

# EUROPE IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

MARITIME SECURITY ASPECTS

MARIA THAEMAR C. TANA, Ph.D.

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# Europe in Southeast Asia: Maritime Security Aspects

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## **Background: The EU and the Indo-Pacific**

The Indo-Pacific is evolving and has become “the power center of world geopolitics.”<sup>i</sup> The region is responsible for two-thirds of global economic growth and has three of the world’s four largest economies – China, Japan, and India.<sup>ii</sup> Likewise, Southeast Asia, which is at the heart of the Indo-Pacific, has more than half a billion people and boasts among the world’s fastest-growing economies. The vast region is thus central to the global value chain, international trade, and investment flows - 40% of global trade passes through the Strait of Malacca and 30% through the South China Sea (SCS).<sup>iii</sup> At the same time, current dynamics in the Indo-Pacific featured tensions over contested territories and waters and rising geopolitical rivalries which have spilled over the economic, political, and security areas. Therefore, in light of these new realities, the European Union (EU) was compelled to reassess its engagement strategy towards the region.

Europe and the Indo-Pacific are highly interconnected – the EU is a top investor and leading development cooperation partner in the region, and the Indo-Pacific is the second-largest destination for EU exports.<sup>iv</sup> The EU and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) have enjoyed more than fifty years of cooperation and share many common principles and interests, including a commitment to multilateralism, free trade, and

a rules-based order.<sup>v</sup> However, given the persistent and emerging regional security challenges, EU-ASEAN relations have taken a more strategic turn. The succeeding sections will discuss in detail: (1) the EU's Indo-Pacific Strategy and; (2) the EU's views on China, maritime security, and the recently concluded AUKUS (trilateral security pact between Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States). The last section looks at the challenges to policy formulation and implementation and gives some recommendations going forward.

## **The EU's Indo-Pacific Strategy**

On 16 September 2021, the Council of the European Union published the EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific. It marked the beginning of the EU's new approach to the region, diversifying its relations beyond traditional regional partners like China, Japan, and members of the Association for Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), to include India, Australia, South Korea, Taiwan, and other "like-minded" states.

The EU's Indo-Pacific strategy aims to contribute to the region's stability, security, prosperity, and sustainable development consistent with the principle of democracy. It likewise seeks to maintain a free and open Indo-Pacific while building strong and enduring relationships with key actors in the region. It is important to note that the EU's strategy is different from Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) vision, which has the following objectives: (1) to promote maritime order through the establishment of the rule of law; (2) to secure connectivity across the Indian and Pacific Oceans by promoting free trade and development, and building and investing in infrastructure; (3) to enhance governance through capacity-building; and (4) to ensure maritime security by providing equipment and technical assistance to Southeast Asian maritime states.<sup>vi</sup> A key feature of Japan's FOIP, however, is that it primarily regards China as a security threat and seeks to form a coalition that would balance against China.<sup>vii</sup> The EU, on the other hand, emphasizes that its strategy is more about cooperation and not confrontation.

The EU Strategy highlights the following key action areas:<sup>viii</sup>

- Sustainable and inclusive prosperity
- Green transition
- Ocean governance
- Digital governance and partnerships
- Connectivity
- Security and defense
- Human security

The EU's engagement with the Indo-Pacific region will be principled and long-term and focuses on the following goals:<sup>ix</sup>

- To solidify and defend the rules-based international order by promoting inclusive and effective multilateral cooperation based on shared values and principles, including a commitment to respecting democracy, human rights, and the rule of law.
- To promote a level playing field and an open and fair environment for trade and investment.
- To contribute to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), addressing climate change and environmental degradation on land and the ocean, and supporting sustainable and inclusive socio-economic development.
- To engage in bilateral and multilateral cooperation with partners to meet the objectives of the Paris Agreement on Climate Change and the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD)
- To pursue its long-standing multilateral and regional cooperation with the United Nations and Bretton Woods Institutions, as well as regional organizations such as ASEAN and the African Union in the western Indian Ocean.
- To support truly inclusive policymaking and cooperation, where the voices of civil society, the private sector, social partners, and other key stakeholders count.

- To establish mutually supportive trade and economic relations with the region that foster inclusive economic growth and stability and promote and facilitate connectivity.
- To engage in the region as a partner in our efforts to raise awareness of the impact of global demographic trends.

The implementation of the EU strategy includes several actions, such as:<sup>x</sup>

- Engaging with Indo-Pacific partners to build more resilient and sustainable global value chains by diversifying trade and economic relations, and by developing technological standards and regulations that are in line with our values and principles.
- Completing EU trade negotiations with Australia, Indonesia, and New Zealand; resuming trade negotiations and starting investment negotiations with India; completing an Economic Partnership Agreement with the East Africa Community; assessing the possible resumption of trade negotiations with Malaysia, the Philippines and Thailand, and the eventual negotiation of a region-to-region trade agreement with ASEAN.
- Concluding Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (PCA) with Malaysia and Thailand; starting PCA negotiations with the Maldives and bringing the EU's upcoming Partnership Agreement with the African, Caribbean, and Pacific (ACP) to full fruition.
- Concluding Green Alliances and Partnerships with willing and ambitious Indo-Pacific partners to fight against climate change and environmental degradation.
- Strengthening ocean governance in the region, including increasing the EU's support for Indo-Pacific countries' fisheries management and control systems, the fight against IUU fishing, and the implementation of Sustainable Fisheries Partnership Agreements.

- Expanding the network of digital partnerships with Indo-Pacific partners, as well as exploring the possibility of new Digital Partnership Agreements.
- Stepping up implementation of the Connectivity Partnerships with Japan and India; supporting partners in establishing an appropriate regulatory environment and facilitating the mobilization of the necessary funding to improve connectivity on the ground between Europe and the Indo-Pacific.
- Strengthen cooperation on research and innovation under “Horizon Europe”; explore the association to this program of eligible like-minded Indo-Pacific partners such as Australia, Japan, Republic of Korea, New Zealand, and Singapore.
- Exploring ways to ensure enhanced naval deployments by the EU Member States to help protect the sea lines of communication and freedom of navigation in the Indo-Pacific while boosting Indo-Pacific partners’ capacity to ensure maritime security.
- Reinforcing support to healthcare systems and pandemic preparedness for the least developed countries in the Indo-Pacific region, enhancing collaborative research on communicable diseases in the context of the Horizon Europe research program.

Note that there is no direct mention of the China threat in the joint communication. Instead, it was stressed that cooperation is open for all and that the EU will continue to work with China, “engaging bilaterally to promote solutions to common challenges, cooperating on issues of common interest and encouraging China to play its part in a peaceful and thriving Indo-Pacific region.” However, it was also emphasized that while the EU will continue to protect its essential interests and promote its values,” it will stand firm in defending its core values and principles (i.e., human rights). It is also important to note that different EU member states have different relations and have different policies toward China. As mentioned by Giorgio Cuscito (*Limes, Rivista Italiana di geopolitica*), all the EU member states have different perspectives on China’s rise and the Indo-Pacific security.



## Germany, the Netherlands, and France

Germany, for instance, has put forward a series of initiatives ranging from strengthened multilateralism, tackling issues like climate change and environmental protection and promoting peace and stability, human rights, the rule of law, and fair and sustainable free trade.<sup>xi</sup> Germany thus aims to build consensus by formulating a policy that would not antagonize either China or the US. The Netherlands, on the other hand, focuses on the strengthening of the international legal order, democracy and human rights, and sustainable trade. It also seeks to promote security, particularly maritime security, and places importance on issues like climate change, global healthcare, and poverty reduction.<sup>xii</sup> Concerning China, the Dutch position is to cooperate whenever possible but to protect whenever necessary. Finally, France's role in the Indo-Pacific is conceived as follows: strong involvement in settling regional disputes; acting as a guarantor of safety in the region; deepening of ties with China and strategic partners throughout the EU; a greater role in regional organizations in support of multilateralism (supporting ASEAN as a central pillar for stability in the region).<sup>xiii</sup> What makes France's position different from Germany and the Netherlands is that it is keen on defending its interests in the Indo-Pacific and is prepared to oppose China.<sup>xiv</sup> As for the other EU Member States, observers note that most remain indifferent to the region despite its growing economic and political importance. Despite the push by Germany, the Netherlands, and France for a Pan-European strategy in the Indo-Pacific region and the resulting EU Strategy, division still exists among the member states on the China question.

## Security and Defense

The EU pledges to promote an open and rules-based regional security order, focusing in particular on securing the sea lines of communication (SLOCs) and capacity-building. The EU also intends to enhance its naval presence in the Indo-Pacific, to conduct more joint exercises and port-calls with regional countries to protect freedom of navigation and ensure the safe passage of commercial vessels. Furthermore, it seeks to intensify defense

and security dialogues with Indo-Pacific partners, including discussions on counterterrorism and cybersecurity.

There are several reasons for the EU's increased assertiveness and engagement in the security affairs of the region. First, there is a growing recognition within the EU that it needs to play a bigger role and bear greater responsibility in maintaining the peace and stability of the Indo-Pacific. Doing so will enhance its ability to influence the geopolitical dynamics of the region whose fate is inextricably linked to that of Europe. Second, there is a need for the EU to demonstrate its strategic autonomy, to show that it is capable to "strike out on its own without the need for the US to support it."<sup>xv</sup> The EU is not always regarded as a strong security actor, and it aims to change this perception and underscore several contributions that the EU makes in promoting an open and rules-based regional security architecture. The Australia-United Kingdom-United States (AUKUS) security arrangement, which undercut a Franco-Australian submarine deal and reconfigured Paris' strategy, compelled the 27-member bloc to assert greater agency in charting its own path in the Indo-Pacific.

## **The South China Sea Disputes and Maritime Security**

The South China Sea is geographically far from Europe, but as pointed by Georgi Engelbrecht, Senior Analyst at the International Crisis Group, conflicts, and tensions in this area will have significant consequences for its prosperity. In a recent speech by President Charles Michel, President of the European Council, at the UN General Assembly, he stated that the security and freedom of navigation in the South China Sea must be guaranteed under international law.<sup>xvi</sup> With this, the EU can now be seen as assuming a role of that of a normative power.

According to Engelbrecht, there are two ways we can look at the SCS disputes. One is through conflict prevention by resolving disputes and finding solutions vis-à-vis sovereignty issues of territorial claims. The other is through conflict de-escalation by creating a climate of confidence and exploring avenues for cooperation. The EU, however, refrains from

taking sides in the disputes and has adopted an approach that is described as “principled neutrality.” One reason behind this is that the EU has broad and diversified relations with the states involved in the contest. In addition, as previously mentioned, EU member states also have different positions and views on China and the Indo-Pacific security. There is thus a split in opinion among EU member states on whether to consider the Indo-Pacific in strategic or economic terms. The lack of consensus suggests that some degree of ambivalence is present within the bloc on how or even whether to devise a more strategic and comprehensive approach towards the region.

### **On China**

Most member states identify China as among their top partners in the Indo-Pacific and are thus wary of the EU’s strategy, viewing it as a sign of alignment with the United States and/or at least partly as a tool against China. In a survey conducted by the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), it was revealed that ten EU member states regard the adoption of an Indo-Pacific strategy as a means for the bloc to deal with the growing challenge from China and also an opportunity to take advantage of the economic benefits that the region offers.<sup>xvii</sup> For thirteen member states, the Indo-Pacific strategy is regarded as a mere platform to pursue economic interests, with security issues taking a backseat.<sup>xviii</sup> However, it is important to note that as China becomes increasingly assertive in the Indo-Pacific and as its rivalry with the US intensifies, it will be increasingly difficult for the EU and its member states to remain neutral.

### **On Maritime Security**

The situation in the South China Sea is becoming increasingly concerning for the EU. Due to China’s behavior and activities in the flashpoint, it has become imperative for the EU to strengthen its relations with like-minded countries in the Indo-Pacific. As mentioned, the priority is to secure the SLOCs. But the EU’s concept of maritime security is also evolving to include not just the protection of maritime routes but also

freedom of navigation, the exclusive economic zones (EEZ) of partner countries, and marine biodiversity.

Where do member states stand on the problem of the South China Sea and the maritime security of the Indo-Pacific? As pointed out by some observers, indifference seem to prevail among member states regarding these issues. The ECRF survey has likewise revealed that most of the EU members have little security interest in the region, although there are some (like Lithuania and Finland) that believe that it is important to include security in the EU's Indo-Pacific strategy, if only as a way to sustain the US' involvement in Europe.<sup>xix</sup> Twelve member states have said that they are prepared to participate in freedom of navigation operations in the Indo-Pacific, but only four (Spain, Germany, Belgium, and the Netherlands) declared willingness to strengthen their military presence in the region.<sup>xx</sup> Hence, with just these four member states expressing willingness to contribute to Indo-Pacific maritime security, there is a disconnect regarding actions that are deemed necessary versus how much the states are ready to commit to them. There is a clear preference for limiting contributions to non-military ("soft power") aspects. This could mean that the EU will continue to lack credibility on "hard security" areas in the Indo-Pacific.

## On AUKUS

The creation of a trilateral security partnership between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States (AUKUS) was announced in a joint statement on 15 September 2021. It committed the three allies to cooperate on developing crucial technologies, including cyber and artificial intelligence (AI). The agreement is intended to counter the emerging hegemony of China in the region, and although US officials have denied this, many experts still believe that AUKUS signals a paradigm shift in strategy and policy across the region.

The important point of AUKUS is to allow Australia to build nuclear-powered submarines using American technology. This is the first time in 50 years that Washington have shared its closely guarded submarine

technology with another country. The only other country with which the US shared such know-how and technology was with its special trans-Atlantic ally, the UK. Nuclear-powered submarines are faster and more difficult to detect than their conventionally powered peers, can stay submerged for months, and shoot long-range missiles. Stationing them in Australia would thus reinforce the US' defense posture in the region.

China condemned the agreement as “extremely irresponsible,” stating further that it “seriously undermines regional peace and stability and intensifies the arms race.”<sup>xxi</sup> China further accused the US, UK, and Australia of having a “Cold War mentality and ideological prejudice.”<sup>xxii</sup> The pact also resulted in a row with France, which was kept in the dark about the trilateral negotiations and has lost a commercial deal with Australia to build 12 submarines. As France's Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian stated, “It's really a stab in the back.”<sup>xxiii</sup>

AUKUS has immense implications for the geopolitics of the region, and key ASEAN states have different views on this. The Philippines, for one, believes that a stronger Western presence in the region could deter Chinese aggression in the SCS.<sup>xxiv</sup> Indonesia, on the other hand, contends that that AUKUS could trigger an arms race among the Great Powers, which in turn could undermine nuclear non-proliferation. Jakarta further argues that although AUKUS may not directly threaten a Southeast Asian state, it could, however, provoke a response from China and exacerbate the US-China military rivalry, which would consequently place many Southeast Asian states in an insecure position.<sup>xxv</sup> Similarly, Malaysia emphasizes the danger of escalating conflicts in the region and called for maintaining and deepening dialogue with Beijing.<sup>xxvi</sup>

## Challenges and Recommendations

The EU's expanded role and strategic engagement in the Indo-Pacific are prompted largely by shifts in the geopolitical environment and changes in its relationship with China. There are concerns about China's growing assertiveness in the maritime domain, which might have serious

implications for Europe's security and economic interests. Thus, in recognition of the challenges and new realities in the Indo-Pacific, which is shaping as a key international geography, the EU was pushed to step up its security activities and strengthen its defense diplomacy in the region. There are, however, persistent challenges to the implementation of the EU's Indo-Pacific Strategy.

### **Ambivalence and Divides among the EU Member States**

Differences in views among EU member states on how to deal with China's rise and its consequent challenges, and to what extent the EU should involve itself in Indo-Pacific security affairs is the main stumbling block to the implementation of the strategy. It sometimes appears as if some EU member states are not fully aware, or are in denial, of the significance of the strategic shifts in the Indo-Pacific and how and to what extent it will affect Europe. Instead, a sense of economic opportunity and the notion of strategic neutrality prevail among the member states. Eventually, however, as tensions continue to rise, it will become clear that neutrality will no longer be an option. The EU and its member states will have to acknowledge their differences more directly with China.

Although it is unlikely that all member states will agree on a single concept of the Indo-Pacific and develop common policies, EU member states could adopt an approach that uses the EU Indo-Pacific strategy as a framework to come up with consistent policies. This could enhance the EU's capacity to act, increase the EU's visibility in the region, and underscore the EU's willingness to play an active role in shaping the geopolitical affairs in the Indo-Pacific.

### **AUKUS and ASEAN**

AUKUS is considered by key Southeast Asian states as a potential trigger for conflict in the already unstable region. As mentioned, both Malaysia and Indonesia have expressed concerns about arms races, competing power projection, and nuclear proliferation. The Philippines, in contrast, has voiced

its support for the agreement, stating that it complements the ASEAN's Indo-Pacific Outlook, and "sees value in the enhancement of a neighbor's capability to project power."<sup>xxvii</sup> The other ASEAN member states, however, are more cautious and prefer not to comment, although Vietnam has recently signed a defense deal with Japan that is aimed at countering China's military assertiveness in the SCS.

Analysts have argued that the AUKUS agreement has indeed heightened uncertainties in the region and increased the insecurities of Southeast Asian states. There is a danger that Southeast Asia would get entangled in Great Power rivalries as AUKUS is more pointed on its objective to counter China's growing military influence in the Indo-Pacific. In light of this, the stakes are raised as AUKUS could force China to accelerate its military modernization. The situation has then become a classic security dilemma scenario as the trilateral initiative was seen as a response to China's burgeoning naval buildup. ASEAN's lack of cohesion further contributes to the problem. It becomes evident that the bloc is struggling to maintain regional order, and there is a need to improve confidence-building and conflict resolution mechanisms.

### **Benefits for Southeast Asia?**

Ambassador Igor Driesmans, head of the EU delegation to the ASEAN, stated that "the launch of the EU Strategy is good news for Southeast Asia."<sup>xxviii</sup> The EU lacks "hard power" in the region, but Southeast Asia could benefit from other aspects of cooperation. The EU's commitment to promoting an open, multilateral, and rules-based regional order, human rights, human security, increased connectivity, and free and fair trade would undoubtedly contribute to the peace and stability of the region.

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Established in 2014, Asia Pacific Pathways to Progress Foundation, Inc. (APPPFI) is an independent policy think tank that aims to promote peace, development, and cultural understanding for peoples of the Philippines and the Asia Pacific through research, international dialogue, and cooperation. It is the Philippine member of the regional network ASEAN Institutes for Strategic and International Studies.

The organization's work focuses on the implications of international and regional developments for the Philippines and its foreign relations. It has dedicated programs which cover international security developments, maritime affairs, connectivity and integration, and China.

Principally, APPFI undertakes three major activities. First, it conducts and publishes policy-oriented research, disseminates the same to relevant stakeholders, and provides quarterly analyses of regional developments. Second, it organizes roundtable discussions and national as well as international conferences, solely or in partnership with other institutions. Third, it hosts exchanges and develops issue-based partnerships with governmental and non-governmental organizations, academic institutions, and the private sector in the Philippines and the Asia Pacific.

## RESEARCH PROGRAMS

- CHINA PROGRAM

APPF's original flagship program focuses on China and Philippines-China relations. The China Program stands on two pillars: (1) promoting better understanding among Philippine stakeholders of the implications of China's emerging role in East Asia and the world, and (2) strengthening linkages and engaging in Track Two diplomacy between these two neighboring countries.

- MARITIME DEVELOPMENT & SECURITY PROGRAM (MDSP)

This multidisciplinary program explores how the Philippines can enhance advantages and minimize threats and risks arising from its maritime strategic environment, looking toward both the internal and external dimensions. MDSP aims to generate timely discussions and appropriate recommendations regarding the strategic implications of Philippine maritime security, marine economic resources, and coastal development.

- REGIONAL INTEGRATION & CONNECTIVITY PROGRAM (RICP)

The RICP promotes a critical understanding of the political economy of regional development, and of economic trends and issues that affect Philippine national and regional interests. It seeks to generate insights and research that will enable the Philippines to strategically navigate through its international economic engagements, and interact beneficially with regional states and multilateral institutions.

- REGIONAL SECURITY ARCHITECTURE PROGRAM (RSAP)

The RSAP examines the evolving security environment, the role of multilateral and other forms of security associations, and institutional developments that affect Philippine and regional security. RSAP will be a hub producing research, intelligent commentary, and policy briefs from leading experts and specialists in the Philippines and the wider Asia-Pacific region.




Closely linked to, but independent from the Christian Democratic Union of Germany, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS) Philippines is a German political foundation. Established in 1964, KAS Philippines was the first ever KAS office in Asia. Ever since its inception, KAS has been actively working in the Philippines under the principles of freedom, justice, and solidarity.

With the main purpose of developing programs that boost the country's democratic institutions and processes, KAS strongly believes that human dignity and human rights are at the very heart of their work. Thus, KAS regards people as the starting point of its initiatives towards social justice, democratic freedom, and sustainable economic activity. KAS Philippines creates, develops, and sustains networks within the political and economic arenas by bringing people together who take their mandates seriously in society.

Given that KAS provides, not just research, but also robust and dynamic activities, the foundation considers itself not just as a think tank, but a think-and-do tank that works along socially equitable, economically efficient, and ecologically sustainable lines. KAS Philippines' country foci are institutional and political reform, the social market economy, and peace and development in Mindanao. The foundation works with civil society organizations, the academe, governmental institutions, political parties, think-tanks, the media, and decision-makers, creating strong partnerships along the way. Particularly, KAS Philippines aims to increase political cooperation in development cooperation at the national and international levels.

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