



# Multilateralizing Maritime Security in the Indo-Pacific

## How Europe can contribute to regional deterrence

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European countries' increasing interest in maritime security in the Indo-Pacific is evident, and welcome by the US and European partners in the region. This paper surveys the evolution of regional security concerns since the initial EU foray into Indo-Pacific maritime security through Operation ATLANTA in 2008, and highlights the centrality of deterrence of China to the current concerns of like-minded countries in the region.<sup>1</sup> It argues that European countries have the capability to make a meaningful contribution to deterrence in the Indo-Pacific, because many elements of European hard power (including cyber, space, military-industrial and nuclear) are not limited to the Euro-Atlantic area. Within the Indo-Pacific, European countries should focus the substance of their peacetime (and wartime) engagement in the Indian Ocean, and more deliberately use any military presence East of Singapore for deterrence signalling.

## Shifting Goalposts: Phases in Indo-Pacific Maritime Security Since 2008

While European engagement in maritime security in the Indo-Pacific has evolved significantly in the last decade and a half, so have regional concerns about maritime security. Of course, there are strong elements of continuity in the constituent elements of the regional maritime security architecture—from international organizations to longstanding exercise series such as RIMPAC, MALABAR or TALISMAN SABRE, and underlying formal alliances and alignments. But within this context, the political and strategic focus has shifted several times since 2008, with each phase bringing a new paradigm that was superimposed on, rather than resolved, the defining challenges of earlier phases.

The first of these phases, which also saw the first EU military deployment to the Indo-Pacific, related to the consequences of state fragility and terrorism in the Northwest Indian Ocean. The EU's operation ATLANTA (since 2008) and NATO's operation OCEAN SHIELD (2009-16) were (and remain) narrowly focused geographically, as well as in terms of ambition and scope. As an approach to multilateral maritime security in the region, they signified a geographic overlap in the Northeast Indian Ocean of what otherwise remained distinctly Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific security systems. And yet, its geostrategic significance for Indo-Pacific maritime security was much broader than that, as Japanese participation contributed to Tokyo becoming a more self-confident and active security actor across the Indo-Pacific; and China emerged as a globally active naval power with a permanent surface vessel presence in the Indian Ocean, as well as a substantial naval base in Djibouti.<sup>2</sup>

1 The perspective on these issues is an Australian view insofar as it reflects the enduring characteristics of Australia's geostrategic situation, which force it to make choices that bear parallels to those facing European countries: It straddles the Indian Ocean as well as the Pacific Ocean, with the resulting need to prioritize between different regions. Geographic distance from areas of tension in the northern hemisphere gives Australia a greater measure of discretion in terms of its own strategic engagement in areas such as the South China Sea or Senkakus than is afforded those countries whose territorial claims are directly affected; while the importance of the United States alliance to its security makes US policy an important consideration in its own right. Finally, the paper also reflects perceptions of regional security in Australia that are rapidly deteriorating, to the point that Australia's Prime Minister Scott Morrison explicitly drew parallels to the 1930s when announcing the government's commitment to significant increases in defence spending, in the midst of the global pandemic, in 2020. Peter Hartcher, 'Scott Morrison is not going to duck this crisis', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 July 2020, <https://www.smh.com.au/national/scott-morrison-is-not-going-to-duck-this-crisis-20200703-p558w5.html>

2 In contrast, the failure to build any significant maritime dimension to NATO's Indo-Pacific partnerships that also emerged during that time was a major missed opportunity. See Stephan Frühling, 'NATO and Australia: Six Decades of Cooperation', in Alexander Moens and Brooke Smith-Windsor (eds.), *NATO and Asia-Pacific* (Rome: NATO Defense College, 2016), pp. 135-154.

European countries have the capability to make a meaningful contribution to deterrence in the Indo-Pacific, because many elements of European hard power (including cyber, space, military-industrial and nuclear) are not limited to the Euro-Atlantic area.

The Obama administration's 'pivot' or 'rebalance' to the Indo-Pacific from late 2011 reflected the growing importance of these geostrategic developments in East Asia, in a way that was also reflected in Australia's 2013 Defence White Paper.<sup>3</sup> Deliberately shifting US (and most allied, including Australian) attention away from the greater Middle East (and Northwest Indian Ocean), it was not however a direct reaction to the military rise of China or any other specific threat. Even in its narrow security dimensions, the 'pivot' thus balanced concern about China with the need for containment of North Korea—including multilateral maritime sanction enforcement counter-terrorism cooperation in Southeast Asia, which has a strong maritime element in the Sulu Sea; and often Coast Guard-led engagement on maritime security capacity building in the South Pacific and Indian Ocean. As late as 2016, the Rohingya crisis caused the latest Indo-Pacific wave of uncontrolled maritime migration, and the 2017 siege of Marawi led to the deployment of significant numbers US and Australian forces, including patrol boats and Maritime Patrol Aircraft (MPA), to assist in the fight against Islamic State-affiliated terrorists in the Philippines. In that sense, the essence of the phase of the 'pivot' was that maritime security in the Indo-Pacific mattered insofar as it reflected the global significance—and fragility—of the wider Indo-Pacific region in economic, demographic and strategic terms.

The next paradigmatic phase can be dated to 2014, even if, as in Europe, the practical implications for multilateral security took several years to become apparent. China's construction of artificial islands in the South China Sea (and increased provocations around the Senkaku Islands) placed 'gray zone' competition at the centre of the strategic agenda for the US and its allies—a shift set down most explicitly in Australia's 2016 Defence White Paper, and the US 2018 National Defense Strategy. For lack of a better alternative, Freedom of Navigation became a central conceptual and—through the longstanding US instrument of Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPS)—practical focal point of the US and allied policy response in the South China Sea, even though the core challenge was China's demonstrated willingness to break international law and norms in the pursuit of a regional shift in the balance of power, than the security of international shipping as such. China's leverage of purportedly commercial Belt and Road investments overseas for strategic gains reinforced the perception of competition as the main challenge facing the region. In this perspective, multilateral maritime security organizations, capacity building in island states in the Indian Ocean and South Pacific, as well as maritime infrastructure investment all become fora for strategic competition with China.

However, in the most recent, and most challenging phase, concerns about a major conflict with China in the 2020s, most likely over the future of Taiwan, have become the focal point of the strategic concerns of the US and its allies. If there is a single cause for this shift, it is the perception of a marked change in Beijing's behaviour over the last two to three years that has shattered confidence in Chinese interest to keep competition limited. China's economic coercion of Australia; its moves to isolate its population from the outside world seemingly indefinitely; its reckless willingness to risk armed conflict with nuclear-armed India in the Himalayas in 2020; the concentration of power unseen since Chairman Mao's days in the person of Xi Jinping; the harsh Hong Kong internal security law that signals open disdain for any negotiated solution acceptable to the Taiwanese; and Xi's statements that "historical task of the complete reunification of the motherland must be fulfilled, and will definitely be fulfilled",<sup>4</sup> in the context of the articulation of definite timelines for the re-emergence of China as a world power, all contributed to this reassessment.

3 Although its antecedents can be traced back to the previous Bush administration. See Nina Silove, 'The pivot before the pivot', *International Security* 40:4 (2016), pp. 45–88.

4 'China-Taiwan tensions: Xi Jinping says 'reunification' must be fulfilled', *BBC News*, 9 October 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-58854081>



# Multilateral Maritime Security

## Cooperation and Deterrence of China:

### ‘What Would Europe Do’?

If one traced the role of China across these eras, there was some comfort from the suggestion that China, was still following Deng Xiaoping's adage to 'hide your strength and bide your time' when it emerged as a regional security actor from 2008. The 'pivot' acknowledged this growing strength, which by 2014 it stopped hiding. Today, the concern now is that it also may have stopped biding its time.<sup>5</sup> Whether a Chinese attempt at forceful take-over of Taiwan might occur in the years to 2027, as suggested in recent testimony by COMINDOPACOM Admiral Phil Davidson,<sup>6</sup> or whether it only seeks to be able to do so at that time, as suggested by Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark Milley,<sup>7</sup> the consequences either way are profound for global security at large. Since its violent clashes with China in 2020, India has markedly dropped many of its traditional reservations about close military cooperation with other powers.<sup>8</sup> Also in 2020, Australia's Defence Strategic Update explicitly moved away from an implicit assumption of ten years warning time before major conflict, shifting investment into short-term improvements including increased munitions and fuel stockpiles, sea mines, munition production capacity, and improvements to battle damage repair capacity.<sup>9</sup>

Hence, in 2021 governments in the US, Australia, India, Japan and Taiwan are filled with a notable sense of urgency about the regional (maritime) balance of power, which finds its expression in very practical preparations for the possibility of major war within this decade. This does not mean that the concerns that dominated in earlier years have disappeared. Piracy on the Horn of Africa may well resurge as a threat to international shipping; the low-level civil war in Myanmar may well lead to a new maritime exodus; non-traditional threats such as drug-smuggling, illegal fishing and terrorist movements remain challenges from East Africa through Southeast Asia to the South Pacific. Chinese leverage of infrastructure investment remains a concern for Australia and other countries,<sup>10</sup> and one can at least hope

5 Stan Grant, 'China's era of 'hide and bide' is over', *ABC News*, 30 January 2018, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-01-30/chinese-military-asia-south-china-sea-geopolitical-conflict-us/9372972>

6 Mallory Shelbourne, 'Davidson: China Could Try to Take Control of Taiwan In 'Next Six Years'', *USNI News*, 9 March 2021, <https://news.usni.org/2021/03/09/davidson-china-could-try-to-take-control-of-taiwan-in-next-six-years>

7 Sam LaGrone, 'Milley: China Wants Capability to Take Taiwan by 2027, Sees No Near-term Intent to Invade', *USNI News*, 23 June 2021, <https://news.usni.org/2021/06/23/milley-china-wants-capability-to-take-taiwan-by-2027-sees-no-near-term-intent-to-invade>

8 Tanvi Madan, 'India is not sitting on the geopolitical fence', *War on the Rocks*, 27 October 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/10/india-is-not-sitting-on-the-geopolitical-fence/>

9 Commonwealth of Australia, 2020 *Defence Strategic Update* (Canberra: Department of Defence, 2020). The 2021 decision to acquire SSN with assistance from the US and UK rather than proceed with the French submarine contract, also demonstrates the government's willingness to incur significant (political) cost for maintaining Australia's defence in light of deteriorating circumstances. Perhaps more importantly, it also frees up cash flow in the near term for short-term capability improvements in the 2020s, before even the first of the new French-designed submarines would have joined the fleet, and was accompanied by explicit government affirmation of its willingness to increase defence spending even further than foreshadowed in the 2020 Defence Strategic Update. Most recently, in a decision not included in that document, Australia signed contracts to increase of its fleet of MH-60R Seahawk ASW helicopters from 24 to 36: Nigel Pittaway, 'Australia buys 12 more MH-60R helicopters', *Australian Defence Magazine*, 9 October 2021, <https://www.australiandefence.com.au/defence/sea/australia-buys-12-more-mh-60r-helicopters>

10 The most recent example being Australia's financial support for the take-over of South Pacific mobile phone operator Digicel by the Australian Telstra, rather than Chinese interests previously mooted as the most likely bidder. Senator the Hon Marise Payne, Minister for Foreign Affairs, 'Telstra decision to acquire Digicel Pacific', media release, 25 October 2021, <https://www.foreignminister.gov.au/minister/marise-payne/media-release/telstra-decision-acquire-digicel-pacific>

Mere presence may signal general political concern about regional developments, but when it comes to Taiwan it is ultimately China's perception of the capacity and willingness to bring hard power to bear, should Xi Jinping consider rolling the dice, that will preserve the peace.

that international eyes on the activities of Chinese Navy, Coast Guard and Maritime Safety Administration vessels in the South China Sea may have some moderating influence on their behaviour towards regional countries.

However, the harsh reality is that none of this will matter much, for regional countries or, for that matter, Europe, if the US, its allies and like-minded countries fail to ensure that, to paraphrase Colin Gray, "in moments of acute crisis the [Chinese] general staff cannot brief the Politburo with a plausible theory of military victory".<sup>11</sup> Mere presence may signal general political concern about regional developments, but when it comes to Taiwan it is ultimately China's perception of the capacity and willingness to bring hard power to bear, should Xi Jinping consider rolling the dice, that will preserve the peace. In that sense, deterrence is now the central policy concern,<sup>12</sup> and the political and practical aspects of multilateral maritime security cooperation are a key element of establishing the credibility of deterrence in terms of capability, as well as political signalling.

In the absence of formal multilateral alliances and alliance institutions, international maritime exercises are the main mechanism in the Indo-Pacific for signalling political commitment as well as demonstrating capability for collaboration in high-intensity warfare. Hence, India, for example, has joined its other Quad partners in participating in France's LA PEROUSE Indian Ocean exercise in 2021,<sup>13</sup> and also shed its traditional hesitation about aligning participation in exercise MALABAR with membership of the Quad. With multinational carrier operations and ASW, MALABAR is now focusing on high-intensity operations of a kind that is only relevant in major conflict.<sup>14</sup> The biannual US-Australia exercise TALISMAN SABRE is also increasing in complexity, where capabilities relevant for high-intensity littoral warfare are increasingly prominent (and publicized) additions, such as rapid HIMARS insertion from 2019,<sup>15</sup> and PATRIOT air defence systems,<sup>16</sup> as well as improvised capabilities to lay naval mines, in 2021.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, there are explicit calls in Australia to shift the geographic location of the exercise series from Northeast Queensland to the Northwest Shelf, to expressly increase its alignment with likely areas of operation in a major conflict with China.<sup>18</sup>

11 Colin S. Gray, 'Nuclear Strategy: The Case for a Theory of Victory', *International Security* 4:1 (1979), p. 56.

12 In Australia's case, in the 2020 Defence Strategic Update, deterrence has replaced the focus on 'support to the global rules-based order' of the 2016 White Paper as the central policy pillar for defence policy and posture.

13 Xavier Vavasseur, 'Australia, France, India, Japan and the United States take part in exercise La Pérouse', *Naval News*, 6 April 2021, <https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2021/04/australia-france-india-japan-and-the-united-states-take-part-in-exercise-la-perouse/>

14 Rajeswari Pillai Rajagopalan, 'The Quad Conducts Malabar Naval Exercise', *The Diplomat*, 27 August 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/08/the-quad-conducts-malabar-naval-exercise/>; Krishn Kaushik, 'Explained: The Malabar Exercise of Quad nations, and why it matters to India', *The Indian Express*, 31 August 2021, <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/malabar-exercise-of-quad-nations-why-it-matters-to-india-7472058/>

15 Ashley Maldonado-Suarez, 'Exercise Talisman Sabre 2019: Demonstrates High Mobility Artillery Rocket System in Australia', *US INDOPACOM*, 10 July 2019, <https://www.pacom.mil/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/1901005/exercise-talisman-sabre-2019-demonstrates-high-mobility-artillery-rocket-system/>; 'Exercise Talisman Sabre 21: HIMARS Live Fire', *SLDinfo.com*, 13 July 2021, <https://sldinfo.com/2021/09/exercise-talisman-sabre-21-himars-live-fire/>

16 Craig Childs, 'US Army launches Patriot missiles during Exercise Talisman Saber 21', *US Army*, 28 July 2021, [https://www.army.mil/article/249151/us\\_army\\_launches\\_patriot\\_missiles\\_during\\_exercise\\_talisman\\_saber\\_21](https://www.army.mil/article/249151/us_army_launches_patriot_missiles_during_exercise_talisman_saber_21)

17 Martin Manaranche, 'Royal Australian Navy Lays Inert Minefields As Part Of Exercise Talisman Sabre 21', *Naval News*, 28 July 2021, <https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2021/07/royal-australian-navy-lays-inert-mine-fields-as-part-of-exercise-talisman-sabre-21/>

18 Peter Dean and Stephen Smith, 'Wargames facing wrong way as the strategic focus shifts', *The Australian*, 2 August 2021, <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/inquirer/wargames-facing-wrong-way-as-the-strategic-focus-shifts/news-story/890aebab36418d43d9209b803abf4a1>

European choices in this regard have often been broadly categorized as backfilling for US forces (especially in the Euro-Atlantic and Middle East), direct engagement in the Indo-Pacific, or a greater European role in 'middle spaces' between both zones.

As European countries develop and negotiate the nature and extent of their role in the Indo-Pacific internally, amongst each other and with their North American NATO allies, this regional context will shape perception of its political-military engagement in the region. Recent months have seen prominent naval deployments by the UK, Netherlands,<sup>19</sup> and Germany;<sup>20</sup> and France's explicit articulation of its military posture as an Indo-Pacific power.<sup>21</sup> But in its overall approach, European policy seems to trace, with a lag and, for outside observers, somewhat confusingly different speeds—the evolution described above. For example, there are strong parallels between the wide range topics covered in the EU's carefully titled Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, and the Obama administration's broad characterization of the 'pivot'. On the other hand, characterizations by EU leaders of China as a systemic rival, NATO's agreement on that China poses "systemic challenges ... to areas relevant to Alliance security", and the recognition in European capitals of the political significance of even mere naval transits through the South China Sea, are signs of a greater paradigmatic focus on competition with China. While different foci of national capitals, EU and NATO in this regard are inevitable given the dynamics of intra-European cooperation, they do not help provide clarity on the key question raised by a deterrence paradigm, namely: what would Europe do? Whatever European's intentions, their increased engagement and presence in the Indo-Pacific will inevitably be parsed by regional countries for indications on this question. On the one hand, different foci for EU, NATO and national approaches are not a problem as such—indeed, regional countries' approaches themselves show similar differentiation in the existence of parallel multilateral fora led by navies (such as the Indian Ocean and Western Pacific Naval Symposia), and by coast guards (such as the North and West Pacific Coast Guard Fora), to address different aspects of maritime security. But ultimately, the deterrence paradigm does raise the question for European countries whether and how the various EU, NATO and national engagements are integrated into a coherent whole?

European choices in this regard have often been broadly categorized as backfilling for US forces (especially in the Euro-Atlantic and Middle East), direct engagement in the Indo-Pacific, or a greater European role in 'middle spaces' between both zones.<sup>22</sup> While the basic distinction between all three remains valid for the allocation of military resources in wartime in particular, a deterrence point of view suggests that the purpose for which Europe might engage in any of these three that is the most pertinent question for European policy, rather than a choice between them. Even if integrating Europe's posture and policy in this way will remain challenging at the level of explicit strategy development, European countries should seek to develop a more holistic approach to supporting regional deterrence in the Indo-Pacific that would be based on three main pillars: A comprehensive concept of global European hard power; a focus on the Indian Ocean; and a conscious approach to using military presence for signalling.

19 'Royal Netherlands Navy frigate to join UK Carrier Strike Group', *Naval Technology*, 1 April 2021, <https://www.naval-technology.com/news/royal-netherlands-navy-frigate-to-join-uk-carrier-strike-group/>

20 'Indo-Pacific Deployment 2021', *Bundeswehr*, undated, <https://www.bundeswehr.de/en/organization/navy/news/indo-pacific-deployment-2021>

21 French government, *France's Strategy in the Indo-Pacific* (Paris: Foreign Ministry, 2021), [https://au.ambafrance.org/IMG/pdf/en\\_indopacifique\\_web\\_cle0f44b5.pdf?13678/a892c4f93ab0687400274085650d-6d72973af817](https://au.ambafrance.org/IMG/pdf/en_indopacifique_web_cle0f44b5.pdf?13678/a892c4f93ab0687400274085650d-6d72973af817)

22 Stephan Frühling and Benjamin Schreier, NATO's new strategic concept and US commitments in the Asia-Pacific', *RUSI Journal*, 154:5 (2009), pp. 98-103; Luis Simón, 'Europe, the rise of Asia and the future of the transatlantic relationship', *International Affairs* 91:5 (2015), pp. 969-989. European choices are thus not as stark and direct as those between engagement and abandonment that the United States itself is facing in the Indo-Pacific (see Paul van Hooft, 'All-in or all-out: why insularity pushes and pulls American grand strategy to extremes', *Security Studies* 29:4 (2020), pp. 701-729), but the consequences of what would be a de-facto third world war between the US and China would be profound for European security regardless the outcome.

## The Global Reach of European Hard Power

In general, real and perceived limits of European (hard) power are often both the starting and end points of European debates about engagement in the Indo-Pacific. In relation to the weakness of almost all European navies relative to those now found in the Indo-Pacific, and the severe challenges of projecting conventional military power halfway around the globe, these limits are very real. But not all military or hard power domains are similarly constrained: In relation to cyber operations; space operations; the ability of Europe's military-industrial complex to support the demands of a long war by resupplying the US and its Indo-Pacific allies; and the reach of British and French nuclear weapons; geographic distance matters little and can even be an advantage. The increasing European capability to contribute to military operations in the non-geographic domains of space and cyber, and European acknowledgment of this by recognition of both as military domains within NATO, can thus also contribute to Indo-Pacific deterrence. In the context of the dramatic expansion of Chinese nuclear forces, the British decision to increase the upper limit of its own nuclear stockpile also signals a determination to remain globally relevant at the nuclear level.

If European maritime engagement in the Indo-Pacific will give China pause, it will be because of its link to global European hard power, even if that remains physically centred on the Euro-Atlantic area, not the capability of a lone under-armed frigate cruising within its A2AD screen.<sup>23</sup> Hence, strengthening a European contribution to Indo-Pacific deterrence must start with a more defined, global narrative of European hard power, such as:

- Acknowledging the global dimension of NATO's collective cyber, space, nuclear and industrial capabilities in NATO's new Strategic Concept, and future NATO Summit communiqués;
- Leveraging NATO's increased attention on maritime high-intensity conflict in the North Atlantic by, for example, demonstrating the ability of European forces to back-fill US operational commitments in the North Atlantic, such as temporarily taking over duties of the newly established US destroyer anti-submarine task force in Norfolk,<sup>24</sup> or the ability to surge European MPA across the Euro-Atlantic theater; and
- Supporting the increased efforts of Indo-Pacific countries to come to terms with the material demands of high-intensity conflict by expanding the logistics cooperation agreements with Indo-Pacific countries like Australia, Singapore, South Korea and New Zealand. All of these countries are US allies and partners, NATO partners and operate European weapons systems and munitions, whose sustainment in a long war would benefit from reciprocal sharing of spares as well as consumables including torpedoes, decoys, sonobuoys, air defence missiles or sea-mines.

<sup>23</sup> Not least when the difficulties of resupply in a conflict zone with European-sourced munitions not available from allied stores in the region are taken into account. The French military presence in New Caledonia and Polynesia, which would be highly relevant for theater-wide anti-submarine operations in particular, is an separate case.

<sup>24</sup> Mallory Shelbourne, 'Navy Creates New Atlantic Destroyer Task Group to Hunt Russian Submarines', *USNI News*, 27 September 2021, <https://news.usni.org/2021/09/27/navy-creates-new-atlantic-destroyer-task-group-to-hunt-russian-submarines>

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## Focus Practical Engagement on the Indian Ocean

While the capability of European countries to contribute to Indo-Pacific deterrence lies in their hard power centred on the Euro-Atlantic, there are many other political and security concerns that drive European interest and engagement in the maritime Indo-Pacific. As extra-regional powers (with the exception of France), European countries need to determine the geographic priorities for their Indo-Pacific engagement from general interests rather than geography as such. Concern about maritime supply routes might lead to a focus on the Horn of Africa; development and environmental concerns on capacity building in the island and archipelagic states of the Indian and Pacific Oceans and Southeast Asia; considerations about rules-based order on presence in the South China Sea; non-proliferation on sanctions enforcement of North Korea. Rather than invalidating these considerations—indeed, most practical maritime engagement of Australia, Japan or the US also reflects a broad range of concerns—a deterrence paradigm leads to the question of how European activities in this regard would complement the activities of the US and its Indo-Pacific allies, and how they could be leveraged to manage the challenge of direct conflict with China.

The possible role of Europe and European forces in the Indian Ocean remains of particular salience in this regard, and not just because of its relative geographic proximity to Europe. US and regional analysts focused on the Indian Ocean commonly bemoan the limited and haphazard US engagement and naval presence in the region.<sup>25</sup> For the US Navy, whose patterns of peacetime presence tend to reflect wartime considerations, the withdrawal from Afghanistan and increased focus on Taiwan will perpetuate the Indian Ocean as an economy-of-force theatre.<sup>26</sup> But although a war over Taiwan would be decided by the outcome of force-on-force battles in East Asia, the Indian Ocean will remain of important as a transit area for convoys bearing fuel and other wartime supplies between the North Atlantic area, Middle East, Australia (and US long-range strike forces operating from it), and Japan (via circumnavigation of Australia). Like their predecessors of WWII, these will be challenged by surface raiders and submarines.

Relative geographic proximity of the Indian Ocean to Europe (compared with the Pacific); the complementarity of European engagement in the Western Indian Ocean littoral with EU engagement in continental Africa; the economic importance of Northwest Indian Ocean sea lines for Europe; complementarity with US posture in the Indo-Pacific; and the limited scale of the torpedo and missile threat that Chinese submarines and raiders could deploy against such convoys; would thus all argue for making the Indian Ocean the geographic focus for European engagement in Indo-Pacific maritime security, in peacetime as well as war.

25 Louis Bergeron, Nick Iorio, and Jeff Payne, 'The US Needs a New Indian Ocean Strategy, Now', *The Diplomat*, 11 February 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/02/the-us-needs-a-new-indian-ocean-strategy-now/>; Darshana M. Baruah, 'Showing up is half the battle: U.S. maritime forces in the Indian Ocean', *War on the Rocks*, 18 March 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/03/showing-up-is-half-the-battle-u-s-maritime-forces-in-the-indian-ocean/>

26 Hence, senior US leaders have noticeably cooled on the idea to (re-)establish a new Fleet headquarters in Singapore. Dzirhan Mahadzir, 'CNO Gilday: Keeping Littoral Combat Ships Nimble Key to Pacific Deployments, No Plans for 1st Fleet in Singapore', *USNI News*, 28 July 2021, <https://news.usni.org/2021/07/28/cno-gilday-keeping-littoral-combat-ships-nimble-key-to-pacific-deployments-no-plans-for-1st-fleet-in-singapore>

All argue for making the Indian Ocean the geographic focus for European engagement in Indo-Pacific maritime security, in peacetime as well as war.

Regional countries' maritime domain awareness remains a significant challenge across the Indian Ocean.<sup>27</sup> Given capability constraints at the national levels, improving regional countries' national systems should be a priority. However, the traditional EU focus on the Western African littoral, and the US (and Australian) focus on the Eastern Indian Ocean that arises from the peculiarities of the US Unified Command plan, means there also remains a need to build links across the Indian Ocean as a whole.<sup>28</sup> Increasing the capacity and effectiveness of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) is important in this regard.<sup>29</sup> While the UK, Germany and Italy are 'dialogue partners', and France joined the association as a member in 2020, its mandate is a good fit for the broad economic as well as security objectives of the EU's Indo-Pacific strategy.

In wartime, Europe's limited naval and MPA capabilities could play a far more significant role in the Indian Ocean than in the Western Pacific. In practice, the Indian Navy would carry the greatest burden in that theater. In this context, European countries should consider opportunities to leverage any deployment of MPA capabilities in the region, such as those assigned to ATLANTA, to build cooperative relationships with India in the use of the increasingly extensive Indian regional MPA base network, as France has recently begun to do.<sup>30</sup> Increasing direct European links with the Indian Navy's Information Fusing Centre would also help support peacetime maritime domain awareness as well as ease possible wartime cooperation.<sup>31</sup>

## Signalling for General and Immediate Deterrence

From a deterrence point of view, any European naval presence east of Singapore is primarily relevant for signalling. As a sign of European concern with Indo-Pacific security, it contributes to general deterrence of it reduces the confidence in Beijing in its ability to limit and control the cost of competition and aggression. Should there be a danger of acute hostilities, however, allies, adversaries and regional countries will look to the movements of whatever European vessels happen to find themselves in the region as a signal of Europe's (collective) stance in the crisis. Given geographic distances, reinforcement or European presence in the Indo-Pacific itself is unlikely to be a viable signalling tool for immediate deterrence and crisis management.

27 Anthony Bergin, David Brewster and Aakriti Bachhawat, *Ocean horizons: Strengthening maritime security in Indo-Pacific island states*, Special Report (Canberra: Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 2019).

28 David Brewster, 'Give light, and the darkness will disappear: Australia's quest for maritime domain awareness in the Indian Ocean', *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region* 14:3 (2018), pp. 296-314.

29 David Brewster, *Australia's second sea: Facing our multipolar future in the Indian Ocean*, Special Report (Canberra: Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 2019).

30 David Brewster and Samuel Bashfield, 'Building a new maritime surveillance network across the Indian Ocean', *ASPI Strategist*, 4 August 2021, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/building-a-new-maritime-surveillance-network-across-the-indian-ocean/>

31 Australia began posting liaison officers to the centre in 2021. 'Australia posts liaison officer at Indian Navy's Information Fusion Centre', *The Economic Times*, 20 February 2021, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/australia-posts-liaison-officer-at-indian-navys-information-fusion-centre/article-show/81123788.cms?from=mdr>

Given geographic distances, reinforcement or European presence in the Indo-Pacific itself is unlikely to be a viable signalling tool for immediate deterrence and crisis management.

To improve the signalling value of European maritime presence in the Pacific for general as well as immediate deterrence, European countries should thus consider:

- More regular and substantial participation in prominent regional exercises. France and Germany have in recently started to send observers to exercise TALISMAN SABRE, which could be expanded to additional countries and exercises, including possibly MALABAR. Aligning the deployment schedule of European naval vessels to participate in future iterations of these major exercises would be a major signal of support for regional countries' increasingly open preparations for major conflict with China.<sup>32</sup>
- Moving from parallel national towards a more, formally or informally, coordinated posture and presence, which would support both points above. Expanding the EU's new 'Coordinated Maritime Presence' framework<sup>33</sup> to the Western Pacific would seem particularly useful in this regard, as would expanding the recent practice of national observers to accompany other countries' ships.
- Public statements, at the national and/or NATO level, that directly link European countries' military engagement and presence in the Indo-Pacific, including in the EU framework, with their (collective) willingness to stand by their Indo-Pacific allies and partners in ensuring regional stability. All EU countries that operate MPA or naval vessels of relevance for deployments to Western Pacific are NATO members, and coordination and cooperation for immediate crisis management would in all likelihood take place through that alliance; and
- Developing and exercising not just tactical, but also political-military arrangements with the US, Australia and Japan for cooperation of naval forces in the region. But even amongst Indo-Pacific allies, there is a paucity of political-military frameworks for immediate deterrence and crisis management. Former Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, for example, stated in his autobiography that one reason for Australia's reluctance to engage in the same kind of FONOPS as the US Navy undertakes in the South China Sea, was concern about the lack of political-military arrangements that would ensure US involvement in local crisis management.<sup>34</sup> Unlike in NATO, the US and its Indo-Pacific allies have never created, and thus have no experience with, standing joint forces.<sup>35</sup> While a coordinated EU presence would not be able to fill such a gap, the greater permanency of planning arrangements and political attention that would accompany it would at least help participating European countries navigate these challenges, and bringing European creativity to temporary political-military coalitions and command arrangements with like-minded countries—perhaps starting in less sensitive areas such as the Indian Ocean—would be a valuable contribution in its own right.

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32 Deployment of MPA specifically for maritime the exercises would also be an option to manage limited availability of major vessels. While the UK's Royal Airforce regularly participates in Five Power Defence Arrangement exercises in Malaysia and Singapore, the German Luftwaffe has recently announced plans to participate with several aircraft in Australia's 2022 PITCH BLACK exercise. Vivienne Machi, 'As Europe looks to the Indo-Pacific, so does the Luftwaffe', *DefenseNews*, 5 November 2021, <https://www.defensenews.com/digital-show-dailies/feindef/2021/11/05/as-europe-looks-to-the-indo-pacific-so-does-the-luftwaffe/>

33 European External Action Service, 'Coordinated Maritime Presences', January 2021, [https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/coordinated\\_maritime\\_presences.pdf](https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/coordinated_maritime_presences.pdf)

34 Stephen Dziedzic and Andrew Greene, 'US official urges Australia to participate in South China Sea freedom of navigation operations', *ABC News*, 27 July 2020, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-07-27/australia-pressured-to-participate-in-south-china-sea-operation/12496326>

35 Stephan Frühling, 'Is ANZUS Really an Alliance? Aligning the US and Australia', *Survival* 60:5 (2018), pp. 199-218.

## Conclusions

From the perspective of its Indo-Pacific partners, deterrence failure over Taiwan is now the greatest threat to regional (and global) security. Given the political-military challenges of building coherent deterrence in the Euro-Atlantic, it is understandable that Europeans may be loath to also view their Indo-Pacific engagement through a deterrence paradigm. However, Indo-Pacific countries will do so anyway. As long as it engages in maritime security in the Indo-Pacific at all, the real question facing Europe is thus not whether to engage with regional deterrence, but how coherent it wants its posture to be.

While the opportunity cost of engagement is greatest in the deployment of European naval vessels to the Western Pacific, from a deterrence point of view this is useful for signalling — and could be made more so by increased European cooperation, but not much more. In contrast, articulating the global reach of European hard power in the cyber, space, military-industrial and nuclear domains primarily requires political and diplomatic, rather than specific financial or capability investment. Within the Indo-Pacific, Europe does, can and should engage materially in maritime security for many reasons — economic, political, developmental, environmental — other than the deterrence of China. By focusing that engagement on the Indian Ocean, however, it can also leverage that investment into the political and operational relationships and infrastructure that could support a European contribution to the defence of regional shipping.

As stark as the implications of these three recommendations are for the current state of global security, for Europe it is, ultimately, a more positive perspective than analyses that start and end with the material trade-off between engagement in the Euro-Atlantic and the Indo-Pacific.

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As long as it engages in maritime security in the Indo-Pacific at all, the real question facing Europe is thus not whether to engage with regional deterrence, but how coherent it wants its posture to be.

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