



Getting Real about the Indo-Pacific

Redefining European Approach to Maritime Security

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For the last twenty years, the European Union (EU)'s maritime security policy in the Indian Ocean has been dedicated almost exclusively to the fight against maritime crime, despite the changing geopolitical situation and China's growing presence in the area. Focusing on non-traditional maritime security issues, the EU has failed to recognize the strategic dimension of its own interventions and therefore to frame a proper strategy that would consider the interplay of economic interests, resources access and power competitions in the maritime domain. Beyond sectors like the fight against piracy, law enforcement and capacity building, the EU makes little active contribution to the security of the Indo-Pacific. The problem is partly due to a lack of naval assets and proper coordination. But it is also the consequence of the EU's *de facto* refusal to think of its non-traditional ocean governance tasks in strategic terms. The EU has not only failed to give China pause, it is still wondering whether it should try at all. This lack of will prevents the EU to use its limited capacities in different and more strategically effective ways and does contribute to a *de facto* marginalization of the EU as a security actor in the area.

This paper argues that it would be delusional to expect EU member states to increase significantly their fleet in the foreseeable future. Yet, the EU has the capability to play a much greater role in the future providing it redefines the concept of maritime security. The evolution of the maritime strategic landscape is indeed increasingly characterized by the 'weaponization' of a number of traditional economic activities. Resource appropriation combines with the militarization of the oceans as demonstrated recently by the Chinese use of fishing fleet to pursue geopolitical gains in the South China Sea. The recently released EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific opens the way for such a redefinition of maritime security which would allow the EU to play on a variety of tools, ranging from traditional military ones to capacity building and governance. These measures could contribute to raise the costs of the Chinese policies in the Indo-Pacific, and therefore indirectly contribute to containing Beijing. This, of course, remains to be developed but the EU Indo-Pacific strategy constitutes a useful strategic framework which, although not decisive, could provide the basis for an effective European policy and presence in the Indo-Pacific.

The determinants of the European maritime security approach in the Indian Ocean

While there had been little European interest in the Indian Ocean outside of economic cooperation and development aid issues¹ until the turn of the century, the rise of piracy in the Horn of Africa changed the Western perception of the region. The most important factor from the European perspective was the immense volume of commercial shipping conducted through the Indian Ocean, and the need to safeguard the EU sea lines of communication. In this context, the EU gave priority to fighting against piracy and armed robbery at sea, through an integrated approach that combined military and civilian instruments.

This policy has led the EU to undertake numerous initiatives to assert itself as a legitimate and relatively effective actor in the fight against maritime crime. The CSDP's Naval operation,

¹ Erwan Lannon (2017), 'The European Union and the Indian Ocean Islands: identifying opportunities for developing a more ambitious and comprehensive strategy', *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region*, 13:2, 190-212

Focusing on non-traditional maritime security issues, the EU has failed to recognize the strategic dimension of its own interventions and therefore to frame a proper strategy that would consider the interplay of economic interests, resources access and power competitions in the maritime domain.

The EU's CSDP operations and capacity-building activities are not efficient in addressing the more strategic aspects of maritime security, and the growing competition for political and economic influence in the Indian Ocean. European spheres of interests are increasingly overlapping with Chinese foreign activities in the maritime domain.

EURONAVFOR-ATALANTA, launched in 2008, and initially scheduled to last one year, has been repeatedly extended, recently until December 2022.² Through the European Development Fund, several programs to promote maritime security through capacity building, information sharing and operational coordination in the Western Indian Ocean have also been launched. In the south of the Indian Ocean, one major regional initiative was the Regional Maritime Safety Advancement Program (MASE) that was implemented from 2013 and 2020. This programme has contributed to developing local capacity to arrest and prosecute pirates and disrupt their financial networks, as well as regional operational coordination and information sharing. Another complementary project was the Indian Ocean Critical Maritime Routes (CRIMARIO) program, launched from 2016 to 2019,³ which focused on facilitating maritime situational awareness and information sharing among regional states through training and the provision of an information-sharing platform. Building on its experience, the EU now aims to expand its expertise outside of the Western Indian Ocean. The CRIMARIO II project was set up in 2020 in order to expand its geographical scope towards South and Southeast Asia.

This integrated approach of the EU in the Indian Ocean has now reached its limits. On the military side, many countries continue to support ATALANTA only because the operation has demonstrated a capacity to operate beyond European shores without incurring great costs or operational risks for those members that contribute to the operation.⁴ In reality, however, the EU's commitment to this major global operation has greatly diminished, being largely replaced by an effective Chinese presence. On the civilian side, the European initiatives have been restrained by existing weaknesses in maritime capacity and resource constraints among regional countries, lack of financial and human resources from the EU, and differences of interest between the EU and regional actors.⁵

More generally, the EU's CSDP operations and capacity-building activities are not efficient in addressing the more strategic aspects of maritime security, and the growing competition for political and economic influence in the Indian Ocean. European spheres of interests are increasingly overlapping with Chinese foreign activities in the maritime domain. These activities have included the establishment of China's first overseas military base in Djibouti, also home to EU Member States and allies, namely French, Italian and US forces. Despite these emerging trends, the EU has failed to expand its strategic focus from maritime crime to include a more clearly defined position vis-à-vis increasing political tensions at sea.⁶ This is closely related to its limited naval resources in the Indian Ocean and beyond.

2 The operation's mandate has expanded over time, from providing protection for World Food Program (WFP) threatened by smugglers and contributing to the deterrence, prevention and repression of acts of piracy off the Somali coast to include monitoring of fishing activities off the coast of Somalia; contributing to the enforcement of the weapons embargo on Somalia; and countering the trafficking of narcotic drugs off the coast of Somalia.

3 CRIMARIO was a successor to the 'Enhancing Maritime Security and Safety through Information Sharing and Capacity Building' (MARSIC) project, which ran from 2010 to 2015.

4 Peter Dombrowski and Simon Reich (2019), 'The EU's Maritime operations and the future of European Security: learning from operations Atalanta and Sophia', *Comparative European Politics*, 17, 860-884

5 For a full assessment, see Christian Bueger, Timothy Edmunds & Robert McCabe (2020), 'Into the sea: capacity-building innovations and the maritime security challenge', *Third World Quarterly*, 41:2, 228-246.

6 Jessica Larsen (2019), 'The EU as a security Actor. Perspectives from the maritime domain', The Danish Institute for International Studies. https://pure.diiis.dk/ws/files/3090122/European_Union_Security_Actor_DIIS_Report_06_2019.pdf

The Limits of the EU Naval Presence

In recent years, the EU has developed a set of declarations and policies demonstrating its close interdependence with the maritime stability of the Asia-Pacific area, including the 2014 Maritime Security Strategy (EUMSS), updated in 2018, and the 2016 Global Strategy for Foreign and Security Policy (EUGS 2016). While ambitious on the surface, these strategies have yet to be implemented through the deployment of adequate naval assets and the development of a common security vision among EU member states. The EU's ambition for its role in maritime security in the Indo-Pacific, as expressed in the Indo-Pacific strategy, is by any standards, unimpressive. As such, it reflects the reality of Europe's naval involvement in the region, the weakness of the member states capacities (the EU does not have assets of its own), but also a total absence of political will to address the strategic issue it is confronted with in the area.

The last development was the maritime security of the EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, released on September 16, 2021. These strategies set the tone and ambition for the EU's role as a global security provider, and explicitly mentioned maritime security in the Indian Ocean. When it comes to the practical dimension of maritime security, the EU Indo-Pacific document mentions the EU Naval Force Somalia (EUNAVFOR Somalia), operation ATALANTA, the only meaningful action ever conducted by the EU in the Indian Ocean, and indicates its willingness to conduct more joint exercises and port calls as well as multilateral exercises, while it intends to "explore ways to ensure enhanced naval deployments by its Member States in the region".⁷ It should also assess the opportunity of establishing Maritime Areas of Interest in the Indo-Pacific, this intention being conditioned, however, by the lessons learned from the Coordinated Maritime Presence (CMP) concept,⁸ currently experimented in the Gulf of Guinea. In reality, apart from ATALANTA, which is already in place, the implementation of the EU's operational projects is likely to be incremental due to the complete dependence of the External Action Service on the Member States for its operations, hence the very cautious vocabulary of the text (the EU 'will seek to', 'explore', etc.).

There is today a growing consensus about the fact that the type of operation mandates of the EU's CSDP maritime missions are not adapted to current strategic issues. The concept of Coordinated Maritime Presence (CMP), a voluntary arrangement that aims to allow EU permanent access to naval capabilities and thus greater and more flexible reach at sea beyond CSDP operations, was developed as a reaction to this situation. The first iteration of the mechanism was launched in January 2021 in the Gulf of Guinea. While there is a French proposal to replicate it in the Indian Ocean, the idea has not yet been backed by other EU member states. This issue is linked to another main limitation to the European action, which is the lack of convergence between EU countries on how to cohere around a common strategy. A good example of this is the Indian Ocean Working Group that was created in 2019 within the framework of the European Initiative Intervention (EI2).⁹ This working group meets twice a year and brings together France, Spain, Italy, Portugal, the United Kingdom and Germany. It aims to bring out common security assessments of the Indian Ocean, and to identify common interests in order to prepare future joint commitments. However, this group does not yet meet

7 European Commission, High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, *The EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific*, Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council, Brussels, 16 September 2021, https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/jointcommunication_2021_24_1_en.pdf *The EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific*, Op. Cit.

8 *Ibid.*

9 The EI2 was launched in June 2018 by 9 European ministers of Defense, on the initiative of France.

these expectations, especially because of diverging interests between participating countries and a difficulty to agree on common objectives.

Lastly, EU countries have difficulties prioritizing and coordinating resources between CSDP operations and ad hoc operations conducted on a voluntary basis by individual states. Italy, for example, decided in October 2021 to contribute to operation AGENOR within the European-led Maritime Awareness in the Strait of Hormuz (EMASOH) initiative, while in 2020 Germany NAVY F124 Sachsenclass frigate Hamburg was redirected from the Indo-Pacific to participate to EUNAVFOR MED IRINI operation in the Mediterranean Sea. These initiatives have been taken without questioning collectively which maritime threats deserve priority, how maritime assets can be allocated more equitably, or how to reach an agreement with other non-European member states on an effective division of labour in the Indian Ocean region and beyond. In addition, a recent report published by the European Council of Foreign Affairs (ECFR) on the perceptions of the Indo-Pacific concept by the EU Member States indicated that although 12 of them declared being willing to participate to FONOPS, only four of them were ready to send ships.¹⁰

Therefore, the multilateralization of maritime security in the EU context remains a very limited process (EUNAVFOR operations). This does not mean that individual EU countries are not contributing to collective security in the Indo-Pacific. France, and to a much lesser extent the Netherlands, as well as, symbolically, Germany, are sending ships to the area. But they do it mostly as part of their national strategies, not as EU Member States. In addition, when France and the Netherlands play the multilateral card in the Indo-Pacific, they do so most often outside the EU framework, within the transatlantic alliance (and beyond), while Germany acts alone. In 2021, the Netherlands even chose to contribute to an operation led by the UK in the area. These three countries are today sponsoring a strategy which aims at redefining the Indo-Pacific concept on European terms, not without ambivalence, though, as their postures vis-à-vis China seem to differ.

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From non-traditional to strategic threats: Achieving strategic goals through sub-strategic means

EU Member States differ on what they are capable and willing to contribute to maritime security in the Indo-Pacific but, although with various emphasis, agree on the three main characteristics of all Indo-Pacific strategies: the willingness to manage the rise of China; an equal, and for most East and Central European states stronger, desire to preserve the US alliance; and, above all, the intention to preserve themselves and Europe from the consequences of the US-China rivalry. Assessing whether the latter can suffice to prevent escalation is a speculative endeavor as the answer depends on the one side of the supposed Chinese reaction to what she may see as ganging up against her and on the other one, on a complicated calculation by each of the actors to determine whether the security benefits from a potential coalition would outweigh the security risks from China's reaction.

¹⁰ Frederic Grare, Manisha Reuter, *Moving closer: European views of the Indo-Pacific*, European Council on Foreign Relations Special Report, 13 September 2021, <https://ecfr.eu/special/moving-closer-european-views-of-the-indo-pacific/>

This is precisely the dilemma Europeans are trying to avoid but their objective is less to dampen China's assertiveness, on which they have little control, than to constrain it and try to get China to behave according to internationally accepted norms of behavior. This is where the EU strategy's intentions in terms of capacity building, but also vis-à-vis *a priori* non-strategic issues such as ocean governance should be taken into account.

In line with past actions in the Southwest of the Indian Ocean, and current ones in the Bay of Bengal, they will seek to extend its Critical Maritime Routes in the Indian Ocean (CRIMARIO) information sharing capacity building projects to the Southern Pacific and increase synergies with like-minded partners.

This contribution to Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) is meant to address all kinds of non-traditional security threats but also help improve ocean governance, primarily (although not exclusively) to allow littoral states to control their own Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ). Although presented as two different sets of activities in the EU strategy, maritime security and ocean governance complement each other well as they address different facets of the evolving Indo-Pacific strategic landscape, in which the appropriation of resources combines with the militarization of the oceans while the Chinese to pursue their territorial claims under the guise of economic activities. This weaponization of economic activities has allowed them to consolidate their position despite overwhelming US naval superiority.

The fisheries sector illustrates the point. Threats, and more generally international law violations associated with it are more impactful than any other maritime crime, because they directly impact the daily livelihood of millions. Moreover, 95 percent of global fish catch takes place in EEZs. Fisheries management therefore has become a central geopolitical issue in the Indo-Pacific. More than any other country China vastly contributes to this problem with not only its fleet size and the tonnage of its catches, but also its fishing practices—which include illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing—and, above all, a fisheries policy that exports its environmental problems while protecting its own national marine areas. China is not the only country which indulges such practices but it is by far the most important of the very few who use fishing to serve their revisionist agendas and strategic interests more broadly.

In many instances, the Chinese fishing fleet acts as a surrogate of the People's Liberation Army Navy. Incidents have been multiplying in the South and East China Seas, the most spectacular of which happened in March 2021 when the Philippines discovered that the Whitsun Reef, 170 nautical miles west of Palawan in the northern parts of the Spratly Islands, was being occupied by around 220 Chinese fishing vessels. Later that same month, Japan Coast Guard officials reported an incursion by PRC vessels off the Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea.¹¹ Fisheries have therefore become an extension of traditional security, perverting conservation measures in the process to back up territorial claims. Littoral states of the South China Sea have, for example, rejected the seasonal fishing moratorium unilaterally decreed by China since 1999, as they understand the move as an attempt by China to assert its sovereignty over these waters.

11 'Nations push back against increased Chinese militia activities in disputed waters', *Indo-Pacific Defense Forum*, April 18, 2021, <https://ipdefenseforum.com/2021/04/nations-push-back-against-increased-chinese-maritime-militia-activities-in-disputed-waters/>

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The EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific:

The opening up of a field of action for the EU

The stated intention of the maritime security pillar of the EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific is to “promote an open and rule-based regional security architecture including secure sea lines of communication, capacity building and enhanced naval presence in the Indo-Pacific in accordance with the legal framework established by the UNCLOS”.¹² This somewhat conventional formulation refers to the categories described in the Council Conclusion of May 2018 on “Enhanced EU Security Cooperation in and With Asia”, which include upholding freedom of navigation, fight against piracy, organized crime, Illegal Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) fishing, illegal trafficking and maritime pollution.¹³

It does open, in effect, a vast field for effective strategic cooperation. It is unlikely to counter China's naval activities in the area. But linking maritime security and ocean governance may help it partly compensate its relative lack of naval presence by capabilities in activities which although non-military in nature may have a potentially important strategic impact. Therefore, building MDA' helping unifying a notoriously fragmented governance' helping littoral states to better integrate UNCLOS regulations in their national legislation' training coast guards or customs; and promoting the adherence by littoral states of important mechanisms such as the Port Measures Agreement are non-military approaches that would not be a substitute to naval operations, nor, alone, fix the strategic problem but could possibly restrain the strategic space in which China operates. Beijing's current strategy consists of the creation of *fait accomplis*, the accumulation of which gradually changes the balance of power. In this context, the gap between the stakes to protect and the risk incurred in doing so is so high that it discourages external interventions. With the proposed preventive approach, focusing on littoral states capacity building, Chinese escalation would still be possible but at a much higher economic, military and political cost.

Within the framework of the EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, existing institutional division within the EU, between for example fisheries management, a prerogative of the DG-MARE, and CRIMARIO, a responsibility of the External Action Service should be seen as an element of flexibility, not a liability, providing the coordination between the two bodies is improved. It would then allow for greater political weight in normative and institutional matters, while a number of more security-related activities can and will be conducted by interested Member States, possibly in minilateral formats, in thematic coalitions of the willing, with the participation of concerned littoral states.

The potential political impact of the EU approach should not be forgotten in the process. China has adroitly played the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) for propaganda purpose before the concerned states started realizing the potential political cost to government caught between the demand of their populations and their incapacity to resist Chinese pressures. The maritime security approach advocated in the present paper is, on the contrary, based on the satisfaction of the needs of millions. It is therefore essential to develop a narrative allowing the EU to reap the political benefits of its policies.

¹² *The EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific*, Op. Cit.

¹³ Council of the European Union, *Enhanced EU Security Cooperation in and With Asia*, Council conclusions, 28 May 2018, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/35456/st09265-re01-en18.pdf>

In the 21st century, in which threats are likely to be increasingly of a hybrid nature, the EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific constitutes an interesting set of guidelines. Not a strategy *per se*, but a strategic framework in which different policies can be developed in a flexible manner providing Member States take it as such, without losing sight of the larger problem, and not as an alibi for inaction.



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