



Guarding the Maritime Commons

What role for Europe in the Indo-Pacific

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Executive Summary

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Executive summary

1. Open and secure maritime commons are crucial to international trade between Europe and Asia and essential to international peace and security for the world at large. A stable and multilateral order in the Indo-Pacific is the best bet to keep the sealines of communication open and secure.
2. European naval diplomacy in the Indo-Pacific sends a clear signal to regional states, including China, and to the US, that Europe's interests are at stake when maritime freedom of navigation is threatened. In fact, naval capabilities are a necessary component if Europe aspires to a role as a responsible stakeholder in the region.
3. However, tensions between Europe and China are likely to increase as a consequence of an increased European naval presence in the Indo-Pacific. Sending naval vessels alongside the US is at odds with an engagement strategy that also strives to include China. A conflict that would directly or indirectly involve European states is not outside the realm of possibilities.
4. Europeans should therefore be clear about the objectives their naval diplomacy seeks to accomplish and their capacity to do so, and set priorities accordingly. Current European naval capacity in general is still limited and European navies lack the ability to defend even themselves. At present, a European presence in the Indo-Pacific is therefore largely symbolic and not credible, if it is aimed at reassuring regional partners or for deterring actors seeking to change the status quo.
5. Despite broad European agreement on multilateral engagement Europeans must develop more specific policies and capabilities in the context of the overarching EU strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific and national strategies.
6. Europeans can make tangible contributions to the multilateral maritime order in the Indo-Pacific: regional states have real needs for collaboration on comprehensive maritime security issues to do with (1) maritime security and law enforcement; (2) environment and climate security; (3) governance, norms, and conflict prevention.
7. Europe has a choice of partners from regional actors, but needs to acknowledge the tension between actors that are strategically relevant and those with which Europeans share ideological affinity. In the case of Australia, Japan, South Korea and Taiwan, both aspects overlap; in the case of other actors they do not or not entirely.
8. To ensure a credible European naval presence that reassures partners in the region and acts as a deterrent, we recommend Europeans use and pool resources and infrastructure already in the region.
9. Specifically, Europeans should designate zones of responsibility from Europe to Asia to secure the sealines of communication. European lead nations, together with Indo-Pacific partners, can cover different regions, but with an emphasis on the waters closer to Europe such as the Western Indian Ocean.
10. In sum, Europeans need to face an unpleasant reality in which they confront difficult choices regarding maritime security in the Indo-Pacific.

The Indo-Pacific region has emerged as the new epicenter of geopolitical competition, due to the growth of the Asian economies in general and of the People's Republic of China in particular. The Sino-American rivalry has intensified over the past decade, as China has increased its assertiveness towards its neighbors in the Western Pacific and the US attempts to maintain its hegemony in the region. The struggle over the future of Asia will define the 21st century for the rest of the world, like the struggle over Europe defined the 20th century. In the wake of the US pivot to the Indo-Pacific, the Europeans have begun their own tilt towards the region. France, the UK, Germany, and the Netherlands, as well as others, have sent ships as part of a naval diplomacy effort to reassure regional states and underline the importance of open and secure sealines of communication. They have published policy statements to reaffirm their preference for a multilateral order, as has the European Union itself. Open and secure sealines, and freedom of navigation, are essential for global trade, enabling the connection of economies over vast distances at low cost, and for trade between Europe and Asia in particular. Consequently, Europeans share their preference for a stable, open, and secure multilateral order with partner states in South, Southeast, and East Asia.

The struggle over the future of Asia will define the 21st century for the rest of the world, like the struggle over Europe defined the 20th century.

It remains unclear, however, what specific role should Europeans play in the Indo-Pacific. European states do not agree on either how much they should engage with China or how closely their engagement with the region should accord with US policies that are more willing to typecast Chinese behavior as aggressive – as the US underlined in its 2022 strategy for the Indo-Pacific. A more cohesive approach will strengthen the European contribution to security and stability in the region and to the multilateral order, and it avoids sending contradictory signals. In the European Commission's 2021 Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, the EU has offered a broad vision for Europe's participation in the region; we offer footholds towards a concrete agenda. This report poses key questions about the European tilt to the region: (a) what could the repercussions be of European involvement in the Indo-Pacific; (b) whom should the Europeans collaborate with; (c) what are the needs for a more comprehensive maritime security agenda; and (d) how can Europeans ensure they can be a more credible naval presence in the region? For each of these questions, the report formulates a series of recommendations for the nature of the European contribution.

Could the growing involvement of Europeans in maritime security in the Indo-Pacific have counterproductive results?

That the Europeans need to engage to ensure secure and open maritime commons in the Indo-Pacific is clear, but could the growing European involvement in the Indo-Pacific also generate counterproductive results? Until now, Europeans have consciously attempted to pursue an inclusive and multilateral approach to avoid further isolating China, which could lead to a worsening security dynamic in the Indo-Pacific. In contrast, the US has moved towards a strategy aimed at containing and deterring China. Europeans are trying to strike a balance between the centrifugal forces in the Indo-Pacific by reassuring states in the region, while trying to avoid the appearance of ganging up on China. Yet, Europeans must accept that their increased naval presence in the Indo-Pacific—though important and arguably unavoidable to protect European interests and values—has not been welcomed by China.

China is decidedly antagonistic towards the European naval presence, as well as the European statements on behalf of Hong Kong, of Taiwan, and of the Uighur minorities in China. With regards to living up to European values and interests while including China, that ship may have sailed. The 2021 AUKUS deal in which the US and the UK pledged nuclear-powered submarines to Australia shows how difficult that balancing act already is. The multinational UK-led carrier strike group that included both a Dutch and an American ship, also underlines that credible reassurance of regional partners and allies will likely come at a cost in Sino-European relations. European navies operating alongside the US and the Quad grouping that also includes Japan, India, and Australia, will be seen in Beijing as choosing sides against them, as will using NATO as a framework to facilitate European engagements in the region. The risk that this will antagonize China may be an acceptable and, perhaps by now unavoidable, trade-off for the potential to strengthen the multilateral order; however, Europeans must confront the fact that Europeans are unlikely to accomplish all their objectives and that they will have to make difficult choices between engagement with regional states, the credibility of that engagement, and the risk of antagonizing China. How can they do so?

Invest in comprehensive maritime security beyond military engagement, but prepare for worst-case scenarios

Beyond participating in naval diplomacy, Europeans can make other contributions to a multilateral order in the Indo-Pacific and to maritime security. They can collaborate with regional partners as part of minilateral and multilateral approaches to a more comprehensive definition of maritime security that includes (1) maritime security and law enforcement, (2) environmental security, and (3) norms and governance, and conflict prevention.

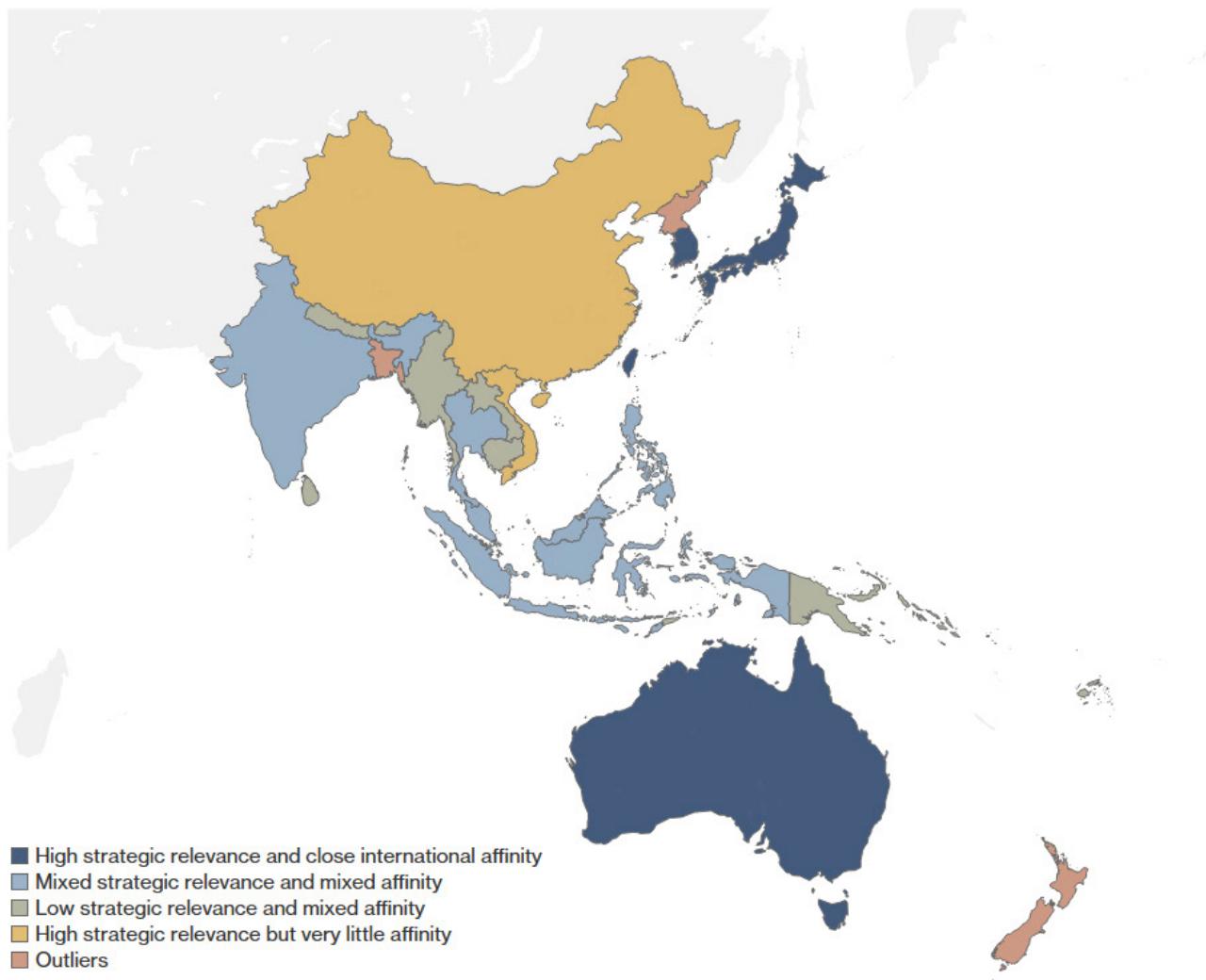
However, if Europeans increase their naval presence in the Indo-Pacific, and the Sino-American competition escalates into open warfare, they must accept that they will be involved politically and militarily. A European role might not involve direct participation in hostilities in the Western Pacific, but Europeans should prepare to backfill US responsibilities for maritime security in the Atlantic Ocean and Mediterranean, in the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf. Moreover, they could be asked to play a role in maintaining open sealanes of communication for allies in the (Western) Indian Ocean, and even asked to help close the transport of oil and gas, and other goods, to China. Participating in blockade activities would make Europe a target of Chinese reprisals – whether military within the region, or through economic sanctions or cyber-attacks within Europe. While this represents a highly unwelcome set of scenarios that current European engagement is seeking to prevent, European agency in shaping events in the region is limited. They thus must prepare for the worst-case scenarios as well, and improve their naval capacity.

Europeans will have to make difficult choices between engagement with regional states, the credibility of that engagement, and the risk of antagonizing China.

Whom should Europeans work with within the Indo-Pacific region?

Europeans need like-minded and strategically relevant partners in the Indo-Pacific if they want a feasible chance to contribute to upholding the multilateral order in the region. Yet, what that means in practice is not always clear. While European states and certain regional states may agree on the importance of keeping the seas open, this does not necessarily mean agreement on other values such as human rights. Moreover, the most capable states do not necessarily share the same values, and those that share them do not always necessarily have sufficient weight to pursue these values. The report therefore introduces a framework that offers a list of economic, political, and security criteria to rank Indo-Pacific states on their strategic relevance and value affinity. We identify several groupings of states in the Indo-Pacific: (1) high strategic relevance and high value affinity; (2) high strategic relevance and low strategic affinity; (3) mixed strategic relevance and affinity; (4) low relevance and affinity. Figure 1 shows our findings, using this methodology. European policymakers can use the framework to identify partners across important dimensions related to European values and interests.

Figure 1. Visualization of country clusters for strategic affinity and relevance



Pick strategically relevant states, as well as those with which you share ideological affinity, but be ready accept some trade-offs with affinity

The report's findings offer a complex picture of multiple groupings of states that vary on relevance to and affinity with Europe. First, the analysis underlines that states such as Australia, Japan, and South Korea are not only important to Europe because of economic, political, and security reasons, but also because their worldviews and values align with European ones. Taiwan is also in this category of value alignment and strategic relevance, though it is not recognized as a member state by the UN. Second, there are states like Vietnam and China that, despite having considerable strategic relevance for Europe, are very far removed in terms of value compatibility. Third, the assessment reveals that there is a category of countries that fall somewhere in between, in that they are strategically relevant but have a mixed record with regards to their affinity with European values and worldviews, such as India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand. The fourth category is the largest, formed largely by insular and smaller states such as Bhutan, Brunei, Cambodia, Fiji, Laos, Maldives, Myanmar, Nepal, Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, Sri Lanka, and Timor Leste whose affinity to Europe is mixed and with low strategic relevance in terms of political and economic weight. That said, states like Sri Lanka and Myanmar occupy geographically strategic locations that arguably gives them more relevance out of proportion to their political and economic weight.

Political decisions about cooperation and engagement can use these criteria as general guidelines but certainly by no means as a straitjacket. However, when it comes to finding partners within the region, the presence of several strategically relevant Indo-Pacific states that share the need for guarding sea trade but otherwise have quite different value sets, reminds us of the fact that Europe will face uncomfortable decisions. This yields the following recommendations:

- European leaders may have to partner up with countries that do not see eye-to-eye with Europe in every field. This could have important strategic implications. To wit, antagonizing these countries would be counterproductive and could end up pushing them further away from Europe, an undesirable result when these states are strategically relevant. India would be the most obvious example of an immensely strategically relevant state that has a mixed record regarding values. Europe's engagement in the Indo-Pacific will therefore require a delicate balancing act, but nonetheless one that offers many possibilities.
- In particular, European leaders will have to address the Chinese 'elephant in the room' when approaching the Indo-Pacific arena and find their place in a region that already witnesses superpower competition between China and the US. Cooperation with Beijing is certainly possible in some dimensions, albeit difficult.

European leaders may have to partner up with countries that do not see eye-to-eye with Europe in every field.

How and where should Europeans work with states in the Indo-Pacific in the maritime sphere?

Europeans can make meaningful contributions to maritime security in the Indo-Pacific alongside regional partners, beyond simply engaging in naval diplomacy. The report divides the maritime security related issues of Indo-Pacific states into three, partially overlapping, categories: (1) maritime security and law enforcement; (2) environment and climate security; (3) international governance, norms, and conflict prevention. Such a comprehensive understanding of maritime security underlines the opportunities for influence potentially available to European states. Here too we developed a framework with multiple indicators. For *maritime security and law enforcement*, we looked at data on piracy, illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing, narcotics use and trafficking, and human trafficking to assess where key Indo-Pacific states are likely to look to strengthen their maritime security and law enforcement. For *environment and climate security* we took into account vulnerability to climate-related hazards. For *governance, norms, and conflict prevention*, we examined maritime tensions and disputes to assess key Indo-Pacific countries' need to reinforce governance, norms, and conflict prevention. The results for the key Indo-Pacific states vary, as table 1 shows, but they point to concrete avenues with which Europeans can engage with the region.

Table 1. Assessment of maritime security needs of key Indo-Pacific States



| Key Indo-Pacific States | Maritime Security and Law Enforcement | Environment and Climate Security | Governance, Norms, and Conflict Prevention |
|-------------------------|---------------------------------------|----------------------------------|--|
| Australia | Low | Low | Medium |
| India | Low | High | Medium |
| Indonesia | High | High | High |
| Japan | Low | Medium | Medium |
| Malaysia | Medium | Medium | High |
| Philippines | Medium | High | High |
| Singapore | Low | Low | Low |
| South Korea | Low | Low | Medium |
| Taiwan | Medium | Low | Medium |
| Thailand | High | Medium | Low |
| Vietnam | High | Medium | High |
| China | High | High | Medium |

Increase and coordinate European presence in maritime security organizations

Indo-Pacific states face numerous maritime security challenges in the areas of (1) maritime security and law enforcement; (2) environment and climate security; (3) international governance, norms, and conflict prevention. European states have experience, and in some cases considerable expertise, in addressing some of these challenges. There is already considerable cooperation with Indo-Pacific states, but we offer the following recommendations:

- Continue to strengthen the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) regime, which includes taking up the issue of ratification with the US, to stress freedom of navigation principles. Key partners here include Japan, South Korea, and Australia, which are both highly strategically relevant and with which Europeans share high affinity in terms of values. Addressing the conflicts between China and its neighbors is at the core of their concerns.
- Engage on maritime security and law enforcement specifically through important regional organizations including the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), specifically the ASEAN-EU meetings, the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM), the initiative for Enhancing Security Cooperation in and with Asia (ESIWA), as well as the EU's Critical Maritime Routes program for the Wider Indian Ocean (CRIMARIO). Key partners are Indonesia and Thailand, which both struggle with these issues, as well as Malaysia and the Philippines. These are states that are mixed in terms of both relevance and affinity for Europeans. Moreover, Vietnam, a state with which Europeans have little affinity, but one that is clearly relevant, also presents a prime partner for engagement on maritime security and law enforcement.
- Develop environmental and climate security collaboration through frameworks like International Maritime Organization (IMO) (which also includes China), ASEAN, ASEM, and the Indian Ocean Rim Association. Key partners here are Indonesia, India, and the Philippines, but also, to an extent, Thailand. These are all states that are mixed in terms of both relevance and affinity for Europeans. Again, Vietnam is also likely to be open to more engagement on environmental and climate security.
- Finally, maritime security and law enforcement and environmental and climate security are also the main remaining topics with which Europeans can attempt to maintain the relationship with China on maritime security. Technical engagement with China should not be expected to yield concrete results, but will keep the door open.

Should Europeans maintain a naval presence in the Indo-Pacific?

Why should Europeans have a naval presence in the Indo-Pacific region given the potential risks involved? Simply put, without any naval assets, Europe cannot make a credible comprehensive contribution to the regional maritime security order within the three policy lines outlined above. Naval diplomacy is an obvious tool to shape politics in regions far from home – ships are mobile and flexible instruments of the state. The presence of European ships in the Indo-Pacific sends a clear signal to regional states, including China, and the US that Europeans perceive they have an interest at stake in keeping the maritime commons in the region open and secure.

The next question is whether European ships present a credible deterrent within the Indo-Pacific or whether they are merely symbolic and a weak signal of commitment? In principle, a European naval presence could reassure regional partners, signal support for US efforts, and

deter China. In practice, European naval capacity is extremely limited. Over the past decades, Europeans have drastically shrunk the number of ships they possess. Only a fraction of the already shrunken European fleets would even be available for deployment; the need for the maintenance and repairs of the vessels, and the training of their crews (not to mention the rest and recuperation) heavily constrain naval capacity. Using a four-to-one deployment ration of ships needed to deploy for an extended period (see Table 2), even the two major European maritime states at present would only manage to deploy four frigates and three-quarters of a destroyer, in the case of France, and three frigates and one destroyer, in the case of the UK. And these deployable ships would also have obligations in other regions. Other European states are even more limited. Moreover, European ships are weighted towards the lighter classes and are equipped with limited defenses. Yet, precision-guided munitions have increased the opportunities at sea for denial strategies by littoral states. European naval presence is therefore indeed a symbol of European interest, but not credible as a deterrent. A European naval presence *could* underline to China that Europe attaches value to an open and secure maritime commons in the Pacific and beyond, but it *will* not if Europeans cannot sustain a reasonable presence.

Table 2. Ships by class available for deployments for selection of European states



| | Ship Type | Total existing ships in class (2021) | Availability (4:1 ratio) |
|----------------|-----------|--------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| France | Destroyer | 3 | ¾ |
| | Frigate | 17 | 4 ¼ |
| United Kingdom | Destroyer | 6 | 1 ½ |
| | Frigate | 12 | 3 |
| Italy | Destroyer | 4 | 1 |
| | Frigate | 11 | 2 ¾ |
| Germany | Destroyer | 3 | ¾ |
| | Frigates | 9 | 2 ¼ |
| Spain | Frigate | 10 | 2 ½ |
| Netherlands | Frigate | 6 | 1 ½ |

Coordinate European presence in the region with regional partners, ensure access agreements, agree on zones of responsibility

Given the inherent limits in their naval capacity, Europeans have to more clearly articulate the objectives they are seeking in the Indo-Pacific, and whether these involve reassurance, deterrence, and/or underlining universal worth of open sealines of communication. They must also agree on who the targets are of these efforts, whether these are regional states, China specifically, or the US. Moreover, Europeans should prioritize among these objectives and targets of diplomatic signaling. Crucially, they should either limit their ambition level according to available capacity, or increase their capacity to meet the objectives. This is arguably the most important set of decisions that Europeans face.

We therefore recommend that European countries:

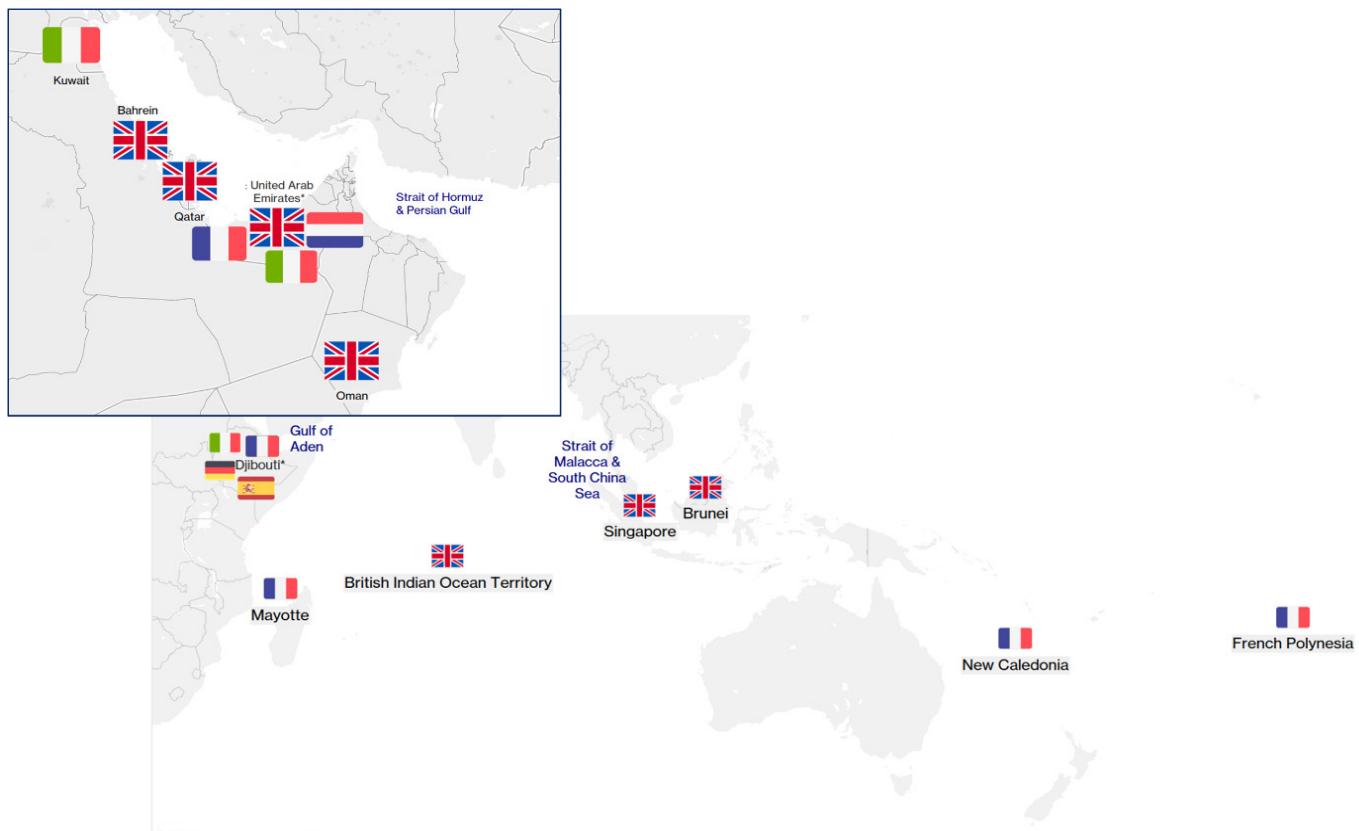
- Articulate attainable objectives, while underlining the risks, and get more out of the existing capacity.

On that basis, Europeans can build a more sustained and meaningful presence for more effective naval diplomacy.

- Multiply Europe's cumulative presence by pooling existing footholds in the Indo-Pacific.

Europeans already have access points in the region through military bases and detachments that are located close to key chokepoints. These access points are either on national territories or through bilateral agreements with host states. France, the UK, and Italy have their own bases, while the Netherlands, Germany, and Spain have smaller forward deployed detachments in the region. Ensuring that European states can access the facilities of the others, and putting in place port access agreements of European states with regional states to sustain European presence in the Indo-Pacific is therefore highly important (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Location of European military bases and strategic hotspots in the Indo-Pacific



*Djibouti has 4 bases

- Ensure sustained presence in the Indo-Pacific by pooling resources.

Agreements are already in place between European states to preposition small stocks of materiel on the facilities of other states (for special forces, for example) in the region; these should be expanded to include other materiel. Ensuring that munitions and spare parts are already within the region makes it easier to sustain a prolonged deployment and increases the credibility of deterrence and reassurance efforts by European navies during periods of heightened tension between regional states (See Table 3).

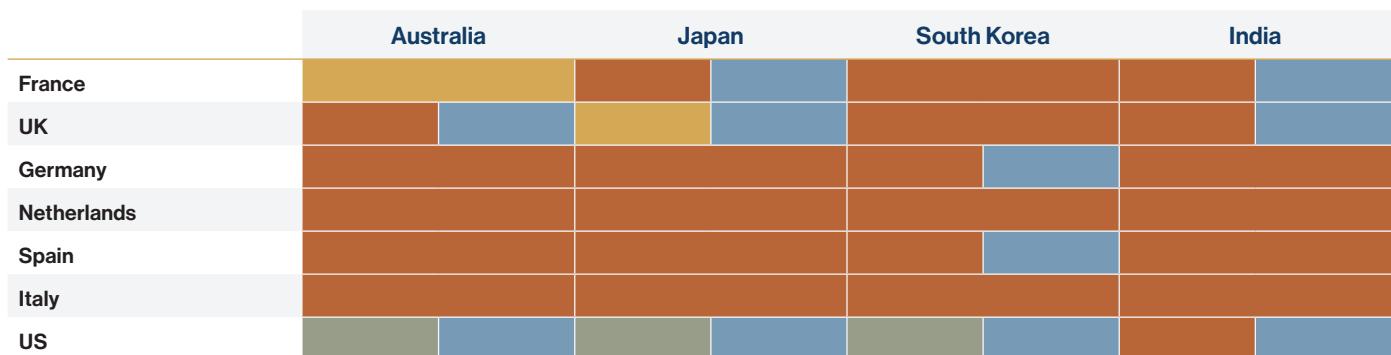
- Plan for the rotational deployment of multinational European contingents in the Indo-Pacific to further strengthen the European presence.

Europeans could keep a naval presence in the Indo-Pacific through rotational deployments of multinational European groupings. Such an approach could build on the model of the EU's Coordinated Maritime Presence concept that has already been applied in the Gulf of Guinea – but preferably including the UK. European ships can rotate in and out of the region, thereby ensuring a sustained presence that signals the European stake in the stability and openness of the region.

- Compartmentalize the sealines of communication between the key European ports and those in East Asia into distinct zones of responsibility to sustain a persistent and predictable European naval presence.

Divide the sealines of communication between the key European ports and those in East Asia into distinct zones of responsibility around the key maritime chokepoints, as a transmission belt of maritime security from East to West and back again. Such a multinational European approach to the Indo-Pacific could result in seven zones of responsibility: (1) the North Sea to Mediterranean; (2) the Red Sea; (3) the eastern coast of Africa; (4) Persian Gulf; (5) the Western Indian Ocean; (6) the Eastern Indian Ocean; and (7) the Western Pacific. France and the UK are the best-positioned European states to take the lead in such an arrangement: France in the Western Indian Ocean and the eastern coast of Africa; the UK in the Persian Gulf and the Eastern Indian Ocean. But their ships, and those of other European states would rotate in and out of those zones.

Table 3. Overview of Status of Forces Agreements and Military Logistics Agreements between key European and Indo-Pacific states, and US



No SOFA nor MLA SOFA under negotiation SOFA Military logistics agreement (MLA signed or negotiating)

- Plan multinational European deployments jointly with ships from key Indo-Pacific partners like Japan, South Korea, Australia, and India.

Finally, the European commitment would be further strengthened if these multinational arrangements include ships from key Indo-Pacific partners like Japan, South Korea, Australia, and India. The risk of European entanglement through joint deployments into potential risk-taking behavior by Indo-Pacific partners would be ameliorated by the shared value affinity with these key states that are both strategically relevant and with shared affinity.

Conclusions: How to guard the commons?

Simply put, the values and interests at stake in the Indo-Pacific make it difficult to avoid European engagement of some kind in the region altogether. The openness of the maritime commons and the stability of East Asia, Southeast Asia, and South Asia are too important for Europe to ignore. Moreover, because regional states welcome European involvement, Europe engagement could, under certain conditions, contribute to bringing stability to the region by expanding the number of actors China has to deal with, making its divide-and-conquer tactics more difficult, and incentivizing it to engage in multilateral frameworks. In this manner, Europeans could possibly contribute to dampening the escalatory pressures within the region. Such a line of thinking has certainly been at the root of the turn towards the Indo-Pacific.

The recent European naval presence in the Indo-Pacific is intended to put European money where their mouth has been, following the series of policy documents that signaled a shift to the region. However, European states individually are limited in their ability to sustain a sizeable naval presence. They risk writing checks they cannot hope to cash. There are options to act though. In addition to outlining problems, the report offers a series of solutions with which Europeans can contribute to guarding the maritime commons in the Indo-Pacific region upon which they so dearly depend. Now it is time to turn words into action.



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