



*Symposium: Europe in the Indo-Pacific: Promoting values and interests in a contested region*

# Europe in the Indo-Pacific: Economic, security, and normative engagement

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## Abstract

The Indo-Pacific has rapidly become the world's geopolitical and geo-economic epicentre. Consequently, much scholarly attention has been focused on Sino–United States superpower competition and on the policies of the region's great and middle powers. However, since Europe has engaged late with the Indo-Pacific, its policies remain under-examined. This Special Issue fills a lacuna in our knowledge through a dedicated appraisal of German, British, Italian, and European Union approaches to the Indo-Pacific. This introductory article provides an analytical survey of the impetus for Europe's new awareness of the Indo-Pacific's importance. It then sheds light on the European approach based on a tripartite framework comprising *economy*, *security*, and *norms*, which is adopted by all the articles in this Special Issue to draw out comparative insights. This research thus contributes to the literature on both European and Indo-Pacific strategic landscapes by examining an understudied development under a novel joint assessment.

## Keywords

Asia-Pacific, Europe, European foreign policy, European Union, France, Germany, Indo-Pacific, Italy, United Kingdom

## Introduction to this Special Issue

The Indo-Pacific region is now widely recognised as the world's geo-economic and geostrategic centre of gravity. Economically, it accounts for approximately two-thirds of the global population, gross domestic product and maritime trade (Rahman et al., 2020). Strategically, it is increasingly defined by both regional tensions and superpower competition, with a plethora of potential

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flashpoints including the Taiwan Strait, East and South China Seas and the Korean Peninsula (Acharya, 2018). Consequently, scholars have understandably focused on regional power shifts (He and Feng, 2023), deepening Sino–American rivalry (Shambaugh, 2018), and the responses of the region's great and middle powers, as they seek to adapt to this uncertain security environment (Abbondanza, 2022).

Despite the Indo-Pacific's indisputable significance, scholarly studies relating to the growing interest of European powers plus the European Union (EU) are relatively scarce, though fast gaining traction. Indeed, there are both valuable academic (e.g. He and Feng, 2023; Mohan, 2020; Odgaard, 2019; Patalano, 2019; Pejsova, 2021; Pugliese, 2023), and think-tank publications (e.g. Fasulo, 2023; Fiott et al., 2022; Simón, 2021) offering valuable and diverse analyses. However, as European policies adapt to an ever-changing Indo-Pacific landscape, research on their collective approaches must be an ongoing endeavour. Moreover, as yet there is no special issue specifically assessing EU and European national approaches to the Indo-Pacific. As a result, there is a lacuna in the literature that this Special Issue seeks to address within the specified parameters set by this journal.

This Special Issue is designed to bring together a cross-section of significant case studies exploring European approaches to the Indo-Pacific, to further contribute to this emerging corpus of literature. It seeks to expose the synergies and divergences amongst the respective approaches adopted by European powers, and between them and the EU. The Special Issue is framed around three defining questions, namely: *why* is Europe now enunciating more proactive policies to engage with the Indo-Pacific? *How* are these being implemented? And *what* is the significance of these developments for the region and for Europe itself? This introductory article briefly sets the stage for deeper investigation of these key questions in the following case-study articles, which include Germany (Rafał Ulatowski), the United Kingdom (Thomas Wilkins), Italy (Gabriele Abbondanza) and the EU (Gorana Grgić). First, it introduces the 'Indo-Pacific' concept and signifies the *economic*, *security*, and *normative* factors that motivate European policies, which are methodologically employed in all the case-study analyses. Second, it provides the necessary chronological background to the evolution of European Indo-Pacific policies themselves. Third, it summarises the key issues addressed by the Special Issue's remaining articles.

## The Indo-Pacific and why it matters for Europe

The concept of the 'Indo-Pacific' is a contested and debated notion. Without delving into the genealogy of the concept, it is essentially an effort to redraw the strategic geography of the prior 'Asia-Pacific' region to incorporate the Indian Ocean, foreground India's rise, and decentre China's pre-eminence (Köllner et al., 2022; Medcalf, 2020). Whilst ostensibly a neutral geographical descriptor, it is closely related to the strategic policy of the United States and its closest allies, aiming to house a balancing (or even 'containment') policy towards China. In that respect, the US-led Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) vision may be viewed as a direct counter to Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Unsurprisingly, China has outright rejected the concept and the policies it embodies, which it sees as illegitimate attempts to curb its rise (He and Feng, 2023), while many other regional actors (especially the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) members) seek to eschew further polarisation by avoiding explicit alignments (Wilkins and Kim, 2022).

Europe has joined this strategic debate late, spurred by the US 'pivot to Asia' initiated during the Obama presidency, which required increased transatlantic burden-sharing (Frühling and Schreer, 2009). Moreover, Europe's growing role is further ravelled by the complexity of related geopolitical and geo-economic implications, as well as by the diverse paths that European

countries have at times pursued (see below). Nevertheless, Europe has major interests which can be loosely divided into economic, security, and normative clusters employed by all the following articles. *Economically*, the Indo-Pacific represents the second-largest EU export destination, Europe and the Indo-Pacific together account for 70% of global trade, and their economies are often complementary (European Parliament, 2022). Indeed, scholars have argued that mercantile interests still represent the most influential driver behind European policies (Pugliese, 2023). In terms of *security*, European capitals are increasingly concerned about a potential conflict and the disruption of vital trade routes and maritime communication lines this would entail. With transatlantic and Indo-Pacific security increasingly intertwined, Washington and others look for support from European allies to counter-balance China (see Fiott et al., 2022). Thirdly, there are also strong *normative* elements in Europe's regional approaches, as both the EU and major European powers support a rules-based international order, aimed at upholding international law, seeking mutual prosperity, and engaging in multilateralism to maintain regional stability. To that end, European actors seek to cooperate with Indo-Pacific organisations and partners sharing the same principles, particularly ASEAN and its members.

## The emergence of European policies towards the Indo-Pacific

Initially, it was Paris<sup>1</sup> that spearheaded the broader European approach due to its status of 'resident power' with almost two million nationals, large exclusive economic zones, and locally-stationed military forces (Pajon, 2018). Notably, France started conducting freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs) and passing exercises in the South China Sea in 2014, including those in conjunction with US vessels (US Department of Defense, 2014). Building on the 2018 *Indo-Pacific White Paper*, France issued an *Indo-Pacific Strategy* in 2022, anchored around four pillars: security/defence, economy, norms and multilateralism, and climate change (French Government, 2022), displaying priorities that are compatible with both European and Indo-Pacific documents. In addition to deep-rooted politico-economic relations and naval deployments, it follows a wide geographical interpretation of this region (encompassing western Indian Ocean states). Consequently, the French approach emphasises multilateralism (including regular meetings with Chinese counterparts) but does not eschew unilateral measures, and exerts both soft (partnerships, climate resilience) and hard power (FONOPs), which places it in a distinct category as neither the British nor other European positions display comparably comprehensive approaches.

The rest of Europe gradually followed suit. Germany and the Netherlands (Dutch Government, 2020) published their Indo-Pacific 'guidelines' in 2020, displaying comparable priorities and geographical understanding of this region, encompassing all countries bordering the Indian and Pacific oceans. Germany vows to strengthen multilateralism, tackle climate change, promote security and the international law, and strengthen rules-based trade, digital transformations and social links (German Government, 2020). However, in his article, Rafał Ulatowski detects a tension in Berlin's attempt to reconcile strategic and normative challenges with its economic dependence on China. Germany's priorities are entirely comparable to Italian, EU, and Dutch ones, as shown by Ulatowski, yet Germany's unbalanced trade profile creates impediments to their actual implementation.

Subsequent to its 'Brexit' from the EU, the UK sought to redefine itself under the mantra of 'Global Britain'. The announcement of its Indo-Pacific 'Tilt' in 2019, understood in the broadest geographical terms, was a key element of this. Like other European powers, the drivers of Britain's 'new strategic approach' to the region have been economic, security, and normative factors, distilled from both national interests and values. Though not a 'strategy' as such, the 2021 *Integrated Review* and 2023 *Refresh* outline the British priorities, which are analogous to those of other European powers (British Government, 2023). As a 'resident power', it combines hard and soft

power goals and means to uphold the regional rules-based order. Thomas Wilkins argues that the British case is distinguished by the greater depth of its alliance, partnerships, and willingness to counter-balance China alongside the US, Japan and Australia (including through AUKUS), which sets it apart from other European partners.

In 2021 the EU itself unveiled its own Indo-Pacific policy, which was undiplomatically overshadowed by the surprise announcement of AUKUS. In her article, Gorana Grgić shows that Brussels highlighted seven priorities (prosperity; environment; ocean governance; digital governance; connectivity; security/defence; human security), echoing many of ASEAN's objectives (European Commission, 2021). These indicate a growing synergy of economic, security, and normative interests in EU foreign policy, which can be traced back to its anti-piracy missions in the Indian Ocean started in 2008. Additionally, her article traces the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO's) new awareness of Indo-Pacific challenges and opportunities (NATO, 2022), potentially fostering renewed transatlantic security cooperation. In the light of a markedly multilateral and cooperative approach, as well as a broad geographical understanding of this region, the EU strategy seems closely aligned with that of Germany, Italy, and the Netherlands. As with all European policies, it is being continuously developed and will likely adapt to a changing security environment.

While the list of official European Indo-Pacific policies ends here (with the recent exception of Lithuania), the interest of other large European actors does not. Italy, in particular, has quietly pivoted to this region through wide-scoped goals overlapping those of European and Indo-Pacific partners and institutions, supported by an inclusive geographical interpretation encompassing all countries bordering the two oceans. This has occurred more visibly in the past five years, by means of increasing economic, security, and normative interests and significant naval deployments, as argued by Gabriele Abbondanza in his article. Recent parliamentary debates have urged Rome to adopt a fully fledged Indo-Pacific strategy, while the government has emphasised Italy's specific contribution to the EU strategy, highlighting strengthened cooperation across numerous areas, including defence and security as one of the many elements (Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022). On account of its shared goals and multilateral means, the nascent though robust Italian approach is comparable to German, EU, and Dutch ones, yet remains remarkably understudied.

Additionally, as smaller European countries continue to formulate more structured approaches to the Indo-Pacific region, their policies may influence EU policies. Spain, for example, has significant politico-economic relations in the Indo-Pacific, and its capable naval forces could feasibly play a role alongside other European deployments. Moreover, several East-Central European countries such as Lithuania and the Czech Republic have been outspoken in opposition to Beijing's policies, and this may affect the European perspective as a whole.

## Whither Europe in the Indo-Pacific?

Europe's emerging Indo-Pacific approach is partially a reaction to China's increasingly assertive stance in the Indo-Pacific and Europe (including Greece's Piraeus port, part of the BRI). It is also due to increasing 'linkages' between the European, transatlantic, and Indo-Pacific security complexes as promoted by the US. Indeed, British Foreign Secretary James Cleverly (2022) noted that the 'security and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific are indivisible from Europe's'. Beijing's 'no limits' strategic partnership with Russia, currently engaged in aggression against Ukraine, further drives the point home. On this note, it is useful to note that Europe combines significant soft and hard power capabilities with which to navigate these complex challenges. The EU and the UK together represent the world's second-largest economic bloc globally, and their navies rank second for tonnage. Europe's 'Big Four' possess modern global blue-water navies which are routinely deployed

outside European waters (Fiott, 2022). On the other hand, the convergence of interests, the economic complementarity, and the growing partnerships and other forms of cooperation depict substantial soft power credentials as well.

These ‘hybrid’ means, which reflect broad and multilateral goals, may represent a ‘third way’ to approach the Indo-Pacific (as argued by Gabriele Abbondanza and Gorana Grgić), which would be symbolically interposed between the more ‘determined’ security policies of the US and its Indo-Pacific allies and the ‘cautious’ pathway preferred by ASEAN members. Consequently, the Special Issue’s contributors engage with such complex developments and structure their analyses around *economic*, *security*, and *normative* drivers, highlighting similarities and the few though noticeable differences. While German, British, Italian, and EU policies are predominantly reactive, still developing and unlikely to decidedly shift the regional balance of power, the Special Issue’s authors argue that they can contribute to a stable and prosper region. Accordingly, the following articles contribute to such debates by providing a comparative assessment of evolving European Indo-Pacific policies.


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### Note

1. Space constraints and repeated contributor unavailability precluded an article on France, which nonetheless remains one of the most studied countries in the literature.

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