

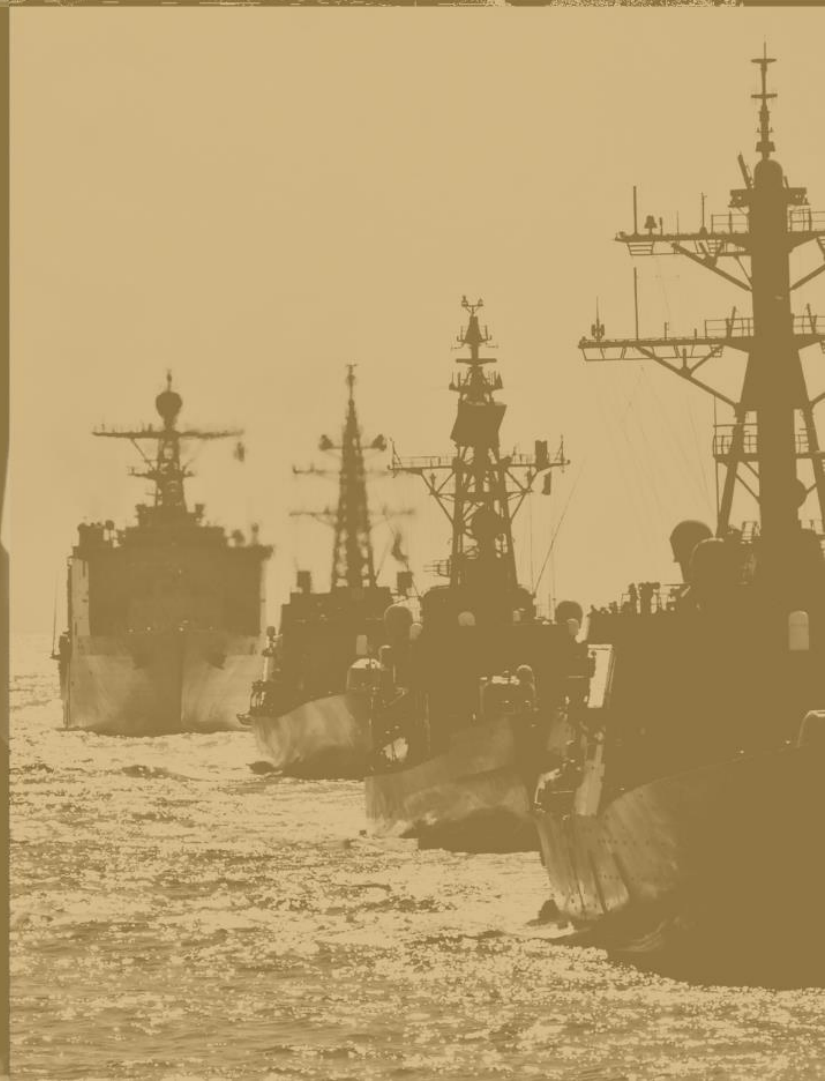


The Hague Centre
for Strategic Studies

Mixed Messages and the EU's Indo-Pacific Strategy

Charmaine Misalucha-Willoughby

April 2024





Mixed Messages and the EU's Indo-Pacific Strategy

Author:

Charmaine Misalucha-Willoughby
De La Salle University

Editors:

Benedetta Girardi and Paul van Hooft, with contributions from Alisa Hoenig

April 2024

The analysis presented in the paper, including the conclusions and recommendations, is the product of independent research. The responsibility for the content of this paper lies with the authors and the authors alone.

© *The Hague* Centre for Strategic Studies. All rights reserved.
No part of this report may be reproduced and/or published in any form by print, photo print, microfilm or any other means without prior written permission from HCSS. All images are subject to the licenses of their respective owners.

Cover photo:

Canva

HCSS
Lange Voorhout 1
2514 EA The Hague

Follow us on social media:
[@hcssnl](#)

The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies
Email: info@hcss.nl
Website: www.hcss.nl

Abstract

In 2021 the European Union launched its Indo-Pacific strategy, given the region's increasing geopolitical significance in times of heightened interdependence. The success of the EU's Indo-Pacific strategy rests upon the EU's ability to substantiate its message through concrete commitments (capability), veracity of intentions (credibility) and regularity of implementation (consistency). While the EU's capability and credibility in the Indo-Pacific remain strong, its greatest challenge lies in consistency. The EU must focus on reframing the core message of its strategy to ensure that it is widely and clearly understood. There are three ways it can do this.

Firstly, the EU must acknowledge the heterogeneity of interests among Indo-Pacific nations who may be wary of extra-regional intervention, by focusing on the economic advantages of increased engagement. Secondly, the EU must be able to structure a message that can firmly withstand the many political changes of 2024, a pivotal year for elections around the world. Thirdly, the EU must minimise the inconsistency of its signalling in the Indo-Pacific by engaging in minilateral arrangements focused on human, environmental, and climate security.

The European Union's launch of its Indo-Pacific strategy in 2021 sent a strong signal to the international community. From a geopolitical perspective, Europe's move was in recognition of growing tensions and rivalries at a time of highly complex interdependence. The EU strategy then rightfully gives importance to the realities of a deeply globalised system that can pose benefits and challenges for different actors. For the United States, the EU's voice lent more weight to the importance of upholding the rules-based international order. Established at the end of the Second World War, the current order is anchored on liberal norms and values, as well as American leadership and hegemony. While the term is often criticised as being overly US-centric, it remains a useful term in Southeast Asia, considering that most countries therein have only achieved their sovereign status in the last century and as such rely heavily on international law to consolidate their statehood. In this context, the EU is seen by the Indo-Pacific as a staunch defender of the rules-based international order. The EU strategy is a reiteration of its support for the rules of the post-1945 structure. Finally, for states in the Indo-Pacific, the EU strategy represented the continuity of longstanding cooperation with European partners. The EU's development cooperation was critical in the state-building of many countries in the Indo-Pacific. Signalling, however, is never a one-shot deal. The success of the EU's message to the world via the Indo-Pacific strategy rests on capability, credibility, and consistency. Capability refers to the EU's muscle mass, so to speak, the brawn that gives its Indo-Pacific strategy substance. Capability is complemented by credibility, which is the veracity of its commitment and measured in the wide-ranging areas of cooperation. Meanwhile, consistency means the regularity of the EU's message.

Recent developments in the Indo-Pacific continue to converge on ways to grapple with China's rise. In the South China Sea, China's occupation of features outside of its exclusive economic zone continues unabated, to the detriment of other claimant states like the Philippines. China's grey zone activities have increased in the last year, with numerous instances of the Chinese Coast Guard's use of military-grade lasers and water cannons, as well as disrupting the Philippine Coast Guard's resupply missions to the BRP Sierra Madre in Second Thomas Shoal. Likewise, the Chinese maritime militia's swarming efforts chase Filipino fisherfolks away from traditional fishing grounds, thereby increasing illegal fishing activities. Additionally, China's actions paralyse the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) as talks remain stalled on the Code of Conduct.

In light of these developments, European and Indo-Pacific engagements focused on maritime security. France started conducting freedom of navigation operations and passing exercises in the South China Sea in 2014, including those in conjunction with US vessels.¹ French-led naval diplomacy built strategic networks at the institutional and state levels to enhance power projection capabilities.² The German frigate Bayern was also deployed in the Indo-Pacific in 2021.³ Meanwhile, the EU funded a crucial maritime capacity-building initiative in 2015 focusing on maritime domain awareness. The Critical Maritime Routes Indo-Pacific (CRIMARIO) program enables partners to better govern maritime spaces by promoting cross-sectorial, interagency, and transregional cooperation on maritime security and

¹ "USS Michael Murphy enhances interoperability with French ship," *Defense Visual Information Distribution Service*, 4 December 2014. <https://www.dvidshub.net/news/149460/uss-michael-murphy-enhances-interoperability-with-french-ship>.

² Liselotte Odgaard, "European Engagement in the Indo-Pacific: The Interplay Between Institutional and State-Level Naval Diplomacy," *Asia Policy*, 14, 1 (October 2019): 129-159.

³ "Indo-Pacific Deployment 2021," *Bundeswehr*, 2021. <https://www.bundeswehr.de/en/organization/navy/news/indo-pacific-deployment-2021>.

safety. For example, CRIMARIO effectively addresses illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing. Moreover, in light of China's recent efforts in the West Philippine Sea, CRIMARIO's information-sharing capabilities are critical in accumulating satellite and radio frequency data that enable the faster identification and analysis of grey zone activities. As key European states have already expanded their security footprint in the Indo-Pacific, there is no doubt that the EU can substantiate the Indo-Pacific strategy, at least in maritime security.

The credibility of its messaging complements Europe's capability in a wide range of areas. The 2021 strategy identifies seven priority areas that build on Europe's longstanding cooperation with states in the Indo-Pacific: sustainable and inclusive prosperity, green transition, ocean governance, digital governance and partnerships, connectivity, security and defence, and human security. Additionally, the Global Gateway serves as the EU's overarching cooperation framework. Bilaterally, the EU and the Philippines signed the Financing Agreement for the Green Economy Program in October 2023.⁴ Worth €60 million, the agreement signified the EU's commitment to the green economy and aimed to assist the Philippines in economic renewal by embracing the circular economy, reducing waste and plastic usage, ensuring water supply and wastewater treatment, promoting energy efficiency, and deploying renewable energy to address the impacts of climate change. Part of the Global Gateway's initiative was launching the first Copernicus programme on earth observation with the data centre in the Philippines.⁵ The Philippines' ability to strengthen its resilience to natural disasters and climate change adaptation is at stake here. The layers of cooperation thus render Europe's commitment highly credible.

The challenge, however, lies in Europe's consistency, given the volatile changes taking place in the Indo-Pacific in 2024. The argument that the EU strategy is more a reaction to the externalities and uncertainties of increasing tensions between the United States and China rather than a careful recalibration of the EU's commitment to the Indo-Pacific is not unfounded.⁶ Indeed, many engagements, especially those in maritime security whose objective is to uphold the rules-based multilateral order, are driven by mercantilist goals.⁷ If the EU strategy were to become successful, the consistency of the signalling needs improvement. Repetition is not necessarily the issue here. Rather, the EU must work on the permutations of its core messaging to ensure that it is received loud and clear by the Indo-Pacific. There are several ways to do this.

⁴ "Global Gateway: EU and Philippines sign €60 million Green Economy Programme," *Global Gateway Forum*, 25 October 2023. https://global-gateway-forum.ec.europa.eu/news/global-gateway-forum-eu-and-philippines-sign-eu60-million-green-economy-programme-2023-10-25_en.

⁵ "Global Gateway: European Space Agency and the Commission join forces on earth observation for the Philippines," *Global Gateway*, 24 January 2023. https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/news-and-events/news/global-gateway-european-space-agency-and-commission-join-forces-earth-observation-philippines-2023-01-24_en.

⁶ Frederick Kliem, "The EU Strategy on Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific: A Meaningful Regional Complement?" *Panorama: Insights into Asian and European Affairs* (Singapore: Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 2022). <https://www.kas.de/documents/288143/16920728/Panorama+European+Strategic+Approaches+to+the+Indo-Pacific.pdf/e7b7d256-61ec-d864-191a-7cd63342cee4?version=1.0&t=1645002783217>.

⁷ Giulio Pugliese, "The European Union's Security Intervention in the Indo-Pacific: Between Multilateralism and Mercantile Interests," *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 17, 1 (2023): 76-98.

First, while there is no doubt that the EU desires a more active role in the Indo-Pacific, there must be a recognition that the latter is not a monolithic bloc.⁸ While the Quad countries may welcome closer ties with the United States and the EU, there are some in Southeast Asia that may be wary of the presence of extra-regional powers. For these countries, China is a geopolitical reality that they must learn to live with, regardless of growing security concerns. Acknowledging these layers can help the EU calibrate its strategy. A focus on improving economic ties can be a convergence point, especially in regard to efforts to support de-risking, supply-chain relocation, and digital trade.

Second, 2024 is an election year for many entities. Taiwan recently elected a pro-independence president, which can spell a new direction in cross-strait relations, as well as US-China competition.⁹ In June, there will be a new composition of the European Parliament, which will predictably bring a shift in policies and a changed agenda. In November, the United States will elect a new president. Concerns abound whether Donald Trump will return to office. The EU needs to ensure that its Indo-Pacific strategy is carefully coordinated to withstand all these changes. It will be up to more than just France, Germany, and the Netherlands to convince the rest of the EU member states of the significance of the Indo-Pacific, regardless of events taking place much closer to Europe's borders.

Finally, the EU can minimise mixed messages by engaging in minilateral arrangements. The phenomenon is gaining momentum in the Indo-Pacific, as indicated by AUKUS and the Quad. The EU can play an equally important role in similar platforms. For example, the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor that was launched in October 2023 suggests that the EU is a competent player in this regard.¹⁰ In Southeast Asia, the EU can initiate minilateral arrangements as they relate to human security in the South China Sea. These efforts can consist of programmes that aid coastal states and communities in capacity building and addressing human trafficking, armed robbery at sea, resilience, climate change adaptation, and biodiversity protection.

In sum, sustaining the upward trajectory of the EU's Indo-Pacific strategy rests not only on showcasing Europe's capability and credibility, but also on the consistency of its messaging. Both regions share core interests demonstrated in a wide range of cooperation activities. However, coordinated efforts are crucial, particularly in light of the elections that are taking place in 2024 in the EU, the United States, and some parts of the Indo-Pacific. The EU can improve its capability, credibility, and consistency by investing in a multilayered approach anchored in human resources and people-to-people ties. In particular, the EU's capability and credibility rest on improved and extended maritime presence in the Indo-Pacific, which can be accomplished by investing in people's education and training in economics, engineering, physics, and other scientific disciplines at the forefront of military developments. From the perspective of the Indo-Pacific, the EU is seen as the champion of the rules-based international order. As such, statements issued by the EU and its member states on various issues will go a long way. Finally,

⁸ Benedetta Girardi, Paul van Hooft, and Alisa Hoenig, "Getting Them on Board: Partners and Avenues for European Engagement in Indo-Pacific Maritime Security," The Hague Center for Strategic Studies, January 2024. <https://hcscs.nl/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Getting-them-on-board-GTC-HCSS-2024.pdf>.

⁹ "Defying China, Taiwan elects William Lai Ching-te as president," *The Economist*, 13 January 2014.

<https://www.economist.com/asia/2024/01/13/defying-china-taiwan-elects-william-lai-ching-te-as-president>.

¹⁰ Julien Barnes-Dacey and Cinzia Bianco, "Intersections of influence: IMEC and Europe's role in a multipolar Middle East," *European Council on Foreign Relations*, 15 September 2023. <https://ecfr.eu/article/intersections-of-influence-imec-and-europes-role-in-a-multipolar-middle-east/>.

the EU's consistency can be strengthened with an equally determined commitment to engage in various platforms, whether multilaterally or bilaterally, in the Track 1.5 or even Track 2 levels, on areas like maritime security and civil maritime governance. Absent strategic coordination in these fronts, the EU strategy risks sending mixed messages to the Indo-Pacific.