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EDITORIAL

Recasting order in the Indo-Pacific: Europe, Asia, and the future of the Liberal International Order

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Abstract

The Liberal International Order (LIO) is increasingly under threat—not only from revisionist and authoritarian states like China and Russia but also from within the USA itself. Unlike his predecessors, who recognized significant benefits for the USA in upholding and defending the rules-based order globally and in the Indo-Pacific, President Donald Trump views the existing LIO as detrimental to American interests. This special issue brings together scholars in Europe and the Indo-Pacific to examine the mounting challenges facing the LIO in the Indo-Pacific. Crucially, the contributions highlight that there has never been a shared consensus on what the LIO—or more neutrally: the rules-based order—entails, but a fragile coexistence of visions. The Indo-Pacific, as a geopolitical and normative crossroads, offers an unparalleled vantage point to test whether pluralism can coexist with rules, and whether middle powers and regional and minilateral organizations such as the European Union (EU), the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), or the Quad can act as custodians of order rather than bystanders to intensifying great-power rivalries, likely resulting in a fragmented and divided rather than truly multilateral and inclusive order in the Indo-Pacific. In fact, the debate surrounding the future of the Liberal International Order has intensified in recent years as geopolitical rivalries, institutional fragmentation, and competing governance models reshape global politics. Nowhere are these tensions more visible than in the Indo-Pacific where the intersection of European and Asian strategic interests reveals both the vulnerabilities and adaptive possibilities of the existing order. This special issue brings these two regions into a shared analytical frame to examine how their interactions shape the evolving contours of the rules-based international system.

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Introduction

The Liberal International Order (LIO), long anchored by the USA and sustained through a dense network of multilateral institutions, is facing an unprecedented moment of uncertainty. For more than seven decades, the USA has played a central role in shaping and maintaining the rules, norms, and institutional frameworks that structured the post-World War II international system. Yet today, this order is being challenged simultaneously from multiple directions: by revisionist powers seeking to reshape global governance, by rising geopolitical rivalries that strain cooperative mechanisms, and increasingly by shifts within the USA itself regarding the value and utility of multilateral commitments. The erratic policies and transactional diplomacy associated with the Trump administration have amplified doubts about Washington's willingness to act as the principal steward of the rules-based order—both globally and within the strategically vital Indo-Pacific region.

At the same time, today's challenges include protracted wars and conflicts, a global decline in democratic standards and liberal values, the concurrent rise of authoritarianism, the growing influence of extreme right-wing parties in Europe - as well as in countries such as Japan - and increasing societal polarization (Economist Intelligence Unit 2025; Acharya 2017). Moreover, we witness a lack of a concerted response to accelerating climate change; lack of international cooperation in dealing with global health issues, as seen clearly during the COVID-19 pandemic with vaccine hoarding; unfettered use of new technologies including artificial intelligence (AI) by repressive regimes; no consensus on mitigating the threat from nuclear weapons; and a growing arms race, particularly in the volatile but economically and geopolitically extremely significant Indo-Pacific, among others, have steadily contributed to asphyxiate the US-led international order (Etchenique 2023; UN 2022; Wax 2024). Moreover, some may even go as far as John Mearsheimer who categorically states, 'Indeed, that order [the LIO] was destined to fail from the start, as it contained the seeds of its own destruction' (Mearsheimer 2019).

The erosion of the Liberal International Order must also be situated within the broader and accelerating decline of multilateralism itself. Over the past decade, global governance mechanisms have increasingly struggled to produce coordinated responses to major crises, whether geopolitical, economic, or environmental. Institutions that once symbolized collective problem-solving, from the WTO to the UN Security Council, have been paralyzed by geopolitical competition and great-power rivalry. In many cases, states are increasingly resorting to ad-hoc coalitions, minilateral arrangements, and strategic partnerships rather than relying on universal institutions. This shift does not necessarily signal the disappearance of multilateralism but rather its fragmentation into overlapping, often competing governance formats.

Simultaneously, the USA, long the principal architect and guarantor of the liberal order, has exhibited growing ambivalence towards the very institutions it helped build. The Trump administration in particular has reinforced a

transactional view of alliances and multilateral commitments, prioritizing bilateral leverage over institutional leadership. In the Indo-Pacific context, this has produced an unusual paradox: Washington continues to champion a 'free and open Indo-Pacific' narrative while simultaneously weakening the broader multilateral foundations that historically underpinned such regional orders. This tension has generated uncertainty among partners in Europe and Asia alike regarding the durability of the US commitments to rules-based governance.

Over the years, scholars have debated whether the LIO is inherently Western in design or genuinely universal in aspiration. What makes the contemporary moment particularly complex is that challenges to the LIO are not merely material or geopolitical, but deeply normative–questioning whose values anchor the international system, and who gets to define 'rule-based' conduct. The emergence of Asia as not only an economic engine but also a site of competing governance models underscores the need to transcend the traditional Atlantic-centric lens. This special issue, therefore, responds to a widening intellectual gap: most analyses of the LIO either focus on US retrenchment or China's revisionism, while overlooking how European and Asian middle powers reinterpret, reform, or repurpose the order in the Indo-Pacific rather than abandon it. In fact, this special issue argues that the evolving interaction between Europe and Asia in the Indo-Pacific illustrates how middle powers are increasingly shaping, adapting, and contesting the Liberal International Order in an era marked by geopolitical fragmentation and declining multilateral consensus.

Against such a scenario, it is important to examine which developments and policies are currently undermining the rules-based order, whether it can be salvaged, and whether competing models of regional governance are emerging. And if so, what are the challenges and opportunities for the various stakeholders in the US-led alliances, partnerships, and coalitions, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region? In this context, the role of the European and Asian states that have embraced the Indo-Pacific concept and construct in defending the LIO is integral. It is equally vital to recognize that Europe and Asia do not engage the LIO from identical historical experiences. Europe views the order as a legacy of institutional liberalism—rooted in post-war reconciliation and collective security—whereas Asia's engagement has been mediated through post-colonial sovereignty, developmental realism, and, more recently, strategic hedging.

This divergence reveals not a shared consensus, but a fragile coexistence of visions: one seeking to preserve liberal and democratic norms, the other seeking to renegotiate them. By bringing Europe and Asia into a single analytical frame, this special issue invites a reconsideration of whether order-building in the Indo-Pacific is an act of preservation, reform, or replacement. But in what measure do their perspectives, strategies, and outlooks overlap and differ? How do they define the LIO? As such, there are three key aspects—political, economic, and security—to their cooperation in terms of strengthening the LIO. An important aspect in many strategies that needs to be examined in more depth is to counter China's rise, in particular in applying a de-risking approach towards China to lessen a nation's economic dependence (Brinza et al. 2024; European Commission and High Representative 2021).

Importantly, whether the Indo-Pacific middle powers like Australia, India, Japan, and South Korea could play a greater role in developing more inclusive frameworks of cooperation that take into account the methods and policies for countering not only traditional security threats but also new hybrid threats and misuse of new technologies like AI by authoritarian regimes would be consequential to this lofty goal. An important stabilizing factor is also the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), as ASEAN is the only institution that established trans-regional cooperation mechanisms in the Indo-Pacific. While all major ASEAN partners, including Washington, Beijing, and Brussels, formally endorse ASEAN's regional centrality in the Indo-Pacific, the caveat is that all these institutions function well during peaceful times but are untested in times of a severe crisis. However, looking at Europe, which is highly institutionalized and has cooperation forums such as the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and Council of Europe, in which Russia is also involved, shows that even well-established organizations were unable to prevent the outbreak of war.

Further, the role of the minilaterals like the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), comprising Australia, India, Japan, and the USA, and AUKUS (Australia, the UK, and the USA), which have been dubbed as exclusive Western clubs, cannot be discounted. But where do they fit into this narrative of defending the liberal order?

Then, there is also the question of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)—a post-war 'peacetime' military alliance which is also a multilateral institution that has shaped to a considerable extent the transatlantic relations: It has been argued in the past, too, that NATO in the twenty-first century grew into 'the principal institutional expression of the transatlantic community of states and the [W]estern values that both defined and united them' (Daalder 1999). Today, it is experiencing a reinvigoration in matters of European security after Russia's unprovoked and brutal war against Ukraine, which the Alliance has been ineffectual in stemming, but has generated wider interest by absorbing more European states like Finland and Sweden that will surely strengthen NATO's ranks (Deni 2022). But in Asia/Indo-Pacific, even as the Alliance has expanded its global ambit with the stress on its Indo-Pacific partners, namely Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and South Korea, its relevance is still severely contested (Droin et al. 2024; Tang 2024).

This special issue argues and contextualizes that the future of the LIO will not be determined solely by great powers and great-power politics, but by the capabilities of coalitions—formal and informal—to articulate credible alternatives to both US-centrism and Sino-centric hierarchy. The Indo-Pacific, as a geopolitical and normative crossroads, offers an unparalleled vantage point to test whether pluralism can coexist with rules, and whether middle powers and regional and minilateral organizations can act as custodians of order rather than bystanders to rivalry.

By situating Europe and Asia in direct conversation, the special issue foregrounds a critical question: can a liberal order endure if liberalism itself is being redefined outside its Western core? Finally, how far and in what ways does the China-Russia convergence impact the LIO? The threat from Russia to European security and from China to Indo-Pacific security highlights not only the assertion linking the two regions' security (of which the deployment of thousands of North Korean soldiers in

Russia's war against Ukraine is only the latest illustration) but also the need for new narratives in the quest for ways to defend the existing rules-based LIO.

This introduction examines the broader context and questions raised by these topics. The fundamental trends and developments are explored in detail within the various chapters of this special issue. In this sense, the central argument advanced in this special issue is that the future of the Liberal International Order will increasingly depend not on the unilateral leadership of a single power, but on the capacity of middle powers and regional coalitions to reinterpret, stabilize, and selectively defend elements of the rules-based order. As the USA adopts a more transactional and selective approach to multilateral commitments, and as China advances alternative institutional visions, the Indo-Pacific has emerged as the principal arena where competing interpretations of order are negotiated. Europe and Asia—often viewed as separate geopolitical theatres—are therefore becoming structurally intertwined in their responses to these transformations. By examining their evolving strategic outlooks, partnerships, and institutional engagements, this special issue argues that the preservation, reform, or transformation of the liberal order will likely emerge through hybrid and plural forms of cooperation rather than through a single dominant institutional architecture.

How Europe and Asia perceive the liberal order

Europe—more broadly defined than solely the European Union (EU)—and Asia share a striking convergence, though not identical, in their overall perception of the liberal order (Kundnani 2024). Both view the liberal global order as one being 'rules-based'. This term represents the minimum consensus among governments, typically defined as adherence to international law, a commitment to both bilateral and multilateral cooperation, and the strengthening of regional institutions. In their Indo-Pacific strategies, Japan, India, Australia, the USA, ASEAN, the EU—including its members France, Germany, the Netherlands, the Czech Republic, and Lithuania—and South Korea frequently refer to the need to uphold the rules-based order (Kironska et al. 2023). Another shared priority of European and Asian governments is the protection of economic interests, frequently linked to the demand for freedom of trade and navigation—particularly in the context of territorial disputes in the South China Sea and East China Sea.

While the term 'LIO' is avoided in the official Western Indo-Pacific strategies, this concept aligns closely with the principles LIO embodies. The Western Indo-Pacific strategies, but also those of Japan and South Korea, emphasize the promotion of democracy, freedom, human rights, and the rule of law to strengthen the regional order (Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs–French Republic 2025; Ministry of Foreign Affairs–Republic of Lithuania 2023; The Government of the Republic of Korea 2022). A term universally endorsed by governments that have issued Indo-Pacific strategies is the concept of a 'free and open Indo-Pacific', first advocated by late Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe during his first term in office (2006–2007) and adopted by the Trump 1.0 administration.

Gaps persist when it comes to the strategic cultures and national interests, which translate to their geopolitical postures vis-à-vis the Indo-Pacific construct. For example, France and Germany both seek to 'defend' or 'preserve' the existing Liberal (rules-based) International Order against an authoritarian China's attempts to remake it. Viewing the LIO as a normative one, the EU considers it to be enshrined in institutions like the United Nations and norms of multilateralism (Ikenberry 2011).

On the other hand, several Asian states recognize that the current liberal order is problematic; it does not need to be defended, but reformed and adapted to the realities of today's multiplexar (or multipolar) world. This includes, in particular, the reformation of existing international institutions like the UN and the WTO, among others. The gap between the two regions was only highlighted at the 2024 Indo-Pacific ministerial forum in Brussels, where representatives from Sri Lanka and Indonesia called out the EU for its 'double standards' on the Ukraine and the Gaza war. (That many Indo-Pacific governments have double standards, too, for instance, failing to condemn human rights violations committed on the Uighur minority in the autonomous region Xinjiang, was not addressed during this meeting.)

These differing postures are deep-rooted in not only strategic cultures but also historical traditions and cultural values. However, to tackle the challenges facing the LIO, Asia and Europe need to work to address their strategic differences and enable open and constructive engagement. The example of ASEAN, however, illustrates the difficulty of finding a common position that does not betray the liberal and democratic core values of the LIO. ASEAN has adopted the Indo-Pacific concept in 2019, albeit comparatively late, given its awareness of China's opposition to this construct, which Beijing perceives as aiming to undermine its rise (Heiduk and Wacker 2020). In principle, ASEAN also endorses a free and open Indo-Pacific, though, unlike Japan, South Korea, and the Western governments, it does not follow a values-based foreign policy. Rather, ASEAN emphasizes its key principles sovereignty, territorial integrity, non-intervention, and its own regional centrality (ASEAN 2019). The key reason is that the majority of the ASEAN members are semi-democratic or authoritarian regimes, mainly interested in regime survival. Accordingly, it cannot be expected that ASEAN as an institution will advocate democracy and human rights in its member states or regionally; thus, they view a rules-based order which inherently builds on these principles as a threat to their regime survival (Ginsburg 2020a, 2020b).

Moreover, despite ASEAN's frequent references to the need of upholding international law, Russia's invasion of Ukraine demonstrates that the Western and Southeast Asian interpretations vary considerably: Only Cambodia, the Philippines, and Singapore criticized Russia's aggression openly (Gerstl and Šimalčík 2023). These differing perspectives on a rules-based order and international raise fundamental questions about whether and how democratic and non-democratic countries can collaborate in maintaining or reforming the existing regional order. What compromises are both sides politically willing to accept? And how effective can a regional order be if it is based on compromises rather than clear, universal, and enforceable principles?

A complex order shaken by the China (plus) threat and the policies of the Trump 2.0 administration?

Before Trump took office for the second time on 20 January 2025, most experts predicted that he would focus geostrategically on rivalry with China—and thus turn his attention to the Indo-Pacific region. President Obama had already initiated this shift. Indeed, during his visit to Japan and the Philippines in March 2025, Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth reaffirmed the security partnership. The Trump 2.0 administration, though, also demanded that both countries, as well as numerous other friendly governments in Asia and Europe, significantly increase their own security efforts. However, Trump has not yet adopted a new comprehensive Indo-Pacific strategy, let alone a coherent foreign policy strategy. In fact, he has alienated even its closest partners with his 'reciprocal tariffs', including Australia, India, the EU, Japan, the Philippines, South Korea, and Vietnam—actors which are indispensable in any successful strategy to contain China. The mounting pressure from the USA on these governments to clarify their position in the event of a potential conflict between the USA and China over Taiwan further complicates their relations with the two superpowers (Blaxland 2025).

Notwithstanding the multiple perspectives on the LIO, including its inherent fallibilities, a factor that holds almost universal primacy regarding its impact on this order is China, particularly Beijing's continuing high-stakes hegemonic, strategic competition with the USA. Undoubtedly, over the last decade, the economic and military rise of China has prompted widespread intellectual and political discussions and debates on how states can respond to the 'China challenge', and how they can defend the LIO. It includes China's continuing attempts to coalesce the authoritarian regimes such as in Russia, North Korea, and Iran in order to ultimately upend the existing system. This exercise is no easy feat, considering the differences in states' relationships with China as well as their views of the LIO. However, even as China is the predominant factor in the quest for the defence of this order, certain aforementioned challenges including the unfettered growth of new technologies and climate change do highlight a wider area of contestation.

Recent developments in the Middle East further illustrate the deepening crisis confronting the international order. The escalating confrontation between Iran and Israel—now increasingly involving direct US military and strategic engagement—has introduced an additional layer of volatility to an already fragile global security landscape. Unlike earlier regional conflicts that were somewhat geographically contained, the present confrontation carries broader systematic implications: it intertwines great-power competition, energy across the Gulf and the wider Indian Ocean. For many states in Asia and Europe, the conflict reinforces the perception that the international system is entering an era of simultaneous and overlapping crisis where traditional diplomatic mechanisms struggle to contain escalation.

The widening Middle Eastern theatres also interact indirectly with Indo-Pacific geopolitics. Sea lanes stretching from the Persian Gulf to the Malacca Strait—vital for Asian manufacturing economies and European trade—are increasingly

exposed to disruption. Consequently, instability in the Middle East cannot be analytically separated from debates on Indo-Pacific security and the sustainability of the broader rules-based order.

Nonetheless, the ongoing wars and conflicts in Ukraine, South Caucasus, and the Middle East have reiterated that the traditional regions of clout are dissipating amid new centres of influence. For example, Russia's sphere of influence in Eurasia and Central Asia has been impacted adversely, as evidenced by Armenia pulling out of the Moscow-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), a military-political bloc comprising six post-Soviet allies, namely Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan (Kozlov 2024). Russia's loss has been China's gain: China's increasing clout in Central Asia and South Caucasus, courtesy of its mammoth Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and huge financial incentives, has paved the way for greater geopolitical influence in the region (Avdaliani 2023; Kashgarian 2022). China's increasing influence in Russia's 'near abroad', however, cannot be in the Kremlin's strategic interest, despite their 'no limits' partnership.

Similarly, the USA has been on the back foot in the Middle East, where its traditional partners like Saudi Arabia have been getting closer to China. China's mediation role in the Saudi-Iranian peace deal, even though not a definitive step towards becoming geopolitically entangled in becoming a security provider in a fraught region, is certainly a worrying one for the USA and necessitates a rethink in the US Middle East policy (Ebrahim 2023). The recent Israel-Hamas war and US' support of Israel amid its ruinous military action in Gaza after the Hamas terrorist attacks of 7 October 2023 has not only allowed the USA to lose international standing, especially in the developing world, but also raised the stakes for China (Cafiero 2023). China has been resolute about supporting the Palestinian cause, distanced itself from Israel, and advocated for a two-state solution, winning strategic brownie points in the Global South (Hale 2023). That China has not condemned Hamas does not seem to have affected its standing in the face of 'collective punishment' of the people of Gaza, as pronounced by the Chinese President Xi Jinping during the BRICS (Brazil-Russia-India-China-South Africa) summit in 2023 (Hale 2023).

Notably, the lure of and the expansions within China-dominated forums like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and BRICS are furthering Xi's aims of toppling the Liberal International Order in pursuit of a Sino-centric post-Western world order where universal ideals championed by the West such as liberalism and democracy will not be coveted any longer (Dams and Veldkamp 2024). One of the main targets of outreach in this connection is the Global South, where China already has extensive linkages largely courtesy of its BRI.

In this context, it would be remiss not to mention Xi's three initiatives that aim to propel China's new 'post-Western' world order-building, namely the Global Development Initiative (GDI), Global Security Initiative (GSI), and Global Civilization Initiative (GCI). Particularly, the GSI, which 'links security with development and emphasizes non-traditional security issues' seeking to find traction in the Global South that is 'disillusioned with the US-dominated international security order' (Ghiasy and Panda 2024).

At the same time, as the Global South grapples with a range of pressing challenges - from food insecurity to climate change - it is unlikely to rally behind

initiatives such as Xi's proposed security order, which would likely intensify their existing vulnerabilities, much as US-China strategic competition already has. Yet without any meaningful participation in global governance system(s) led by the USA/West, which as mentioned earlier are not well-equipped, nor adequately reformed, to face today's challenges or account for the need for equitable representation, the Global South will remain rightly subdued about the LIO. But again, the question arises as to what extent the West can respect the concerns of these mostly undemocratic countries without completely watering down the LIO.

In economic terms, non-Western forums like the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the New Development Bank (NDB, the bank founded by BRICS nations)—often seen as China-led/dominated alternatives to the Bretton Woods Institutions, namely the IMF and the World Bank—as well as expansionist Chinese projects like the BRI, which have leverage beyond the economic benefits into the political and security domains, could certainly be a potential threat to the international economic and political order.

China's efforts have certainly been noted by the USA, which has been pushing to create conditions for developing a new economic- and high-technology-oriented regional security architecture by liaising with several Indo-Pacific partners and allies such as Japan, India, Australia, Taiwan, and South Korea, as well as with Southeast Asian states like Vietnam, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Indonesia. For example, new formats like the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF) introduced by the Biden administration, albeit not a free trade agreement, will help in diversifying trade opportunities and building resilient supply chains. However, in order to be fully embraced by the partner states, this and similar initiatives have to deliver tangible benefits.

Similarly, in the high tech competition with China, the USA has found allies in Japan and the Netherlands—companies based in both states are involved in manufacturing cutting-edge semiconductors—while the proposed CHIP-4 partnership[1] between Japan, Taiwan, South Korea, and the USA gathers steam (Swanson 2023; Sutter KM et al. 2023; Borowiec and Hale 2023).

Such agreements are aimed to expand the controls on advanced technologies that can be shared with China, helping the USA in its efforts to counter China's use of 'supercomputing and artificial intelligence to develop stealth and hypersonic weapons systems, and to try to crack the US government's most encrypted messaging' (Swanson 2023). Moreover, such geoeconomic and geopolitical fragmentation including disruption of supply chains and growing protectionism has forced the EU and its member states as well as Asian middle powers to reckon with the need to boost their involvement in defending the existing world order.

[1] In March 2022, the Biden administration proposed a 'Chip 4' alliance among the USA, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan to strengthen high tech supply chains ties and to 'coordinate approaches to supporting the semiconductor industry' (Sutter KM et al. 2023). However, reportedly, since the proposal was set into motion, the alliance has 'hammered out few concrete details and held just one preliminary meeting' (Borowiec & Hale 2023). The Trump administration has speed up attempts to block China's access to the most advanced chips.

As such, the Liberal International Order with its power jostling, especially in the last decade, is not just a contested concept; it is also an elusive one, as outlined by multiple observers over the years (Kundnani 2024): The global order is exceedingly complex and has only become more so since the end of the Cold War and the rise of a multipolar, though not necessarily multilateral order. Moreover, amid these complexities, the notion of liberal order remains 'ambiguous and underspecified' (Sjursen 2023).

In this emerging environment, the Indo-Pacific has become a critical arena where the future of multilateral governance will likely be tested. While the region was once primarily associated with economic dynamism and institutional experimentation, it is now increasingly defined by strategic contestation and institutional uncertainty. The convergence of US-China rivalry, Russia's revisionist actions, and the growing assertiveness of middle powers has produced what might be described as a 'complex order'—one characterized less by coherent global governance than by overlapping regional arrangements and competitive institutional visions. For Europe and Asia, therefore, the Indo-Pacific debate is no longer solely about regional strategy but about the broader question of whether an adaptive form of multilateral cooperation can survive in an increasingly fragmented international system.

The important questions therefore are: Are the USA under Trump 2.0 still perceived as a credible champion of the LIO? Will the middle powers like Japan, India, and the EU and its member states, who are all keen to exercise more strategic autonomy and a greater geopolitical role and profile in global affairs, be able to define sharper boundaries in their attempts to boost the liberal world order—if necessary, without Washington's support? Or will Xi's attempts to promote an alternative concept reconfigure the template? And will the Asian governments which are usually keen to avoid clear alignment choices to maintain strategic ambiguity amid the growing Sino-US rivalry or will they be forced to side with one of the great powers? Another major question is whether the Indo-Pacific nations, notably the Southeast Asian states, which despite conflicts with China in the South China Sea are loathe to enrage it, but are also keen to actively engage the USA, Japan, the EU, and other middle powers, will be able to maintain their hedging strategies (Gerstl 2022)?

The EU-Asia interactions: critical to Liberal International Order?

The EU is seen as 'a vanguard of the Liberal International Order', which implies its approach is dependent on 'a specific set of rules and norms, based primarily on democracy, human rights, the rule of law, market economies, and fair trade', as well as multilateralism, trade liberalism, and freedom of navigation, among other traits (Sjursen 2023; Szewczyk 2019). Importantly, according to Sjursen (2023), the economic and political integration of the EU as 'a general move towards closer institutionalization of international relations in the western bloc' underscores 'how the legitimacy of the EU is bound up with that of the LIO'. However, the EU also seemed to much of the world, including in Asia, a normative power disinclined to enter into the messy world of global and regional geopolitics. As the EU's late embrace of the Indo-Pacific concept and its continued overreliance on China as an

economic partner surely illustrate. Only in the last few years has the EU acknowledged China as a strategic competitor, while Ursula von der Leyen, the President of the European Commission, emphasizes that she leads a 'geopolitical' Commission.

As an important aside, despite the EU's recent investigations into China's unfair trade practices, the EU's China policy is defined by the strategy documents which were reviewed 5 years earlier in 2019 (European Commission and High Representative 2019)—a couple of years before the EU got serious about China's economic and political assertiveness and a long time considering the fast-devolving political landscape (EU Delegation to the PRC 2023). Moreover, China, let alone China's coercive actions, was not directly mentioned in the Joint Communication on 'European Economic Security Strategy' in 2023, which intends to de-risk Europe's supply chains, critical infrastructure, and digital technology (Atlantic Council 2023). This again serves to highlight the complexities and compulsions of international relations.

Nonetheless, against a scenario where a rise in authoritarianism and protectionism as well as a decline in democratic standards and multilateralism are some of the key challenges to the liberal order in recent years, the EU has been looking to reconfigure its policy approaches to the new global complexities, including and beyond the China factor. As a result, in the last couple of years, the EU has launched or upgraded a flurry of initiatives: To name a few, the strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific (2021); the €300 billion Global Gateway Initiative (GGI; 2021), a global infrastructure project that is expected to rival China's BRI; the Council of the European Union (2022), an ambitious plan that seeks to strengthen the EU's strategic autonomy goals; and a much-needed upgrade of the EU Maritime Security Strategy (Council of the European Union (2023). Under various institutional umbrellas, the EU cooperates not only with so-called like-minded partners but also authoritarian countries, including the Indochinese nations. This kind of pragmatism is necessary in the emerging new great-power world order.

Importantly, the inefficiencies of the current order have made the multipolar narrative appealing not just to the Global South but also to middle powers like France, which is looking for greater 'strategic autonomy' from the USA, including 'strategic coordination' with China, especially in view of President Trump, who was already during his first term committed to an 'America First' foreign policy (Embassy of the PRC 2024; Surk and Corbet 2024; Lyons 2024). China is certainly not excluded from this worldview, but is seen as a valuable (or necessary) partner (including in trade and climate action), as Xi Jinping's 5-day tour to Europe earlier in 2024, visiting France, Serbia, and Hungary, attests, who while granting hardly any concessions to the EU certainly looked to limit the deterioration in Europe-China ties in the last few years (Al Jazeera 2024).

In this context, the EU's local partnerships in the Indo-Pacific with regional giants and middle powers like India, Japan, and South Korea, as well as the inclusivity-minded Southeast Asian states and the multilateral bloc of ASEAN—around whose centrality the Indo-Pacific concept, at least outwardly, revolves—will naturally be vital. First off, as the EU's and some of its member states' strategies clearly state, there is a direct link between European prosperity and economic interests to Indo-Pacific security. Therefore, as the contest with China both in the South China Sea

and the Taiwan Strait heats up—e.g. while the Philippines is aggressively strengthening security cooperation with both the USA and Japan, the return to power of the pro-independence Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) in Taiwan has sharpened the battle lines—the instability for maritime trade and the sea lines of communication (SLOCs) vital for Europe becomes a crucial factor for the EU's intent to enhance its maritime presence in the Indo-Pacific (Harding et al. 2024; Li 2024).

Notably, the EU already has a strong footprint in the western Indian Ocean region via the EU Naval Force (NAVFOR) Operation ATALANTA. And it has expanded its outreach by deepening maritime security cooperation with ASEAN and selected members, with a focus on transnational maritime threats, ocean governance, and climate change, as well as by clearly supporting an ASEAN-led process towards a regional Code of Conduct in the hotly contested South China Sea. Growing defence and security cooperation collaborations with India, Japan, and South Korea, too, are important in enhancing the EU's goal as a credible contributor to regional maritime security. With Japan and South Korea, the EU is also looking to build defence industry partnerships aimed at joint development of military equipment (Reuters 2024).

On the economic security front, too, the ramifications of Russia's war against Ukraine have provided momentum to the EU's diversification drive with strengthened partnerships with Indo-Pacific states. The EU's new Economic Security Strategy is looking to integrate economic interests with security and sustainable development obligations, and the Indo-Pacific certainly is both a concern (e.g. overdependence on China and the ensuing coercion attempts) and a haven for partnerships. For example, with Japan, the EU is looking at a 'golden era' with vital deals such as the Economic Partnership Agreement, the EU-Japan Strategic Partnership agreement, and the Partnership on Sustainable Connectivity and Quality Infrastructure, besides a focus on green transition and digitalization (De Ruyt 2023). Reportedly, they are also looking to deepen cooperation on strengthening supply chain resilience for semiconductors and critical materials (Kyodo 2024).

Similarly, the establishment of the Trade and Technology Council (TTC) between the EU and India—only the second after with the USA—is important for the diversification goals, as well as to present a counter to China especially in the high-tech fields.

As a result, the EU's Indo-Pacific strategy and the GGI, besides the other new policies, via economic, technological, security, and connectivity partnerships, are being used as integrated and comprehensive means to expand the EU's geopolitical goals, including economic security and strategic autonomy.

About the special issue

This special issue examines how European and Asian actors are reassessing the Liberal International Order (LIO) amid growing geopolitical contestation in the Indo-Pacific. It begins by reflecting on the institutional and policy limitations of the European Union in engaging the region, highlighting the tension between Europe's normative ambitions and the bureaucratic and policy constraints that often shape its external action. Building on this structural critique, the subsequent contribution

explores the evolving concept of strategic autonomy in both Europe and Asia, arguing that simultaneous global conflicts and growing uncertainty about the long-term reliability of the USA have compelled regional actors to rethink their strategic positioning.

The discussion then turns to the security dimension, examining how emerging linkages between NATO and the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) are gradually connecting the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific theatres. Complementing this perspective, another article analyzes the implications of AUKUS and the broader debate over whether new minilateral security arrangements strengthen or undermine the EU's traditional normative influence in the Indo-Pacific.

The following papers shift the focus towards regional partnerships and systemic pressures shaping the future of the LIO. One contribution analyzes the expanding scope and limitations of EU-Japan security cooperation, highlighting its growing relevance for defending elements of the rules-based order while also recognizing the practical constraints that continue to shape the partnership. Another article examines the evolving political convergence between the EU and ASEAN, assessing whether institutional similarities and shared principles translate into deeper strategic alignment in the Indo-Pacific context.

The issue also explores the emerging role of Türkiye in the Indo-Pacific, situating Ankara's strategic interests within broader European debates on engagement with the region. Finally, the closing contribution investigates the implications of Sino-Russian alignment in Southeast Asia, illustrating how this partnership complicates efforts to sustain the Liberal International Order and reinforces competitive dynamics within the regional system. Taken together, these contributions illuminate how diverse actors—from European institutions to Indo-Pacific partners—are navigating the tensions between cooperation, competition, and institutional adaptation in an increasingly fragmented international order.

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Declarations

Competing interest The authors declare no competing interests.

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