



Facultad de Ciencias Humanas y Sociales
Grado en Relaciones Internacionales

Trabajo Fin de Grado

Towards a Stronger EU in the Indo-Pacific: Strategic Autonomy and Pragmatism?

Closing the gap between expectations and reality

Student: **María Milagros Martín Jiménez**

Director: Prof. Javier Gil Pérez

Madrid, May 2022

Abstract

The increasing antagonism and multipolar contestation that now governs the international scene has sparked debates concerning the EU's urgent need to change the traditional course of its foreign policy. With the future of the international community getting more uncertain with each day, the concepts of strategic autonomy and pragmatism are gaining more attention among the academic community and EU officials. This dissertation is aimed at finding policy directions that will enable the emergence of a stronger European Union towards a region that is becoming increasingly relevant in world politics: the Indo-Pacific. With this objective, the first section of this contribution will be devoted to understanding the past engagement of the EU with this region and with China, as one of its most important players, so as to identify the main successes and obstacles that have defined them. Secondly, through the lenses of the strategic autonomy and pragmatism debates, the analysis will suggest policy options that might enhance the EU's role in the region.

Key Words: European Union, Indo-Pacific, China, ASEAN, strategic autonomy, normativism, pragmatism

Resumen

El creciente antagonismo y contestación multipolar que gobiernan el panorama internacional, han suscitado debates sobre la urgente necesidad de la UE de cambiar el rumbo tradicional de su política exterior. Con el futuro de la comunidad internacional más incierto que nunca, los conceptos de autonomía estratégica y pragmatismo están ganando más atención entre la comunidad académica y los representantes de la UE. Este TFG pretende encontrar alternativas que permitan el surgimiento de una Unión Europea más fuerte con respecto a una región cada vez más relevante en la política mundial: el Indo-Pacífico. Con este objetivo en mente, la primera sección de esta contribución será dedicada al análisis de las relaciones

pasadas de la UE con esta región y con China, como uno de sus actores más importantes, para identificar sus principales éxitos y obstáculos. En segundo lugar, siguiendo el enfoque de los debates sobre autonomía estratégica y pragmatismo, el análisis sugerirá opciones de política exterior que podrían reforzar la presencia de la UE en la región.

Palabras clave: Unión Europea, Indo-Pacífico, China, ASEAN, autonomía estratégica, normativismo, pragmatismo

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INDEX ABBREVIATIONS

ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
ASEM	Asia-Europe Meeting
AUKUS	Australia-United Kingdom-United States
CAI	Comprehensive Agreement on Investments
CAP	Comprehensive Strategic Partnership
CARD	Coordinated Annual Review on Defence
CFSP	Common Foreign and Security Policy
CSDP	Common Security and Defence Policy
FTAs	Free Trade Agreements
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulation
IPR	Intellectual Property Rights
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
PCA	Partnership and Cooperation Agreement
PESCO	Permanent Structured Cooperation
PIPA	Personal Information Protection Act
QMV	Qualified majority voting
RCEP	Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership
TEU	Treaty on European Union
TFEU	Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union

1. AIM AND MOTIVATION

The international events that have recently unfolded before the eyes of the world are signalling the need for international actors to change and adapt their policies to adequately face increasingly complex scenarios. In the past months, our world has witnessed unprecedented events such as the outbreak of a pandemic that has exposed the main flaws of our system, North Korea's nuclear tests and the US' and South Korea's joint response, increasing tensions in the South China Sea and Russia's invasion of Ukraine. These are the best examples on how raw power politics have taken over the international arena and how security, economic and political stability should not be taken for granted.

In this context, discourses in favour of a more geopolitical, pragmatic and autonomous EU have installed in Brussel's corridors. This dissertation seeks to clarify the steps that need to be undertaken to enhance the EU's presence in a region that is progressively shifting the fulcrum of global power away from the Atlantic and Europe (Simón & Speck, 2017, p. 5). Moreover, one of the objectives of this contribution is to understand the main political, normative and economic disparities that, in the past, have prevailed in the Union's engagement with the region and with China. Finally, the present analysis is aimed at contributing to the current debates that surround the EU's foreign policy-direction pertaining to a shift to a more strategic autonomous and pragmatic Union in contrast with the aspiration to export the democratic values and principles that since its creation have guided the EU's international action.

In order to better achieve these objectives, the focus will be mainly placed in the past and future relations of the Union with the Indo-Pacific and with China, an undoubtable power in the region. In fact, many strategists argue that the notion "Indo-Pacific" has evolved as a desire of counterbalancing China's rising prominence (Brown, 2021). Additionally, a brief reference will be made to ASEAN, an actor whose efforts and commitment to achieving stability, cooperation, dialogue and a rules-based order in the region can be of interest to the European Union (ASEAN, 2021, 3).

2. STATE OF THE ART

The Indo-Pacific, producer of 60% of global GDP, “home to three-fifths of the world’s population and the forefront of the digital economy” (European Commission, 2021) is a region that the European Union cannot disregard, despite initial struggles to appropriately acknowledge its importance (Simón & Speck, 2017, p. 5).

From an economic perspective, many experts agree that “the shift to Asia as the world’s economic centre of gravity” (Benaglia, 2021) has already taken place. Despite the negative economic lows experienced as a consequence of the Covid-19 outbreak (job losses, human capital deficits and falling incomes, among others), at the beginning of 2021, the World Bank estimated that the region would experience a growth of 7.2% and a 4.4% in 2022, going back to the path of economic recovery (Di Carlo & Islam, 2021). Similarly, a 2021 UN report on the world economic situation prospects, recorded that the economies in Asia performed better than those in the rest of developing regions and forecasted a growth of 6.4% in 2021 for China (UN Report). Moreover, as stated by the Chairman of the European Parliament’s Committee on Foreign Affairs, David McAllister, the region “is expected to account for more than half of the global economy by the end of this decade” (2021, p. 3). In addition, integration initiatives such as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), signed in 2020 by 15 Asia-Pacific countries such as China, South Korea and Japan, account for nearly a third of global GDP and shift supply chains away from Europe (D’Ambrogio, 2021).

Regarding the particular influence that the region’s economy has for the Union, experts highlight the fact that it is home to four of the Union’s ten biggest trading partners and the second largest recipient of EU exports. Additionally, the EU is one of the major trade partners, top investors and leading providers of development cooperation of Indo-Pacific economies (Mohan, 2021). This interrelatedness is also described in the EU strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific which clarifies that together they account for 60% of foreign direct investment flows and 70% of the global trade in goods and services. Moreover, trade exchanges between both regions reached 1.5 trillion euros in 2019, higher than between any other geographical regions of the world, and with China alone being the top exporter (9.3 %,

198.2 billion euros) (D'Ambrogio, 2021). The strategy goes on and declares that “the EU and the Indo-Pacific are natural partner regions in terms of trade and investment” (European Commission, 2021).

Besides, the relevance of the Indo-Pacific not only relies on its optimistic economic performance and the interrelation that exists with the EU, but it also depends on demographic and security variables. With regards to the former, it is important to bear in mind that the region is home to 20 of the world's 30 megacities and 60% of the total population, as well as the source of almost half of global carbon emissions, which make its countries essential players in addressing present and future climate challenges.

From a security perspective, the Indo-Pacific is at a high risk of instability due to “geopolitical rivalries, border disputes and simmering domestic, cross-border conflicts (...), refugee flows and regional and international terrorist networks” (Federal Foreign Office, 2021). This, united to the fact that, throughout the last decade, the region's arms spending increased more rapidly than anywhere else, amounting to 30% of global expenditure, and that it lacks structures for cooperative security and efficient mechanisms to control and restrain conflict (2021), makes it worthy of the EU's attention. In line with this idea, the strategy stresses that, in past years, geopolitical dynamics have opened the door to intense tensions, displays of force and competition over regional hotspots such as the Taiwan Strait or the South China Sea, which, have eventually led to a significant military build-up (European Commission, 2021).

In light of what has been explained beforehand, the EU should adopt a more proactive role and move beyond its traditional aid and trade-focused relationship with the region (Di Carlo & Islam, 2021) to encompass the security, political and strategic dimensions (Mohan, 2021).

2.1 Assessment of the EU's current (ir)relevance in the region

With respect to the conception that citizens in the Indo-Pacific have with regards to the role of the EU in their territory, in high political spheres, Asian diplomats have always

“lamented the lack of interest of European heads of state in the region and their reluctance to participate in summit meetings of regional organisations” (Holslag, 2021).

Additionally, the ASEAN Studies Centre at the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute conducted the State of Southeast Asia Survey to capture the views and perspectives of opinion-makers, policymakers and leaders in the region. One of the conclusions of the survey was that, when it came to choosing the most influential economic powers in the region, the EU, despite improving its position since 2020, still maintained a weak performance and remained as one of the top three least influential economies along with Australia and India. Similarly, concerning the political and strategic weight, respondents placed the EU in a weak spot, performing as one of the worst actors included in the survey, far behind China (the top performer), the US and ASEAN. Nonetheless, the EU “continues to be seen as the player most capable of filling the global leadership vacuum on the rule of law” (Martinus, Seah, Thi Ha & Thi Phuong, 2021). However, this same study shows that, despite its citizens’ appreciation for Europe’s championship of climate change and a rules-based order, they question its real potential to display leadership and believe that the Union remains an “impotent partner” and “ephemeral power” (Holslag, 2021).

Similarly, when it comes to experts’ opinions on the subject, a rather pessimistic scenario is depicted. Many agree that, as consequence of its nonmilitary capabilities, the EU continues to be a normative or civilian power, given its past role in shaping governance, human rights and global norms. Likewise, the EU is considered a “market power” owing to its capacity to “influence foreign governments not through force or the threat of violence, but through inducements of better trade” (Hutt, 2019). Hence, it has been argued that “the EU needs to revamp its approach to the Indo-Pacific by better understanding the expectations of its partners in the region” (Koenig & Redeker, 2020). In fact, in the context of the 13th Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM), Garima Mohan noted, that it is imperative that the EU views the region from a more strategic approach that it has done in the past and abandons its orthodox neutral standpoint (Shankar, 2021).

In this regard, it is highly accepted that the Covid-19 pandemic has exposed the Union's vulnerabilities pertaining to the health, defense, security and investment sectors. Additionally, the surge of state-centric nationalism inside our borders, the risk of nuclear and arms race, the appearance of cyber threats and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, makes it urgent for the EU, now more than ever, to give faster and more strategic responses and not get lost in the vagueness of its objective of fostering resilience. With regards to this latest argument, experts warn that the current compass for EU policies, defined as "the ability not only to withstand and cope with challenges but also to undergo transitions, in a sustainable, fair and democratic manner", can lead to a new "constructive ambiguity" in practice (Bargués, 2021, p. 6).

Adding up to this line of reasoning, actors who, like the EU, are determined to influence the international arena must "maintain (or improve) their active role in global affairs, even in challenging circumstances" (Abbondanza, 2021). The so-called Europe's "holiday from history", viable in the 20th century, is no longer an option given the interdependent and multipolar world we now live in. As Koenig and Redeker have clearly sum up "it is time for the EU to get real about its geopolitical ambitions" (2021) and become geopolitically assertive. These arguments are also shared by many EU officials. As an example, Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission, has repeatedly stated that the Union has outgrown its technocratic and economic origins and is now prepared to increase its power through a "geopolitical Commission" better suited to face the new balance of power (Lefebvre, 2021). This geopolitical Commission would require the development of more security-related and strategic policies, in contrast with the traditional single market-related approach (Haroche, 2021). For many experts, this constitutes a crucial evolution that the Union must undergo to reshape its external action in the near future.

Likewise, Josep Borrell, High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, has pointed out that, for the EU to become the partner of choice for other world powers, it must strengthen its influence in the international sphere and maximise its geopolitical impact (2020). According to him, this objective can only be achieved through a degree of autonomy in all fields (Bargués, 2021, p. 9). As Angela Merkel once stressed out

“we Europeans truly have to take our fate into our own hands” (2021). In addition to stressing out the need for a more autonomous EU, Josep Borrell has continuously highlighted that, considering the current antagonistic international environment, the Union must take advantage of its full range of capacities and not rely only on soft power”, as it is used to do (Weiler, 2020).

Lastly, it is not possible to conclude an analysis on the connection of the Indo-Pacific and the European Union without briefly referencing the AUKUS alliance. It consists of a security and defence partnership between Australia, the US and the UK whose development has been surrounded by controversy (Shea, 2021). It is founded on the three superpowers’ cooperation with the aim to improve their quantum, artificial intelligence and cyber capabilities (Whitman, 2021). For many scholars, this alliance, which has resulted in the abrupt cancellation of Australia’s contract to purchase French submarines, has “loosened the already fragile strategic connection between Europe and the Indo-Pacific” (Kuo, 2021). Additionally, the timing of its announcement, the day of the release of the EU Strategy for the Indo-Pacific, depicts a profound disregard for the Europeans (Kuo, 2021; Marafona, 2021 & Shea, 2021) and will most probably lead to the diminishing of the potential value of the Strategy and debilitate its implementation (Kuo, 2021). AUKUS has refuted the argument of those who believed that the election of Joe Biden as US President would change the path followed by its predecessor, and return to business as it had been in the past. In addition to proving that Europe is “increasingly marginal in US foreign policy” the alliance has exposed that the European Union is not perceived as a prominent actor in the region (Kuo, 2021).

Many hope that AUKUS will serve as a wake-up call for the EU to put an end to its “indecisive Indo-Pacific policy” (Kuo, 2021). If not, the Union risks becoming a secondary actor, relegated to a position navigating between “more assertive Chinese and US counterparts, despite its comparable global capabilities and interests” (Abbondanza, 2021). Once more, reality proves the Union’s urgent need to secure greater strategic autonomy (Marafona, 2021).

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This section will be devoted to the analysis of the International Relations' theories that guide this dissertation. First, to better understand the region that is subject of this contribution, the concept of the "Indo-Pacific" will be briefly examined in contrast with the concept of "Asia-Pacific". Secondly, it will address the main debates that are associated with the current presence of the EU in the international sphere and that have inspired this analysis: normativism v pragmatism and the attainment of strategic autonomy.

3.1 Indo-Pacific: a new concept full of political implications

The notion "Indo-Pacific" was first envisioned in 2017 by Japan, which introduced it in its "Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy", and was highly welcomed by Washington (Detsch, 2021). Soon after, the concept was embraced by ASEAN, which named its 2019 annual summit as "ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific". Similarly, Australia incorporated it in several policy papers and official speeches (Conley, 2019).

Recently, the concept "Indo-Pacific" has increased its presence and relevance in international relations' theoretical debates, challenging the orthodox concept of "Asia-Pacific". On the one hand, from a geographical perspective, "Asia-Pacific" refers to Asian countries that lie within the Pacific Ocean and mainly includes South-east Asia, North-east Asia and Oceania (Singh, n.d.). Conversely, the "Indo-Pacific" has a wider scope that combines the Pacific and Indian Oceans and includes countries that range from South-east Asia and the Eastern Coast of Africa across the Indian Ocean to the South and Western Pacific (Fukushima, 2021). On the other hand, from a substantive standpoint, while the "Asia-Pacific" has a rather economic conception, that since the 1980s has referenced a zone of emerging markets that experienced rapid economic growth (Singh, n.d.), the "Indo-Pacific" exceeds the economic domain to encompass security and diplomatic affairs (Fukushima, 2021).

Therefore, the rise of the "Indo-Pacific" as the new concept designating the region has been motivated by a political rationale. In fact, as stated by many analysts, this evolving concept,

“captures the shift in power and influence from the West to the East” (Singh, n.d.) and “reflects the rise of geopolitical and geoeconomics rivalry” (Kiglics, Köllner & Patman, 2021). For others, the term is deemed as divisive and aimed at signalling support for the US over China as well as at countering the latter’s rise (Conley, 2019). For the purpose of this contribution, the concept “Indo-Pacific” has been chosen over “Asia-Pacific” due to its inclusion in the EU’s 2021 Strategy towards the region.

3.2 The EU as a liberal power: time to rethink its normative approach?

The EU’s origin as an integration of distinct countries that once were at war with one another is the living proof of how, as asserted by Kantian liberalism, through economic integration, democracy and international institutions, prosperity and peace can be achieved (Ahmad, Kalim & Gull, 2018, p. 32). Since then, the Union has become a queen promoter of liberal values to the point that it is now considered “the strongest proponent and defender of the liberal global order” (Smith & Youngs, 2018). As a liberal international actor, the EU’s external action has been characterised by the promotion of democracy, international law and multilateralism through its participation in other international organizations (Petrie, 2013, p. 16). The embrace of human rights, individual liberties and the rule of law, that since the 18th and 19th centuries has shaped liberal theories, is implicit in the EU’s nature (Franch, 2019, p. 88). Likewise, the Union is frequently described as a normative actor with soft power characteristics (Gänzle & Winn, 2019, p. 11). With regards to its engagement with the Indo-Pacific, as will be explained in the first part of the analysis, the EU has followed this same strategy and has aimed to become a normative power, with more or less success.

In the past decade, the debate concerning the need for the EU to abandon its values-based approach in favour of a more pragmatic stand has gained relevance. Pragmatism has usually been associated with the US’ performance and has been depicted as the successful combination of idealism and realism (Siemers, 2004, p. 809). In the European scene, the concept gained greater attention with the EU Global Strategy. Considered the “conceptual cornerstone” of the strategy, the concept of “principled pragmatism” was mentioned three

times and was associated with the idea of “resilience” (Gänzle & Winn, 2019, p. 11). Currently, academic literature depicts pragmatism as the choice to adopt a realist turn in EU policymaking. Further, it means the combination of its traditional and self-defining idealistic aspirations of advancing a better world with a realistic assessment of strategic scenarios (Mammadov, 2021). In line with this idea, for many scholars, the EU should follow the same path it did when entering Turkey’s migrant deal, which “prioritised the Member States’ perceived interest in limiting migration over basic human rights and the Copenhagen criteria” (Mihalache, 2016, p. 3).

3.3 Strategic autonomy as the EU’s future

Council conclusions in November 2016 were the closest the EU has come to a definition of “strategic autonomy”. Accordingly, by attaining strategic autonomy in fields such as economy, energy and security, the EU would opt to act multilaterally when possible and autonomously if necessary (Borrell, 2020). Further, the daring objective of achieving strategic autonomy in all policy fields would imply growing more coherent, capable and stronger in the international sphere, leaving behind past accusations of EU irrelevancy (Bargués, 2021, p. 11).

Irrespective of the arguments that will be stressed in succeeding sections of this contribution, it is important to advance that the acquirement of strategic autonomy requires internal cohesion among the 27 Member States and their commitment to engage in global affairs. Nevertheless, concerning the former, as will be explained later on in this dissertation, internal dissension has frequently hampered the development of a joined external action (Barbé & Morillas, 2019, p. 759). To lessen the negative impact of Member States’ contestation, the introduction of qualified majority in foreign policy decision-making processes appears particularly meaningful (Bargués, 2021, p. 9). Additionally, the EU’s strategic autonomy cannot be seen as a withdrawal from the world. Contrarily, the achievement of this autonomy requires an increased engagement in the international scene through the consolidation and reinforcement of the Union’s alliances (2021, p. 10). Once again, the embrace of strategic

autonomy reopens the debate “on how to close the gap between expectations and reality” (Rieker & Blockmans, 2019, p. 13).

4. OBJECTIVES, HYPOTHESIS AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Through the analysis of past relations and the existing literature and academic debates concerning EU’s economic and security dependencies to foreign actors and its normative-based approach to the Indo-Pacific, this dissertation aims to provide adequate answers to the questions: (i) Has the EU achieved its economic, political and security objectives with regards to its engagement in the Indo-Pacific and in China? (ii) Should the EU give up its normative expectations towards the region in favour of a pragmatic standpoint? (iii) How can the EU become a key player in the Indo-Pacific through the attainment of economic and security strategic autonomy?

The hypothesis of this dissertation is that the enhancement of the geopolitical role of the EU in the Indo-Pacific requires the attainment of strategic autonomy in fields such as economy and security and the guarantee of internal coherence at EU level. In this regard, the analysis of the main economic and security dependencies of the Union in the region will lead to increase awareness with regards to the weaknesses that must be addressed so as to attain strategic autonomy in those fields. Additionally, the focus of the scholar literature on internal disparities among Member States depict lack of unity at EU level as the main obstacle to achieving the desired degree of strategic autonomy.

Therefore, the main objectives of this contribution are (i) to provide a general overview of the past relationship between the EU and the Indo-Pacific and China, as well as to (ii) suggest policy alternatives to acquire strategic autonomy in the economic and security fields as a mean to increase the role of the EU in the Indo-Pacific while preserving its values-based approach.

5. METHODOLOGY

For the purpose of answering the questions that have inspired this contribution, it has performed two analyses. The first one covered the past engagement between the EU and the Indo-Pacific and the EU and China. This general overview has allowed to identify the main obstacles that have threaten to jeopardize the Union's presence in the region and determine the degree to which the EU's prior expectations were, or not, met in practice. The second analysis has placed the spotlight in the future participation of the EU in the region. With the aim to shed light as to how to increase its presence in the Indo-Pacific, this dissertation has structured its studies around two main debates that currently capture the Union's foreign policy agenda: whether it should adopt a rather pragmatic approach and how to attain more strategic autonomy. Hence, pertaining to these topics, several conclusions will be pointed out and, finally, some policy recommendations will be suggested.

Pertaining to the sources used in this contribution, a thorough research on the existing academic literature has been carried out. This was achieved through the resort to libraries and online academic browsers by using keywords such as 'foreign policy', 'European Union', 'Indo-Pacific', 'China', 'dependencies', 'strategic autonomy' and 'pragmatism'. In addition, this dissertation has relied on a snowball system while reviewing the existing literature of other works, which resulted in the disclosure of new authors. Finally, this analysis has been advanced through the consultation of official websites, reports, policy documents and oral interventions of EU representatives.

6. PAST EVOLUTION OF EU-INDO-PACIFIC RELATIONS: LIGHTS AND SHADOWS

With the objective of better understanding the steps that need to be undertaken by the Union to increase its role in the Indo-Pacific and of answering the questions that guide the present analysis, this section will be devoted to examining the past performance of the EU. This past overview will begin with a brief general assessment of the attainment of the EU's goals towards the whole region and move on to examine the real degree of fulfilment of the Union's aspirations towards two major actors: ASEAN and China. Additionally, it will

revolve around three main subjects: economic policy, the promotion of its norms and values and the security domain.

6.1 General overview of the EU in the Indo-Pacific

In past decades, multiple statements by EU representatives and policies drafted in official documents have pointed out the Union's perception that future growth prospects of both regions were intimately linked with the level of economic interdependence between them (Council of the European Union, 2012, p.5). Additionally, policy papers released by the EU with regards to its economic engagement with some countries in the region have illustrated how the Union depicts itself as a relevant economic power (Chen & Gao, 2021, p. 11). For instance, in 2001 the EU Commission highlighted how the built up of a "trade and investment pledge" in the context of the second ASEM Summit, in 1998 in London, had been crucial for the economic recovery of Asian countries (European Commission, 2001, p.8). Similarly, the Union has also claimed credit for the region's economic recovery from the 2008 financial crisis. This, united to the fact that many Indo-Pacific States have usually viewed the EU as a key trading partner and economic power (Chen & Gao, 2021, p. 8), opened the door for the Union to develop its strategy as a values and regulatory promoter through its trade policy within the region (Chen & Gao, 2020).

Pertaining to the EU's objective of promoting its norms and values via its trading initiatives, this policy approach has been implicit in all formal manifestations and official documents. Beginning with the EU Treaties, the Union's trade policy must be inspired by the advancement of the EU's values among which we can find the fight for environmental and social standards, the development of poorer countries and the respect for human rights (European Commission, 2015, p. 22). In fact, in 2017, the Communication "A Balanced and Progressive Trade Policy to Harness Globalization" emphasised the Union's policy of "non-comprise of its core values and norms" (European Commission, 2017, p. 4).

These expectations have been translated into practice through different initiatives. As an example, the EU has established legally binding links between free trade agreements and bilateral political agreements, designed to connect normative and political issues with trade (Chen & Gao, 2021, p. 10). Hence, the incorporation of provisions and commitments on rule of law, democracy and human rights on EU FTAs has become a common practise (Bungenberg, & Hazarika, 2019). For illustrative purposes we can cite Thailand trade talks. The FTA negotiations that began in 2013 were suspended in 2014 due to the military coup that took place in the country in May of that year. As stated by EU representatives at the time, despite the economic costs that the suspension could bring to Thailand, the fostering of democracy and human rights was a priority for the Union and a condition for the resuming of negotiations (Vandewalle, 2016).

With regards to the EU's objective of becoming a standard-setter in the region, in past years, it has proactively engaged in regulatory cooperation and has sought to develop a leading position in setting standards through the exploitation of its economic weight in the region and the negotiation of trade agreements (Chen & Gao, 2021, pp. 9-11). More recently, the Union clearly stated its aim to “spearhead the development of new global norms, international standards and cooperation frameworks in areas such as digital and other technologies” (European Commission, 2021, p. 2). Following the same strategy used to promote its core values, the Union includes regulations concerning data protection and data flow in its trade negotiations with countries of the region (Chen & Gao, 2021, p. 9). In this sense, EU officials have, time after time, affirmed that no EU institution would ratify an agreement that threatens data protection, which, as a fundamental right in the EU, is “not up for negotiation” (Kanetake & de Vries, 2018). This goal has transcended from paper to reality and led to the reshaping of the regulatory frameworks in some Indo-Pacific countries. As an example, South Korea, motivated by its intention to meet General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) standards to attain an adequacy decision from the Union, amended its Personal Information Protection Act (PIPA) (Lexology, 2020). However, the practical scope of the Union's regulatory policies has its limitations. As a case in point, after the Economic Partnership Agreement entered into force, the EU and Japan decided to postpone the provision on the free flow of data (Kanetake & de Vries, 2018). Furthermore, the

consolidation of China's regulatory capacity in digital matters has contested and pose a challenge to the Union's original ambitions (Kuo, 2021).

Pertaining to security, the EU's objective of playing a leading role in security affairs is highly reasonable given the correlation that exists between Indo-Pacific security and European prosperity (Chen & Gao, 2021, p. 9). In fact, the security challenges that pose a menace to stability, such as territorial disputes in the South China Sea, North Korea's nuclear programme, the link between European organised crime networks and the region, terrorism and cyber-attacks, among others, successfully explain the Union's interest in increasing its security role. Following this objective, the EU has developed some civilian power tools by becoming the main promoter of development projects and aid donor (De Prado, 2013, p. 2). However, despite the practical efforts on the side of the EU, studies show that despite having been regarded as an "actor" in the peace and security arenas, the Union's strategies and actions are considered less relevant when compared to the US'. Hence, scholars agree that the EU has been deemed, and still is, as a weak security provider and countries in the region do not expect it to play a leading role (Chaban, Miskimmon & O'Loughlin, 2017).

6.2 EU-ASEAN engagement: there is a long way ahead

In recent years, the EU effectively understood that if it wants to play a major role in the region and become an ASEAN's "natural partner" it must work towards bringing positive and beneficial changes through practical and concrete actions instead of through empty political gestures, as it has sometimes done (Pejsova, 2019). Following these conclusions, in December 2020, 43 years after becoming Dialogue Partners, both actors finally upgraded their status to Strategic Partnership, clearing the way for restrengthened economic, development, political, security and strategic cooperation (Kuok, 2021, p. 39). This policy change brought an end to past trends of scepticism concerning the practical capabilities of the EU as a serious strategic player in the region. Among the events that played an important role in boosting the Union's credibility for ASEAN countries, the increase economic engagement and the 2020 UK, France and German's statements in the UN fora rejecting

China's maritime claims with respect to the South China Sea are worthy of mention (Kuok, 2021, p. 39).

With regards to the Union's security role in the region, it has pivoted on the delivering of development aid funding to ASEAN countries (Chen & Gao, 2021, p. 11). By way of example, by 2016, the Union had devoted over 3 billion euros to addressing poverty in ASEAN countries. Similarly, from 2014-2020 more than 170 million euros were granted to fund ASEAN's integration agenda. With this provision of funds, the EU doubled the amount allocated in prior years, from 2007 to 2013 (Delegation of the European Union to Indonesia and Brunei Darussalam, 2016).

However, despite the positive advancements, there is still a long way ahead. In the socio-political arena the EU's approach of promoting its core values through trade agreements with ASEAN has proved ineffective and, on some occasions, even counterproductive. For instance, the Union's advocacy of environmental sustainability with regards to its resolution on palm oil led to criticism and interventionist condemnations in Indonesia and Malaysia (Tan, 2018). Similarly, for some scholars, past records of "over-promising and under-delivering" derived in some opposition towards the EU and the preference for powers such as the US, Japan or Australia in security matters (Mohan, 2021).

6.3 EU-China relations: navigating troubled waters

Since both parties first established diplomatic relations in 1975, their cooperation has progressively become more extensive and intensive, reaching many areas of common interest (Men, 2008, p. 3). In 1998, annual EU-China summits were launched and have since taken place 23 times, most recently in April 2022 (European Council, 2021). Endeavours to take their relationship beyond the economic and commercial spheres finally materialised in 2003 with the "Comprehensive Strategic Partnership". The two sides also launched the High-level Economic and Trade Dialogue in 2008 and the High-level Strategic Dialogue in 2010, aimed at addressing issues that range from financial affairs and trade to civil society, labour safety,

education, energy, security or climate change (Maher, 2016, pp. 960-961). Additionally, alongside Japan and the Republic of Korea, China is considered an EU Strategic Partner in the region (Cantell, Gazzina & Soutullo, 2021). However, the Asian country's restrictions on market access, its human rights record and slow pace of political reform have sparked criticism and hardened bilateral relations (Men, 2008, p. 7). The pages that follow will be devoted to the analysis of the main features of the Sino-EU relations in the past years from the economic, political and security perspectives. The highlight of the main obstacles and successes that have marked their engagement will enable an improved assessment of the next steps that need to be taken by the EU to increase its presence and power in the Indo-Pacific.

6.3.1 Economic Approach

Pertaining to the economic engagement between the EU and China, some accomplishments have occurred. In terms of capacity building, several initiatives within China's key industrial sectors have taken place. In this sense, the sharing of EU's economic expertise has had a positive influx in China's construction of technological skills and the creation of a mixed market economy (Irwin Crookes, 2013, p. 645). For instance, with respect to intellectual property protection, China has recognised the benefits of initiatives such as IPR2, which introduced European-led regulatory assessment exercises and judicial training programmes into the country's domestic legal framework (IPKey, 2011). This program has been successful in the promotion of the legal rights of patents and trademarks. Similarly, consumer protection has also been a subject of trade agreements concerning the Chinese manufacturing sector. Other initiatives include the promotion of the Low-Carbon Economy Platform, which has boosted cleantech developments, as well as the improvement of air traffic management and pilot training in China's civil aviation sector through a EuropeAid project (EEAS, 2011).

Despite the attainment of positive outcomes derived from the linkage of mutual learning and knowledge exchange, EU-China economic engagement has not been free of hardships. Back in 1989, the brutal repression of student-led demonstrations by the Chinese government, generally known as Tiananmen Square protests, led to a Western arms embargo (Gözkaman,

2014). The lifting of the embargo has been repeatedly discussed since 2003; however, regardless of reiterated discussion on the matter, the passing of an anti-secession law in March 2005 closed the door to a forthcoming end of the arms embargo (Men, 2008, p. 5). The law, which brought to the table Taiwan's reunification with mainland China, constituted a legal basis for the threat of the use of force and military intervention in case Taipei decided to unilaterally declare its independence (Rémond, 2008, p. 316). The risk of an escalation in Cross-Strait instability and an arms race in the Taiwan Strait increased opposition to lift the weapons embargo among European leaders. Finally, in 2005, a majority in the European Parliament (431 to 85) voted in favour of keeping the arms embargo, which has been maintained up to date (Men, 2008, p. 5). However, contrarily to what could have been expected, the issue did not become a military or political crisis. In practice, this incident did not stop commercial relations between China and the EU to grow stronger. In fact, both exports and import between them followed a growth path from 2002 to 2012 (Gözkaman, 2014). As stated by Men, "there seems to be a tacit agreement between the EU and China that this issue is not allowed to disturb bilateral relations" (2008, p. 5).

Furthermore, despite the original optimism that followed the announcement and implementation of the Strategic Partnership between China and the EU in 2003, an increased nationalist edge, that led to disadvantages affecting non-Chinese firms who intended to exploit market opportunities in China's economic sectors, cooled negotiations (Crookes, 2013, p. 648). Soon after the announcement of the partnership, in 2005, both parties had to encounter a textile dispute. Derived from the major growth of Chinese exports to European markets, demands from EU Member States to impose limits on textile imports from China resulted in the banning of the quota regime (Men, 2008, p. 6). Subsequently, disappointment and mistrust progressively flooded the strategic lexicon between both parties. In support of this statement, some scholars have highlighted how the 2006 Strategy "included a harder edge into the tone of the EU's engagement" (Crookes, 2013, p. 648). Furthermore, attempts to upgrade their relation to a full Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) were hardened by the Union's requirement to introduce a human rights and democracy clause (Crookes, 2013, p. 649).

Another great example of the back-and-forth that characterises Sino-EU relationship can be found in the Comprehensive Agreement on Investments (CAI). It developed as an answer to increasing complaints of unfair treatment in China from European companies. The EU's goals "were centred around three priorities: market access, level playing field and sustainable development" (Silva, 2022). Among the obstacles faced by the agreement, the long-time span of its negotiations, which extended from January 2014 to December 2020, is striking. Moreover, its ratification, originally scheduled for the end of 2021, got suspended in May of that year as a response to Chinese sanctions affecting European human rights advocates (Chipman, 2021). As of 29 of May, the deal's ratification and signature is still pending.

6.3.2 Political and Security Approaches

In the past decades, China's attitude towards human rights, rule of law and democracy, among others, have obscured EU efforts to achieve social and political change (Crookes, 2013, p. 646). Both actors have failed in reaching a consensus over social and political values and, on China's side, there has not been a will to develop it (Mattlin, 2009, p. 97). The violation of human rights has been a constant in the Communist Party ruling of the country; however, since Xi Jinping became president in March 2013, democratic rule has increasingly deteriorated (Maher, 2016, pg. 964). In fact, according to Human Rights Watch, under his leadership "the Chinese government and Communist Party have unleashed the harshest campaign of politically motivated investigations, detentions and sentencing in the past decade" (2015). There are plenty of examples on how the Chinese government's disregard for human rights and democratic values has negatively impacted Sino-EU relations. For the purpose of this dissertation, suffice to mention three important ones: Hong Kong, Xinjiang and Tibet.

With respect to the situation in Hong Kong, the passing of the controversial National Security Law on March 30th, 2020, led to distress among European countries. The new law cleared the way for harsher suppression of civil liberties and a tighter control over the Autonomous Region's justice system, population and protests against China (Dogniez, 2020). This adds up to a long list of crackdowns on the democratic opposition in Hong Kong among which the

jailing and disappearance of publishers critical with Beijing's government is a common feature (European Parliament, 2020). In recent years, the worsening of the situation led to the condemnation by the European Parliament of the restrictions on freedom of association, press and expression, earlier this year (Pao, 2022).

Pertaining to Xinjiang, tensions derived from the increased settlement of Han Chinese in the region resulted in violent episodes from 2009 to 2014 (Marques, 2019). With the false pretences of addressing terrorism, separatism and extremism, Beijing's government has and still is carrying out "cultural genocide". According to the UN, the number of Uighurs, Kazakhs and other Muslim minorities that have been held in mass detention centres, where their rights are constantly breached, rises to more than one million (Nebehay, 2018). Despite an early desire to avoid confrontations with China, the rapid exacerbation of aggressions forced the EU to impose the first punitive measures since the arms embargo of 1989 (Emmot, 2022). The 2022 penalties, which have mainly targeted Chinese officials, have sparked retaliation in the form of sanctions on European entities, individuals, EU representatives and scholars (Euronews, 2022).

Finally, human rights violations taking place in the Tibetan Autonomous Region have also had a negative impact in the EU-China relation over the years. The restriction of assembly, speech, movement and religious freedoms along with illegal surveillance, intimidation and unlawful use of force by Chinese authorities has given rise to EU representatives' public statements expressing their concerns regarding the issue (Human Rights Watch, 2019). In response, China has adopted a more assertive approach to prevent meetings between EU officials and Tibetan leaders. For instance, in 2008, following a meeting between the French President and the Dalai Lama, it unilaterally cancelled the EU-China Summit (International Campaign for Tibet, 2021).

In the security domain punctual understandings between both parties have arose in the past. As an example, they have thrivingly joint forces to address piracy deployments in the Indian Ocean (Crookes, 2013, p. 642). However, as happened in the economic and political fields, China's disregard for international law keeps weakening the impact of their engagement. The

main issue that constitutes the biggest obstacle between them in the security arena is the territorial dispute in the South China Sea. The rich natural resources that exist in the area, “estimated 11 billion barrels of untapped oil and 190 trillion cubic feet of natural gas” (Center for Preventive Action, 2022), make it highly appealing for all the parties involved. In the 1970s, the competing claimants (Indonesia, Brunei, the Philippines, Malaysia, Vietnam, Taiwan and China), began to claim various zones and islands and, despite the involvement of international tribunals such as the Permanent Court of Arbitration at The Hague, the dispute has not been solved (2022). On these grounds, to ensure its reclaim over land in the South China Sea, China has been artificially creating new islands or increasing the size of the existing ones. Similarly, the country has piled sand into reefs, constructed ports, airstrips and military facilities, mainly in the Paracel and Spratly Islands (Center for Preventive Action, 2022). It has also carried out the militarization of Woody Island by deploying cruise missiles, radar system and fighter jets. Against these unilateral actions, the EU is committed to full compliance of international law, particularly the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (Stano, 2021).

7. THE EU’S FUTURE IN THE INDO-PACIFIC AND CHINA

Once the main obstacles that threaten the EU’s successful engagement with China and other countries in the Indo-Pacific have been identified in the previous section, this chapter will be devoted to answering the questions that guide this dissertation. In first place, this section will cover the debate that currently divides the academic community concerning, on one side, the need of the EU to become more pragmatic towards the Indo-Pacific or, on the other side, to maintain its characteristic normative and values-based standpoint. Secondly, with the objective of answering one of the main questions that have inspired the present analysis and of understanding how the EU can move towards having more strategic autonomy in the context of its foreign policy within the Indo-Pacific, the chapter will examine the main economic and security dependencies of the EU in the region. Finally, it will recommend and analyse several policy solutions that could prove useful in achieving the desired strategic autonomy and in enhancing the role of the EU in the region.

7.1 Normativism v. Pragmatism

The notions of normativism and pragmatism were profoundly examined in the first part of this dissertation, in the theoretical framework. For the purpose of this chapter, suffice to briefly reference the main ideas concerning the debate. On one side, those who uphold the role of the EU as a normative power embrace its commitment towards the promotion of human rights, the rule of law and democratic principles as the driving force of the Union. On the opposite side, some authors endorse the idea that the Union should move towards designing and implementing its foreign policy prioritising its interests over the advocacy of core values.

The previous chapter has shed light on how, in the past, the Union's purpose of becoming a normative power in the Indo-Pacific has encountered some obstacles and how the promotion of its values has sometimes led to tensions that have exceeded the political arena, especially in the context of its relationship with China. As stated by Maher, the EU's engagement with this country "tests the EU's commitment to democracy and human rights, which are central to its identity and ostensibly at the centre of its foreign policy" (2016, p. 962). For some scholars, before 2019, the EU's engagement with China was justified because many believed that it had the ability to positively influence and change the country. However, by 2020 the regression of economic liberalization and the increasing assertiveness of the country's government banished previous hopes (Brown, 2021; Rühlig, 2020, p. 21).

These circumstances have rekindled the debate and have left experts questioning whether the Union can reconcile its role as an international normative power and the establishment of a strategic partnership with a government that continuously violates human rights and international norms (Maher, 2016, p. 962). The lack of consensus with regards to the approach that the EU should adopt has even reached institutions in Brussels and, while the European Council supports a more pragmatic approach, the Parliament is more principled (Rühlig, 2020, p. 21).

The choice of a full pragmatic standpoint could lead to accusations "of selling out political values for the sake of economic cooperation with authoritarian states" (Rühlig, 2020, p. 13).

Consequently, it would lead to criticism concerning the EU's double standards, hypocrisy and selective morality, which would damage its international legitimacy and credibility (Maher, 2016, p. 966). Another alternative would be to endorse the concept of "principled pragmatism" introduced in the 2016 EU Global Strategy. Its core idea was to "insert a dose of political pragmatism in its foreign policy while continuing to uphold its principles" (Mihalache, 2016, p. 9). However, as pointed out by Rühlig, there was ambivalence as to whether develop a more principled or pragmatic policy towards China (2016, p. 21). Additionally, the selective choice of normativism or pragmatism resulted in occasional criticism for turning a blind eye on human rights infringements (Mohan, 2021). A plausible third option would be the determination to prioritise the advancement of its core values and international norms but with the addition of adopting a realist stance compatible with the Commission's goal of moving towards a geopolitical Europe (Silva, 2022). This option, deemed as the best one by this dissertation, is quite similar to "principled pragmatism" with the exception that it gives preference to the "principled" idea, solving prior ambiguities. In practical terms it would also mean engaging in global affairs "for what it can realistically achieve" without raising unattainable expectations (Colombo, 2021, p. 5).

Vestiges of this option can be found in the Union's recent policies. Inter alia, the Strategic Outlook policy paper on EU-China relations simultaneously describes the Asian country as a "partner" (in fields such as climate change and environment), an "economic competitor" (in economic and technological affairs) and a "systemic rival" (pertaining to the country's model of governance) (2022). Likewise, the 2021 Indo-Pacific Strategy clearly stated that, in promoting its values, the EU will push back "where fundamental disagreements exist, such as on human rights" (2021). In this sense, many experts have highlighted the -never used before- "tougher language" of the Strategy (Rühlig, 2020, p. 22) and its recognition of the tensions that currently exist with China (Mohan, 2021). Nevertheless, the implementation of this last alternative, as the approach that would rule the EU's engagement with China and the Indo-Pacific, requires for the Union to have a sufficient degree of strategic autonomy to not be subjected to foreign pressures. Ergo, the following sections will be devoted to the analysis of the fields in which the EU might be dependent on foreign powers and to the suggestion of

alternatives directed at reducing dependencies so that it can prioritise the advocacy of its core values.

7.2 Strategic Autonomy

The concept of strategic autonomy was first introduced in the theoretical framework of this dissertation, and it can be generally summarized as “the EU’s ability to manage interdependence while shaping global policies, norms and practices according to its interests” (Håkansson, 2022, p. 4). It has also been described as the Union’s determination to “control its own geopolitical fate” by combining its usual inclination towards multilateralism while being able to act autonomously if necessary (Theodosopoulos, 2020, p. 2). Moreover, in line with the arguments asserted in the previous section, a higher degree of strategic autonomy can also be interpreted as the answer to addressing increasing criticism with regards to the selective morality and hypocrisy that, according to some authors, the EU has been displaying in the past and that has damaged its legitimacy and credibility towards some actors in the region (Maher, 2016, p. 966).

Baring all these arguments in mind, for the practical purpose of this dissertation, which aims to contribute to the current academic debate on how to increase the role of the EU in the Indo-Pacific, the attainment of a higher degree of strategic autonomy in the fields of economy and security is the suggested solution. To accurately understand how to achieve this policy objective, the present section will address the EU’s economic dependency towards China and its security dependency towards its traditional allies.

7.2.1 Economic Dependency

The economic interconnectedness of the EU and the Indo-Pacific is undeniable. Together they hold over 60% of FDI flows and 70% of global trade in services and goods. Moreover, the EU is the preeminent development cooperation partner, the leading investor as well as one of the region’s major trading partners (European Commission, 2021). Despite the economic importance of the whole region, China’s major economic engagement with the

EU makes it the most relevant economic player. Therefore, the analysis of the EU's economic dependence towards the region will focus on its relationship with China. In addition, escalating political divergences with the country make it essential to thoroughly assess the economic strengths and vulnerabilities of their engagement so as to maintain a healthy degree of interdependence and to balance their competition and cooperation (Zenglein, 2020, p. 2).

In terms of trade, China is the Union's second most important trading partner only behind the US. Likewise, increasing demands for European products in the Asian country have converted it in a crucial export destination. In fact, from 2000 to 2019 the trade volume between them "expanded nearly eightfold to EUR 560 billion" (Zenglein, 2020, p. 2). However, despite the close economic ties that exist between both actors, the impact of Chinese investments and the presence of its companies are still rather minor. Similarly, investments associated with the Belt and Road Initiative have remained scarce (Eder & Mardell, 2018). Hence, in 2019, Chinese imports accounted for 2.4% of the EU's exports which, compared to the 5.7 for the US and the 67% for the EU single market, is a reduced volume (Zenglein, 2020, p. 2).

Pertaining to the products on which the EU is highly dependent, the Covid-19 pandemic revealed that it critically depends on 103 imported products related to the chemical, pharmaceutical, metals and electronics sectors. Among these products Vitamin B, Chloramphenicol, Manganese or electrical transformers are particularly meaningful. Nevertheless, the dependency on these products is concentrated in "technologically less sophisticated areas of the value chain" which derives from companies' economic choice of reducing costs by relocating their production to China (Zenglein, 2020, pp. 7, 9).

Luckily for the EU, economic dependence cuts both ways and the deterioration of the relations between both parties can also unleash negative consequences for China. With regards to what has been previously mentioned concerning medical products and electronic components, while the EU relies on China for their supply, the latter depends on European specialised equipment and machinery to manufacture them (Zenglein, 2020, p. 4). What is more, the EU is situated among China's largest job creators and investors (Kratz, Huotari,

Hanemann & Arcesati, 2020). As a result of the outsourcing of their production by many European brands, they have become great providers of manufacturing contracts in China. Chinese factories that sell consumer goods to European retailers create many jobs and positively contribute to the country's labour-intensive mass production sector, which remains crucial for its economy (Zenglein, 2020, p. 10). As an example, Inditex, the Spanish textile company, purchases its merchandise from 1,300 Chinese factories that employ over 400,000 workers (Inditex, 2019). Similarly, European companies' investments are vital for China's development. Apart for contributing to the country's industrialization goals, they generate local tax revenues and provide indispensable know-how for the domestic innovation system (Zenglein, 2020, pp. 10,11). Therefore, it can be concluded that "the European market is almost as important for Chinese companies as the Chinese market is to the sampled EU companies" (2020, p. 11).

7.2.2 Security Dependency

The EU's security approach towards the Indo-Pacific has been rather normative-based. According to Moreschi, the Union "has had to redefine the way it projects power in the world without disposing of autonomous military means" (2022, p. 4). In the Indo-Pacific, the EU has aimed to increase its relevance through what is known as "soft connectivity" by establishing connectivity partnerships with Japan, in 2019, India, in 2021 and ASEAN (2022, p. 4). Additionally, with regards to the security sphere, most EU initiatives have been associated with capacity-building missions aimed at strengthening the monitoring, operational and defence capabilities of the recipient country's security forces (Algar-Faria, Edmunds & Juncos, 2018). Even so, these missions have been relatively sporadic. In fact, since the 2005 Aceh Monitoring Mission in Indonesia, the Union's action has been limited to the Indian Ocean Rim. Thus far, the EU has only launched a joint military operation in this region: Operation Atlanta, which is still ongoing and whose core goals are the protection of vessels and the prevention of piracy (Moreschi, 2022, pp. 5,6).

The withdrawal of NATO troops from Afghanistan in August 2021 is illuminating proof of the decline of the US' international leadership (Puglierin, 2021) and of its decreasing

commitment towards certain regions (Brooks & Meijer, 2021, p. 7). At the same time, increasing tensions with China and the unprecedented Russian invasion of Ukraine add up to the literature that argues that “Europe will be caught in the middle of a new Cold War” in which the US, solely, no longer prevents conflicts (Nestoras, 2022). Even though China is receiving a lot of attention from NATO, as was proved by the NATO leaders Brussels Summit *Communiqué* (NATO, 2021), “the EU can no longer rely on a transatlantic security community to the extent that it did before” (Olav, 2022, p. 167). The fragmented security landscape that lies ahead will require the EU to “step in, fill the security gap and take up more responsibilities” to become an autonomous security provider (Nestoras, 2022).

In this context, scholars have argued that, due to the lack of consensus between the EU Member States’ perspectives, there is a European security deficit (Olav, 2022, p. 165). In fact, their reluctance to delegating security competences to maintain the highest degree of sovereignty on these issues has led to military capacity shortfalls that jeopardise the attainment of strategic autonomy in this field (Brooks & Meijer, 2021, p. 9). To endure the new challenges that threaten the Union’s security and foreign policies and to enhance its capabilities, it has developed the Strategic Compass and the “European defence package”. The latter includes a Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD), a Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and a European Defence Fund of 8 billion euros for 2021 to 2027 (EDF) (Olav, 2022, p. 165). Starting with the Compass, its main goal is to reinforce the military and civilian CSDP operations. Therefore, it will establish a Rapid Deployment Capacity of 5000 troops built upon the already existing Battle Group concept; however, some experts believe that these battle groups have not been very successful (Duke, 2019). Pertaining to the yearly CARD process, its aim is to better employ the Union’s limited defence resources by addressing its capability shortfalls (Olav, 2022, p. 171). Thus, it should contribute to the adaptation capability development practices and national defence planning cycles (European Defence Agency, 2022). Further, the PESCO is directed at deepening defence cooperation so as to engage in the most demanding missions and enhance the Union’s security (Olav, 2022, p. 171). Last but not least, the Fund’s objective is to further develop Member States’ defence research, technology and materials to reduce the EU’s dependence on other actors (Håkansson, 2021, p. 593).

7.3 The path to the -much desired- stronger role of the EU in the Indo-Pacific

As stated by Keohane and Nye, asymmetrical interdependence between two partners leads to its exploitation by the less dependent actor as a source of bargaining power over different matters (Keohane & Nye, 1977). Unlike asymmetrical power relations, interdependence has usually been depicted as a mean to encourage and promote the use of non-war methods to peacefully resolve disputes (Makalesi, 2020, p. 697). Nevertheless, recent events, such as the Russian invasion of Ukraine or the escalation of tensions in the South China Sea, are enough to give rise to scepticism with regards to the deterrence power of interdependence. Driven by the uncertainty that is now present in the international arena, countries and international actors are pushing towards becoming more self-reliant and looking for new alliances with like-minded countries.

The main objective of this dissertation is to address the issue of moving towards a more strategic autonomous and relevant EU in the Indo-Pacific. After the analysis on the current dependencies of the Union, carried out in the previous pages, this section will be devoted to assessing the different policy options that could be the solution to the issue. Hence, after a concise reference to what has been identified as one of the main obstacles that has hampered the achievement of the EU's prominent role in the region, the lack of coherence between Member States, specific solutions to economic and security dependencies will be recommended.

7.3.1 Internal (in)coherences

As argued by Klose, internal cohesion between the EU's institutions and Member States is crucial to determining the Union's ability to mobilise resources and to shape others' expectations (Klose, 2018, p. 1148). Unfortunately, reaching a common stance is easier said than done. Consequently, the differences that arise at EU level and that undermine the creation of a unified front, hamper progress in the Indo-Pacific and worldwide (Crookes, 2013, p. 649). In this regard, within the structure of EU institutions, the Commission and

Parliament focus more on political issues while the European Council does so with respect to economic matters (Camroux, 2006, p. 6).

Within this framework, in the energy field, the profound transformation of the Union's energy system, requested by the Commission, depends on the ability of policy makers to reconcile conflicting national interests and policy requirements (Freeman & Sattich, 2019, pp. 17, 18). In the economic sphere, the differing levels of dependency towards different actors leads to political imbalances which compromise the attainment of the Union's strategic autonomy. For example, Germany's higher dependence on China results in disagreements related to the political approach on certain issues of their relationship (Zenglein, 2020, p. 5). Similarly, in the security arena, divergent risks and strategic perceptions among Member States, that derive from their differing geography and history (Borrell, 2020), gives rise to substantial discrepancies as to how autonomy should be further developed (Olav, 2022, p. 171). Besides, Member States have demonstrated their lack of willingness to delegate decisional power concerning defence and security matters (Finamore, 2017, p. 160). On the subject of the Indo-Pacific, internal incoherencies have given rise to disparities with regards to the degree of commitment towards that region. For instance, only Spain and Germany have expressed their eagerness to increase the military presence in the region (Moreschi, 2022, p. 519). As stated by some scholars, the EU not only faces lack of security capabilities, but it also faces "chronic unwillingness" of most of its Member States to intervene in challenging circumstances (Deen, Kruijver, Stoetma & Zandee, 2020, p. 11).

7.3.2 Towards economic strategic autonomy

As has been explained in the previous section, the economic interdependence that exists between the EU and China is a matter of growing concern given the political divergences and economic competition that have governed their engagement in past years (Zenglein, 2020, p. 4). Regardless of the economic dependency operating both ways, which implies that the deterioration of the relationship between both parties would result in negative consequences for both, increasing tensions between them have increased fears of

overdependence on China. As pointed out by Josep Borrell, in today's world, "economic interdependence is becoming an instrument of hard power" (2020).

Despite this hazardous scenario, the Union's economic policy towards China should not be biased by a perception of economic vulnerability. China's increasing engagement in economic coercion is a reality but, up to now, it has been limited to threats rather than actions. In this sense, China's policy takes into consideration the country's economic weaknesses and is selective and pragmatic (Beattie, Currey & Hanson, 2020). In fact, except for the 2010 ban on Norwegian salmon, China's economic coercion has scarcely affected Europe. Nevertheless, the EU cannot disregard the Asian country's recent push for more economic self-reliance and the speed up of its efforts to achieve greater economic autarky (Zenglein, 2020, pp. 4-12).

Baring these considerations in mind, the increasing realization that deeper integration could come with political risks and compromise the strategic autonomy of the EU must open the door to exploring policies that could avoid future treacherous scenarios. Among the suggestions made by experts, Josep Borrell has highlighted the need to broaden the role of the euro internationally so as to "avoid being forced to break our own laws under the weight of secondary sanctions and to ensure a much better level-playing field with China" (2020). Additionally, the Covid-19 pandemic has proven the importance of being prepared for shocks and, to achieve this, trade diversification is key (Zenglein, 2020, p. 6). Moreover, the EU must incorporate a more strategic approach to the decisions governing its engagement with China. Far from implying a complete rupture of economic relations and a sever of ties with the country, "it requires managing interdependence and rebalancing the relationship" (2020, p. 12). Reality has shown that a strategic stance is possible and that it does not have to necessarily harm the relationship between both parties. As a case in point, when Taiwan and Japan banned Huawei from the launch of their 5G networks, China's response was muted, contrarily to what happened in Europe. As can be concluded, there are multiple policy options to tackle over-dependence on China and accomplish strategic autonomy in the economic field. Be that as it may, this dissertation concludes that the success of any approach or course of action will not be secured without coherence among all 27 Member States and EU

institutions. In fact, China keeps benefiting from and exploiting internal weak links with the hope of igniting competition and lack of cohesion among the EU's parties to avoid coordinated and strong responses (Zenglein, 2020, p. 12).

7.3.3 Towards security strategic autonomy

As stated by many scholars, to fulfil its goal of achieving strategic autonomy, the EU must set ambitious targets and take giant steps (Deen, Kruijver, Stoetma & Zandee, 2020, p. 31). For many experts, the reason preventing the EU from becoming a security provider in the region is the disuse of the potential of the instruments provided for in the Lisbon Treaty. From a legal perspective, the resort to some of the TEU military and defence provisions, such as the solidarity clause in case of terrorist attacks or disasters (Article 222 TEU), the mutual assistance clause (Art. 42.7 TEU), or permanent structured cooperation (Articles 42.6 and 46 TEU), would provide the Union with the adequate legal basis to gain more strategic autonomy (2020, p. 12). Therefore, Member States' centrifugal threat perceptions, lack of consensus, absence of political will to transfer competences on sensitive areas and deficit of a common ground pertaining to the Union's military level of ambition are the main restraints to the EU's security effectiveness (2020, pp. 12, 28).

To address the issue concerning the Union's goal to attain more strategic autonomy in the security sphere, some recommendations can be pointed out. Firstly, there is an ongoing debate with respect to the introduction of QMV in more CFSP areas (Von der Leyen, 2020). However, the exclusion of "military and defence implications" introduced in Article 31.4 TEU implies that the extension of QMV to military operations would require a treaty revision. Secondly, some scholars have pointed out the alternative of implementing collective defence at EU level. Nonetheless, concerns of competition or analogy with NATO have led to a restrictive interpretation of Article 42.7 TEU (mutual assistance clause) directed mainly at terrorism, hybrid and cyber threats and not at conventional military attacks, which is NATO's domain (Deen, Kruijver, Stoetma & Zandee, 2020, p. 14).

In this context, the idea of building EU's strategic autonomy in close cooperation with NATO is gaining supporters (Olav, 2022, p. 171). This alternative would imply a "Europeanisation" of NATO "where the Europeans take on more responsibility for their own security" (Olav, 2022, p. 166). In line with this policy recommendation, some authors have suggested the establishment of a "European pillar" within NATO as the solution to the diverging views of Member States and their reluctance to attain higher levels of military integration in the EU (Deen, Kruijver, Stoetma & Zandee, 2020, p. 17). This solution, originally envisioned in the 1990s, would successfully serve to "appease American concerns" (2020, p. 17). The core idea of this proposal is that, once determined, EU ambitions could be integrated in a coordinated EU-NATO guidance framework for capability development and defence planning (2020, p. 27).

8. CONCLUSIONS

As has been stressed throughout this contribution, the Indo-Pacific is swiftly becoming the world's economic and political centre of gravity. Ergo, to avoid being left behind, the Union must strengthen its role, bringing to an end the current irrelevancy that threatens its successful advancement in areas other than economic. With the objective of getting closer to achieving an increased relevance in the region, at the initial phase of this analysis, three questions were posed. After the thorough analysis that has been carried out throughout this dissertation, it can be concluded that they have been answered.

Pertaining to the question of whether the EU has achieved its economic, political and security objectives, in light of what has been explained in the first part of the analysis, several conclusions must be highlighted. With regards to the Indo-Pacific as a whole, it can be asserted that, whereas the EU has succeeded in attaining its objectives in the economic sphere to the point of being recognised as an economic power and a key trading partner, the fulfilment of its political, normative and security goals has not followed the same path. While the EU has sought to develop a regulatory and normative leading position through the incorporation of democratic and human rights provisions in its trade agreements with

countries in the Indo-Pacific, the outcomes had not reach initial expectations. In this regard, the Union's normative and political aspirations were bigger than its actual capabilities. Thus, despite initial optimism, the impact of the EU's trade policies has been limited and has failed to reshape the social and political structures in the Indo-Pacific. Similarly, in the security arena, the EU has failed to become a strategic game changer and security player. Something similar can be concluded with respect to the EU's relationship with ASEAN. Accordingly, the development of their economic ties has not been accompanied by advancements in the socio-political and security spheres. In fact, far from positively improving their relationship, the EU's promotion of its core values has raised opposition among ASEAN countries which have perceived the Union's action as interventionist. Pertaining to EU-China relations, the latter's disregard for economic standards, human rights, democracy and international law has led to escalating tensions with Brussels and has jeopardised their relationship. In recent years, the increasing assertiveness of Beijing's government, has eroded the engagement between both parties to the degree that their partnership seems to be in its most unstable phase since they first established diplomatic relations.

Concerning ongoing demands for the EU to leave behind the normative and multilateral approach of its external action in pursuance of a rather pragmatic standpoint, this contribution embraces the alternative of a Union foreign policy in which the prioritisation of its core values is combined with a realist and pragmatic approach, similar to the one that is implicit in the 2021 Indo-Pacific Strategy. As an advantage, the implementation of this policy direction would enable the EU to uphold the liberal and multilateral values that, since its creation, have inspired and guided its internal and external performance. Additionally, it would clear up prior ambiguities associated with the concept of "principled pragmatism", introduced in the 2016 Global Strategy, while reinforcing the external legitimacy of the EU. However, the Union's capability to adopt this position in the international sphere, is dependent on a certain degree of economic and security strategic autonomy. Ergo, a stronger Union, immune to external pressures and capable of not selling out its values in exchange for the attainment of its interests, requires the avoidance of external overdependencies.

In light of what has been explained and in answer to the third question of this analysis, the contribution asserts that the increase of the EU's relevance in the Indo-Pacific entails the achievement of strategic autonomy in the economic and security fields. Firstly, after the review of economic data, the dissertation has concluded that EU and China are economically dependent on each other. The latter's' boost for economic autarky and self-reliance should encourage the EU to push for more economic autonomy through trade diversification, the strengthened of the euro worldwide, strategic decision-making and a rebalance of its engagement with China. In the security domain, there is an urgent need to address the Union's military capacity shortfalls and security deficit. Among the options suggested by this contribution, the achievement of security strategic autonomy through a closer cooperation with NATO seems the most appropriate. Whereas the introduction of QMV in more CFSP areas can be a feasible alternative in the long turn, in an context in which a treaty revision would be welcomed by all the parties involved, an European pillar within NATO can be the best alternative to increase the Union's defensive capacities as long as diverging views among Member States persist.

Irrespective of the choice of one policy option over another, what is essential in the attainment of the EU's strategic autonomy, as a mean to strengthening the EU's position in the Indo-Pacific and to maintaining its normative role, concerns cohesive action among its Member States. Conflicting interests, divergent threat perceptions and unwillingness to transfer security competences among Member States give rise to disparities concerning the degree of commitment towards the region. This ultimately results in hardships to mobilise resources and to act as a united front against the menacing behaviour of some Indo-Pacific actors. On this account, the hypothesis of this dissertation has proven to be adequate in forecasting the conditions that must be fulfilled to increase the EU's impact in the Indo-Pacific.

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