



Towards a Sustainable and Meaningful European Naval Presence in the Indo-Pacific Region A Southeast Asian Perspective

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A Southeast Asian Perspective

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A Short-lived Surge?

2021 was a bumper harvest year for European naval presence in the Indo-Pacific. In that year alone, the United Kingdom carrier strike group 21 centred on the HMS *Queen Elizabeth* (with the Dutch frigate HNLMS *Evertsen* alongside),¹ the German frigate FGS *Bayern*, the French nuclear-powered attack submarine FS *Emeraude* and *Jeanne D'Arc* task force centred on the landing helicopter, dock FS *Tonnerre*, traversed the region and took part in various military engagements. And the French Navy signals intelligence vessel FS *Dupuy de Lôme* transited the Taiwan Strait in October that year.² In September 2021, London dispatched a pair of offshore patrol vessels HMS *Spey* and HMS *Tamar* on a five-year deployment to the Indo-Pacific.³ This surge of European naval presence in the region within a single-year window is unprecedented.

That said, the surge of European naval deployments in 2021 was notable not least because these happened in the context of the European Union's announcement of its Indo-Pacific strategy that same year. Nonetheless, the deployments were scarcely conducted under the EU's umbrella. The UK naval deployments were done under the auspices of London's own Global Britain strategy that focuses on the Indo-Pacific, whereas individual EU powers contributed to the regional naval presence under each's own national flag. This hodgepodge of European naval presence, if taken as a sum of individual country's deployment rather than a pan-EU effort, remains significant, nevertheless. The only question is whether the war in Ukraine and heightened security alert in Europe after February 24 this year could stymie prospects of regular, much less sustained, European naval presence in the Indo-Pacific.

Nevertheless, 2021 was indeed epochal – the flurry of naval engagements carried out that year represented a high-water mark for European naval presence in the Indo-Pacific. As Table 1 below shows, the European navies deployed to the region were involved in a series of high-profile training exercises, several of which can be deemed high-powered types that demand a considerable level of interoperability, and which usually put high-end warfighting capabilities to the test. Basically these drills involved regional major and middle powers – in particular Australia, India and Japan, all of whom happen to also be major U.S. allies (except for New Delhi, a major defence partner). Interestingly, no other Indo-Pacific countries such as those in Southeast Asia were involved in such exercises. And of course, the ostensible target audience of this series of strategic signaling through such naval muscle-flexing – China – was understandably out of the picture.

This hodgepodge of European naval presence, if taken as a sum of individual country's deployment rather than a pan-EU effort, remains significant.

- 1 The U.S. Navy destroyer USS *The Sullivans* sailed as part of UKCSG21 to provide fleet anti-air warfare cover, in large part due to the Royal Navy's capacity shortfalls of the Type-45 air defense destroyer. *U.S. Navy Destroyer Assumes Air Defense Duties as Part of Carrier Strike Group 21*, U.S. Navy press release, 19 July 2021. <https://www.navy.mil/Press-Office/News-Stories/Article/2698887/us-navy-destroyer-assumes-air-defense-duties-as-part-of-carrier-strike-group-21/>
- 2 Xavier Vavasseur, "French SIGINT ship Dupuy de Lôme Makes Rare Taiwan Strait Transit," *Naval News*, 13 October 2021. This was later confirmed by the Taiwan defense minister Chiu Kuo-cheng. "法國防長透露軍艦航經台海 邱國正：台灣海空域國軍都有掌握," [French defense chief reveals warship transited Taiwan Strait; Chiu Kuo-cheng: Taiwanese military in control of the air and maritime situation around Taiwan], *自由時報 [The Liberty Times]*, 14 October 2021.
- 3 *Patrol ships bid farewell to Portsmouth as they begin Indo-Pacific deployment*, Royal Navy press release, 7 September 2021. <https://www.royalnavy.mod.uk/news-and-latest-activity/news/2021/september/07/210907-spey-and-tamar-deploy>

Table 1: Indo-Pacific Naval Exercises Involving European Powers in 2021

Date	Exercise	Location	Participants
March 5-7	La Perouse	Bay of Bengal	Australia, France, India, Japan, United States
May 11-16	Jeanne D'Arc	East China Sea	Australia, France, Japan, United States
August 3-15	Large Scale Global Exercise	Philippine Sea	Netherlands, United Kingdom, United States
August 25-26	Pacific Crown	South of Okinawa	Japan, Netherlands, United Kingdom, United States
October 2-3	Multilateral naval training exercise	Southeast of Okinawa	Canada, Japan, Netherlands, New Zealand, United Kingdom, United States
October 15-18	Maritime Partnership Exercise	Eastern Indian Ocean	Australia, Japan, United Kingdom, United States
November 21-30	ANNUALEX	Philippine Sea	Australia, Canada, Germany, Japan, United States

Source: Compiled by author using various sources including official press releases and news reports.

As such, these high-end exercises appear to present an impression that European naval presence is only welcomed by the Indo-Pacific major and middle powers, especially those closely associated to Washington through its traditional “hub and spokes” system of alliances and security partnerships. Yet it would be misleading to conclude that other lesser powers and small states in Southeast Asia especially, do not. The true picture is perhaps more nuanced than that. This policy brief examines, from a Southeast Asian perspective, prospects and challenges facing the viability of future European naval presence in the Indo-Pacific. It argues that notwithstanding varying perceptions within Southeast Asia, the region remains generally receptive of European naval presence. Given the extant uncertainties surrounding the war in Ukraine that could cast doubts in the Indo-Pacific about the durability of this presence, this paper proposes maintaining the status quo of European powers flying their national flags while representing a general form of European naval presence in the Indo-Pacific at least for the time being.

Southeast Asian Reception

To begin, it is important to note that Southeast Asia is a diverse yet complex region. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations, let alone the geographical region itself, is far from monolithic. It essentially consists of different independent and sovereign nations each with its unique historical experiences spanning pre-colonial, colonial to post-colonial, and national circumstances that are underpinned by their own national interests and priorities. Therefore, dealing with Southeast Asia would mean having to deal with each individual ASEAN member state, instead of merely through ASEAN as an institution. European military engagements, like all other extra-regional examples, thereby will have to necessarily take on such multi-layered approach in order to be effective and meaningful.

It is from this standpoint that one may better understand Southeast Asian reception to European naval presence in the Indo-Pacific. Using naval engagements since last year, as Table 2 shows, one may observe an uneven picture. These engagements include the said Southeast Asian country hosting European naval port visits, as well as bilateral and multilateral joint training of varying scopes (including as basic as passage exercises).

This policy brief examines, from a Southeast Asian perspective, prospects and challenges facing the viability of future European naval presence in the Indo-Pacific.

Laos is omitted because it is a landlocked nation. Myanmar is excluded due to the post-coup political crisis. Cambodia did not engage with any European navies throughout 2021 and 2022. However, the Royal Navy is slated to conduct a port call to Cambodia in February 2023.⁴

Table 2: European Naval Engagements with Southeast Asian Nations in 2021-22



	France	Germany	Netherlands	UK
Brunei	X			X
Indonesia	X			X
Malaysia	X		X	X
Philippines	X			
Singapore	X	X	X	X
Thailand				X
Vietnam	X	X		X

Source: Compiled by author using various sources including official press releases and news reports.

Germany and the Netherlands are deemed new to the “game”, though it would be a matter of time this slate of relationships with the region could be built up with sufficient commitment of political will and resources.

There could be various reasons why engagements, such as port calls, failed to take place (timing, and logistical arrangements being such practical rationales) but such activities are also predicated upon the prevailing political climate. In other words, these engagements could be a litmus test of regional perceptions towards European naval presence, or even broader political ties at large. All in all, such perceptions are non-uniform across Southeast Asia, as Table 2 shows. And the extent of such engagements are also based on familiarity; France and UK logged the most instances of such naval activities in Southeast Asia because they have been working the region for some time – the longest would be London which has by far more extensive defense and security partnerships with Southeast Asian governments compared to Paris which has in recent years been playing catch-up. Germany and the Netherlands are deemed new to the “game”, though it would be a matter of time this slate of relationships with the region could be built up with sufficient commitment of political will and resources.

What explains certain Southeast Asian countries' apparent reticence against engaging with European naval presence? Take Cambodia as an example, deep-seated differences with Europe over such issues as human rights and trade, as well as likely attempt to balance ties with China, which has been allergic to extra-regional military presence, could well be the reasons. For example, Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen said in 2020 that “Europe today has unpleasant relations with ASEAN. At least five countries in ASEAN have issues with the EU. Europe has ceased to purchase palm oil from Malaysia and Indonesia, which would create tensions in the relations among these countries,” he went on: “Europe also targets Cambodia, Myanmar, and the Philippines in terms of human rights issues.”⁵

4 Ry Sochan, “UK navy ship to dock in Cambodia,” *Phnom Penh Post*, 30 November 2022.

5 “EU-Asean relations could be better, says Hun Sen,” *Khmer Times*, 3 February 2020.

It might be a sweeping generalization for the Cambodian leader to describe Europe's ties with ASEAN as "unpleasant" since the bloc is barely monolithic. His view is not an isolated one though amongst ASEAN policy elites. Back in February 2020, then Malaysian defence minister Mohammad Sabu called on the Americans and Europeans not to bring "proxy wars to Asia, especially in the South China Sea."⁶ And then, according to a survey of elite opinion in Southeast Asia published in early 2022, views of EU bearing the most political and strategic influence in the region dipped from 1.7% in 2021 to 0.8% in 2022,⁷ a considerable one-fold decline in such perceptions.

Still, there are supporters amongst ASEAN policy elites for greater European involvement in regional security affairs to help contribute to peace and stability. For example, in 2020, then Philippine Navy chief Vice Admiral Giovanni Carlo Bacordo welcomed the joint statement submitted by France, Germany and the UK to the UN asserting the 2016 arbitral award on the SCS against Beijing's claims.⁸ He had the backing of then Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte who called for working with the EU for "greater good" of the people and emphasized that both the country and the bloc share "deep respect for democracy and the rule of law".⁹ Vietnam also called on the EU to continue its involvement and making constructive contributions to ASEAN's efforts to cope with challenges to regional security and stability, including in the SCS.¹⁰

If It Ain't Broke, Don't Fix It?

The same Southeast Asian elite opinion survey does strike an upbeat politico-strategic context for future European naval presence in the Indo-Pacific. The EU was ranked third, polled at 16.6%, behind the U.S. and ASEAN in leadership in maintaining rules-based order and upholding international law.¹¹ The European bloc was also ranked as the top "third parties" choice, polled at 40.2% in 2022, for ASEAN member states in hedging against uncertainties of the China-U.S. rivalry – in a considerable 10% margin ahead of Japan (at 29.2%).¹² Finally, the EU's trust rating in terms of "doing the right thing" to contribute to global peace, security, prosperity and governance remained strong despite a decline from 49.7% in 2021 to 48.5% in 2022.¹³ Most polled reasoned this trust as due to perceptions about the EU possessing vast economic resources and political will to provide global leadership (figures improved from 13.8% in 2021 to 19.4% in 2022).¹⁴

6 Adib Povera, "Mat Sabu tells Western superpowers to maintain peace in South China Sea," *New Straits Times*, 17 February 2020.

7 *The State of Southeast Asia: 2022 Survey Report*, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies – Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore, p. 23. <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/state-of-southeast-asia-survey/the-state-of-southeast-asia-2022-survey-report/>

8 Priam Nepomuceno, "Navy welcomes EU countries' support for PCA ruling," *Philippines News Agency*, 21 September 2020.

9 The comment came in the backdrop of Manila's earlier accusation that the EU had blocked the delivery of COVID-19 vaccines to the country. Azer Parrocha, "Duterte ready to work constructively with EU," *Philippines News Agency*, 10 February 2021; Llanesca T. Panti, "Roque: No reason to cut ties with EU," *GMA News*, 11 February 2021.

10 "Vietnam vows to contribute to ASEAN-EU strategic partnership," *Vietnam News Agency*, 8 July 2021.

11 This 2022 figure was almost halved from 32.6% the previous year, however. *The State of Southeast Asia*, pp. 26-27.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 33.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 44.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 45.

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That said, however, the war in Ukraine would have casted at least a certain degree of aspersions, if not outright cynicism, amongst Southeast Asians about the durability of Europe's security commitments and presence in the Indo-Pacific. This notwithstanding the clear statement espoused in the EU Indo-Pacific strategy that it “will seek to conduct more joint exercises and port calls with Indo-Pacific partners, including multilateral exercises, to fight piracy and protect freedom of navigation while reinforcing EU naval diplomacy in the region. Given the importance of a meaningful European naval presence in the Indo-Pacific, the EU will explore ways to ensure enhanced naval deployments by its Member States in the region. Taking into account the lessons learned from the first assessment of the EU Coordinated Maritime Presences (CMP) concept, the EU will assess the opportunity of establishing Maritime Areas of Interest in the Indo-Pacific and engage with partners in the region, including by exploring the possibility for them to be associated with this initiative.”¹⁵

Post-Brexit UK also sought to allay such concerns about the sustainability of European attention on the Indo-Pacific. Minister for Armed Forces James Heapey struck a more upbeat tone by rationalizing that, while the West's preoccupation with the war in Ukraine has diluted attention paid to Asian geopolitical flashpoints, it was “perfectly possible” for a balance to be struck in the long term.¹⁶ The crux of the challenge is that, while on the whole European naval presence – tied to a broader diplomatic and economic presence to be sure – has been generally received in a positive manner across the Indo-Pacific, “putting the money where the mouth is” could be easier said than done considering intra-European divergences and the practical issue of naval capacity constraints.

The following potential models could be worth considering for the future projection of European naval presence: 1) under the EU flag; 2) under the NATO flag; and 3) status quo (i.e. to stay as it is, with European powers flying their own national flags while at the same time, representing a general form of European presence).

The first, operating under the EU flag, could help build legitimacy and present a united front. However, this does not appear realistic. Militating against this would be primarily intra-European differences, such as case of Germany avoiding co-deployment with France because of concerns that the latter's more sizeable naval forces would overshadow its own.¹⁷ Stemming from this point, given that the EU relies on member states to contribute assets for overseas naval power projection (and not all EU member states possess the right capability to do that; and even if so, the capacity is limited) there would be issues with burden-sharing and need to balance between such overseas expeditions and immediate security needs in the continent. In that association, only a few European powers would contribute disproportionately to any united effort, and this could raise questions about whether it is more worthwhile flying such missions under national than EU flag. France for example views itself as a default Indo-Pacific power and looks set to pursue its own national interests in this regard, whereas the UK has maintained a standing military presence since 1945 in the region even after post-colonial military withdrawal from Southeast Asia. By contrast, other EU member states' defense and security engagements have been pretty nascent, with exception of Germany stepping up efforts since 2021.

¹⁵ *Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council: The EU strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific*, Brussels, 16 September 2021, p. 13. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/joint-communication-indo-pacific_en

¹⁶ Dewey Sim, “‘Perfectly possible’ for West to strike balance between Ukraine, Asia concerns: UK minister,” *South China Morning Post*, 8 December 2022.

¹⁷ Author's insights gleaned from private conversations with active European naval officials and scholars over the period of 2020 till August 2022.

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The second, flying under NATO flag, could be counterproductive, not least because of more widespread regional perceptions that the alliance is primarily focused on the Russian threat in Europe amidst the war in Ukraine. Hence, flying under the NATO flag does not appear credible in projecting sustained, long-term naval presence in the Indo-Pacific even if there is support by some of the regional countries – which are confined to mainly certain major and middle powers such as Australia, Japan and South Korea. India might also be potentially wary about being associated with NATO. A NATO naval mission may also play into the hands of China's (as well as Russia's) narrative about the alliance seeking to destabilize the region.¹⁸ The other issue is, like the case of the EU, any such NATO naval mission would likely be dominated by certain powers which possess the will and wherewithal, such as chiefly the U.S., and to a lesser extent France and UK. Even within NATO it may be difficult to avoid intramural differences, such as the case of the post-AUKUS fallout. This squabble played out in the form of subtle rivalry over naval presence when in October 2021, barely a month after the AUKUS saga emerged, London's embassy in Hanoi posted on its Twitter page the visit to Cam Ranh Bay by the frigate HMS *Richmond*, which was then shortly followed by Paris' embassy in Vietnam posting a comment that the LHD *Tonnerre*, which visited the same port earlier in April, "seems a little bit larger though".¹⁹ Since then, ties between the concerned NATO member states France, UK and the U.S. have improved. In December that year, the French Marine Nationale and the U.S. Navy signed a Strategic Interoperability Framework,²⁰ which appears to indicate that both Paris and Washington have moved past the AUKUS feud. Yet there is no guarantee that future repeats of such intramural fissures will not happen to stymie a NATO naval mission to the Indo-Pacific.

The projection of European naval presence in the Indo-Pacific under EU and NATO flags may appear alluring, especially since it presents a united front. Yet beyond this symbolic show of unity under a common ensign, one needs to consider those political and practical constraints. In any case, European naval presence under either EU or NATO flag could also potentially limit outreach to the broader Indo-Pacific region beyond a select few regional players such as Australia, India, Japan and South Korea. Some if not all ASEAN member states are expected to be wary of being associated with any blocs perceived to be containing China, just like how they would view the Quad and AUKUS. Several Southeast Asian countries are conditioned by past colonial history in the way they view foreign, especially Western, military presence. Even if Southeast Asian youths are less attached to such sentiments, political elites could still invoke such memories for domestic mileage, as the earlier discussion transpires.

Therefore, the third option – essentially status quo – of European powers flying their national flags while representing a general form of European naval presence in the Indo-Pacific may still remain a feasible way forward at least for the time being, not least until one could see the endgame of the war in Ukraine and how Europe's security landscape could be further transformed. The current arrangements, reflecting more a network of bilateral and unilateral naval

18 For example, Beijing alleged that NATO has "destabilized Europe" hence warned the alliance against doing the same for Asia. *Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian's Regular Press Conference on June 29, 2022*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 29 June 2022. https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/202206/t20220629_10712209.html The Russians tapped a similar narrative. See, for example, "NATO gearing up for heated confrontation with rivals in Asia — senior Russian diplomat," *TASS: Russian News Agency*, 27 October 2022.

19 "Ours is Bigger! France Mocks Size of UK Warship Visiting Vietnam," *Radio Free Asia*, 4 October 2021.

20 *Navy, French Marine Nationale sign Strategic Interoperability Framework*, U.S. Navy press release, 18 December 2021. <https://www.navy.mil/Press-Office/News-Stories/Article/2878786/navy-french-marine-nationale-sign-strategic-interoperability-framework/>

engagements, would confer the political and operational advantages of being versatile and flexible, albeit more ad-hoc in nature. This loose set-up would therefore take into more proper account the respectively unique diversities, contexts and circumstances in Europe and the Indo-Pacific, and provide on the whole greater strategic freedom of maneuver for the countries of these two regions. Ultimately, it might be sticking to the current arrangements, and gradually building up the available collective pool of European wherewithal for such purpose, that a sustained, meaningful European naval presence in the Indo-Pacific can become possible to attain.

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