



THE EU AS A GLOBAL ACTOR IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

DECEMBER 2021 MARIE JOURDAIN

Introduction

This is what we call a difficult start. Released the day after the announcement of the security partnership between the United States, United Kingdom, and Australia, the European Union's first strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific had little coverage as the diplomatic crisis rose. Notwithstanding the pros and cons of AUKUS' contribution to the stability of the Indo-Pacific region, this decision signaled that continental Europe is not as important in the US security strategy as it has been,¹ but also that Europe and European countries are not perceived as essential interlocutors in the Indo-Pacific, especially on security issues. Since then, the Biden administration went out of its way to prove the opposite. These diplomatic efforts come also in recognition that the EU engagement in the Indo-Pacific is there for the long run. The EU document evidences the strategic interests for the EU to step up its engagement,² opening the door for deeper cooperation on issues of shared interests. As such, the EU intends to be a global actor in the region.

This strategy is particularly relevant to the United States as Washington has called for more European awareness of the Indo-Pacific challenges. The first step was for Europe to agree on the importance of the Indo-Pacific region for the EU and to define a common approach. The strategy motto, as presented by High Representative/Vice-President Josep Borrell, is: "cooperate whenever it is possible and protect our values and interests every time that

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- 1 European Commissioner for the Internal Market Thierry Breton stated at the Atlantic Council on September 21, 2021, that the withdrawal from Afghanistan and AUKUS have contributed for some in Europe to a "wake-up call." He said: "Something has changed. There is indeed a growing feeling in Europe . . . that something is broken."
- 2 European Council President Charles Michel stated, "The AUKUS security partnership further demonstrates the need for a common EU approach in a region of strategic interest," (@eucopresident), *tweet*, September 16, 2021; also see the strategy: "Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council: The EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific," September 16, 2021, https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/jointcommunication_indo_pacific_en.pdf.

it is necessary.”³ As such, it represents an opportunity for Washington to deepen the transatlantic relationship in an area where both the United States and the EU share similar objectives.

What remains to be seen is the impact of the diplomatic crisis over AUKUS on the cooperation between the EU and the United States in the Indo-Pacific. France is indeed the EU member state with the most military involvement in the region and is at the forefront of advocating for more European engagement there⁴ (with France aggregating European assets in its maritime patrols, for instance). While advocating for cooperation, the EU has actually been kept in the dark regarding AUKUS, and that might limit the EU’s appetite to engage more with partners it may perceive as unreliable. This potential outcome is not in the interest of the EU or the United States, and Washington demonstrated that it is determined to preserve cooperation with the Europeans on the Indo-Pacific.

The approaches, although distinctive, could foster new synergies. As demonstrated by Michael Shurkin, a consultant and former US intelligence analyst, “If anything, [Australia and the United States] should see further French integration into Indo-Pacific security arrangements as a priority. France, after all, aside from its hard power, can complement the [United States] diplomatically by presenting itself as the not-quite-America American ally, and can also involve the European Union.”⁵ Such a positive agenda would require several developments: effective trust between Europeans and the AUKUS allies; recognizing the EU’s legitimacy to pursue its agenda in the Indo-Pacific (the joint statement between Presidents Macron and Biden,⁶ for instance, is a good first step in that regard); and being the credible actor the EU claims to be through effective implementation of the strategy.

This brief examines what the EU strategy entails for the Indo-Pacific, its strategic interests there, the Union’s view of China, security and defense priorities.



On September 16, 2021, Josep Borrell, High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/Vice-President of the European Commission, delivered remarks on the EU strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific. Source: European External Action Service

The “Indo-Pacific region”

The strategy delimits the geographical extent of the Indo-Pacific: from the Eastern coastal countries of Africa to the Pacific Islands. This definition is somewhat similar to those adopted by the three European countries (France, Germany, and the Netherlands) which had already elaborated national strategies on the Indo-Pacific.⁷ The region does not include the western coast of the Americas. This must be kept in mind when engaging with countries that have an Indo-Pacific approach from a different vantage point (the United States does not include the western part of the Indian Ocean, for instance).

EU strategic interests in the region

The novelty of the strategy is not that the EU is showing interest in the Indo-Pacific region, where it is already largely engaged, but that the EU elaborated a common vision. It acknowledges having strategic interests to defend there

3 High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/Vice-President of the European Commission, Remarks, Press Conference on the Joint Communication, European Union External Action Service (website), September 16, 2021, https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/104215/indo-pacific-remarks-high-representativevice-president-press-conference-joint-communication_en.

4 Pierre Morcos, “France: A Bridge between Europe and the Indo-Pacific?,” Commentary, Center for Strategic and International Studies, April 1, 2021 <https://www.csis.org/analysis/france-bridge-between-europe-and-indo-pacific>

5 Michael Shurkin, “France in the Pacific: What It’s Been Up To, and Why It’s Good for America,” 9DASHLINE (a Europe-based online platform), September 20, 2021, <https://www.9dashline.com/article/france-in-the-pacific-what-its-been-up-to-and-why-its-good-for-america>.

6 “Joint Statement of the Phone Call between President Biden and President Macron,” White House (website), September 22, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/09/22/joint-statement-on-the-phone-call-between-president-biden-and-president-macron/>.

7 In their respective national Indo-Pacific strategies, Germany states, “The Federal Government considers the Indo-Pacific to be the entire region characterized by the Indian Ocean and the Pacific”; France says the “Indo-Pacific spans from Djibouti to Polynesia”; and the Netherlands refers to “the Indian and Pacific Oceans.”

because of the Indo-Pacific region's importance as the "world's economic and strategic center of gravity."⁸ First, the region is strategically key from an economic standpoint (with 60 percent of global gross domestic product), has demographic and growing military weight, and is called to play an essential role in fighting climate change. Second, the ties between the EU and the Indo-Pacific region are already extremely robust and the respective economies are intertwined. The document underlines that annual trade totaled €1.5 trillion (US\$1.74 trillion) in 2019, the highest between two regions in the world; the Indo-Pacific is the "second largest destination of EU exports," while the EU is the Association of Southeast Asian Nation's (ASEAN) second-largest trading partner after China; the EU also is the top investor (and by far) in the Indo-Pacific region (the total stock of EU investments in the Indo-Pacific reaches €12 trillion, compared to €6 trillion for the United States and €2 trillion for China).⁹

In this light, the risk of increasing destabilization fueled by "intense competition" would have spillover effects on the EU: in 2019, 55 percent of EU imports (by value) arrived by sea,¹⁰ so naturally the EU is concerned about the stability of choke points (e.g., Strait of Malacca, South China Sea). Threats to the international rules-based order and the respect of human rights lead to a deteriorating trade environment, in which the EU operates. The effects of climate change are felt worldwide, and for countries to be able to fight and adapt to this shifting landscape is in the interest of the EU.¹¹ Finally, the COVID-19 crisis highlighted bottlenecks in the supply chain and led to shortages of certain critical products in Europe in 2020. On its strategic dependencies analysis,¹² the European Commission analyzed 5,200 products in "sensitive ecosystems": the EU is "highly dependent on foreign suppliers" for 137 of them, and most of them are in China. The report evaluates a range of these dependencies from raw materials, batteries, pharmaceutical ingredients, hydrogen, and semiconductors to cloud and edge technol-

ogies. This EU overreliance on a limited number of partners limits, mechanically, the EU's political leverage.

Therefore, the strategy advocates for more "resilience from open, diversified, and undistorted access to world markets."¹³ All these factors speak in favor of growing cooperation and diversification of partnerships. The overall idea is that for the EU interests to be preserved (e.g., access to markets, resilience of supply chain, etc.), the Indo-Pacific region must be stable, be able to tackle climate change with efficiency, and succeed in its digital transition. The underlying conditions are the respect for the rules-based international order, democratic principles, and human rights. The means to meet the objectives is cooperation.

Cooperation

The EU defends an "inclusive approach," ready to work with whatever country or organization shares the same objectives on an area of shared interest. In this regard, the strategy is pragmatic; however, not only shared interests drive engagement with partners, but also values and principles (such as multilateralism and human rights). The EU intends to (further) engage bilaterally (negotiating/concluding new partnership and cooperation agreements, for instance), with regional (ASEAN in particular) and multilateral organizations (NATO is not mentioned specifically). The EU aims to enhance cooperation with those that already have existing Indo-Pacific approaches (ASEAN, Australia, India, Japan, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States). Interestingly, the EU shows interest in engaging with the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, or Quad (Australia, India, Japan, and the United States). The United Kingdom is mentioned only once (compared to Japan's twenty-two references), although Borrell stated in his remarks at the press conference on the joint communication that the EU stands ready to cooperate with London.¹⁴

8 Josep Borrell, "The EU Needs a Strategic Approach for the Indo-Pacific," Blog of the EU High Representative, European Union External Action Service March 12, 2021, https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/94898/eu-needs-strategic-approach-indo-pacific_en.

9 "Indo-Pacific: Remarks by the High Representative/Vice-President at the Press Conference on the Joint Communication," European Union External Action Service (website), September 16, 2021, https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/104215/indo-pacific-remarks-high-representativevice-president-press-conference-joint-communication_en.

10 "File: Value of Extra EU-27 Trade in Goods, by Mode of Transport, 2002 and 2019," Eurostat, Statistics Explained (website), August 5, 2020, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=File:Value_of_extra_EU-27_trade_in_goods,_by_mode_of_transport,_2002_and_2019.png.

11 The EU strategy notes that the region is responsible for 57 percent of global carbon dioxide emissions, and this share is growing; the sharp decline of the region's biodiversity and pressure on natural resources and fish stocks affect the whole ecosystem.

12 European Industrial Strategy, EU (website), accessed September 21, 2021, https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/europe-fit-digital-age/european-industrial-strategy_en.

13 "Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council: The EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific."

14 "Indo-Pacific: Remarks by the High Representative/Vice-President."



On November 4, 2021, the very first visit of a European Parliament delegation was welcomed by President Tsai Ing-wen to discuss the issue of disinformation. Source: Taiwan Presidential Office, <https://english.president.gov.tw/News/6185>

Focus on China

Since 2019, the EU has considered China as a “negotiating partner,” an “economic competitor,” and a “systemic rival.”¹⁵ The EU is traditionally cautious when referring to China. The 2021 April Council conclusions only mentioned China to vaguely defend the need to progress on the Comprehensive Agreement on Investment. This deal, which had long been in the making, was agreed in January (angering the newly elected US administration), but was frozen in May by the European Parliament (to retaliate against Chinese counter-sanctions amid the Xinjian human rights situation).¹⁶

Borrell, referring to China, presented the strategy as “one of cooperation, not confrontation.”¹⁷ Yet the EU is now tough-

ening its stance toward China, mentioning the “fundamental disagreements” with Beijing,¹⁸ designating specifically the Chinese significant “military buildup,”¹⁹ referring to the “display of force [...] in the South and East China Sea and in the Taiwan Strait.”²⁰ Without referring explicitly to China, the EU vows to cooperate against “unfair practices,”²¹ such as economic coercion (since then, the European Commission proposed a new tool to counter the use of economic coercion by third countries) or intellectual property theft. In the meantime, the EU mentions cooperation specifically with Taiwan four times: on semiconductors to address strategic dependencies; on trade and investment; on illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing; and on data protection. By aiming to reduce its strategic dependencies, the EU is also acting to get back some leverage with China.

15 European Commission and High Representative/Vice-President, “EU-China—A Strategic Outlook,” a Joint Contribution to the European Council, March 12, 2019, <https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/communication-eu-china-a-strategic-outlook.pdf>.

16 “MEPs Refuse Any Agreement with China whilst Sanctions Are in Place,” European Parliament, News (website), May 20, 2021, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20210517IPRO4123/meps-refuse-any-agreement-with-china-whilst-sanctions-are-in-place>.

17 Josep Borrell, (@JosepBorrellF), tweet, September 16, 2021, <https://twitter.com/JosepBorrellF/status/1438533599628832777>.

18 “Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council: The EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific.”

19 “Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council: The EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific.”

20 “Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council: The EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific.”

21 “Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council: The EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific.”

That the EU is taking a harder stance on China is remarkable considering the usual cautiousness of some member states, such as Germany or Hungary. This new firmness appears to be the result of growing European awareness and pressure from different actors, perhaps the European Parliament,²² European public opinion,²³ and European partners. Moreover, Slovenia, holding the EU presidency, advocates for a stronger stance as China attempts to constrain Lithuania,²⁴ in an attempt to cause the latter to step back from welcoming a Taiwan representation office and leaving the 17+1 forum of China and Central and Eastern European nations. The EU also elaborated a toolbox for 5G security to secure 5G networks in March 2021.²⁵ The EU launched this month the Global Gateway²⁶, seen as a European alternative to China's Belt and Road Initiative, and whose range of action encompasses the Indo-Pacific region. The strategy remains balanced, as China is key in tackling shared issues such as climate change or narco trafficking. However, with the European Parliament pushing for a new strategy to engage with China and an expected tougher stance toward China by the new German coalition,²⁷ the EU strategy for the Indo-Pacific is a significant milestone in the EU-China relationship.

Security and defense

The strategy lists seven priorities: sustainable and inclusive prosperity; green transition; ocean governance; digital governance and partnership; connectivity; security and defense; and human security. The sixth item, security and defense, is more substantial than had been anticipated. It is quite detailed and marks a step forward for the EU in terms of growing European involvement in the Indo-Pacific

region to address shared security challenges and threats.²⁸ The EU recognized the need for a more robust naval military presence in the region (by member states). As such, the possible extension of the EU Coordinated Maritime Presences concept to the Indo-Pacific will be a marker of the EU's determination to translate words into concrete actions. (A pilot case is taking place in the Gulf of Guinea). This new concept facilitates the coordination of already existing means to foster information sharing and joint maneuvers, but aims overall to "ensure a permanent maritime presence and outreach in Maritime Areas of Interest."²⁹ With limited naval assets and multiple areas of concern (including the High North, Mediterranean Sea, Gulf of Guinea, and Strait of Hormuz), such a move would concretely translate the key importance of the region for European interests.

The strategy also underlines objectives such as increasing the number of joint exercises and port calls with Indo-Pacific partners, extending the EU-funded Critical Maritime Routes program in the Indian Ocean and a capacity-building project to the Southern Pacific,³⁰ and facilitating information sharing through information fusion centers. The EU intends to facilitate the participation of Indo-Pacific countries in two existing missions in the region: one naval operation (Operation Atalanta, EU Naval Force Somalia) and a European training mission in Mozambique.

The EU intends to boost its presence in regional security forums (through participation in the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus, the East Asia Summit, and the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium).³¹ Defense and security will also be discussed in bilateral dialogues with Indo-Pacific partners.

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- 22 "Parliament Sets Out its Vision for a New EU Strategy on China," European Parliament, News (website), September 19, 2021, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20210910IPR11917/parliament-sets-out-its-vision-for-a-new-eu-strategy-on-china>. The European Parliament also sent a delegation in Taiwan early November.
- 23 See "Transatlantic Trends 2021," Bertelsmann Foundation and the German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF), GMF website, June 7, 2021 <https://www.gmfus.org/news/transatlantic-trends-2021>.
- 24 Robbie Gramer, "Pressured by China, Lithuania Won't Back Down over Taiwan," *Foreign Policy*, September 7, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/09/07/lithuania-taiwan-china-dispute-geopolitics-europe-landsbergis/>.
- 25 "The EU Toolbox for 5G Security," Factsheet, European Commission, Shaping Europe's Digital Future (website), March 24, 2021, <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/library/eu-toolbox-5g-security>.
- 26 https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_21_6433
- 27 See, for example, Frederick Kliem, "Germany Set to Toughen China Stance under New Coalition," Opinion, *Nikkei Asia*, October 3, 2021, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Opinion/Germany-set-to-toughen-China-stance-under-new-coalition>. "Both the Greens and the [Free Democrats] advocate a stronger stance on China and Russia," Kliem wrote.
- 28 Mirna Galic, "As China Poses Challenges, Europe Makes its Presence Known in the Indo-Pacific," Analysis and Commentary, United States Institute of Peace, August 3, 2021, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2021/08/china-poses-challenges-europe-makes-its-presence-known-indo-pacific>.
- 29 "Gulf of Guinea: Council Conclusions Launching the Pilot Case for the Coordinated Maritime Presences Concept," European Council, Press Release, January 21, 2021 <https://tinyurl.com/y7dtfa9#>.
- 30 "Project News," EU CRIMARIO (website), <https://www.crimario.eu/en/>.
- 31 France is the only EU country participating in the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium as a member, as it holds territories in the Indo-Pacific region. Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, and Spain are observers.



On October 16, 2021, the European Union and Japan conducted a joint naval anti-piracy exercise off the coast of the Gulf of Aden and of the Arabian Sea. Source: EEAS, https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/105779/maritime-security-eu-and-japan-carry-out-joint-naval-exercise_en

Military diplomacy must be more robust, hence the deployment of military advisers in the EU delegations and the establishment of an EU Cyber Diplomacy Network. The EU plans to play a more active part in a project it commissioned, along with the German Federal Foreign Office, called Enhancing Security Cooperation in and with Asia.³² The project identifies four priority areas: counterterrorism/prevention of violent extremism; cybersecurity; maritime security; and crisis management. All of these actions, especially in the maritime domain, are likely to influence the work on the strategic compass for security and defense,³³ which is to be released in March 2022.

Finally, the EU acknowledges there are new security challenges and a need for cooperation to address them, namely cybersecurity; counterterrorism; nuclear safety and nonproliferation of nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons; and foreign information manipulation and interference. Although the issue of climate change is addressed at length

in the strategy, it is not specifically addressed in the section on new security challenges.

By putting the emphasis on security and defense cooperation, the EU has the opportunity to translate its voicing of concerns into concrete steps, especially in the realm of maritime and cyber security. If some in Washington might regret that this engagement remains limited, and does not specifically address China, it is nonetheless a complementary approach, the aim of which is of interest to the United States: the promotion of an “open and rules-based regional security architecture.”³⁴

Conclusion

The European Union is usually not seen as a global actor in the Indo-Pacific because of a limited awareness of the challenges in a distant region,³⁵ a diversity of stances regarding China, or cooperation being limited to some areas. By assessing the EU’s strategic interests and vision, the strategy intends to prove the contrary. Through cooperation, mainly by strengthening and diversifying its partnerships, the EU sets its own approach. In that regard, it participates to build its “strategic autonomy.”³⁶ At the European Council meeting of October 21-22, heads of state sent the signal that Europe would prove its determination, endorsing the strategy.³⁷

The open question is about future cooperation between the EU and the AUKUS allies. France and the EU are involved in the Indo-Pacific region for the long term, and the opportunity to further engage the EU should not be missed. President Biden’s acknowledgment of the strategic importance of French and European engagement in the Indo-Pacific region, including in the framework of the EU’s strategy for the region paved the way for cooperation.³⁸ More has come with the two EU-US meetings (the second edition on China and the very first one on the Indo-Pacific) on the 2nd and 3rd of December. The Department of State and the European External Action Service “affirmed their shared goal to coordinate in Indo-Pacific engagement and identified possible

32 “Enhancing Security Cooperation in and with Asia,” project website via service provider GIZ, <https://www.giz.de/en/worldwide/87412.html>.

33 “Towards a Strategic Compass,” Factsheet, European Union External Action (website), May 6, 2021, https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/89047/towards-strategic-compass_en.

34 “Questions and Answers: EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific,” European Commission, Press Corner (website), September 16, 2021, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/QANDA_21_4709.

35 France, with 1.6 million French citizens in its territories there, is an exception.

36 The June 2020 Council Conclusions on Security and Defence states that “the EU will enhance its strategic autonomy and its ability to cooperate with partners in order to safeguard its values and interests.” See Council Conclusions on Security and Defence, General Secretariat of the Council, 8910/20, June 17, 2020, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/44521/st08910-en20.pdf>.

37 According to the *EU press release*: The European Council discussed the preparations for the upcoming ASEM Summit on 25-26 November 2021. In this context, it supports the EU strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region and invites the Council to ensure its swift implementation.

38 “Joint Statement of the Phone Call between President Biden and President Macron.”

priority areas and immediate themes for cooperation,”³⁹ such as climate change, public health, freedom of navigation and maritime security, or human rights. Turning official commitments into action is now the way forward and would demonstrate that the transatlantic community can effectively deliver together in the Indo-Pacific region. The United States might also play a critical role in easing the tension between France/the EU and Australia and the United Kingdom.

The United States has much to gain in the EU’s implementation of its strategy. Some Indo-Pacific countries are indeed reluctant to be associated with the perceived competition-driven US strategy for the region: such countries (e.g., India and Indonesia) might perceive it in their interest to engage also with the EU. It would still be good news for the United States, as the EU intends to work toward a region that

is more stable, secure, and sustainably developed, in line with the principle of democracy and the rule of law. That’s an idea Erik Brattberg and Philippe Le Corre articulated in a paper published by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in late 2019, saying: “A greater European presence in the region advances the US objective of promoting a tighter regional security architecture with vital partners,” and that the EU’s support for ASEAN “can help foster a more multilateral, cooperative Asian security architecture.”⁴⁰

The United States could make the most of the French presidency of the EU in the first semester of 2022. In this light, the yet-to-come EU-US dialogue on security and defense could include a discussion on the EU strategy in the Indo-Pacific, in order to foster transatlantic cooperation in this region of strategic interest.

39 “EU-U.S.: Joint Press Release by the EEAS and Department of State on the High-Level Consultations on the Indo-Pacific”, December 3, <https://www.state.gov/eu-u-s-joint-press-release-by-the-eeas-and-department-of-state-on-the-high-level-consultations-on-the-indo-pacific/>

40 Erik Brattberg and Philippe Le Corre, *The Case for Transatlantic Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Working Paper, December 18, 2019, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/12/18/case-for-transatlantic-cooperation-in-indo-pacific-pub-80632>.



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