



The EU's Naval Presence in the Indo-Pacific What Is It Worth?

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Introduction

Recent years have seen an unprecedented concentration of European interest – and warships – in the Indo-Pacific. This development reflects the growing ambition of Brussels to contribute to the volatile regional maritime security environment, marked by an increasing naval build-up, China's maritime expansionism and lasting sovereignty disputes. As a trading power, the European Union has a strategic interest in the safeguard and promotion of free, safe and stable maritime environment. At the same time, the willingness to play a more proactive role in international security is in line with the ongoing "geopolitical" shift in the European Union's external action. In the absence of a European navy, the operational part of this engagement is carried out by the navies of its Member States. To date, three countries have risen to the task, namely France, Germany and the Netherlands.

What has been the scope and focus of their presence and to what effect? The French naval presence is by far the most substantive feature on the regional maritime security landscape, and one that is destined to stay and grow in the future. Germany made the headlines with the inaugural deployment of its frigate Bayern in 2021, as well as its aerial assets in 2022, breaking with its traditionally low international security profile. Finally, the Dutch have joined the British-led deployment, undertaking several important military exercises. The British-led Carrier Strike Group 2021 stands out as a showcase the United Kingdom's determination to step up its presence in the region post-Brexit, operating however outside of the EU's political and strategic framework.¹ At the EU level, the extension of the Coordinated Maritime Presence to the Northwest Indian Ocean also reflects the Union's growing willingness to increase its operational awareness and footprint.

This paper looks at the rationales and specificities of the naval deployments of France, Germany and the Netherlands in the Indo-Pacific in the context of Brussels' recent official tilt towards the region in 2021. It analyzes the responses of partners, including China and the US, before assessing their overall contribution to the regional strategic dynamic. Despite the limited capabilities and value-added in operational terms, the EU's 'politics of presence' in regional seas fulfills multiple functions. First, it underscores the growing concern over the deteriorating maritime security environment and its direct impact for European stability and prosperity. Second, it sends a strong message to the EU's 'like-minded' partners in the region, notably Japan, South Korea and India, providing an operational underpinning to the expanding political and security partnerships. Third, a greater variety of international actors with diverse modus operandi helps testing Beijing's reactions and better understanding its limits. Finally, it symbolically demonstrates the European Union's determination to walk the talk on its narrative and effort to build its reputation as an international security player.

¹ Given that the main interest of this paper is to examine the EU's contribution to the regional naval balance, the British activities are not in prime focus.

As a trading power the EU has a strategic interest in safeguarding a free, safe and stable maritime environment.

The “politics of presence”

The ambition of the European Union to step up involvement in the Indo-Pacific has been pinned down by the publication of its ‘Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific’ in September 2021.² The document formulates a comprehensive approach to the region, focusing on several priority areas including trade, connectivity, governance, and security and defence. The need to enhance maritime security has always been a key pillar of Brussels’ engagement in and with the region, both bilaterally and within multilateral settings. Naturally, the promotion of a free, safe, and rules-based maritime order is a priority for the trading super-power, which it does through all available means. The operational side of this engagement, including the defense of freedom of navigation, is delegated to the Member States, whose navies are explicitly encouraged to “play a strategic role in providing global reach, flexibility and access” for the interest of all the European Union.³ The recent naval deployments of France, Germany and the Netherlands – three countries that have significantly informed and shaped the EU’s Indo-Pacific Strategy through their own national strategies formulated in 2019 and 2020 respectively – have therefore an inherent connection to and implication for the strategic footprint of the Union as a whole.

France is the EU’s sole resident power in the Indo-Pacific region, which hosts 93% of its EEZ, 1,5 million population, 8000 military personnel and assets. Paris was first to publish an Indo-Pacific Strategy already in 2019 and has steered in many respects the EU’s tilt towards the region, which echoes its own national strategic interests. As such, its naval presence is by far the largest and the most impactful. French navy ships transit the region (including the South China Sea) regularly at least 2-3 times a year, be it with its annual Jeanne d’Arc mission (a training, but fully operational mission composed of an amphibious helicopter carrier and a frigate escort), its surveillance frigate Vendemiaire based in New Caledonia or its Tahiti-based Prairial frigate. Since 2016, when the then Defence Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian called for a greater European presence in the region in defence of freedom of navigation, French deployments have an explicit European flavor, hosting and coordinating efforts with other EU Member States.⁴ France’s commitment to the region is likely to increase in the future, including plans to deploy its Charles de Gaulle Carrier Strike Group by 2025.⁵

Recent years show a distinct upgrade in the French presence, signaling the growing concerns in Paris over the deteriorating maritime security environment, as well as its determination to fulfill its role as a security provider in the region. Among the most notable examples is the deployment of its mission Marianne in September 2020, composed of its nuclear submarine SSN Emeraude and accompanying vessel BSAM Seine. The unusually long mission took eight months and adventured into the South China Sea for the first time in 20 years.⁶ While submarine deployments usually keep a low profile, mission Marianne was widely reported, including on social media, which underscores its role as a naval diplomacy tool above all.

2 Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council: ‘The EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific’, 16 September 2021, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/joint-communication-indo-pacific_en

3 EU Maritime Security Strategy, June 24, 2014, p.10, <https://register.consilium.europa.eu/doc/srv?l=EN&f=ST%2011205%202014%20INIT>

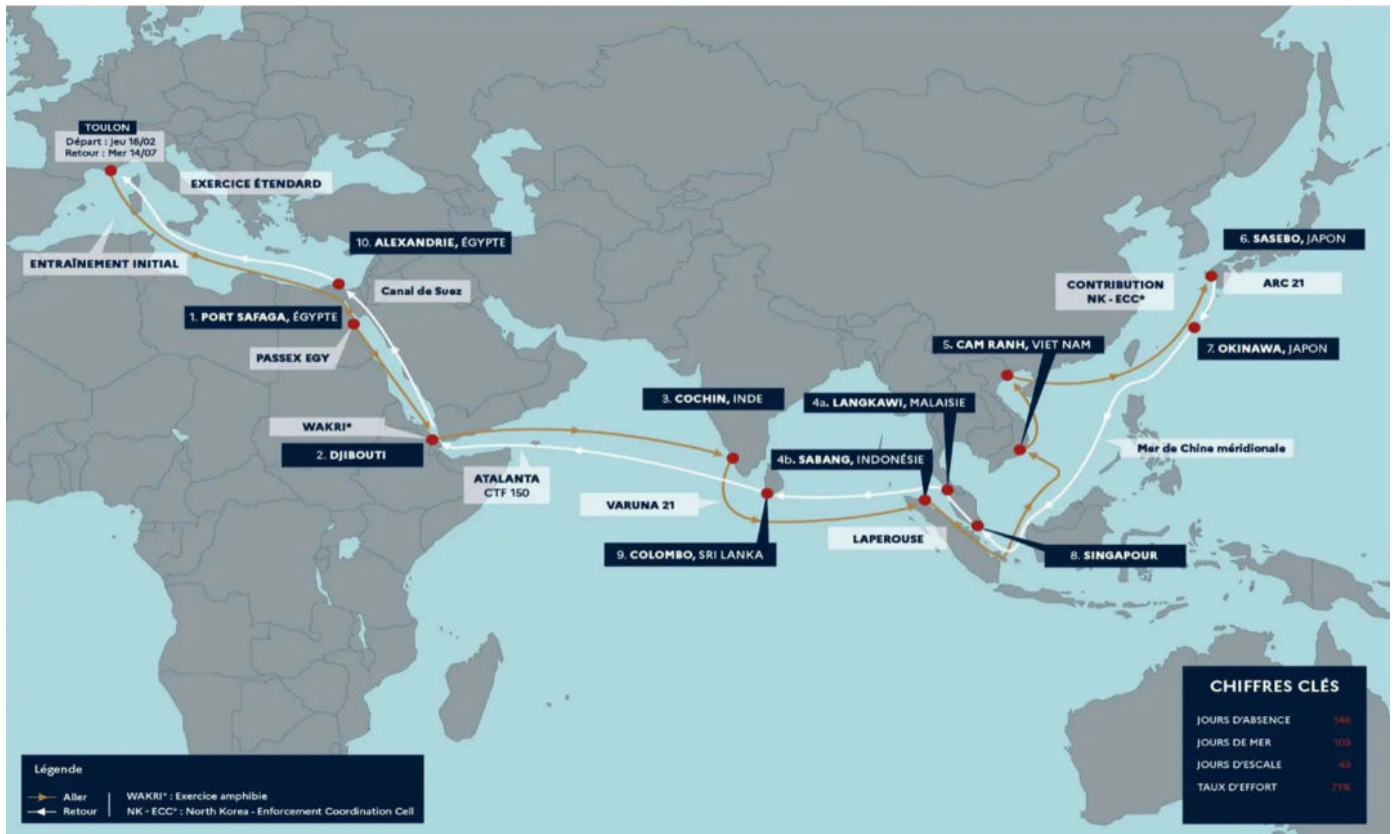
4 Valerie Niquet, “France leads Europe’s Changing Approach to Asian Security Issues », <https://thediplotat.com/2016/06/france-leads-europes-changing-approach-to-asian-security-issues/>

5 <https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2022/07/french-navy-aircraft-carrier-mission-pacific-in-2025/>

6 <http://www.opex360.com/2021/04/09/le-sna-emeraude-et-le-bsam-seine-ont-termine-leur-mission-dinteret-strategique-dans-lindo-pacifique/>

Recent years show an upgrade in the French presence, signaling growing concerns over the deteriorating maritime security environment and its determination to provide security in the region.

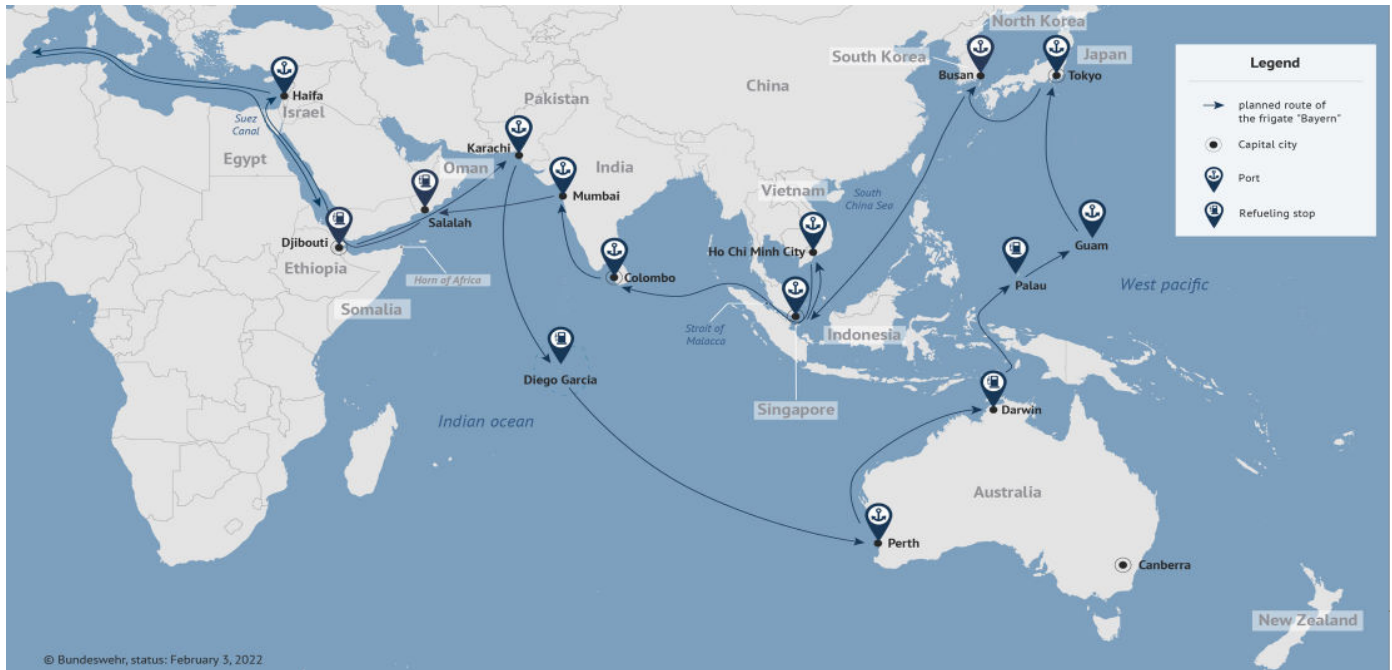
Figure 1. Route of the Jeanne d'Arc mission 2021. Source: French Ministry of Defence



The deployment of the German Navy's frigate Bayern to the Indo-Pacific has attracted most mediatic attention for a reason. Unlike France, Germany has no territories in the region, neither it has a suitable blue-water navy. Traditionally reluctant to engage in international security matters, Berlin has been maintaining an ambiguous policy towards China, its key economic partner. The publication of its 'Indo-Pacific Policy Guidelines' in November 2020 announced a shift in its foreign policy, mostly driven by the country's commitment to the global rule-based order that has become central to the Indo-Pacific debate. The idea to deploy a German navy ship to Asia has been informally floated since 2017, but it took four years to put in place, amidst a heated domestic political debate. The frigate finally set sails in August 2021 for six-months-long mission, with a core message: "showing the flag".⁷ During the highly symbolic, diplomatic voyage, it conducted exercise with Japan, South Korea, Australia and the US, as well as transited the South China Sea, plying through the commercial routes. The Bundeswehr so far plans to deploy a similar mission to the region on bi-annual basis.

Berlin has been maintaining an ambiguous policy towards China, its key economic partner.

⁷ Indo-Pacific deployment 2021, Bundeswehr, <https://www.bundeswehr.de/en/organization/navy/news/indo-pacific-deployment-2021>

Figure 2. The Germany Navy ship Bayern's 2021 route. Source: Bundeswehr

Another surprising, but operationally and politically note-worthy deployment, came later in 2022 from the German Air Force, in a form of a large contingent of six Eurofighters, three A330 tankers and four A400M transporters carrying 250 air force soldiers joining the Australia-led Pitch Black multilateral exercise in August 2022.⁸ The "Rapid Pacific 2022" was an unprecedented operation designed to send a clear reassuring message to key partners – especially Australia, Japan and South Korea - of Germany's long-distance rapid deployment and operational capacity in the region. The fighter jets were careful to avoid the Taiwan Strait and "barely touched" the South China Sea on their route to Australia, not to send any "threatening messages" to China.⁹

Finally, the Netherlands, a trading country with a rich maritime tradition, also deployed its navy into the region in 2021, following the publication adopted its own national Indo-Pacific Guidelines in November 2020. Against a controversial domestic debate, frigate HNLMS Evertsen joined the British Carrier Strike Group led by its Queen Elizabeth aircraft carrier for a seven-months long mission, as a "physical symbol of the Netherlands' commitment to freedom of navigation and the *Law of the Sea*" as a key determinant of trade, stability and shared interests in the Indo-Pacific region."¹⁰ As part of the CSG21, the Dutch joined several exercises with Singapore, Japan and the US Navy, as well as a FONOP in the South China Sea. The decision to join the CSG21 aimed to underscore The Hague's "willingness to contribute to multilateral endeavors" seeking to promote the rule of law and freedom of navigation in the region.¹¹ While similar types of naval deployments may be rare in the future, the Netherlands is one of the European countries that manifests strongly its commitment to promoting regional maritime security and shipping safety, which may be reflected in an involvement in crisis prevention, disaster relief and capacity building efforts in the future.¹²

8 https://ac.nato.int/archive/2022/DEU_deploy_PB

9 <https://www.dw.com/en/germany-sends-fighter-jets-to-indo-pacific-training-mission/a-62815572>

10 Press release: Dutch frigate EVERTSEN's visit to Singapore, 11 October 2021, <https://www.netherlandsandyou.nl/latest-news/news/2021/10/08/hnlms-evertsen-to-arrive-in-singapore>

11 Ibid.

12 Maaïke Okano-Heijmans, "Netherlands and Indo-Pacific: inclusive, but not value-neutral", Clingendael, 31 August 2021, <https://www.clingendael.org/publication/netherlands-and-indo-pacific-inclusive-not-value-neutral>

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Table 1. European naval deployments in the Indo-Pacific in 2021-2022

Country	Mission	Assets	Objective	Exercises
France	<i>Jeanne d'Arc</i> Amphibious Ready Group (ARG)	LHD Tonerre Frigate Surcouf	FON, RBO	VARUNA 21 (IN) ARC 21 (USN, JMSDF, RAN)
	<i>Marianne</i>	SSN Emeraude BSAH Seine	ASW	ASW (USN, JMSDF; Guam visit) TNI AL
		SIGINT ship Dupuy de Lome Frigate Vendémère Frigate Prairial	Surveillance	Taiwan Strait Exercise with TNI AL
	<i>Pegase 2022</i>	3 Rafales 2 A330 2 A400M		GARUDA 22 (IA) PITCH BLACK 22 (RAA, USA, etc.)
Germany		Frigate Bayern	FON, RBO RBO, anti-piracy	PASSEX (IN, JMSDF, USN, PKN) Combined Maritime Forces (CMF)
	<i>Rapid Pacific 2022</i>	6 Eurofighters 3 A330 4 A400M		PITCH BLACK 22
The Netherlands	<i>OP FORTIS 21</i> (Part of British-led CSG21)	Frigate Evertsen	FON, RBO	Konkan Shakti (IN) FONOP (UK, US)

Too little to some, too much to others

Overall, the increased European interest and naval presence has been positively received by regional countries, except for China. The publication of the EU's Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific has been seen as Europe's acknowledgment of the importance of the region for global security and shifting geopolitical focus. Against the growing polarization driven by the US – China strategic rivalry, Europe is viewed as a stabilizing force. Its less confrontational foreign policy, economic power, focus on the promotion of rules of law, multi-lateralism and non-traditional security, is in line with many of the regional countries' efforts to expand the breathing space and avoid being drawn into great power competition. A key concern has been, however, whether the Europeans will be capable to sustain their interest and walk the talk on their promises. This is precisely what the growing naval presence aims to demonstrate.

The reactions of Southeast Asian countries have been mixed. Geographically located at the intersection of the Indian and the Pacific Oceans, Southeast Asia is not only home to many traditional and non-traditional maritime security challenges, but also the heart of the regional cooperative security architecture, therefore playing a key role in Indo-Pacific stability. Southeast Asia is also a key theatre of Sino-American competition. On the one hand, the deployments of European navies have been appreciated for being more sensible to regional sensitivities and showcasing an alternative approach that that the US Navy. On the other hand, most littoral states of the South China Sea, including the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia and Indonesia, keep wary of the increased concentration of international naval forces in their

neighborhood.¹³ While opposing China's expansionism and attached to defending their sovereign interests, their key concern is to keep the neighborhood peaceful. And as much as the presence of foreign navies may support their national security objectives, the worries of incidental clashes stemming from the militarization prevail, especially given the doubts as for their effective contribution in case of escalation of tensions.

Unsurprisingly, Beijing is not pleased with the increased international presence in its neighborhood, albeit its response to the European deployments has been slightly less virulent than to the US. That is arguably due to the comparatively less provocative nature of the activities, partly to the more positive diplomatic relations it maintains with the respective European countries. As a general rule, the closer a country aligns to the US, the harsher treatment it will receive. Upon the deployment of the British Carrier Strike Group, which also included a US destroyer and a F35 fighter jets, China accused foreign powers to "sending their warships thousands of kilometers from home to flex muscles" and steering militarization in the South China Sea.¹⁴ Its engagement in a FONOP in the South China Sea in September 2021 was called an "immature" decision, and a result of a "fantasy to revive its past glory as a world superpower", referring to the UK as a "toady" of the US, which may backfire and face retaliation from China.¹⁵

The French line of conduct in the South China Sea is a good example of a more careful navigation of China's narrative. While its presence intends to display France's attachment to international law and the freedom of navigation, its modus operandi has been different from the USN FONOPs in several aspects. First, the French do not call their presence FON "operations", but a "routine exercise" – naturally underscoring that freedom of navigation is a common good that is simply practiced, without emphasizing the bellicose context that an "operation" entails. Second, French navy ships abide by a general rule of staying out of 12nm from any maritime feature. This does not equal to its acceptance of China's territorial claims, but rather an effort to avoid frictions with any of the littoral claimant states.¹⁶ Finally, the golden rule of the French has been to keep a lower profile and not to overly publicize its presence, all the while staying firm and transparent in its endeavors.

The French Navy also plied ships through the Strait of Taiwan, which Beijing denies the status of an international strait. When its Vendémère surveillance frigate crossed the Strait in April 2019, it was asked for identification by the Chinese authorities and subsequently disinvited from the annual Chinese naval parade in Qingdao. On several occasions, Chinese PLA vessels crossed the route of French warships, signaling discontent with their presence in the South China Sea, but carefully avoid any form of escalation.¹⁷ The latest transit of the Vendémère through the Taiwan Strait was followed in a "professional manner" by the PLA Navy.¹⁸ The FRN signal intelligence vessel Dupuy de Lomé transited the Strait in October 2021, without any commentary from the Chinese side.

13 Interview with maritime security experts from the Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia and Vietnam, grouped in a APRAN study on the South China Sea (classified), 2020

14 China blasts NATO with British aircraft carrier 'heading to South China Sea', South China Morning Post, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/3116146/china-blasts-nato-british-aircraft-carrier-heading-south-china>

15 "UK tilting toward Indo-Pacific to counterweight China 'immature' decision", Global Times, 16 March 2021, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202103/1218586.shtml>

16 Rapport d'information no 1868 sur 'les enjeux stratégiques en mer de Chine méridionale', Assemblée Nationale, 17 October 2017, available online at https://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/dyn/15/rapports/cion_afetr/I15b1868_rapport-information

17 Interview with Admiral Pierre Vandier, Revue Conflits, 2 March 2022, <https://www.revueconflits.com/entretien-avec-lamiral-pierre-vandier-chef-detat-major-de-la-marine/>

18 <http://www.opex360.com/2022/03/19/la-fregate-francaise-vendemiaire-a-navigue-dans-le-detroit-de-taiwan-malgre-les-revendications-chinoises/>

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Criticism of freeriding on the US security umbrella, with Europe stepping up the defence of its own neighbourhood have dominated the transatlantic debate on Asia.

Despite the close economic and diplomatic ties with Germany, the Bayern was denied a port visit in Shanghai during its trip. The visit was supposed to signal Berlin's effort to "maintain dialogue" with China.¹⁹ Beijing's official response referred to the importance of a "all-round strategic partnership" with Germany, while reminding "countries outside the region (...) to play a constructive role" and not interfere into the dispute.²⁰ The Dutch frigate suffered the same criticism for being part of the British-US CSG, but no specific retaliation from Beijing entailed.

The most supportive of the European involvement are the so-called 'likeminded partners', which are also arguably its main target audience. Japan, South Korea, but also India, Australia and Taiwan are the most directly concerned by the deteriorating regional security environment and China's growing assertiveness. Strengthening networking, interoperability and cooperation with those partners has been the common denominator of all European naval deployments, putting a stamp of concrete on ongoing political commitments. Japan and others, maintain deepening security ties with all three Member States, as well as the Union, in an effort to diversify and strengthen its security guarantees, especially within the US alliance framework.

Finally, the United States, the central player and security provider in the region, welcome the increased European involvement, albeit sees its contribution as "too limited".²¹ Criticisms of freeriding on the US security umbrella or calls for better burden sharing, with Europe stepping up the defense of its own neighborhood keep dominating the transatlantic debate on Asia. However, the nature of threats has changed, and China's growing regional and global assertiveness cannot be addressed solely through military means. While Europe's naval presence in the region may be humble and mostly symbolic, its effective contribution to regional maritime security order remains in the field of legal, technological, economic, and normative realms.

Contribution to the regional maritime order

Despite differences in the form, all recent European naval deployments to the Indo-Pacific aimed at sending similar key messages in terms of substance. First, they express the high degree of concern by European countries about the deterioration of regional maritime security and its direct impact on their economic and strategic interests. As a late comer to the Indo-Pacific security debate, Europe has been for a long time considered as a distant player, seemingly uninterested or not fully aware about the gravity of the multiple threats in the region. This has changed substantially, along with a better sense of the China challenge and a greater internal push for more strategic independence in Brussels.

Second, it is a message of reassurance to the democratic partners in the region, notably Japan, South Korea and India, demonstrating Europe's readiness and capability to contribute in times of crisis. Contrary to what has been feared, Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine did

19 <https://www.dw.com/en/china-denies-port-visit-by-german-warship/a-59190643>

20 Press conference with the spokesperson of the PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs Zhao Lijian, 16 September 2021, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/202109/t20210916_9721334.html

21 David Scott, "European Contributions to the Indo-Pacific Maritime Order", *Pacific Forum Issues & Insights Working Paper*, Vol. 21, No.13, September 2021, <https://pacforum.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Europe-Contribution-COMLETE.pdf>

not distract Europe from Asia; it made it more aware about the interconnectedness between the two security theaters. While security cooperation with like-minded partners stands at the core of European strategies in the Indo-Pacific, a physical naval presence brings concrete opportunities for improving interoperability and materialize these political commitments.

Third, the various ways European navies approach China while navigating through in its contested neighborhood represent useful case studies to test Beijing's responses and understand its red lines. Caution and transparency remain the common line of conduct, avoiding any tactical escalation and misunderstanding. In a way, this reflects well Europe's current (and constantly evolving) policy vis-à-vis the PRC, which combines growing concerns and effort to signal discontent, while maintaining dialogue and staying below the threshold of confrontation.

Finally, the fact that the deployments followed almost immediately after the formulation of the respective countries' strategic documents on the Indo-Pacific demonstrates their determination walk the talk of their policies. The unprecedented scale of European naval presence in the past two years needs to be read within the context of its scarce capabilities and resources, which amplifies its symbolic significance. As limited as its contribution may be from an operational viewpoint, they remain important tools of diplomatic signaling both externally and internally.

The EU does not have a 7th fleet and it seems obvious that in case of an open conflict, its role may be close to negligible. However, its experience and expertise in crisis management, international maritime law, Maritime Domain Awareness, good ocean governance and multilateral cooperation for the management of non-traditional maritime concerns (including piracy, sea-borne crime, migration, IUU fishing, etc.) is of great value to address most of the everyday functional security challenges in the region. This has become increasingly clear and voiced out by most regional partners, especially in South and Southeast Asia. Capacity building in the above issue-areas constitutes the bulk of European efforts and main contribution to regional maritime security. The naval presence may be the proverbial 'cherry on top', whose main purpose is to add visibility and credibility to its engagement.

As limited as Europe's contribution may be from an operational viewpoint, the European naval presence in the Indo-Pacific remains an important tool for diplomatic signalling.

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