



Analysis of and Recommendations for European Naval Presence in the Indo-Pacific Region

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Geopolitical View of the Indo-Pacific Concept

It has come under our observation that the world's economic and political centre of gravity continues to shift towards the Indo-Pacific with China playing a dominant role in areas such as trade, military, and technology. Another evident observation is that American supremacy has declined relatively in the region. These changes pose a new challenge for most European countries whose economic future and geopolitical relevance are inextricably linked to developments in the region. As a way of walking a fine line in the Indo-Pacific region, with it being the epicentre of great power rivalry between US and China, France published Indo-Pacific strategy paper in 2018 and 2019, and Germany and the Netherlands followed in September and November 2020 respectively. Due to the efforts of those three countries, the "EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific" could be launched as an official strategy in 2021.

However, the way those countries and also the U.S., Australia, Japan, India, Indonesia, and ASEAN use the term "Indo-Pacific" is different from each other in terms of its conceptual meaning. The different understanding of the term has been led to mistrust and confusion in the regional dialogues and cooperative activities in the region. Most of those countries are focused only on the geographical definition of the term. Some countries, like Japan, South Korea, China, and Hungary, perceive the term to indicate the region from India through Southeast Asia, while others, like Belgium, the Czech Republic, France, Greece, Spain, and Sweden, regard the term as a region from the eastern coast of Africa to the western coast of the Americas. In fact, there are more than two different definitions of the term. The different meanings of the term are not academic debates but rather various policy angles implying divergent interests, thus leading to varying extents of engagement in the region.

However, geopolitical perceptions of the term, beyond just geographical ones, are needed in order to grasp exactly the real reasons underlying their use of the term "Indo-Pacific." A speech delivered by the late Prime Minister Abe before the Indian Parliament in 2007 can be a case in point in the geopolitical context. He then spoke about the "confluence of the two oceans." It is believed that the two oceans were meant to be the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean, respectively. And, as noted, the hyphen "-" in between the two words "India" and "Pacific" means interaction, enabling us to recognise that the choice of the word "confluence" is quite natural. Thus, the word "confluence," implies a new single stream generated by the convergence of the two large bodies of water which is likely to tend toward the north, where the South China Sea and East China Sea lie. And the reason the word "Indo" in the Indo-Pacific is included implies not only a maritime area but also India as a political entity.

All things mentioned above taken together, as presumably intended by the prime minister, suggest that the concept of the Indo-Pacific may be more than a political slogan or initiative. It is assumed to be a strategy that can be applied against China and India in the South China Sea and/or East China Sea. That's why the view of the Indo-Pacific concept from a geopolitical context can be warranted.

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Signals of European Naval Presence in the Indo-Pacific Region

For Europe as a whole, the Indo-Pacific concept seems to imply more of a geo-economic factor and less of a geopolitical aspect. According to the “EU strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific,” the region is regarded as vital for its economic growth. The region produces almost 60% of global GDP and contributes to two-thirds of global growth. The region is also home to three of the four largest economies outside the EU, namely China, India, and Japan. The EU, as a major partner for the region, sees the region as being at the forefront of the digital economy and technological developments. These facts are the main reasons the EU has been a top investor, top development assistance provider, and a significant trading partner for the region.

A series of voyages in recent periods by multiple EU member states in the region can be seen from the geo-economic perspective as viewed above. The recent naval deployments by the UK, France, Germany, and the Netherlands are good examples whose fundamental motivations are economic rather than security or defence related, unlike US or Japanese motivations in the region. As noted, the US is currently engaged in the so-called “strategic competition” with China to prevent China from becoming the hegemon in the region, while the US attempts to hold on to the status of regional hegemon simultaneously in the Western hemisphere. The arrival of another regional hegemon in any area is not acceptable to US national security doctrine.

But EU member states are in the same position as the U.S. Thus, they are not likely to side with either of the two in a potential competition scenario due to their naval presence in the region. EU naval vessels sailing near contested waters claimed by China, especially in the South China Sea, send a signal to countries in the region that the international rules of the road should be observed as much in the sea as elsewhere. The European naval presence emphasises freedom of navigation in the contested sea is an expression of their concern about the violation of principles enshrined in the UNCLOS, resulting in harm to their economic interests in the region. The main sources of the concerns are believed to be Chinese military assertiveness and grey-zone activities in the sea. But the activities of the European navies will not go to the point where their convictions and arguments can trigger military conflicts with China. Most EU member states recognise the economic benefits created by engagement with China and the need for fruitful cooperation on global issues with China as well.

Nevertheless, many European partners in the region are raising questions about the sustainability of the European naval deployment. If their naval deployments are ad hoc activities rather than parts of their comprehensive strategy it is more likely to raise tension with China, this could be a source of security concerns for most of the regional countries that want to see a peaceful and stable environment in the region. But, if European navies stand to contribute to wider maritime security capacity building for some countries in the region in order to mitigate a range of maritime challenges, particularly non-traditional ones, their presence could be welcomed by the regional partners. In this case, European naval deployment in the region can be viewed purely as a maritime security provider, not as hostile activities against China. Maritime domain awareness and combating challenges like illegal, unregulated, and unreported fishing are areas where capacity buildings are most needed by most countries in the region.

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The Chinese reaction to the European naval presence in and around disputed waters has been defensive. It regards the deployment of any foreign navies as a quarrelsome action and has been wary of the foreign naval deployments in its waters. China has traditionally disliked multilateral approaches to maritime issues while its counterpart countries liked multilateral platforms. Accordingly, China will be troubled if the European naval deployments, be they temporary or regular, are viewed as a multilateral pushback on Chinese claims and activities in the region. It has been generally a Chinese belief that foreign naval vessels near its territory are viewed as bullying and threat-mongering.

Balanced Approaches to European Naval Deployments in the Region

There is a need for Europe as a whole to keep a balance between the European region and the Indo-Pacific region when dividing and deploying their naval forces.

The European capacity to provide maritime security in the region using their naval deployment alone is in fact, quite limited. Of course, there have been a few successful cases in providing maritime security. Activities of the deployed HMS Richmond in the East China Sea were a good example, where she identified and tracked ships suspected of breaching UN sanctions. As noted, North Korea's ambitions to acquire WMDs (Weapons of Mass-Destruction) pose a grave threat to the region and to the world as well. The ship, as a part of the Carrier Strike Group, could contribute to curtailing the DPRK's effort to build WMD programmes by reporting on vessels of interest and providing valuable imagery and contact data.

But, considering pressure closer to home, especially with regard to Russia, it is unavoidable that a limit that can be imposed on the European capacity for naval projection in the Indo-Pacific region. Russia, as evidenced by its invasion of Ukraine, still remains an acute threat to all EU member countries. Therefore, there is a need for Europe as a whole to keep a balance between the European region and the Indo-Pacific region when dividing and deploying their naval forces in either region. The worsening security situations in Europe could also be a grave concern even for countries in the Indo-Pacific region on issues of energy and food security. This is just to remind us of the principle of indivisible security in an interdependent and interconnected world today.

Nevertheless, keeping the balance between the two regions means that it is inevitable for Europeans to see a gap between what can be provided and what should be provided in terms of their naval assets in the Indo-Pacific region. The gap will get wider as current security situations grow more serious. Thus, a better way to fill the gap in this case is to be aligned with US naval forces and to make the most use of available maritime assets from their partners and likeminded countries in the region.

But these European activities may be viewed as contradictory to their strategic autonomy, which has become the foremost buzzword in Brussels since the release of the EU Global Strategy in 2016. The principle of the EU's strategic autonomy is now expanding even to include not only security and defence issues from which the concept originated, but also technological, digital, climate, and trade spheres. The concept requires the preparatory and collective ability to meet various challenges and threats through enhanced resilience. But, in reality, the capabilities that can be mobilised for implementing the concept in both traditional and non-traditional challenges on the seas of the Indo-Pacific region are still insufficient.

Accordingly, there is another need for maintaining a balance even between the transatlantic alliance and European strategic autonomy, meaning that the concept of strategic autonomy is in need of a certain degree of cooperation with US naval forces in providing maritime security in the Indo-Pacific region. European naval forces can only play a supporting role in the Indo-Pacific region when they try to maintain a balance between Europe and the region, while they can play a leading role in the region when they try to keep a balance between the US and its strategic autonomy principle.

Minilateral Approach to European Role in the Region

Given the need for Europe to maintain a balance in its relations with the Indo-Pacific region and the US, the question can be raised as to the desirable frameworks that can make a Europe's role effective in the Indo-Pacific region. The shifting balance of power dynamics in the Indo-Pacific area has had a negative impact on the effective operation of larger multilateral institutions like the United Nations (UN), Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) in dealing with challenges on a regional and global level as well. For example, it is argued that ASEAN, which runs on the principle of consensus, has grown increasingly fractured and has been frequently unable to produce joint statements. It was once regarded as a model of an economically integrated institution that could deal with regional challenges.

But, when Chinese issues were on the table regarding their territorial integrity and sovereignty, Southeast Asian states have divided among themselves, thus hurting ASEAN's core principles of mutual respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all nations. This does not necessarily mean that traditional multilateral and regional institutions are of no use in managing and solving regional security challenges and other hot issues in the region. It is rather argued that engaging in smaller, more informal organizations is more valuable for working on various contentious issues that are difficult to solve in larger groups. Furthermore, minilateral groupings dealing with a number of economic, security, and strategic issues have been known to be better than depending on even a single fragmented regional organization, which provides few options and solutions for various challenges facing the region.

Those have pushed countries in the region to find alternatives to bilateral frameworks like the US-led alliances and China-led alliances or partnerships and to multilateral institutions like ASEAN. The bilateral and multilateral frameworks have continued to be critical elements of the Asia-Pacific strategic architecture. But, given that the tensions in the region are likely to flourish, minilateral platforms based on broad strategic interests and specific issues like supply chain resilience are expected to thrive, given their nature of being rather exclusive, flexible, and functional in the region. Quad and AUKUS are case in point, both are examples of a minilateral framework in the region. Even though there are some credibility questions among members of the framework, the partnership among them will be strengthened and become more feasible as their interests and perceptions of threats converge.

But the minilateral frameworks need to begin as Track 1 or Track 2 formats rather than formal frameworks. Minilateral groupings as official institutions from their inception may be perceived as a return of balance in power politics in the region, thus being naturally able to invite Chinese aggressive protest as a response. But starting with informal frameworks that have not been institutionalised yet can become a tenable strategy because it's not a cause for immediate concern to certain countries that cannot legitimately launch a harsh protest against the

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informal groupings. As evidenced by the QUAD case, informal groupings are unlikely to dissipate anytime soon, while the initial imperatives of them will only intensify, if they stick to universal values common to as many countries.

Coordinated Maritime Presence through a Coalition of Willing

To put it briefly, the above-mentioned rationales for European naval power to be deployed in the Indo-Pacific region, are twofold; one is related to the traditional role, while the other is related to non-traditional issues. The former is generally to protect seaborne trade routes running back and forth between Europe and the Asia-Pacific region, while the latter is to deal with non-traditional maritime security issues like piracy, maritime terrorism, climate change, illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing, illegal immigration, and the smuggling of arms and drugs. A more important fact here is that the security of SLOCs because the safety of the seas is a public good that is both non-excludable and non-rivalrous. Just like the fresh air that every person can breathe to stay healthy, a secure sea can be beneficial to all countries concerned about maritime security.

Secure seas as a public good implies that the more navies the region sees participating in the roles, the more effective the results. Considering the nature of the roles the navy can play, there is no reason China, Russia, or even North Korea will not join in performing the roles collectively. If some countries in the region will not accept and will condemn the European Navies' benign activities for reasons that are unacceptable and incomprehensible to other countries, their motives to deny the benign activities are perceived as suspicious, thus ultimately invoking a need for deterrence and defence that can lead to a destabilizing security situation in the region.

Taking into account their national interests and profits at stake in the region, the strategic depth of European countries in terms of maritime security is much shallower than that of other countries on different continents, even though they are located too far away geographically from the region. And, as mentioned above, the European navies available for deployment are not enough to perform certain roles for maritime security in the region.

Taken together their strategic depth and the limits of their naval assets, an Indo-Pacific version of the Coordinated Maritime Presence concept is recommended to be formed and implemented in the region. There are no reason European partners and likeminded countries in the Indo-Pacific region cannot join the concept of implementing activities for enhancing maritime security in the region. It can be formed and executed on a voluntary basis. In other words, a coalition of the willing that includes European navies and the navies of reliable and voluntary countries in the region can be forged in the areas of their common maritime interests. Sharing of maritime information, analysis, and awareness can be a good example where coordination among participating countries from both sides, even including the US, is indispensable to addressing the maritime security challenges in the region.

For some countries from either region, good lessons and experiences have already been accumulated through participation in maritime security operations such as anti-piracy operations, Operation Atlanta, Operation Sophia, Operation IRINI, and other related maritime operations. Thus, when they come together and cooperate with a certain degree of coordination under the EU umbrella, they can provide continuity, complementarity, and synergy as a reliable maritime security provider in the region.

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Conclusion

Any single country alone cannot provide the resources needed to address maritime challenges in the Indo-Pacific region. Considering the nature of maritime security threats and challenges in general, cooperation rather than competition is needed in the 21st century. In this context, European naval engagement in the Indo-Pacific region in recent years is viewed as a good attempt not only for the regional countries but for the whole world. But, given our shared objectives, limited resources, its own strategic autonomy, and the indivisible security principle, balanced approaches are needed between how much is and how much should be done when deciding how much can be deployed in terms of their naval assets. Accordingly, a unilateral framework and the Indo-Pacific version of CMP in the form of a coalition is recommended to be adopted in this region for the EU as a whole to be able to provide maritime security.

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