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Abstract

The Indo-Pacific is an increasingly important region for global security, but also an arena for geopolitical contestation. Due to its trade and economic interests, as well as broader concerns about the international order, Europe has high stakes in the Indo-Pacific. While France and Great Britain are traditionally the only European states with a significant maritime presence in Asia, the European Union as a whole has, therefore, increased its maritime engagement in recent years. However, European states continue to face obstacles and constraints in expanding their maritime power. The EU has so far been successful in facilitating, among others, information exchange in the Indo-Pacific through Maritime Domain Awareness and the Coordinated Maritime Presence. Its efforts remain largely focused on the Western part of the region. This paper analyses what Europe hopes to achieve in the Indo-Pacific, which challenges it faces, and what it is currently doing and can do further to contribute to maritime security.

1. Introduction

In 2012, during a speech at the Shangri La Dialogue security forum, Jean-Yves Le Drian, then French Minister of Defence, urged European navies to coordinate with each other in order for the EU to play a greater role in Asia's maritime security. But Europe is far away, and only the French and British navies have a regular presence in the region. These two navies, like their American counterpart, do not hesitate to transit regularly through the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea. Ten years later, in 2023, the European Union's High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy, Josep Borrell tried also to convince the European navies to be more visible in the region, particularly in the Taiwan Strait, to show their attachment to freedom of navigation.¹ For him, this is not just a question of defending the EU's trade and economic interests, but of helping it to realise its geopolitical ambitions as a recognised maritime security actor.

The EU has provided a very rich institutional framework to pursue its security agenda in the region with the publication of the Indo-Pacific Cooperation Strategy (2021),² the Strategic Compass (2022),³ and, most recently, the EU updated Maritime Security Strategy (2023).⁴ The EU also has a great deal of experience in the regional maritime domain thanks to the naval operation ATALANTA, the maritime capacity-building programme CRIMARIO II and, more recently, the implementation of the Coordinated Maritime Presence (CMP) mechanism. For the time being, however, these maritime initiatives remain partly focused on the Western Indian Ocean.

¹ Josep Borrell “ Un regard froid sur la Chine », *Journal du Dimanche*, 22 April 2023. [TRIBUNE. Josep Borrell, chef de la diplomatie européenne : « Un regard froid sur la Chine » \(lejdd.fr\)](#)

² The Indo-Pacific Cooperation Strategy for the Indo-Pacific, 15 September 2021. [EC Joint Communication - EU strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, 16-9-2021 | EU texts | Documents | DASE | Delegations | European Parliament \(europa.eu\)](#)

³ The Strategic Compass, 21 March 2022. [pdf \(europa.eu\)](#)

⁴ EU Maritime Security Strategy, 24 October 2023. [Maritime security: Council approves revised EU strategy and action plan - Consilium \(europa.eu\)](#)

2. Showing the EU's flag in globalised and contested waters

Strategic developments at sea in the Indo-Pacific can affect European security in many ways. In this sense the 'Indo-Pacific' is more than a geographic vision, it carries political significance and engagement as the EU is speaking of "a free and open Indo-Pacific."⁵ China is making excessive maritime claims in the South and East China Seas, asserting sovereignty rights with no legal basis, challenging Taiwan's maritime domain and developing grey zone activities in the area. China is contesting the Taiwan Strait's status as an international marine space by considering it part of its territorial waters.⁶ In April 2019, the Chinese authorities attempted to intimidate the French frigate *Vendémiaire*, then described the ship's passage through the Strait as illegal. However, the UNCLOS is clear on the delimitation of maritime areas: a country's territorial waters extend from the coast to 12 nautical miles, and beyond that is the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), over which the country does not exercise sovereignty but has exploitation rights and where freedom of navigation applies. As the distance between mainland China and Taiwan is at least 130 km, China only has power over a small area of the Strait, not the whole of it. However, by claiming this area as its territorial waters, China intends to impose its own restrictive interpretation of the freedom of movement of military vessels and aircraft and their right of innocent passage, as it does in the South China Sea.⁷

For Josep Borrell, a greater presence and more patrols by European units would demonstrate to China that Europe maintains its desire for the status quo and is categorically opposed to any use of force in this area of latent conflict. A more visible Europe could in particular complicate China's strategic calculations by bringing new "like-minded" actors aiming to uphold a rules-based order and to support stability and cooperation at sea. France spends between one and two times a year in the region and is one of the few European navies to do so. 2021 marks a significant reinvestment by EU navies in the region, paving the way for the publication of the organisation's Indo-Pacific strategy. That same year, Germany deployed the frigate *Bayern* to the region for the first time but

⁵ As underlined in the Strategy for Cooperation for the Indo-Pacific and recently in the final communiqué of the Ministerial Forum for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific held in Brussels on 2 February 2024. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/boosting-eu-indo-pacific-partnerships-chair%E2%80%99s-press-release-following-eu-indo-pacific-ministerial_en

⁶ Keyuan Zou "Redefining the legal status of the Taiwan straits", *The International Journal of Marine coastal law*, May 2000, 15(2), 245-268. DOI: [10.1163/157180800X00091](https://doi.org/10.1163/157180800X00091) Magdalena Fung « Debrief : US-China spat over legal status of Taiwan straits », *The Straits Times*, 21 June 2022. [Debrief: US-China spat over legal status of Taiwan Strait | The Straits Times](#)

⁷ On the notion territorial sea, China recognizes the concept of innocent passage but requires prior authorization for the passage of foreign warships.

avoided the Straits. The German Navy's dispatch of a combat ship to the region for seven months in 2021 and 2022 illustrates Europe's increased interest in the Indo-Pacific and its ambition to show the flag there. This is the first mission of its kind for almost twenty years, and there are plans to deploy two more ships in 2024. Similarly, the Netherlands has integrated its frigate Evertsen into the UK's CSG21 deployment in 2021 and plans to deploy a warship to the region every two years. Significantly, the French Navy publicly reported on the deployment of a nuclear attack submarine to the area from September 2021 to April 2022, with port calls in Guam, Perth and Djibouti. The Italian Navy is also more active, with more frequent missions and port calls. The Cavour aircraft carrier battle group will be deployed in the Indo-Pacific in 2024.

The difficulty lies in the fact that very few countries in Europe have ocean-going vessels capable of navigating so far from their port bases. If the United States frequently sails in the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait, it is because it can rely on a vast fleet, with a strong presence in the Pacific, and because it has numerous naval bases and logistical facilities, including in South-East Asia. Australia also occasionally sends a few ships, but these operate much closer to their homeports. For European navies, the most decisive factor remains China's reaction and the risk of retaliation, not only military with the threat of intentional collision, aggressive shadowing or other measures, but more broadly punitive measures of a political and economic nature. Any interference in what China views as internal affairs, which includes Taiwan or Beijing's 'maritime rights,' can be met with sanctions. In 2021, Lithuania faced strong diplomatic pressure and an economic embargo from Beijing due to the opening of a Taiwanese Representation Office in Vilnius followed by the opening of a Lithuanian Representation Office in Taipei.⁸ Thus, visa bans, asset freezes and import restrictions are China's most used sanctions in the last decade.⁹ However, maintaining a presence in the South China Sea and the waters of the Taiwan Strait has several strategic advantages for Europe. It allows the EU to gather intelligence and environmental data and to monitor nearby Chinese military activities. Above all, it is a pragmatic way of defending maritime multilateralism in an area where it is contested, and of giving substance to strategic partnerships and cooperation with the EU's neighbouring partners, such as the ASEAN member states, India, Japan, South Korea and Australia.

⁸ Konstantinas Andrijauskas "The sino-lithuanian crisis : going beyond the Taiwanese Representation Office issue", *IFRI Briefings*, 8 March 2022. <https://www.ifri.org/en/publications/briefings-de-lifri/sino-lithuanian-crisis-going-beyond-taiwanese-representative-office>

⁹ Michael Green, Kathleen Hicks, Zack Cooper, John Schaus and Jack Douglas "Counter-coercion series : Senkaku islands trawler collision", *AMTI*, 18 May 2017. [Counter-Coercion Series: Senkaku Islands Trawler Collision | Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative \(csis.org\)](#)

3. The European Union, a maritime security actor in the Indo-Pacific: Making the most of existing tools from ATALANTA to CRIMARIO II

In its *Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific*, the EU stated its ambition to become involved in seven key areas of interest in this region, including maritime governance and security and defence. In terms of maritime governance, the EU intends to focus on defending the Montego Bay Convention, sustainable ocean management, and the fight against illegal fishing. In terms of security and defence, the EU wants to promote an open architecture with secure maritime communication routes, enhanced regional maritime capabilities and a "reinforced naval presence" through increased deployments of Member States' vessels in the region. These latter orientations are further developed in the revised EU Maritime Security Strategy and Action Plan. The question of how the EU intends to achieve these goals remains open due to the renewed focus on Euro-Atlantic security because of the Russia-Ukraine war, existing resource constraints, and weak internal political consensus on long-range deployments within Member States.¹⁰

But the EU already has a number of tools at its disposal to help shape the region's strategic maritime culture, and increase Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA). MDA describes a means of gathering information about activities at sea and maritime incidents, collating and fusing the information from multiples sources to develop a maritime picture that can be shared with all maritime agencies. Over the last 15 years, significant initiatives have been launched throughout the Indo-Pacific region to increase MDA, with the establishment of regional Information Fusion Centres (IFC): Singapore (2009), Madagascar (2016), Guguram/India (2018), Vanuatu/Pacific (2023) and Peru (2019). The United States also recognises the importance of reinforcing regional MDA; the current US administration has understood the strategic value of the MDA in developing new maritime cooperative partnerships and sharing its vision of a free and open Indo-Pacific. In May 2022, President Biden announced the creation of the Indo-Pacific partnership for MDA at a QUAD meeting.

The EU is combining two kinds of approaches: a naval operation (ATALANTA) and a soft security initiative (CRIMARIO). In this way, the it is responding to the region's major non-traditional security

¹⁰ Frédéric Grare, Manisha Reuter "Moving closer: European views of the Indo-Pacific", ECFR, 13 September 2021. [Moving closer: European views of the Indo-Pacific | ECFR](#)

needs: protecting the Blue Economy of the littoral states, strengthening the MDA to improve the security of the EEZs of its partners and enhancing law enforcement capacities, thus making it possible to multilateralise regional maritime security. Largely supported by the region, these two major initiatives have become a powerful strategic marker, firmly anchoring the European holistic security approach and ambitions in the Indo-Pacific. They enable the EU to keep out of the strong naval competition that is a feature of the region, while at the same time meeting essential security needs for many of its partners.

The best-known MDA is the EUNAVFOR-ATALAN mission, which has provided an almost permanent presence at sea since it was launched in 2008.¹¹ There is also the CRIMARIO II (Critical Maritime Route in the Indo-Pacific) a regional maritime capacity-building programme. Launched in 2015 with the Indian Ocean as its area of activity, it has been extended in 2020 to the entire Indo-Pacific region. CRIMARIO II is enhancing information sharing and promoting an information exchange and incident management platform called IORIS. The value of ATALANTA and CRIMARIO II is that they contribute to a better knowledge of the regional maritime domain and give the EU's partners in the Indo-Pacific the means to know what is happening at sea and therefore to secure more effectively their maritime spaces. Both contribute in their own way to strengthening the Indo-Pacific MDA and to empowering EU regional partners. The two initiatives also support the maritime security architecture implemented by the Indian Ocean Commission through MASE to promote MDA of the coastal countries of ESA-IO (Eastern and Southern Africa and the Indian Ocean).¹²

¹¹ ATALANTA operates the Maritime Security Center-Horn of Africa (MSCHOA) that helps protect merchant shipping in the region by providing information that assists in preventing piracy attacks.

¹² MASE (Maritime Security) is organized around the activities of two regional maritime centers: the Regional Maritime Information Fusion Center, RMIFC, based in Madagascar and the Regional Center for Operational Coordination, RCOC, based in Seychelles.

4. Towards the operationalisation of the European naval presence in the Indo-Pacific with the CMP?

The European Union has chosen the North-Western Indian Ocean (NWIO) as the preferred theatre for its naval commitment, based on the experience gained from its sustained participation in the international community's operation to combat Somali piracy. It is a maritime area with which it is familiar thanks to its long-standing presence with the Atalanta naval force off the Horn of Africa. This mission has evolved greatly over time, demonstrating the European Union's ability to adapt to changes in security in the region and to the needs expressed by its main partners. Initially dedicated to the protection of World Food Programme vessels for Somalia and the fight against piracy, the mandate of Operation Atalanta has been extended to include the fight against criminal activities at sea (trafficking in drugs, arms and people), reflecting regional concerns. Since 2019, the EU has also been taking part in a surveillance operation in the Strait of Hormuz (European Maritime Awareness in the Strait of Hormuz - EMASOH) to protect merchant traffic and prevent a further rise of tensions on an essential maritime route linking energy production in the Middle East to North America, Europe and Asia.¹³

The EU's presence in the (NWIO) has become institutionalised further. In January 2021, the EU launched the 'Coordinated Maritime Presences' (CMP) concept,¹⁴ a non-CSDP mechanism designed to foster a semi-permanent presence in maritime areas of interest, share information about them and promote international cooperation and partnership at sea. In practical terms, the aim is to take advantage of the activities of European navies deployed nationally in the region. Volunteer countries exchange information on the situation in the area with an EU control centre and, where appropriate, can become more involved in a training activity or a stopover under a dual European and national umbrella. According to the level of presence at sea of member States, it may offer an opportunity to create ad hoc naval groups among EU member states but also to consider adding littoral States and affinity partners such as Japan, Australia and South Korea but also India and the UAE in the Western Indian Ocean¹⁵

¹³ Eva Pejsova "The EU as a maritime security provider", EUISS Policy Brief, 16 December 2019, [The EU as a maritime security provider | European Union Institute for Security Studies \(europa.eu\)](#)

¹⁴ EEAS "Maritime Diplomacy: how Coordinated Maritime presences (CMP) serves EU interest globally", 22 July 2022. [Maritime Diplomacy: How Coordinated Maritime Presences \(CMP\) serves EU interest globally. | EEAS \(europa.eu\)](#)

¹⁵ Benedetta Girardi, Paul Van Hooft and Alisa Hoenig "Getting them on board", The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, January 2024. [Getting-Them-On-Board-European-Engagement-in-Indo-Pacific-Maritime-Security-HCSS-2024.pdf](#)

The implementation of the CMP concept in the NWIO aims to strengthen the training and capacity-building activities of operation ATALANTA by encouraging cooperation with other naval resources of EU Member States present in the area or those of coastal States. By appointing a Senior Coordinator for its implementation, the EU is also making the CMP a vehicle for maritime diplomacy in the Indian Ocean. The presence of the Senior Coordinator adds a more political dimension to port calls and Maritime Dialogues with partners such as India or through participation in specific fora such as the Djibouti/Jeddah Code of Conduct¹⁶ or the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS).¹⁷ However, it marks the EU's strong strategic focus on the Indian Ocean region.

The CMP concept is a flexible and apparently easy-to-implement mechanism, but it remains dependent on a strategic environment that can be complex and even dangerous. The aim of strengthening Europe's role in maritime security in the NWIO¹⁸ is to relieve allies and partners of some of the regional security burden. But for some Member States, this presence implies an implicit commitment to go further if a crisis were to erupt in the Western Pacific, possibly by responding on a limited scale, and therefore entails a risk. There is therefore no guarantee that the CMP experience will be extended further into the Indo-Pacific. On the contrary, it should remain localised in the Western Indian Ocean.

They are many reasons for that :

- The Indian Ocean is a traditional area of operations for the EU. ATALANTA and the CRIMARIO project are viewed favourably by regional powers, including India, the UAE, Kenya, the Seychelles (the two latter being champions of the Blue Economy).
- What is more, the EU can draw on the French military resources and locations present in the area: La Réunion, Djibouti and Abu Dhabi, a French military settlement and Headquarters of the Admiral commanding the French naval forces in the Indian Ocean (ALINDIEN) and also inter-army Commander of the French forces based in the United Arab Emirates. .
- This geographical choice may be due to the importance of securing merchant traffic in this region for the EU as it is heavily dependent on the security of the Seelines of Communications (SLOC) through the Indian Ocean.
- The same reasoning behind the launch of operation ATALANTA is behind the launch on the 19th of February 2024 of a new EU naval operation, ASPIDES, designed to protect merchant vessels in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden against the Houthis attacks.

Any consideration of extending the CMP concept will have to take account of this dual strategic priority and operational context. If the EU is considered a credible and trusted player in the Indian

¹⁶ The Djibouti/Jeddah Code of Conduct (DCOC) is a regional maritime security cooperation agreement established in 2008 to fight piracy off the coast of Somalia and the Horn of Africa. It has been revised in 2017 to address wider security maritime issues, including the Blue Economy of littoral States. It consists of member States surrounding the Gulf of Aden, Red Sea, East Africa, Indian Ocean. ATALANTA and CRIMARIO are regularly invited to attend.

¹⁷ IONS is a security initiative launched in 2008 by India to increase cooperation among navies and coastguards of 25 littoral States of the Indo-Pacific ranging from the Western Indian Ocean (including Middle East navies such as Iran, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and UAE), East Africa, South Asia, Southeast Asia and Pacific. France is the only EU country participating in the IONS as a member, as its hold territories in the Indo-Pacific region, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and Spain are observers. Atalanta and CRIMARIO are regularly invited to participate in exercises and training at sea organized by the forum.

¹⁸ Coordinated Maritime Presences, CMP, 21 February 2022. [Coordinated Maritime Presences: Council extends implementation in the Gulf of Guinea for two years and establishes a new Maritime Area of Interest in the North-Western Indian Ocean - Consilium \(europa.eu\)](#)

Ocean, it is thanks to the experience and positive feedback accumulated over the last fifteen years by Atalanta and the CRIMARIO project. While the CMP concept can be extended to the NWIO because it meets the EU's strategic priorities with the active support of the French and Indian navies, this is not the case in South-East Asia, where the EU risks finding itself caught up in the growing strategic competition between the United States and China.¹⁹

¹⁹ Ramon Pacheco Pardo, Nicola Leveringhaus "Security and Defence in the Indo-Pacific: what is at stake for the EU and its strategy", EU Parliament IDA, December 2021. [Security and defence in the Indo-Pacific: What is at stake for the EU and its strategy? \(europa.eu\)](https://www.europa.eu)