

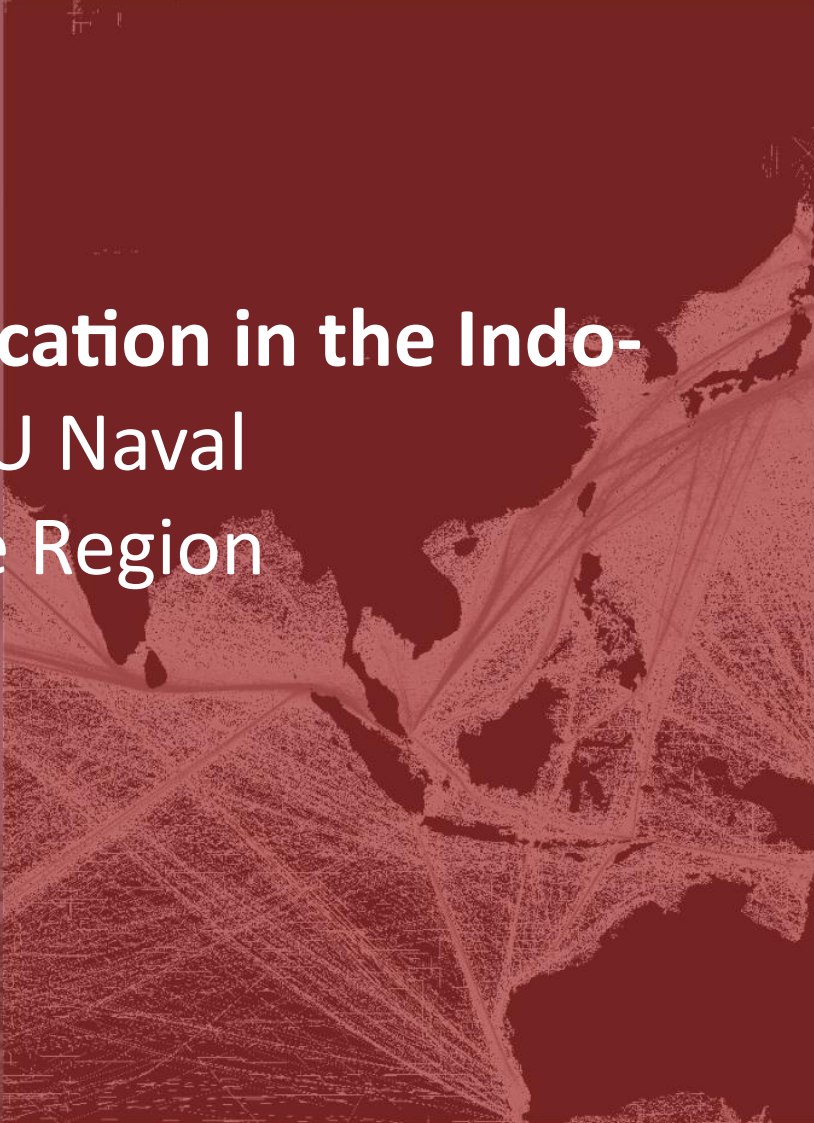


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Strategic Communication in the Indo-Pacific: Signalling EU Naval Commitment to the Region

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Abstract

The European Union now regards the Indo-Pacific as being at the centre of contemporary geopolitical and security challenges. This has led to an increasing European presence in the region aimed, amongst others, at the protection of trade and the maintenance of international law. With a focus on naval strategy, this paper outlines how the EU's policies towards the Indo-Pacific are an instance of foreign policy signalling. The EU's three naval operations as well as the Coordinated Maritime Presence have so far signalled the bloc's objective to be a global maritime security provider. For this to be effective, the EU must ensure the credibility of its activities. The paper analyses how this can be achieved, including in the Eastern part of the Indo-Pacific. It ends with policy recommendations for more effective signalling.

1. Introduction

In 2021, the Indo-Pacific suddenly and unexpectedly rose to the top of the foreign policy agenda of the European Union (EU). The publication of the EU's Indo Pacific Strategy (henceforth 'Strategy') in September 2021 showed that the EU considers the region to be of great geopolitical interest with important security challenges.¹ The Strategy laid down the EU's policy preferences; yet at the same time presented an instance of signalling. Signalling is strategic communication normally undertaken by states in their international relations, particularly during crises.

We argue that the EU, as a regional organisation with intergovernmental and supranational elements, signals as a state does, albeit in its own distinct way. In this policy brief, we sketch what have been the most effective signals of the EU's interests in the Indo-Pacific since the launch of the Strategy, as well as some of the limitations. We focus on the EU's naval strategy and related signalling such as the EU Maritime Strategy.² First, because a free and open Indo-Pacific (which the naval strategy aims to underpin) is a necessary condition to achieve many of the other European policy objectives. Secondly, because the EU's naval strategy directly shapes the maritime security interests of countries in the region, including the Great Powers. The paper concludes with several policy recommendations on naval signalling in the Indo-Pacific for European policy makers.

¹ European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, "Joint communication to the European parliament and the council" The EU strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, 2023. Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52021JC0024> (accessed 19 February 2024).

² European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, "JOIN/2023/8 Joint communication on the update of the EU Maritime Security Strategy and its Action Plan: An enhanced EU Maritime Security Strategy for evolving maritime threats", 10 March 2023, Brussels. Available at: https://oceans-and-fisheries.ec.europa.eu/document/download/7274a9ab-ad29-4dae-83fb-c849d1ca188b_en?filename=join-2023-8_en.pdf (Accessed 19 February 2024).

2. EU naval signalling in the Indo-Pacific

The existence of the Strategy and the following Maritime Strategy is explained by the strategic interests that the EU has in the Indo-Pacific. These involve trade interests, and thereby the support for a free and open Indo-Pacific with freedom of overflight and navigation, the future of trade standards and regulations, countering piracy and other disrupting threats from non-state actors and states, the upholding of international law, and the necessity to deal with geopolitical tensions in the region. Simply stating these interests was meant as a way to prove that the EU has a credible stake in the stability of this region, but the way these interests are presented and signalled are also an important component of that credibility as well. Signalling, as a form of strategic communication aimed at influencing other actors' behaviour, is typically a foreign policy activity conducted by states. In a recent article, we argue that the EU can be – and actually is – a signalling actor as well.³

In terms of signalling, EU High Representative Josep Borrell clearly identified the *shared interests* between the EU and Indo-Pacific partners on the day the Strategy was launched: “The futures of the EU and the Indo-Pacific are interlinked. Our engagement aims at maintaining a free and open Indo-Pacific for all, while building strong and lasting partnerships to cooperate on matters from the green transition, ocean governance or the digital agenda to security and defence.”⁴ From the Strategy it then became clear that the EU focused on working together with like-minded countries on a variety of policy fields.

In an effort to ensure the credibility of this engagement, the EU signalled in the Strategy and follow-up documents that European interactions with the Indo-Pacific did not start in 2021. For decades, there has been a recognition among several member states and EU institutions that European security interests are affected by developments in the Indo-Pacific. In the past decade, several successful forms of this engagement building on earlier initiatives stand out. In this policy brief, we focus on the EU's naval deployments, which we argue are a good illustration of the EU's cumulative and credible signalling posture in the Indo-Pacific.

Since 2008, the EU has contributed to maritime security off the horn of Africa and in the North Western Indian Ocean (NWIO) by way of its Atalanta mission. It has supported the African coastal states in fighting piracy and helped in implementing several United Nations resolutions. Operation Irini (until 2020 preceded by operation Sophia) implemented a UN mandate and also involved close cooperation with a coastal state (i.e. Libya). The EU's three naval operations were followed by a new concept in 2021: the Coordinated Maritime Presence (CMP). The CMP concept was tested in the

³ Willigen and Blarel, *ibid.*

⁴ European Commission, “EU and Indo-Pacific: Natural partners”, 16 June 2021. Available at: https://cyprus.representation.ec.europa.eu/news/eu-and-indo-pacific-natural-partners-2021-09-16_en (Accessed 19 February 2024).

Gulf of Guinea in 2021 and then expanded to the Indo-Pacific, particularly the NWIO.⁵ CMP was therefore the second instance of EU naval signalling in (a part of) the Indo-Pacific Strategy. Compared to the three naval operations, CMP speaks more explicitly to the EU's objectives to be a global maritime security provider and holds the promise to ensure a growing European naval presence in the Indo-Pacific.

The NWIO is now officially designated a European Maritime Area of Interest (MAI). The EU clearly defined what it considers to be its interests in the MAI: "The North Western Indian Ocean is one of the most dynamic centres of economic growth in the world; 80% of the world's trade passes through the Indian Ocean; it is an area rich in natural resources (oil, gas, marine life); safe and secure sea lines in the region are key to link trade between the Middle East, Africa, East Asia, and Europe."⁶ These are structural interests and therefore the CMP is not a time-bound naval operation like Atalanta, but a mechanism to coordinate the naval and air assets of EU-members which are present in the MAI. The expectation has therefore been that through the CMP the EU would "reinforce its strategic focus and actions in the region; ensure a European naval presence in the Indo-Pacific; strengthen partnership and cooperation in the region including with maritime industry; enhance the EU's role as a global maritime security provider."⁷ The strength of the concept has been that it included any EU member states' naval asset which entered the MAI. The asset remains under the command and control of the individual member state, but on a voluntary basis it can be asked to perform EU-related tasks.

A step-by-step expansion of the CMP concept to the East would further boost the credibility of the EU as a maritime security provider to the larger region. For that to happen, the Council of the EU needs first to determine these parts of the Indo-Pacific as MAI. Like in the case of the NWIO it would be a strong signal underpinning the EU's interest in the region as it would ensure further awareness and stimulate exchange of information between naval assets of EU members which happen to be present in this part of the Indo-Pacific. Until recently, individual member states and (small) coalitions of EU members, including France, Germany, and the Netherlands, have conducted naval operations in the Eastern part of the Indo-Pacific. The Indo-Pacific deployment of the German frigate Bayern, the Dutch frigates Evertsen and Tromp, and the more regular visits of French naval vessels to the region link directly to the objectives of the EU's Strategy.

With the exceptions of regular French deployments in the region and the decision of the Dutch to deploy a frigate to the Indo-Pacific every two years, these naval operations are generally of an ad-hoc nature. Declaring the eastern parts of the Indo-Pacific a MAI would help in making a more credible signal of European commitment to the region. It would signal to like-minded partners that the EU is interested to be involved in the long term. This gradual naval coordination needs to be properly signalled to partners in the Indo-Pacific, coordinated among member-states, and need not antagonise China. The current framing relabels already existing EU naval and air assets, but not

⁵ Council of the European Union, "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", 21 February 2022. Available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/02/21/coordinated-maritime-presences-council-extends-implementation-in-the-gulf-of-guinea-for-2-years-and-establishes-a-new-concept-in-the-north-west-indian-ocean/> (Accessed 19 February 2024).

⁶ Council of the European Union, *ibid.*

⁷ Council of the European Union, *ibid.*

necessarily increase their number. At the same time, more naval operations will be needed to enhance the EU's credibility, and to coordinate actions not only among EU member states, but also with likeminded partners in maritime security. The three naval missions and the CMP in the Gulf of Guinea have made the EU develop more experience in cooperating with regional partners in ensuring maritime security.

Concretely, there have been regular joint naval exercises performed by naval forces under EU command and the navies of India, Japan, the Republic of Korea, and since 2023 with the US.⁸ The EU-Japan Strategic Partnership (2019) boosted stronger security and defence relations and allowed for closer security coordination, dialogue, and information exchange.⁹ In another example of increasing naval coordination with other like-minded regional actors, France has promoted a stronger coordination of EU-India naval operations in the NWIO, building on a strong bilateral cooperation, guided by the Joint Strategic Vision for the Indian Ocean adopted in 2018.¹⁰

Finally, the ongoing Red Sea crisis and Houthi attacks on trading ships have shed light on the volatility of this other crucial seaway of the broader Indo-Pacific and are an example of how EU strategic interests are directly affected by the volatile security situation in this region. Borrell tweeted in December 2023: "Irresponsible Houthi actions are a threat to freedom of navigation in the Red Sea."¹¹ The EU's concrete reaction has further demonstrated how it has been aiming to build on previous involvement in the region and distinguish its own intervention from other actors involved. While some EU member states have deployed warships to protect international ships, the EU and most member states (with the exception of Denmark, the Netherlands and Greece¹²) have refrained from joining the U.S.-led Operation Prosperity Guardian to avoid any further escalation. Instead, on 19 February the EU foreign ministers decided to launch the naval operation EUNAVFOR Aspides specifically meant to help secure merchant shipping in the Red Sea, as low-common denominator to mobilise most EU member states.¹³ This is an important signal that, while various EU members might participate in various bilateral or minilateral naval initiatives in this region, the EU has also aimed at emphasising an EU-level initiative with the support of all member states in the context of the Houthi crisis. The European naval force (which includes contribution from Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, and interestingly also Denmark and Greece also involved in the US-led operations) has been presented as a different deterrent and defensive operation complementing the Prosperity Guardian, with a one-year mandate and a planned budget of €8 million.¹⁴ Aspides has

⁸ European External Action Service, "US: First ever joint naval exercise conducted between the EU and U.S.", European External Action Service, 24 March 2023. Available at: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/us-first-ever-joint-naval-exercise-conducted-between-eu-and-us_en (accessed 19 February 2024).

⁹ European External Action Service, *EU-Japan Strategic Partnership Agreement* (Brussels: European Union, 2019).

¹⁰ Présidence de la République, *India-France Indo-Pacific Roadmap*, Paris, 2018.

¹¹ Cienski Jan, "EU pledges to join US-led Red Sea patrol effort", *Politico*, 20 December 2023. Available at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-pledges-to-join-us-led-red-sea-patrol-effort/> (accessed 19 February 2024).

¹² Although only the Netherlands participated

¹³ Council of the European Union, "Security and freedom of navigation in the Red Sea: Council launches EUNAVFOR ASPIDES", 19 februari 2024. Available at: [Security and freedom of navigation in the Red Sea: Council launches EUNAVFOR ASPIDES - Consilium \(europa.eu\)](https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2024/02/19-eu-launches-eunavfor-aspides/) (accessed 19 February 2024).

¹⁴ Pugno Aurélie, "EU launches Red Sea mission 'Aspides' to protect vessels from Houthi attacks", Euractiv 19 February 2024. Available at: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/defence-and-security/news/eu-launches-red-sea-mission-aspides-to-protect-vessels-from-houthi-attacks/> (accessed 21 February 2024).

been framed as an alternative to what is considered as a too escalatory approach by the US.¹⁵ Furthermore, the EU has already been a credible maritime security provider in the region given its experience with maritime security missions for the past 16 years off the Horn of Africa and NWIO, including the Red Sea. Germany, Belgium, Italy, and France have been most supportive of a distinct EU naval operation to protect merchant shipping from Houthi attacks, with Belgium and Germany promising to send their own warships to complement the French naval presence.¹⁶ This would be another important signal of a gradual and credible EU naval contribution to ensuring stability and free merchant shipping.

These various examples show that the EU has been increasingly involved in naval signalling and hence increases its credibility as an actor in the Indo-Pacific. Unlike many other foreign policy signals to this region, naval diplomacy, and deployment in distant theatres of operation is not cheap, especially in terms of financial costs and domestic politics. But there have also been limitations with regard to the security and defence role it can effectively play in the Indo-Pacific. More pooling of personnel and naval assets through the CMP could signal an increased commitment over the long term. However, without enlarged naval capabilities, the EU risks becoming less credible in its signalling in the Indo-Pacific and in its potential for building partnerships.

¹⁵ Allard, Léonie, Cinzia Bianco, Mathieu Droin, “With Operation Aspides, Europe is charting its own course in and around the Red Sea”, Atlantic Council, 7 March 2024. Available at: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/with-operation-aspides-europe-is-charting-its-own-course/>

¹⁶ Belton Paddy, “EU backs Red Sea naval mission but that may expose ‘splits’ at home” *Brussels Signals*. 23 January 2024. Available at: <https://brusselssignal.eu/2024/01/eu-backs-red-sea-naval-mission-but-that-may-expose-splits-at-home/> (accessed 19 February 2024).

3. Policy recommendations

- 1) Signalling is effective as long as it remains credible, consistent and therefore, regular coordination among EU institutions and between EU member states on both security interests and the mobilisation of naval assets in the Indo-Pacific is crucial. Any open divisions, as in the context of the reaction to ongoing security crises like the Houthi attacks, can send the wrong signals to regional actors. Beyond the annual EU Indo-Pacific Ministerial Forum, the EU should develop a more adaptive and reactive channel to regularly conciliate positions and create a broader and deeper European consensus on the EU's naval interests, notably ensuring maritime security in this part of the Indian Ocean which bridges European and Indo-Pacific sea lines of communication, and the proper tools to mobilise in the Indo-Pacific.¹⁷
- 2) In order to be perceived as a credible actor in the Indo-Pacific and to manage regional expectations, the EU should continue to build common and promising EU initiatives, such as the Coordinated Military Presence, but continue with naval presence operations of groups of individual member states and include the UK.
- 3) Neither currently nor in the foreseeable future will European naval capabilities be competitive in the case of military escalation. Even so, naval capabilities will need to increase and be coupled via bi-, mini-, or multilateral cooperation with like-minded partners in the region such as South Korea, Japan, India, and Australia.¹⁸
- 4) The EU should encourage a gradual and flexible naval strategy, distinguishing it from the US strategy, and manage expectations. The reaction to the Houthi attacks was an example of shared security concerns with US and regional actors, but *Aspides* has been framed as different than the US due to concerns about regional escalation. This differentiated posture brings certain benefits in signalling a distinct position to regional actors which are concerned about the US-China competition and bipolarisation in the region but needs to be carefully managed with partners like the US.
- 5) EU institutions should think more explicitly about the value of signalling as it can help in identifying the real and shared priorities with different audiences in the Indo-Pacific (such as likeminded regional powers, external powers, and non-state actors).

¹⁷ Panda, Jagannath, *Indo-Pacific Security in 2030-35: Links in the Chain*, HCSS report, October 2023. Available at: <https://hcss.nl/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Indo-Pacific-Security-in-2030-35-Links-in-the-Chain-HCSS-2023.pdf> (accessed 19 February 2024).

¹⁸ Benedetta Girardi, Paul van Hooft and Alisa Hoenig, *Getting them on board: Partners and avenues for European engagement in Indo-Pacific maritime security*. HCSS report, January 2024, The Hague. Available at: <https://hcss.nl/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Getting-them-on-board-GTC-HCSS-2024.pdf> (accessed 19 February 2024).