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NAVIGATING THE CHINA CONTEST: EU'S MARITIME ROAD TO 2030 AND MIDDLE POWERS

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INDO PACIFIC PROGRAM

ABOUT THIS ARTICLE

Europe's strategic presence in the Indo-Pacific has become a matter of great substance in current global politics. The emergence of China as a disruptive maritime power, especially with its hardening stance toward maritime disputes in the Indo-Pacific, has forced a shift in many countries' strategic outlook, including some of the European countries. The EU as a multilateral body seems to be changing its strategic outlook about China, as well as on maritime issues in the Indo-Pacific. With the Indian Ocean being a gateway to the region, the EU's Indo-Pacific outlook and Maritime Security Strategy (MSS) evolving to a new ground needs serious observation from India and other Indo-Pacific partners.

This paper looks at the EU's evolving maritime policy frameworks – like the MSS, Strategic Compass, and the Indo-Pacific strategy – to understand their complementarities and impact on its presence in the Indo-Pacific domain. Through a review of such an integrated approach by the EU, which emphasizes regional maritime multilateralism alongside bilateral frameworks, the paper outlines key trends that the EU could forge with India and other Quad powers such as Australia, Japan, and the US, to dissuade or possibly pose a challenge to the Chinese maritime dominance in the region. In particular, this paper will highlight the strategic convergence between the EU and the Quad powers including India on the maritime spheres in the Indian Ocean.

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INTRODUCTION

In the near-decade, since the European Union (EU) released its Maritime Security Strategy (MSS) in 2014, the “direct connection between European prosperity and Asian security” highlighted by the EU’s global strategy in 2016 has only strengthened (EEAS 2016, 37). China’s continued regional and global economic, technological, and military belligerence, as well as its strategic competition with the US, has compelled the EU to redefine its strategic considerations for the Indo-Pacific – a region that is both the current global economic engine and a hotbed for fragile conflicts.

In this context, the release of the EU’s Indo-Pacific Strategy for Cooperation in 2021, the Strategic Compass in 2022, and the revised MSS and its Action Plan in 2023 marks the emergence of an integrated security approach by the EU for the Indo-Pacific in particular.

Further, the ever-increasing US-China strategic tussle for dominance has forced influential but vulnerable “middle powers” like Australia, India, Japan, and Vietnam—which are overdependent on these major powers for security and economic needs—to devise ways to achieve a semblance of regional balance of power. Therefore, the EU—as a major multilateral body with immense economic, maritime, and technological security capacities—emerges as a credible balancing partner. Can the EU’s evolving maritime policy

frameworks dispel, even in a limited manner, the concerns of small and middle powers in the Indo-Pacific? This paper attempts to outline key trends that the EU could forge with the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) middle powers Australia, India, and Japan, as well as the “Quad Plus”[1] actor, Vietnam, to dissuade or possibly pose a challenge to Chinese maritime dominance in the region. It will also highlight how small and middle states in the region can benefit from an enhanced maritime engagement with the EU.

MIDDLE POWERS CRITICAL TO EU'S MARITIME STRATEGY?

In late October 2023, the Council of the EU approved the latest revision of the EUMSS, which draws from the EU’s Strategic Compass for Security and Defence and is in line with the EU’s broader engagement via its 2021 Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific (Council of the EU 2023; EEAS 2021; EEAS 2022). This approach takes cognizance of the new and evolving traditional and non-traditional security challenges in the maritime domain, including potential blockades of choke points by disruptive actors, climate change, and cyber-related disruptions of marine infrastructure (e.g. subsea cables). The revised MSS also aligns with the EU’s 2022 international ocean governance conclusions that are fundamental to fulfilling sustainable development goals. This also gives tremendous scope for partnering with Indo-Pacific Global South

states either directly or via developmental initiatives with middle powers.

Importantly, the EU's recent strategies acknowledge, without naming China, the "display of force" in the East and South China Seas, as well as in the Taiwan Strait, and the need to secure sea lines of communication (SLOCs) such as along important choke points like the Malacca Straits to maintain stability and security in the region (Council of the EU 2023, 8).

For this purpose, it is imperative to build resilient cooperative partnerships with like-minded states. And all three policy documents are clear about the intention to deepen and strengthen the EU's cooperation on maritime affairs not just through organizations like the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) but also via "tailored" cooperation with like-minded (of which some are also strategic partners) middle Indo-Pacific powers like Australia, Japan, India, and Vietnam.

There is immense scope for targeted cooperation for the EU both via direct bilateral linkages with smaller/middle powers and through third-country or regional cooperation measures (e.g., the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation, BIMSTEC) with middle powers. The EU is already intensifying its maritime presence through regular port calls and joint naval exercises, such as between Operation Atalanta and India under the framework of the EU Strategy for Cooperation in the

Indo-Pacific (EU NAVFOR 2023). For example, in October 2023, the EU and India conducted their maiden joint naval exercise in the Gulf of Guinea (PIB 2023).

In this context, the expansion of the implementation of the EU's coordinated maritime presences (CMP) concept to the north-western Indian Ocean after its successful security and capacity-building iteration in the Gulf of Guinea will advance the EU's outreach in the Indo-Pacific region (Kremidas-Courtney 2023).

The EU's maritime domain awareness initiatives—such as the Indo-Pacific Regional Information Sharing (IORIS) tool developed by the Critical Maritime Routes Indo-Pacific (CRIMARIO) project and the international Shared Awareness and De-confliction (SHADE) conferences—are sustainable approaches for a stable Indo-Pacific.

Besides anti-piracy operations, information exchange, port calls, and joint exercises, the cooperation between Indo-Pacific stakeholders should also include securing undersea infrastructure like the expanding subsea cable networks—the arteries of the digital-era global communication and trade—between Europe and Asia in the near future. The Nord Stream gas pipeline explosions in late 2022 have raised the security quotient for Europe, which has already become wary of China's growing technological ambitions and "concerns over grey-zone activities" (Beuger et al. 2022, 33).

Here, it is important to note the EU—which already hosts telecom leaders in supplying, laying, and maintaining submarine cables like Orange Marine and Nexans—is in the midst of boosting its telecommunications and internet infrastructure while looking to plug its vulnerabilities (Pollet 2023; Beuger et al. 2022, 14).

So, cooperation with Asian states like India (an upcoming economic, digital powerhouse), Japan (host to some of the world's largest submarine cable manufacturers), and Australia (the leading voice in cable legislation measures) could greatly benefit the EU, these middle powers, and the smaller states that are being included in this network.

For example, the Pacific Islands involved in the USD 95 million Micronesia cable project (funded by Australia, Japan, and the US) are set to benefit digitally and economically while the bigger powers will ensure their China-related security concerns (Kyodo 2023). The EU should look to collaborate in a similar manner. By engaging in economic partnerships that prioritize sustainable development and adherence to environmental standards, the EU contributes theoretically to dispelling anxieties related to asymmetrical power dynamics and economic coercion of smaller powers in the Indo-Pacific.

INDIA

Vis-à-vis India, with its new digital-era Telecom Act at the draft stage and multiple new cable networks in the offing, especially with Europe (e.g. the Reliance co-owned India-Europe-Xpress; Google's Blue and Raman; and the Sea-Me-We-6), the country is looking to expand its digital bandwidth capacities and increase its multi-aligned outreach with several states in the process (Kristin 2022; Koley 2021). The EU and India, along with other local partners, can capitalize on this growing trend of expanding subsea cable architecture by building on strategic regional connections (e.g. between Europe and the West/South/Southeast Asia), as well as developing human-centric legal frameworks for this vital but neglected field.

Notably, India and the EU have also stepped up their cooperation activities via three Global Gateway priorities in digital, climate & energy, and transport sectors in the northeast of India and its immediate neighbourhoods of Bangladesh, Bhutan, and Nepal (EEAS 2023). This will certainly help connecting and fulfilling the resilient infrastructure needs of one of the least integrated subregions of Asia, particularly in the strategically significant Bay of Bengal littorals, and enhancing the EU's strategic presence in the Indian Ocean.

Moreover, the Global Gateway is set to be a part of the newly launched, albeit currently in peril due to the ongoing

Hamas-Israel war, India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) for establishing an inter-regional network of railways and ports. If implemented, this is also expected to help increase a coordinated European naval presence in the Indo-Pacific (Laskar 2023).

JAPAN

With Japan, another key strategic partner, the EU must enhance technological cooperation, for countering hybrid tactics, and develop legal frameworks for new avenues like subsea cables. At the same time, there is also a need to synergize maritime cooperation via Global Gateway; the existing connectivity partnership; supply chains; defence industries; and energy security, to enhance bilateral ties and create a third-party cooperation framework in the wider Indo-Pacific (ECFR 2022).

The two could also build on the EU's tilt towards the US view of the Indo-Pacific, i.e., a "greater transatlantic convergence" vis-à-vis China to align their Indo-Pacific strategic visions (Panda 2022). Perhaps, they can even coalesce with other partners in countering China's coercive attempts at changing the status quo in the Taiwan Strait, as well as in the East China Sea, where Japan faces increased potential for confrontation due to repeated Chinese "intrusions" into Japanese territorial waters. In 2023, Japan has accelerated its maritime efforts by adopting a new five-year ocean policy, and greater cooperation would be welcome (Yamaguchi 2023).

The EU already includes India, Japan, and Vietnam, among others, in its project "Enhancing Security Cooperation in and with Asia" in four interconnected priority areas, namely counter-terrorism, cybersecurity, maritime security, and crisis management. The revised EUMSS should step up the intensity of these cooperation measures.

AUSTRALIA

Australia is another "partner of choice" for the EU with ongoing strategic cooperation initiatives in areas such as counter-terrorism, development and humanitarian aid, maritime capacity building, and crisis management for a rules-based Indo-Pacific (EEAS 2021). Australia and the EU also have a framework participation agreement (FPA) that facilitates the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) for safeguarding the rules-based multilateral order.

Besides renewable energy, critical minerals supply chains, and climate action, the two sides have, in line with their acknowledged primacy of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), reaffirmed their commitment to promote security and stability in the South China Sea and across the Taiwan Strait (European Commission 2022). With the updated EUMSS, the two will surely enhance maritime engagement through initiatives such as the expanded CMP ambit and the EU's CRIMARIO capacity-building project.

VIETNAM

Europe's increased engagement with the Indo-Pacific has also found takers in Southeast Asia, particularly because of the ASEAN states' interest in maintaining the balance of power and an inclusive Indo-Pacific vision for common prosperity and stability. Vietnam is the EU's "solid" Southeast Asian partner; it was also the first ASEAN member to sign the FPA with the EU, paving the way for an EU-Vietnam partnership on maritime security and defence (EEAS 2020).

With the EU recalibrating its MSS and ASEAN launching the ASEAN Maritime Outlook for the first time, there is immense scope for cooperation between Vietnam and the EU, particularly in advancing maritime domain awareness; naval cooperation, including exercises and information exchange; and development of marine infrastructure (Mishra & Yan 2023).

CONCLUSION: EU'S VALUE-BASED PARTNERSHIP TO ENHANCE MARITIME MIDDLE POWER CONVERGENCE?

For the EU, a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific is important not just because securing its waterways is integral for the EU as a trading, maritime power, but also to build a sustainable regional architecture. The EU's aforementioned integrated approach will complement the EU's bilateral and multilateral engagements in the region and pave the

way for effective minilateral cooperation with like-minded partners, including the increasingly relevant, revitalised Quad (Atanassova-Cornelis & Pejsova 2021, 2-4). At some stage, the EU's participation at the bilateral, or even trilateral, level may also give impetus to the potential for Quad's extension as an inclusive "Plus" forum.

Importantly, against the background of Russia's protracted war against Ukraine, including the debilitating naval blockade, preparing to counter any such aggressive potential tactics in the Indo-Pacific, primarily by an authoritarian China, is a forward-looking approach by the EU that will yield long-term dividends.

The EU's evolving maritime policy frameworks, grounded in multilateralism, adherence to international norms, collaborative security initiatives, and economic diplomacy, hold the potential to address concerns of small and middle powers in the Indo-Pacific. Inclusion of middle powers is also critical to the EU's Indo-Pacific outreach in order to build trust with smaller states of the region. India and Japan as middle powers that have growing global sway have strong ties with smaller powers of South and East Asia; collaboration with Vietnam extends a similar outreach towards Southeast Asia. Australia holds a protective influence over Pacific Island nations, advocating for their rights at platforms where they have not yet gained membership.

For the EU, which has largely been engaged as a limited economic/diplomatic player when it comes to countries like Laos, Nepal, Papua New Guinea, Tuvalu and more, the need to expand engagement via reliable partners like Japan, Australia and India (as well as Vietnam) will help balance both the containment hesitancy that smaller states in the region associate with Quad, as well as their hedging strategy when it comes to deeper political engagement with big powers like the EU amidst a rising China-US great power rivalry.

The EU faces a multifaceted challenge when it comes to building stronger trust with small power states in the Indo-Pacific. The EU, as a normative power, should leverage its norm-setting capabilities to promote shared values. By emphasizing principles such as democracy, human rights, and environmental sustainability, the EU can construct a theoretical foundation for trust-building alongside powers like Australia, India and Japan that are common trusted partners of both the EU and smaller Indo-Pacific states. Practical examples include supporting democratic institutions through capacity-building programs and promoting sustainable development initiatives with countries like Singapore, Maldives, Indonesia, Brunei and New Zealand.

The EU's commitment to multilateralism aligns with the interests of small power states seeking a rules-based international order. Theoretical adherence to

multilateral frameworks, such as UNCLOS, and active participation in regional organizations like ASEAN, can serve as trust-building mechanisms. Practical contributions, such as joint patrols, capacity-building programs, and disaster response cooperation, enhance the EU's credibility as a reliable security partner. The EU can also employ cultural diplomacy to enhance people-to-people connections, fostering mutual understanding and trust. Emphasis on cultural diversity and inclusivity can be demonstrated through educational exchange programs, cultural festivals, and collaborative research projects.

ENDNOTE

[1] During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, the four Quad states coordinated regular (virtual) discussions with a group of Indo-Pacific countries, including New Zealand, South Korea and Vietnam, to synergise efforts on vaccine development and other such global/regional health-related challenges. This extended format is often unofficially labelled as the "Quad Plus".

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