threat becomes multi-fold.

Hence, naval influence over these strategic links and choke points allows for not only access into territory but also provide detection mechanisms through surveillance and reconnaissance



missions for a range of activities including illegal fishing, piracy, and state-sponsored dark shipping. The EU must look for ways to cooperate with the Quad's latest maritime initiative, the Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA), which aims to pursue tactical-level activities including tracking of "dark shipping" and improve partners' ability to respond to climate and humanitarian events by integrating operations in the Pacific Islands, Southeast Asia, and the IOR—a goal in alignment with the EU's intent that would also help increase its reach.

Notwithstanding the EU's gains from its EUNAVFOR operations against piracy, the limited presence and operations are a hindrance to its power projection. Moreover, as a result of its increasing significance, the IOR has become increasingly crowded (presence of the US, China, India, Japan, Australia, among other regional actors); therefore, in the absence of international agreements governing crises at sea (including collisions), the EU and its member states like Germany and France that have considerable military presence will need to identify and prepare for security risks arising out of any accidental or deliberate disruptions.

Nonetheless, the CMP would provide the EU a means to establish permanent presence in the IOR. In the near future, the CMP concept could be extended to the South China Sea, as highlighted by the EU Ambassador to Vietnam, Giorgio Aliberti, as well as to the crucial choke point of the Malacca Straits that connects the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea (Pacific Ocean). It would boost the recent deployments of Dutch, French, and German frigates through this region, which besides factoring the China threat also showcased European strategic autonomy and strength, as well as underscored the right to freedom of navigation.

However, beyond anti-piracy operations and geopolitical goals, the EU must walk the talk on addressing vital non-traditional security aspects such as environmental degradation and over-exploitation of seabed resources, too. In 2021, the EU was accused by Indian Ocean littorals like Maldives of "hypocritical" standards for proposing inadequate measures to tackle overfishing of yellowfin tuna, while being the disproportionate beneficiary.

In deep-sea mining too, as per a [Seas at Risk](#) report although the EU is committed to



sustainability and protection of biodiversity, due to the present over-consumption of minerals and metals to sustain the green transition to electric cars and digital appliances— Europe uses up to “20% of global mineral production for less than 10% of the world’s population”—the EU member states have upped their stake in this sector while not contributing enough to the seabed protection research.

Thus, the EU and its member states must tread a fine line between normative rhetoric and accountability in their partnership with local actors to build overall credibility.

### Exploring the Special Case of India

Over the years, China via its landmark Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has successfully secured access to commercial ports surrounding the Indian sub-continent, including in Gwadar (Pakistan), Koh Kong (Cambodia), and Hambantota (Sri Lanka), in a bid to control and perhaps overtake India’s traditional control of this region. The above map outlines the six-corridors of the BRI that prepares a more serious and alternative entry of China into the Indian Ocean Region. Both the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor plays significant gateways for China’s foreyes into Indian Ocean.

Obviously, the threat from BRI’s debt diplomacy is beginning to show effect, not just in terms of growing instability in the region but also China’s unfettered control of strategic areas of interest (e.g. through ports and military bases). The case of Sri Lanka exemplifies this threat. Hence, such a development is concerning for not just the smaller economies in question but also powers such as the EU and India that have considerable stakes in the region. The growing maritime exercises (e.g. Malabar, La Pérouse, Milan) among France, the US, India, Australia, Japan, and South Korea are evidence of such concerns.

Notably, in recognition of the EU’s new found awareness about the pitfalls of Chinese strategy (e.g. the BRI) and gradual tilt away from unconditional rapprochement, as well as an increasing intent to enhance the EU’s Indo-

Pacific presence, its cooperation with India takes on a new meaning against the backdrop of the Ukraine war. Although in some European strategic quarters, India has been criticised for profiting from its Russian ties and not taking an unambiguous anti-Russia stance during the Ukrainian war, the EU-India ties have remained unaffected. On the contrary, because of India’s deft tightrope diplomacy walk under stressful conditions, including Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s hectic visits to Europe in 2022, have given a “fillip” to the existing relationship.

As the EU and India celebrate 60 years of bilateral ties in 2022, their democratic commitment to ensuring a universal value- and rules-based global order, encompassing multipolarity and effective multilateralism, continues through their [strategic partnership](#). With the search for the right maritime Indo-Pacific security architecture continuing, India as one the region’s largest economies and maritime states with extensive reach in the IOR and a valuable asset to check China’s increasing IOR footprint becomes a natural partner.

Although the EU and India have reiterated a shared outlook on the free and open Indo-Pacific vision, their relationship has not touched the potential. One of the challenges has been the lack of intent on both sides to overcome the mistrust, especially for regional endeavours. But the success of India’s relationship with France and its well-rounded multi-alignment diplomacy centred on partnerships in concert with the EU’s current needs for an anchor state in the Indo-Pacific has paved the way for revitalised ties.

As a consequence, in an unprecedented step, leaders of the EU, all 27 member states, and India met in [May 2021](#) focusing on trade, technology, green action, and maritime security, among others. The EU and India have agreed to deepen their maritime cooperation, and an outcome has been the EU-India Maritime Dialogue, which held its second meeting virtually on February 1, 2022.

The [consultations](#) centred around potential cooperation in maritime security, particularly [joint naval exercises](#) (last year in June, India participated in a joint naval exercise with



EUNAVFOR Somalia in the Gulf of Aden to improve operational interoperability) and policy developments covering the EU strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific and India's Indo-Pacific Oceans' Initiative. In June 2022, the two sides had the first-ever defence and security consultations that included increasing cooperation on maritime security, implementation of the European code of conduct on arms export to India's neighbourhood, cooperation in co-development and co-production of defence equipment, and India's participation in Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO).

Against such a scenario, it would not be an exaggeration to state that the maritime engagement between EUNAVFOR and Indian Navy has facilitated the EU-India revitalisation. Europe and India are well-poised to complement each other's strengths in the maritime domain. For example, the EU and its member states, in particular France, have a marked presence in the western Indian Ocean, an area where India faces lacunae. Similarly, the EU can make use of India's capabilities in the eastern Indian Ocean, particularly around the strategic Straits of Malacca. Together, they can also coordinate crises/incidents at sea and be better prepared to handle contingencies on shared challenges (e.g. potentials trade blockades of the SLOCs).

Finally, even though their challenges from China are different—for India, China presents a direct military threat, whereas for the EU, it is a global geopolitical threat—India, like the EU, is unwilling to compartmentalise, by not side-stepping the “abnormality” in border issues in favour of cooperation in other areas (especially a booming bilateral trade), as China expects. Hence, the EU and India's common grouse can become an instructive experience towards a non-confrontational approach to the China dilemma. Although this evolving similarity reflects in the security outlook, too, the India-EU maritime diplomacy is at a nascent stage and requires continued impetus.

### **Policy Recommendations for India-EU Maritime Cooperation: Road to 2030**

- Increase the scope of maritime cooperation—though the dialogue on maritime security is a welcome move but joint actions should also be explored
- Enhance cooperation between the Indian Navy and EUNAVFOR Atalanta—e.g. by conducting regular information sharing exercises to test efficacy of communication network, key for any maritime security architecture.
- Coordinate integrated actions such as port calls regularly with member states
- Conduct trilateral exercises with Australia, another IOR power, and Japan, which has been increasing its maritime preparedness in response to Beijing's “new normal” activities around the South China Sea
- Conduct joint operations on crisis preparedness in the event of blockade of choke points
- Explore maritime and joint exercise programmes with the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) for improving interoperability and crisis-fighting competencies
- Explore ways to cooperate under the Quad's extensive maritime security initiatives, including on non-traditional security threats
- Build and support research missions to explore ways to protect deep-sea ecosystems
- Coalesce forces, as members of the International Seabed Authority, to advocate for more stringent measures on deep-sea exploration in keeping with their values-based cooperative approach and fight against environmental risks

### ***The Way Ahead: Preventive Action without the Power Competition Trap?***

The EU's drive to become a greater maritime security actor is largely due to China's maritime expansion (military and economic). The increasing militarisation of the Indo-Pacific and territorial tensions caused by China's assertive behaviour have led the EU to enhance their presence so as to protect a free and open Indo-Pacific, and China's Maritime Silk Road has spurred the EU's connectivity initiatives. However, the EU's new comprehensive approach to the Indo-Pacific is beyond just reactionary measures to China's maritime adventurism: It encompasses a values-driven

(democracy, human rights, and the rule of law) willingness to be a strong regional player, which will take risks in its relationship with China, albeit non-confrontationally, to protect its interests. Thus, while the EU will continue its “multifaceted engagement” with China, it will simultaneously protect its essential interests and values, as well as push back on fundamental disagreements. For instance, the EU will focus on investigating ways of guaranteeing upgraded maritime deployments by EU member states to assist with safeguarding the SLOCs, especially in regional hotspots like the South and East China Seas and the Taiwan Strait, which have a “direct” impact on the EU’s security interests.

A notable feature of the EU’s integrated approach to the Indo-Pacific is its reiteration on broadening and supporting local (regional and middle) partnerships and promoting multilateral cooperation to boost maritime security. So far, Brussels has been unable to project itself as a central autonomous player in the region. The updated approach, therefore, seeks to raise its profile, from the perceived image as a worthy bystander to one who is proactive and influences the decision-making in the regional developments.

Its focus on cross-sectoral cooperation (including civil and military combinations) will also help in projecting its image as a long-term, holistic, inclusive global security provider, rather than simply as a “trade partner or normative power”. Moreover, many of its member states like France, Germany, and the Netherlands are major players in the region with their own Indo-Pacific visions and strong regional partnerships.

Thus, the EU’s comprehensive, integrated approach to the Indo-Pacific underscores its greater willingness to move beyond its limited traditional scope, but through constructive, inclusive, and non-confrontational means, i.e., an attempt to avoid the power competition trap inherent in the volatile and tense theatre of the Indo-Pacific. So, the intent is in place, but whether it will translate into concrete, meaningful action remains to be seen.

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