



The Hague Centre  
for Strategic Studies

# Far Seas, Hard Choices

Aligning Ambitious European Objectives with  
Capabilities and Coalitions for the Indo-Pacific

Davis Ellison, Benedetta Girardi and Laura Jasper

October 2024





## Far Seas, Hard Choices

Aligning Ambitious European Objectives with  
Capabilities and Coalitions for the Indo-Pacific

**Authors:**

Davis Ellison, Benedetta Girardi and Laura Jasper

**Contributor:**

Alisa Hoenig

**Cover image source:**

Ministry of Defence, the Netherlands

October 2024

The research for and production of this report has been conducted within the PROGRESS research framework agreement. Responsibility for the contents and for the opinions expressed, rests solely with the authors and does not constitute, nor should be construed as, an endorsement by the Netherlands Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Defense.

© *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.

# Table of Contents

<b>1.</b>	<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>2.</b>	<b>Europeans are pursuing multiple objectives</b>	<b>4</b>
2.1.	China: straddling the line	5
2.2.	Indo-Pacific: reaching out to regional partners	7
2.3.	The United States: To follow, supplement, or provide an alternative?	8
<b>3.</b>	<b>Regional actors have different views</b>	<b>10</b>
3.1.	America's allies: Japan, South Korea, Australia, and the Philippines	11
3.2.	The In-Betweeners: India, Indonesia, and ASEAN	13
<b>4.</b>	<b>How to build a inter-regional naval coalition</b>	<b>15</b>
4.1.	Different objectives require different naval tasks	16
4.2.	Different objectives and tasks, thus require different intensity	18
4.3.	Tensions, trade-offs, and competing coalition options	20
	Case Study: America's <i>Prosperity Guardian</i> vs. Europe's <i>Aspides</i>	22
<b>5.</b>	<b>Conclusion: towards the next generation of maritime coalitions</b>	<b>23</b>



# 1. Introduction

Europe faces hard choices in its security; a clear example of these choices pertains to the role European navies and other military assets can and should play in the Indo-Pacific. The Indo-Pacific has become the centre of gravity for both the global economy and geopolitics.<sup>1</sup> Specifically, the intensifying Sino-American competition has made it the region where the future of US hegemony and hegemonic order will be decided. China is presenting both a challenge to the legal order in the Western Indian Ocean, specifically towards Taiwan and the South China Sea, as well as a challenge to US military hegemony.<sup>2</sup> Demands on Europeans to strengthen maritime security are increasing. The Euro-Asian supply chain is the most significant on the planet, but insecure.<sup>3</sup> The ease with which the Iran-backed Houthi group was able to disrupt global maritime trade at the end of 2023 and the beginning of 2024 was telling.

When it comes to the Indo-Pacific, Europeans are playing an increasingly greater role in the region, both because their economic interests and their interests in a stable order are at stake, and because of their allegiance to the United States.<sup>4</sup> The European engagement with the Indo-Pacific has increased since 2018; multiple European states have increased their military presence in the region, sending naval vessels to the region for port visits and joint exercises. The UK led a carrier group in 2021 that included a Dutch frigate and a US vessel, and travelled from Europe through the Black Sea, Red Sea, and Indian Ocean to the Western Pacific, with a French-led carrier group and a separate German frigate visiting parts of the Indo-Pacific as well.<sup>5</sup> New visits are planned for 2024 and the years after; the Netherlands will send has sent the frigate Tromp to the region.<sup>6</sup> As maritime security is under threat, European maritime missions such as European-led Maritime Awareness in the Strait of Hormuz (EMASOH) and ATALANTA (the first EU naval mission) off the Horn of Africa and the Western Indian Ocean have grown in importance. The EU has also instituted the Coordinated Maritime Presence to enable a long-term, consistent presence in the Western Indian Ocean.<sup>7</sup> This builds on an increased focus on the region evidenced by the publications of policy statements by both individual European states and Europe as a collective.

1 Paul van Hooft, Benedetta Girardi, and Tim Sweijjs, *Guarding the Maritime Commons: What Role for Europe in the Indo-Pacific* (The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, 2022).

2 Paul Van Hooft and Tim Sweijjs, "Why Should Europe Guard the Indo-Pacific Maritime Commons: Order, Access, or US Hegemony?" (The Hague, Netherlands: Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, September 2023), <https://hcsc.nl/report/why-should-europe-guard-the-indo-pacific-maritime-commons-order-access-or-us-hegemony/>.

3 Benedetta Girardi, Paul Van Hooft, and Giovanni Cisco, "What the Indo-Pacific Means to Europe: Trade Value, Chokepoints, and Security Risks" (The Hague, Netherlands: Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, 2023).

4 Van Hooft and Sweijjs, "Why Should Europe Guard the Indo-Pacific Maritime Commons."

5 George Allison, "British Carrier Strike Group to Sail through South China Sea," UKDJ, April 28, 2021; Frank Gardner, "China Warns UK as Carrier Strike Group Approaches," *BBC News*, July 29, 2021, sec. Asia; Xavier Vavasseur, "French Carrier Strike Group Begins 2021 Deployment," USNI News, February 23, 2021. Blake Herzinger, "Germany Nervously Tests the Indo-Pacific Waters," *Foreign Policy*, January 3, 2022.

6 Jaime Karremann, "Fregat Tromp volgend jaar door Zuid-Chinese Zee," *Marineschepen.nl*, accessed January 29, 2024, <https://marineschepen.nl/nieuws/Tromp-volgend-jaar-naar-Zuid-Chinese-Zee-031123.html>.

7 "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," accessed January 22, 2024, <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/>.

Of the military assets that states can deploy for political purposes, navies are particularly powerful means to send a signal to allies, partners, and adversaries; they are highly mobile, fungible, easy to slip into multiple coalitions, and can fulfil numerous peacetime tasks besides warfighting.<sup>8</sup> But in the case of the growing European naval presence in the Indo-Pacific, *to what ends are they the means?* What signals can the naval presence send to respectively other Europeans, to regional Indo-Pacific states including partners, and to the United States and China? Can these simultaneous signals be effective or do they cancel each other out?

Europe's strategy regarding the Indo-Pacific lacks focus and is rather a laundry list of desired outcomes and activities,<sup>9</sup> than a more meaningful ends-means theory of how a state "causes security" for itself<sup>10</sup>, underlining priorities within objectives and articulating the trade-offs between various costs and benefits. Hard choices have not been common for European policymakers, as three decades of relative peace in and near Europe – or at least the Western European core of the European Union and NATO – has negated much of the urgency. Navies have suffered as a consequence.<sup>11</sup>

Nonetheless, there *are* clear and hard choices to be made by Europeans. In the Indo-Pacific, they are pursuing multiple objectives, from hoping to reassure regional partners and allies, deterring China, maintaining a relationship with China, strengthening the relationship with the United States, while not weakening European capabilities needed for Europe and overspending on limited defence resources. These objectives are not fully compatible; in fact, they are, to a large extent, contradictory. In this brief, we identify the following eight stylized objectives:

1. Maintain good relations with China;
2. Maintain good relations with Japan, Australia, and South Korea;
3. Maintain good relations with states in Southeast Asia;
4. Ensure free and open sealines in Western Pacific;
5. Maintain international maritime law regime;
6. Limit defence spending in general / ensure sufficient resources for defence and deterrence in Europe, and obligations to NATO;
7. Prevent Chinese hegemony in the Western Pacific;
8. Support the United States and the transatlantic relationship.

Each of these objectives suggests different naval tasks, and each of these tasks suggests a different level of intensity. Whereas supporting international maritime law might only require a small physical presence of a frigate or offshore patrol boat for maritime law enforcement, reassurance and deterrence as part of a great power conflict far from Europe would require offensive and defensive capabilities, power projection capabilities, and significant logistics.

8 Naval presence sends a signal of state interests. Ian Speller, *Understanding Naval Warfare*, 2nd ed. (Second edition. | Abingdon, Oxon ; N.Y., NY : Routledge, [2019]: Routledge, 2018), 83. Colin S. Gray, *The Leverage of Sea Power: The Strategic Advantage of Navies in War* (Free Press, 1992), 2; Speller, *Understanding Naval Warfare*, 25. Kevin Rowlands, *Naval Diplomacy in the 21st Century: A Model for the Post-Cold War Global Order* (Routledge, 2018). Christian Le Mière, *Maritime Diplomacy in the 21st Century: Drivers and Challenges* (Routledge, 2014).

9 Lawrence Freedman, *Strategy: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 610–11.

10 Barry R. Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine: France, Britain, and Germany between the World Wars* (Cornell University Press, 1984), 1.

11 Paul van Hooft, Davis Ellison, and Frederik Mertens, "Maritime Security in a Time of Renewed Interstate Competition: Navigating the Royal Netherlands Navy through the Geopolitical and Technological Challenges and Threats in the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific Regions" (The Hague, Netherlands: The Hague Centre For Strategic Studies, 2024).

## Europe's strategy regarding the Indo Pacific lacks focus.

This brief explores why and how different coalitions of European military forces can form and deploy to the Indo-Pacific. It explores the trade-offs faced by European states as they seek both partners within Europe and in the region and the respective impacts these choices make on the military and economic dynamics of the region.

First, we explore the varying objectives European states are exploring in the Indo-Pacific, relative to regional and international perspectives (namely China, select regional states, and the United States). Second, we review the positions of regional states in greater detail with an aim towards informing possible coalition formations. Third, the specific naval tasks that European states have indicated a desire to perform are broken down in greater detail, specifically in relation to the availability of actual capabilities. Finally, these three sections combine into a theoretical exploration of possible coalitions of European and Indo-Pacific states and their likely impacts on relations with China and on regional stability.

## 2. Europeans are pursuing multiple objectives

Europeans are pursuing multiple objectives in the Indo-Pacific region, some of which are complementary, some which are not. Not only Europe's key maritime powers, the UK and France, have articulated their interest in the region,<sup>12</sup> but also Germany and the Netherlands,<sup>13</sup> as well as the EU itself.<sup>14</sup> The documents have overlapping objectives with respect to multilateralism, legalism and freedom of the seas. Current practice already demonstrates differentiated objectives between European states.<sup>15</sup> The European Union's strategy in the region identifies a number of priority areas for regional engagement, with the security and defence effort being focused on the protection of sea lines of communication (SLOCs), capacity-building, enhanced naval presence, and countering cybercrime. Most national strategies that focus on the region roughly map onto these priorities, as identified in Table XYZ below. However, divergences can clearly be seen.

**Table 1. Summary of European naval objectives in the Indo-Pacific**



	SLOC protection	Deterring China	Capacity building	Naval presence	Cyber	Counter-Piracy	Counter-terrorism
EU	X	X	X	X	X	X	
Germany			X	X			
France	X		X		X		X
Netherlands	X		X	X			
Italy	X						
Spain	X		X	X			
UK	X	X	X	X	X		

<sup>12</sup> France and Security in the Indo Pacific," May 2019, 6. "France's Defence Strategy in the Indo-Pacific" (Paris: Ministère des Armées, 2019), 16. Though the British statement is not a dedicated policy document, it discusses the tilt to the region extensively. "Global Britain in a Competitive Age: The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy" (HM Government, March 2021), 67.

<sup>13</sup> Policy Guidelines for the Indo-Pacific," August 2020, 23–26. "Indo-Pacific: Guidelines for Strengthening Dutch and EU Cooperation with Partners in Asia" (Government of the Netherlands, November 2020).

<sup>14</sup> "Council Conclusions on an EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific" (Council of the European Union, April 16, 2021). The EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific" (European Commission, September 16, 2021), 2.

<sup>15</sup> Eva Pejsova, "The EU's Naval Presence in the Indo-Pacific: What Is It Worth?," Europe in the Indo-Pacific Hub (The Hague: The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, March 2023), <https://hcss.nl/report/the-eus-naval-presence-in-the-indo-pacific-what-is-it-worth/>.

The multiple objectives within the region for Europeans are in inherent tension with one another, with a balancing act of political, military, and economic engagement with China, regional states, and the U.S. The following sections explore each of these relationships in turn and in greater detail.

## 2.1. China: straddling the line

The European attitude towards China has shifted, with more explicitly critical voices emerging since 2020. The 2019 statement by the EU Commission captured that shift towards a more complex outlook; China was a “partner”, a “competitor”, and a “systemic rival”.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, China is included as an authoritarian challenge – though not a threat - in the 2022 NATO Strategic Concept.<sup>17</sup>

The tension comes through in the references to China in the Indo-Pacific strategies refer to China. The Netherlands notes that the Sino-American competition is “increasingly extending into the realism of security policy”, most visibly in the East and South China Sea.<sup>18</sup> Consequently, the document notes, “the region must be prevented from becoming a pawn in the great-power contest”, where the EU can help “preserve” the balance and when necessary provide “a counterweight “ to the influence of “one or more great powers”.<sup>19</sup>

The British, reflecting similar American thinking, note that China under the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is “an epoch-defining and systemic challenge”, which is pursuing “regional and global dominance” and is a threat to “the rules-based international order”. Which is likely to culminate in direct or “grey zone” aggression against Taiwan.<sup>20</sup> China is responsible for “escalating tensions in the Indo-Pacific” and present a challenge to a region that should remain “free and open for the prosperity of all”.<sup>21</sup> Britain doubled-down with its strategy in 2021 by sending a carrier group to the South China Sea, which prompted warnings from Beijing.<sup>22</sup> The Chinese defence ministry noted that “The Chinese side believes that the South China Sea should not become a sea of great power rivalry dominated by weapons and warships”.<sup>23</sup>

16 European Commission, “EU-China Strategic Outlook: Commission and HR/VP Contribution to the European Council (21-22 March 2019),” Text, European Commission - European Commission, March 21, 2019, [https://ec.europa.eu/info/publications/eu-china-strategic-outlook-commission-contribution-european-council-21-22-march-2019\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/publications/eu-china-strategic-outlook-commission-contribution-european-council-21-22-march-2019_en).

17 NATO, “NATO 2022 - Strategic Concept” (Brussels: NATO, June 2022), <https://www.nato.int/strategic-concept/index.html>; Paul Van Hooft, “China and the Indo-Pacific in the 2022 NATO Strategic Concept,” *Atlantisch Perspectief*, September 2022.

18 “Indo-Pacific: Guidelines for Strengthening Dutch and EU Cooperation with Partners in Asia,” 4.

19 “Indo-Pacific: Guidelines for Strengthening Dutch and EU Cooperation with Partners in Asia,” 5.

20 Defence Committee, “House of Commons Defence Committee, UK Defence and the Indo-Pacific, Eleventh Report of Session 2022-2023,” Text (London: House of Commons, October 24, 2023), 3,6, 2022-2023, <https://www.publicinformationonline.com/shop/409453>.

21 “Defence Command Paper 2023: Defence’s Response to a More Contested and Volatile World,” GOV.UK, October 2, 2023, 8–9, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/defence-command-paper-2023-defences-response-to-a-more-contested-and-volatile-world>.

22 Frank Gardner, “China Warns UK as Carrier Strike Group Approaches,” BBC News, July 29, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-58015367>.

23 “NATO Navies Send Strategic Signals in the Indo-Pacific | Proceedings - August 2022 Vol. 148/8/1,434,” accessed February 1, 2024, <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2022/august/nato-navies-send-strategic-signals-indo-pacific>.



Both France and Germany have clearly sought a more balanced approach in relation to China, though not often with much success. Berlin's efforts to engage regional states equally and inclusively were not entirely successful, when the German frigate *Bayern* was denied access to the port of Shanghai in September 2021.<sup>24</sup> A French passage through the Taiwan Strait in 2019 led to accusations that France had "illegally entered Chinese waters".<sup>25</sup> Regardless, both states maintain close trade relations with China. Indeed, China is Germany's largest trade partner ahead of both the U.S. and the Netherlands.<sup>26</sup> French foreign minister Catherine Colonna stated that Paris is "really committed to dialogue with China" despite tensions over trade imbalances and technology transfer restrictions.<sup>27</sup> The economic relationship simply precludes aggressive competition or an increased securitisation of relations with Paris and Berlin.

This balance is not entirely consistent across Europe, however. In Italy, Giorgia Meloni announced in December 2023 that her country would be withdrawing from China's controversial Belt and Road Initiative. The Meloni government has been much more transatlantic in its outlook since coming into office, with this step solidifying a closer relationship with Washington and London's approach to China.<sup>28</sup> Conversely, Spain has sought to maintain economic relations with China, but also has increasingly engaged diplomatically, particularly over the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez has been particularly proactive about engaging Beijing to develop a ceasefire and peace plan for the war, an effort that differentiates Madrid from many of its NATO and EU allies. This is all occurring alongside consistent Spanish endorsement of collective EU stances towards China on matters related to trade, Taiwan, and technology.<sup>29</sup>

Overall, the geoeconomics of trade between Asia and Europe bars a full repudiation of relations between EU states and China. Indeed, just as Britain took steps to both militarise and increase its presence in the Indo-Pacific, its trade relationship with China grew stronger than ever.<sup>30</sup> Similarly, Britain has applied to both the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), both of which would more closely tie this close U.S. allies' economy into the China-dominated regional economic structure. This is all occurring alongside the membership of 24 European states in the Beijing-dominated Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). As far as policy debates go on either military posture in the Indo-Pacific or economic 'de-risking' with Beijing, they can only ever go so far (as of this writing) without seriously disrupting the trade and investment architecture between regions.<sup>31</sup>

24 "China Denies German Warship Entry into Harbour, Berlin Says," *Reuters*, September 16, 2021, sec. Europe, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/china-denies-german-warship-entry-into-harbour-berlin-says-2021-09-15/>.

25 "Making Sense of China's Reaction to the French Navy's Taiwan Strait Transit – The Diplomat," accessed February 1, 2024, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/04/making-sense-of-chinas-reaction-to-the-french-navys-taiwan-strait-transit/>.

26 "The People's Republic of China Is Again Germany's Main Trading Partner," German Federal Statistical Office, 2022, <https://www.destatis.de/EN/Themes/Economy/Foreign-Trade/trading-partners.html>.

27 Laurie Chen, John Irish, and Laurie Chen, "China and Europe Should Work Together to Enhance Stable Trade Ties - Wang," *Reuters*, November 24, 2023, sec. World, <https://www.reuters.com/world/french-foreign-minister-visits-china-soothe-ties-after-ev-probe-2023-11-24/>.

28 Ilaria Mazzocco and Andrea Leonard Palazzi, "Italy Withdraws from China's Belt and Road Initiative," Center for Strategic and International Studies, December 14, 2023, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/italy-withdraws-chinas-belt-and-road-initiative>.

29 Mario Estaban and Ugo Armanini, "Spain's Informal China Policy: A Coherent and Europeanist Approach," Elcano Royal Institute, October 23, 2023, <https://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/en/analyses/spains-informal-china-policy-a-coherent-and-europeanist-approach/>.

30 "UK Trade with China: 2021," UK Office for National Statistics, 2021, <https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/nationalaccounts/balanceofpayments/articles/uktradewithchina2021/2022-06-01>.

31 "Li Qiang Co-Chairs the 24th China-EU Summit with President of the European Council Charles Michel and President of the European Commission Ursula von Der Leyen," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, December 7, 2023, [https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/zxxx\\_662805/202312/t20231211\\_11199403.html](https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/zxxx_662805/202312/t20231211_11199403.html).

The geoeconomics of trade between Asia and Europe bars a full repudiation of relations between EU states and China.

Simply put, European objectives are caught between a desire for an increased security presence, though with different underlying motivations, and the need to preserve a working relationship with the world's second-largest (and likely future largest) economy.

## 2.2. Indo-Pacific: reaching out to regional partners

The tension towards China extends to the depth of outreach to states with which European states could collaborate in the Indo-Pacific. Regional states, particularly those in ASEAN, have to balance any desire to contain China's military ambitions with their economic ties to Beijing. Furthermore, alignment in the Indo-Pacific is often not viewed as something binary. For many states, pursuing close economic relations with China does not prejudice against security cooperation with, say, Europe. This "multi-alignment" can be readily seen in the case of Vietnam, which has increased its engagement with both the United States *and* China in recent years. These outwardly contradictory but inwardly consistent policies will be vital for crafting strategies towards engaging with regional powers.

The Indo-Pacific strategies underline the importance of reaching out to regional partners to maintain the maritime order specifically, and a multilateral order more generally. The Dutch strategy notes that the majority of states in the Indo-Pacific look to avoid "becoming a pawn of one of the great powers or spoils in the conflict between them". In search of "anchors", the Europeans may play such a role for small and middle powers in the Indo-Pacific.<sup>32</sup> The Netherlands is also clear that it is in the interest of European states to collaborate with states in the Indo-Pacific to "safeguard peace and security, reduce tensions on trade issues, promote maritime security and unhindered safe passage on shipping routes", and that "far away", developments in the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean will affect European and Dutch prosperity.<sup>33</sup>

France has been especially active in building relations with the region, with Paris presenting itself as an alternative partner to the United States in China. President Macron said before the 2022 meeting of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum (APEC) that "in the spirit of confrontation between big elephants, having a good friend in this jungle could be an asset -- and I think we are probably this reliable and trustworthy good friend in the jungle."<sup>34</sup>

Moreover, the EU has underlined more specific goals by highlighting the importance of freedom of navigation and overflight for regional security and stability, specifically in accordance with the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).<sup>35</sup> Institutionally, the EU has been a "strategic partner" of ASEAN since 2020, with the agreed areas of cooperation including "peace and stability [...] crime and counter terrorism, cyber security, and maritime security."<sup>36</sup>

32 "Indo-Pacific: Guidelines for Strengthening Dutch and EU Cooperation with Partners in Asia," 1.

33 "Indo-Pacific: Guidelines for Strengthening Dutch and EU Cooperation with Partners in Asia," 3.

34 Gwen Robinson, "Macron Sets Sights on France-ASEAN Dialogue Partnership," Nikkei Asia, November 18, 2022, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Editor-s-Picks/Interview/Macron-sets-sights-on-France-ASEAN-dialogue-partnership>.

35 "EU Indo-Pacific Ministerial Forum: Co-Chairs' Press Release | EEAS," accessed January 29, 2024, [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu-indo-pacific-ministerial-forum-co-chairs%E2%80%99-press-release\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu-indo-pacific-ministerial-forum-co-chairs%E2%80%99-press-release_en).

36 "EU-ASEAN Strategic Partnership," European External Action Service, December 1, 2020, [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu-asean-strategic-partnership\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu-asean-strategic-partnership_en).

There are, of course, a variety of layered and overlapping challenges to establishing objectives for a region in which states differ widely in alignments, goals, and state structures. ASEAN alone features a member with a full mutual defence treaty with the U.S. (Philippines) and another that is a designated Major Non-NATO Ally (Thailand). Meanwhile Indonesia, while making some defence overtures to both China and the United States, has consciously remained non-aligned both out of economic interest and with the aim to keep itself and ASEAN independent.<sup>37</sup>

Beyond Southeast Asia, defence relations between European and Pacific states have grown particularly strong in recent years. Britain's involvement in the AUKUS deal covers a wide range of cooperation measures, most importantly including an effort to jointly build nuclear-powered submarines with Australia and the United States.<sup>38</sup> This deal upset relations between Canberra and Paris, who had previously agreed a deal to purchase French-made submarines.<sup>39</sup> Britain and Italy have developed close relations with Japan in developing the sixth-generation Global Combat Aircraft Programme (GCAP), which includes a fairly clear effort to match Chinese military developments.<sup>40</sup> Germany and Poland have developed close defence relationships with South Korea, with Berlin selling Seoul advanced long-range Taurus missiles and Warsaw purchasing South Korean tanks.<sup>41</sup>

European states have tread carefully in the Indo-Pacific thus far. Goals range from improved economic ties with ASEAN states, to offering an alternative to American primacy, to deterring China, and to reassuring regional states. This, of course, cannot all be done simultaneously. These goals are at crossed-purposes and the possible impact on further cooperation will be explored in a later section below.

## 2.3. The United States: To follow, supplement, or provide an alternative?

The American position on the Indo-Pacific region is nearly totally dominated by concerns about China and its continually growing military and economic power. Arguably, U.S. is attempting to enact a modern containment policy against China to ensure its own primacy in the region. Several U.S. administrations have also effectively taken the U.S. out of the economic game in the area by refusing to join what are perceived as China-led trade agreements. Washington also maintains its own alliance network with mutual defence treaties with Japan, Korea, Australia, New Zealand, and the Philippines. It has come to a point where the U.S. is perhaps over-committed in a security sense to the region while under-involved in the wider diplomatic, political, and economic scene in the Indo-Pacific.

37 Huong Le Thu, "How to Survive a Great-Power Competition: Southeast Asia's Precarious Balancing Act," *Foreign Affairs* 102, no. 3 (June 2023): 30–36.

38 "AUKUS Joint Leaders' Statement," U.S. Embassy & Consulates in Australia, March 14, 2023, <https://au.usembassy.gov/aukus-joint-leaders-statement/>.

39 Maddison Connaughton, "AUKUS Gets Awkward Down Under," *Foreign Policy* (blog), March 24, 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/03/24/aukus-australia-submarine-deal-paul-keating/>.

40 "FCAS | Global Combat Air Programme," BAE Systems | International, accessed February 6, 2024, <https://www.baesystems.com/en/product/global-combat-air-programme>.

41 Ian Bowers and Henrik Stålhane Hiim, "Conventional Counterforce Dilemmas: South Korea's Deterrence Strategy and Stability on the Korean Peninsula," *International Security* 45, no. 3 (January 1, 2021): 7–39, [https://doi.org/10.1162/isec\\_a\\_00399](https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00399); Blake Herzinger, "Germany's Tank Blunder Creates South Korean Market in Europe," *Foreign Policy*, January 30, 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/01/30/south-korea-europe-k2-tanks-defense-partnerships-germany/>.

The US messaging on Europe in the Indo-Pacific— during the Biden administration — has been mixed. The Joint Press Release by the European External Action Service (EEAS) and the Department of State on the High-Level Consultations on the Indo-Pacific notes that the US and the EU share strategic interests in strengthening cooperation with partners in the Indo-Pacific on the bases of shared values and interests and in support of multilateral rules-based frameworks.<sup>42</sup>

More materially, U.S. officials have referenced the actual military capabilities of European states in terms of Washington's Indo-Pacific goals. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin has framed European efforts in the Indo-Pacific as in line with U.S. efforts to counter China's growing military assertiveness and that the U.S. strategy for the Indo-Pacific recognizes, "like France", the "strategic value" of an increased role of the EU in the Indo-Pacific.<sup>43 44</sup> The Congressional Research Service argued more concretely that, European "efforts reinforce the United States' goal of maintaining regional stability by strengthening a collective deterrent to challenges to international security norm."<sup>45</sup>

This messaging has been inconsistent, however, with Secretary Austin noting that the British carrier groups in the region do little in terms of practical terms to strengthen US forces against China and that the UK could be more helpful in other parts of the world. European efforts closer to home would, in this view, relieve the U.S. of its presently overstretched security commitments.<sup>46</sup>

The question for European states then is to consider how far along the shared path with the U.S. they want to go. The argument for European presence in the Indo-Pacific has partly been the need to signal support for U.S. objectives. However, more independent policies have also been expressed. The Netherlands notes that its approach in the Indo-Pacific should reflect the "distinctive European outlook" on the region, and the EU's "economic and political interests".<sup>47</sup> France underlines its national interests as it is the "only European state" with territories in the Indian Ocean and the Pacific; yet, it will do this in line with the ambition to make the EU a more autonomous actor.<sup>48</sup> Britain, however, is more closely aligned with the U.S. as both a result of London's general foreign policy preferences but also out of a connection to regional states such as Australia and Singapore.

When it comes to the relationship with the United States, European states should consider the variety of competing goals. Three are particularly clear: (1) the relative importance of maintaining the transatlantic defence relationship; (2) maintaining effective economic ties with China; and (3) building equitable relations with other regional states who are wary of American militarisation in the region.

42 "EU-U.S.: Joint Press Release by the EEAS and Department of State on the High-Level Consultations on the Indo-Pacific - United States Department of State," US Department of State, December 3, 2021, <https://www.state.gov/eu-u-s-joint-press-release-by-the-eeas-and-department-of-state-on-the-high-level-consultations-on-the-indo-pacific/>.

43 "Austin Says U.S. Supports EU Common Defense Plans That Strengthen NATO," *RadioFreeEurope*, October 22, 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/austin-nato-eu-defense/31524792.html>.

44 White House, "The Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States" (Washington D.C: The White House, February 11, 2022), 7.

45 <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF11052> FOR SELF, ZOTERO THIS SOURCE

46 Anatol Lieven, "The US Doesn't Need Europe's Help in the 'Indo-Pacific,'" *Responsible Statecraft* (blog), July 30, 2021, <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2021/07/30/the-us-doesnt-need-europes-help-in-the-indo-pacific/>.

47 "Indo-Pacific: Guidelines for Strengthening Dutch and EU Cooperation with Partners in Asia," 4.

48 "The Indo-Pacific, a Strategic Region for Our Security Interests: Speech by the Minister," France in South Sudan, January 29, 2024, <https://ssd.ambafrance.org/The-Indo-Pacific-a-Strategic-Region-for-our-Security-Interests-Speech-by-the>.

The question for European states then is to consider how far along the shared path with the U.S. they want to go.

# 3. Regional actors have different views

It is not only Europe that is facing choices, however. States in the region, particularly ASEAN, are being increasingly pressured into either Washington or Beijing's camp and the balance of economic reliance on China and security reliance on the US is increasingly untenable. Meanwhile, instability is persistent in the Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean, with ongoing conflicts in eastern Africa, Yemen, and ongoing tension in the Persian Gulf threatening vital sea lines of communication to Europe.

As a consequence, Europe's increased attention to the Indo-Pacific is not a one-way street. Key regional middle powers including Japan, South Korea, Australia, Indonesia, as well as India, have welcomed greater European engagement with the region, especially in the maritime domain.<sup>49</sup> Japan underlines the "free and open Indo-Pacific" model, and the support it gained not only from the U.S., but also European states and emerging and developing countries.<sup>50</sup> Similarly, South Korea in its own Indo-Pacific role, writes that European states are "important partners" and substantive cooperation with the EU and its members states, specifically France and Germany, as well as the UK, on a "rules-based order" would be needed, precisely because they share the "same core values of freedom, democracy, and human rights".<sup>51</sup>

This section explores two major groupings of Indo-Pacific states, the first being the more clearly U.S.-aligned states of Japan, South Korea, Australia, and the Philippines, and the second being the more non- or multi-aligned states of India, Indonesia, and ASEAN more broadly. These groupings are naturally imperfect, and therefore the section addresses specific national concerns in greater detail in order to address differing policies with sufficient nuance.

49 Satoshi Sugiyama, "As Europe's Interest in the Indo-Pacific Grows, Is Japan Ready to Lead the Way?," *The Japan Times*, May 18, 2021. Alexandra Brzozowski, "Ambassador: EU and South Korea Born to Be Best like-Minded Partners," *Euractiv*, May 5, 2021. Garima Mohan, "Where Does Europe Fit in India's Indo-Pacific Policy?," *Sasakawa USA*, March 21, 2022. "Jaishankar: Distance No Insulation, Challenges in Indo-Pacific Could Extend to Europe: Jaishankar - The Economic Times," *Economic Times India Times*, February 22, 2022. Rory Medcalf, "Antipodean Entente: Optimising Australia and Europe's Indo-Pacific Partnership," in *Europe's Indo-Pacific Embrace: Global Partnerships for Regional Resilience* (Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, 2021). Susannah Patton, "Australia's Views of Europe in Indo-Pacific: Potential for Balance," *Sasakawa USA*, February 25, 2022. Kiki Verico, "How Indonesia Sees the Indo-Pacific Economic Architecture," *The National Bureau of Asian Research (NBR)* (blog), November 6, 2021.

50 "New Plan for a 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP)," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 1, accessed January 30, 2024, [https://www.mofa.go.jp/foip/pc/page3e\\_001336.html](https://www.mofa.go.jp/foip/pc/page3e_001336.html).

51 "Strategy for a Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region" (Seoul, South Korea: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, December 2022).



### 3.1. America's allies: Japan, South Korea, Australia, and the Philippines

European states have reached out individually, and as a collective, to a specific grouping of states with which it not only has long-established relationships, but also closer affinity in terms of values, and that also possess significant capacity.<sup>52</sup> These states, all treaty allies of the United States since the early Cold War, have also moved much closer to NATO institutionally in recent years.<sup>53</sup> Much of this proximity is explained by (largely) shared threat perceptions of Chinese capabilities and intentions. Japan has high expectations for greater European commitments to the Indo-Pacific as it also considers an actual Sino-US confrontation a threat to its interests.<sup>54</sup> Australia, likewise, has welcomed European force projection in the Indo-Pacific, specifically by the French and the British, as necessary to discourage China's coercive and destabilizing behaviour in the region.<sup>55</sup>

Australia and New Zealand have perhaps the longest running security partnerships with European states, due mostly to both states being former British Dominions and now Commonwealth members. Both joined NATO in Afghanistan, though this was primarily due to the aim of signalling support to Washington. This largely Atlanticist bent in their policies has not prevented overtures to Europe more widely, however. Australia states that it is committed to working with the EU, alongside regional partners, and the Australian Prime Minister, the European Council president and European Commission president underlined the importance of "ASEAN centrality" and a "ASEAN-led architecture" to underline regional stability.<sup>56</sup> Australia's relationship with Europe is, however, channelled strongly through the AUKUS partnership, which it perceives as the best bet to "ensure regional stability and security".<sup>57</sup> This has had a particularly negative impact on Canberra's relationship with Paris, as described earlier. Importantly, New Zealand has not consistently followed the line of "Washington's camp." Current Prime Minister Chris Hipkins has moderated language related to Beijing in the past year, seeking to ensure the stability of trade relations with its second largest trade partner after Australia.<sup>58</sup> Relatedly, Wellington has in the past been more sceptical of Washington's security involvement in the Pacific, particularly when it comes to the stationing of nuclear weapons.<sup>59</sup>

52 Benedetta Girardi, Paul Van Hoof, and Alisa Hoenig, "Getting Them on Board: Partners and Avenues for European Engagement in Indo-Pacific Maritime Security" (The Hague, Netherlands: Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, 2024).

53 "Relations with Partners in the Indo-Pacific Region," NATO, August 17, 2023, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_183254.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_183254.htm).

54 Celine Pajon, "The EU-Japan Partnership in the Indo-Pacific: Opportunities and Challenges," *Real Institute Elcano*, March 12, 2021, <https://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/en/analyses/the-eu-japan-partnership-in-the-indo-pacific-opportunities-and-challenges/>.

55 Medcalf, "Antipodean Entente: Optimising Australia and Europe's Indo-Pacific Partnership." Australia is pushed towards higher European involvement in the Indo-Pacific because the US is no longer the peerless regional hegemon. Patton, "Australia's Views of Europe in Indo-Pacific: Potential for Balance."

56 "Australia-EU Leaders' Meeting 2022: Joint Press Release by Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, European Council President Charles Michel and European Commission President Ursula von Der Leyen," accessed January 30, 2024, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/11/16/australia-eu-leaders-meeting-2022-joint-press-release-by-australian-prime-minister-anthony-albanese-european-council-president-charles-michel-and-european-commission-president-ursula-von-der-leyen/>.

57 "An Enduring Partnership in an Era of Change," Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, January 31, 2023, <https://www.foreignminister.gov.au/minister/penny-wong/speech/enduring-partnership-era-change>.

58 Derek Grossman, "New Zealand's New Prime Minister Is Making Nice with China," RAND Corporation, August 9, 2023, <https://www.rand.org/pubs/commentary/2023/08/new-zealands-new-prime-minister-is-making-nice-with.html>.

59 Van Jackson, *Pacific Power Paradox* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2023).

South Korea has welcomed the EU's Indo-Pacific strategy, considering it more inclusive and with less emphasis on geopolitical competition.<sup>60</sup> Seoul, in its own Indo-Pacific strategy, further notes that European states are "important partners" and substantive cooperation with the EU and its members states, specifically France and Germany, as well as the UK, on a "rules-based order" would be needed, precisely because they share the "same core values of freedom, democracy, and human rights".<sup>61</sup> From a security perspective, however, Seoul's priority is very much centred on addressing its key threat from North Korea, wherein the South's relationship is much more dominated by its alliance with the United States. This does not necessarily preclude defence relations, as the South Korean purchase of German Taurus missiles as part of its conventional deterrence shows.<sup>62</sup>

Japan is an interesting case as a potential European partner. Tokyo believes that greater European engagement in Asia will improve regional peace and stability<sup>63</sup> and agreed to a Strategic Partnership where the EU and Japan would play the role of a stabilizer in the region.<sup>64</sup> Economic relations between Japan and Europe are also high, particularly in high-value added technology categories.<sup>65</sup> Japan's involvement in the GCAP sixth-generation fighter programme with Britain and Italy also speaks to its interest in deeper engagement. From a security standpoint, Tokyo's evolution from a reluctant security actor to one much more proactively engaged in efforts to contain China's behaviour likely points to a more Anglo-American-Australian alignment, particularly due to ongoing territorial disputes with Beijing and the possible role Japanese territory would play in a Sino-American war.<sup>66</sup>

The Philippines is the final example of a more unequivocally U.S.-aligned regional state with which European states could increasingly engage. Manila finds itself in an interesting position, one in which it is both reliant on an American security guarantee in its relations with China, but also a member of ASEAN and looks to maintain close economic ties with Beijing. The country has increasingly built its defence relations with Washington, especially with new President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. (son of the former dictator) seeking to mend ties after the fractious former president Rodrigo Duterte. This has included increasing joint exercises, opening more base access, and generally taken a much more domestically popular anti-Beijing stance.<sup>67</sup> This alignment does not fully subtract from the need to balance economic ties with China however, much of which is mediated through its membership in ASEAN, which arguably protects Manila from the push-and-pull of the Sino-American trade war. In its relations with

60 Brzozowski, "Ambassador: EU and South Korea Born to Be Best like-Minded Partners."

61 "Strategy for a Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region."

62 Bowers and Hiim, "Conventional Counterforce Dilemmas."

63 Sugiyama, "As Europe's Interest in the Indo-Pacific Grows, Is Japan Ready to Lead the Way?" Overall, Japanese officials which have been lobbying for an increased European interest in the region, are welcoming their growing presence. Sugiyama.

64 Japanese defence minister Nobuo Kishi urged European nations for a stronger military involvement in the Indo-Pacific to counter China's influence in the region. Wong, "Japan Urges Europe to Have Stronger Military Presence in Asia to Tackle China." "Defense Minister Kishi's Attendance at the European Parliament (Virtual Format)," Ministry of Defense of Japan, June 17, 2021, <https://www.mod.go.jp/en/article/2021/06/76a1995c77df2f3d7a9838af79427eea64520c56.html>. Kishi went as far to stat that the Indo-Pacific security is no longer separate from that of Europe, intending to enhance Japan's commitment to the security of Europe "Quote Of The Day," Japan Today, May 8, 2022, <https://japantoday.com/category/quote-of-the-day/we-can-no-longer-separate-the-security-of-the-indo-pacific-from-that-of-europe-and-i-am-determined-to-enhance-japan%E2%80%99s-commitment-to-the-security-of-europe>.

65 Girardi, Van Hoof, and Cisco, "What the Indo-Pacific Means to Europe: Trade Value, Chokepoints, and Security Risks."

66 Sheila A. Smith, *Japan Rearmed: The Politics of Military Power* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019).

67 Poppy McPherson, Karen Lema, and Devjyot Ghosal, "How the U.S. Courted the Philippines to Thwart China," *Reuters*, November 29, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/us-china-philippines-marcos/>.

Europe, the Philippines does maintain close trade ties and has recently signed a reinforced defence cooperation agreement with Britain.<sup>68</sup> This loose engagement mechanisms with European states can perhaps best be seen in the light of Manila's effort to balance its relationship with the U.S. with broader engagement to both hedge against U.S. retrenchment and to ensure economic stability.

## 3.2. The In-Betweeners: India, Indonesia, and ASEAN

A larger group of states in South and Southeast Asia share an interest with European states in maintaining a free and open maritime order, managed through legal institutions – even if, as our previous work shows, the affinity between them and European states on other matters is more limited.<sup>69</sup> Particularly stressed through ASEAN as a group, this is with a clear goal to remain multi-aligned in whichever relations are most effective.<sup>70</sup> Additionally, India has very openly supported EU cooperation in the region as closer to its own policy priorities, welcoming the EU's promise to contribute to regional security,<sup>71</sup> with a wide interest in the EU's expertise on economic development, infrastructure, connectivity, digital transformation, climate change and biodiversity.<sup>72</sup>

India is certainly an interesting case in that it maintains a staunch interest in an independent foreign policy and is a member of the BRICS constellation with China, yet has joined in the loose Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, or "Quad", coalition alongside the U.S., Australia, and Japan which has a clear goal of containing China. The looseness of the Quad configuration arguably explains this discrepancy.<sup>73</sup> While some exercises have been jointly conducted, security cooperation remains loose and is unlikely to form into a more permanent arrangement. Given that India has competing interests in its rivalry with Pakistan, a Major Non-NATO Ally of the U.S. and close security partner of Britain. This is also reflective of a more general aim of a strongly independent, post-colonial foreign policy that is extremely reticent to join forums that would leave New Delhi as a follower to another state's goals.<sup>74</sup> Therefore, while there has been some closeness to Washington, and an undeniable rivalry with Beijing, the door perhaps remains open for further engagement with Europe. This has been evidenced

68 Antonio G.M. la Viña and Florisa C. Almodiel-Luteijn, "The Philippines: Positive EU Ties Despite Divisive Rhetoric," in *The Southern Mirror: Reflections on Europe From the Global South* (Brussels: Carnegie Europe, 2022), <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2022/06/29/philippines-positive-eu-ties-despite-divisive-rhetoric-pub-87311>; Joyce Ann L. Rocamora, "PH, UK Ink Defense Pact; Focus Set on Maritime Domain," Philippine News Agency, January 16, 2024, <https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1217069>.

69 Girardi, Van Hooft, and Hoenig, "Getting Them on Board: Partners and Avenues for European Engagement in Indo-Pacific Maritime Security."

70 Le Thu, "How to Survive a Great-Power Competition: Southeast Asia's Precarious Balancing Act."

71 Mohan, "Where Does Europe Fit in India's Indo-Pacific Policy?" Indian External Affairs Minister Jaishankar said they are welcoming EU's commitment to contribute to security of the region at the EU Ministerial Forum on the Indo Pacific. "Jaishankar: Distance No Insulation, Challenges in Indo-Pacific Could Extend to Europe: Jaishankar - The Economic Times."

72 Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury, "India Tells EU That Challenges in Indo-Pacific Can Extend to Europe," *Economic Times*, February 22, 2022, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/india/india-tells-eu-that-challenges-in-indo-pacific-can-extend-to-europe/articleshow/89755121.cms?from=mdr>.

73 S. Jaishankar, *Why Bharat Matters* (Delhi: Rupa Publications, 2024), <https://www.padhegaindia.in/product/why-bharat-matters/>.

74 S. Jaishankar, *The India Way: Strategies for an Uncertain World* (London: HarperCollins, 2020), <https://harpercollins.co.in/product/the-india-way-hardback/>; Emma Chanlett-Avery, K. Alan Kronstadt, and Bruce Vaughn, "The 'Quad': Cooperation Among the United States, Japan, India, and Australia" (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, January 30, 2023), <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF11678>.

by the increasingly concrete defence relationship between Paris and New Delhi, including a newly signed agreement on air and space cooperation.<sup>75</sup>

Indonesia has been similarly reticent towards the Indo-Pacific framing that the U.S. and Japan prefer, attempting to avoid choosing sides between the U.S. and China.<sup>76</sup> Malaysia relatedly fears that explicit balancing behaviour like AUKUS could lead to a further arms race between China and the U.S. and provoke other regional powers.<sup>77</sup> Fears of a Sino-American escalation or of another crisis such as the 1997 Asian financial crisis dominate discussions about alignment and inform the more independent ASEAN way of foreign policy.<sup>78</sup> Europe could be a possible 'third way' option for ASEAN states seeking to avoid a Sino-American clash. Thailand has expressed as much, seeing engagement with the EU as a way to avoid dependence on Beijing and Washington.<sup>79</sup> This is naturally bounded by a continued desire for an independent hand in foreign affairs and the tyranny of distance. ASEAN states cannot wish away China's geographic proximity as much as they cannot wish for the American military presence to be reduced.

Taking all of this into account, the following section considers the four-way dynamics between Europe, Indo-Pacific states, China, and the United States to consider how the plethora of competing and overlapping goals can inform strategies that seek to engage intelligently and productively in the region.

## Europe could be a possible 'third way' option for ASEAN states seeking to avoid a Sino-American clash.

---

75 Shubhajit Roy, "Air and Space to AI and Sea: India, France Adopt New Roadmap of Defence Production," *The Indian Express*, January 26, 2024, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-france-roadmap-on-defence-industrial-ties-9129221/>.

76 Indonesia has warmed up to using the Indo-Pacific framing, but maintains strong economic relations with China and the US which are its two largest economic partners. Verico, "How Indonesia Sees the Indo-Pacific Economic Architecture."

77 Rahul Mishra and Brian M. Wang, "Malaysia and the Indo-Pacific: Navigating the Ocean of Strategic Uncertainties," *Asia-Europe Institute*, Universiti Malaya, October 7, 2021, <https://aei.um.edu.my/malaysia-and-the-indo-pacific-navigating-the-ocean-of-strategic-uncertainties#>.

78 Jackson, *Pacific Power Paradox*.

79 John F. Bradford and Wilfried A. Herrmann, "Thailand's Maritime Strategy: National Resilience and Regional Cooperation," *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*, December 13, 2021, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/JIPA/Display/Article/2870573/thailands-maritime-strategy-national-resilience-and-regional-cooperation/>. David Hutt, "Thailand Moves to Strengthen EU Ties amid US-China Rivalry," *Deutsche Welle*, July 30, 2022, <https://www.dw.com/en/thailand-moves-to-strengthen-eu-ties-amid-us-china-rivalry/a-58706850>.

## 4. How to build a inter-regional naval coalition

There are a variety of political and military factors that shape potential coalitions. First and foremost is commonality of political aim, which is most often shaped by a common threat perception. Stephen Walt argues clearly in his classic work *The Origins of Alliances* that “states tend to ally with or against the foreign power that poses the greatest threat.”<sup>80</sup> This is slightly more nuanced than a pure material argument where states only balance *power*. Using this principle then, it is reasonable to expect European/Indo-Pacific alignments to be generally shaped by a shared threat assessment of China. Indeed, the closest defence relationships in the region are due to shared alignment with the U.S. against China.

However, there is a significant amount of ambiguity about such relationships between Europe and many ASEAN states that are seeking a more non- or multi-aligned role vis-à-vis China and the U.S.<sup>81</sup> Threat narratives do not necessarily share the same saliency as in the cases of Japan or Australia. The previous sections offer some explanation here, wherein the region’s political economy creates pressures to balance external economic power bases, in this case Washington and Beijing.<sup>82</sup> Considerations of threat and power are often overlapping, as this study has sought to show.

Turning to military capabilities, military-military contacts are a starting point in and of themselves. Contacts between Europe and Indo-Pacific states are extensive but highly differentiated between them. Some are mainly centred on the procurement of military equipment, such as the Indonesian purchase of frigates and corvettes from the Netherlands, while others are much deeper such as in the case of the Five Power Defence Arrangement (FPDA) between Australia, Malaysia, New Zealand, Singapore, and the UK in which British and Australian units are actually placed in theatre. There is also increasing engagement through NATO’s partnership programmes, particularly with Australia, Japan, South Korea, and New Zealand.<sup>83</sup>

Beyond this, only two of the European states above, France and the UK, have a permanent presence in the Indo-Pacific due to territorial possessions and treaty commitments. Unsurprisingly, Paris and London have recently committed to strengthen their defence partnership in the Indo-Pacific, to include the 2023 agreement to maintain a carrier group in the region on a rotational basis (the UK having two *Queen Elizabeth*-class carriers and France one *Charles de Gaulle*-class). France has strengthened its relations with the Philippines and Australia, while the UK has increased its engagement with Japan. It is not presently clear

80 Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987), 21.

81 Van Hooft and Sweijis, “Why Should Europe Guard the Indo-Pacific Maritime Commons”; Girardi, Van Hooft, and Hoenig, “Getting Them on Board: Partners and Avenues for European Engagement in Indo-Pacific Maritime Security.”

82 Jackson, *Pacific Power Paradox*.

83 van Hooft, Girardi, and Sweijis, *Guarding the Maritime Commons: What Role for Europe in the Indo-Pacific*.



where these rotational carriers, along with their attendant escorts and air wings, would be based or for how long a single rotation would be. Notionally, they could be based from Singapore given the long history of Royal Navy presence there.

Highlighting this combination of political and military aspects is all to say that strategy in the region is not starting with a *tabula rasa*. As European states seek to build new coalitions with regional partners, especially in maritime security, the specific tasks and capabilities will have to be chosen carefully. Foreign military presences can easily send the wrong message. The following sections accordingly consider (1) the relationship of different objectives to specific naval tasks; and (2) the relative intensity of these tasks in terms of both capability and perception.

## 4.1. Different objectives require different naval tasks

EU states have looked to conduct more joint exercises and port calls with Indo-Pacific partners, to fight piracy and protect freedom of navigation. At the same time, the EU has collectively claimed that its approach is “one of cooperation not confrontation”, and looks to be “inclusive of all partners wishing to cooperate”.<sup>84</sup> As is well established by the preceding sections, there are a wide array of competing objectives. They can be summarised here as:

1. Maintain good relations with China;
2. Maintain good relations with Japan, Australia, and South Korea;
3. Maintain good relations with states in Southeast Asia;
4. Ensure free and open seelines in Western Pacific;
5. Maintain international maritime law regime;
6. Limit defence spending in general / ensure sufficient resources for defence and deterrence in Europe, and obligations to NATO;
7. Prevent Chinese hegemony in the Western Pacific;
8. Support the United States and the transatlantic relationship.

Different coalitions should imply different combinations of objectives and subsequent theories of how to achieve them. The political aims of one coalition would naturally be different than another’s, with the knock-on effect of a differing mixture of naval and diplomatic means.<sup>85</sup> An indicative look at the relationship of such objectives to particular naval tasks are summarised in Table 2.

84 “Questions and Answers: EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific,” Text, European Commission - European Commission, 1–2, accessed January 29, 2024, [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/qanda\\_21\\_4709](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/qanda_21_4709).

85 J.J. Widen, “Naval Diplomacy - A Theoretical Approach,” *Diplomacy and Statecraft* 22, no. 7 (2011): 715–33.

Foreign military presences can easily send the wrong message.

**Table 2. Objectives and naval tasks and capabilities**

Objectives	Related Tasks	Duration	Required Capabilities
Maintain good relations with China	Counter-piracy; law enforcement cooperation	Infrequent	Offshore patrol vessels; maritime patrol aircraft; cyber
Maintain good relations with Japan, Australia, and South Korea	Heavier, blue water warfighting responsibilities	Permanent or semi-permanent	Aircraft carriers, destroyers, frigates, corvettes, attack submarines
Maintain good relations with states in Southeast Asia	Counter-piracy; law enforcement cooperation; humanitarian tasks	Semi-permanent	Offshore patrol vessels; amphibious landing ships; medical and logistics ships
Ensure free and open sealines in the Western Pacific	Heavier, blue water warfighting responsibilities; counter-piracy; counter-terrorism	Semi-permanent	Destroyers, frigates, corvettes, offshore patrol vessels
Maintain international maritime law regime	Freedom of navigation operations	Infrequent	Destroyers, frigates, corvettes
Limit defence spending / balance capabilities with NATO requirements	N/A	N/A	N/A
Prevent Chinese hegemony in the Western Pacific	Heavier, blue water warfighting responsibilities	Permanent or semi-permanent	Aircraft carriers, destroyers, frigates, corvettes, attack submarines
Support the United States and the transatlantic relationship	Heavier, blue water warfighting responsibilities	Permanent or semi-permanent	Aircraft carriers, destroyers, frigates, corvettes, attack submarines

Naval assets offer a degree of flexibility. As a multinational formation moves through a region, different ships from across the partners can pull away for a period to attend to different tasks. This can also be used to accommodate differentiated objectives between partners, by allowing one or more to abstain from certain coalition missions. It should be noted, however, that such abstentions can cause political frictions, as is frequently seen in the use of national caveats during NATO missions.<sup>86</sup> The platforms themselves offer options for communicating political intentions. General-purpose frigates are just that, general purpose. While an aircraft carrier group or an attack submarine clearly demonstrates a more aggressive intent, ships such as frigates, destroyers, and cruisers can offer a more measured presence, while maintaining sufficient capacity for self-defence and robust deterrence messaging if needed.

The military tasks such vessels are intended to achieve include amongst others, maintaining or deny control of the sea,<sup>87</sup> through respectively (1) warfighting;<sup>88</sup> (2) deterrence and compellence;<sup>89</sup> and (3) denial.<sup>90</sup> The military tasks are also directing at exploiting the control

86 Alexander G. Crowther, "NATO Nouvelle: Everything Old Is New Again," *Joint Forces Quarterly* 83, no. 4 (2016): 95–96.

87 Speller, *Understanding Naval Warfare*, 115. Jeremy Stöhs, *How High? The Future of European Naval Power and the High-End Challenge* (Kobenhavn: Djof Publishing; In cooperation with Centre for Military Studies, 2021), 61. Navies can also play a role within nuclear deterrence. Ken Booth, *Navies and Foreign Policy* (Abington, Oxon: Routledge, 2014), 20–21.

88 Geoffrey Till, *Seapower: A Guide for the Twenty-First Century* (Routledge, 2018), 149. Booth, *Navies and Foreign Policy*, 15. Jonathan Masters, "Sea Power: The U.S. Navy and Foreign Policy," *Council on Foreign Relations*, August 19, 2019, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/sea-power-us-navy-and-foreign-policy>. Peter Trevor Haydon, *Sea Power and Maritime Strategy in the 21st Century: A "Medium" Power Perspective* (Centre for Foreign Policy Studies, 2000).

89 Masters, "Sea Power: The U.S. Navy and Foreign Policy"; Haydon, *Sea Power and Maritime Strategy in the 21st Century*.

90 Haydon, *Sea Power and Maritime Strategy in the 21st Century*.

of the sea, which may entail blockades and embargoes after (4) securing control of maritime communications,<sup>91</sup> as well as (5) exploitation through power projection through expeditionary operations.<sup>92</sup> Of course, a clear difference in difficulty exists between projecting a credible naval presence locally or far from one's territory.<sup>93</sup> The portfolio of naval capabilities needed for warfighting, deterrence and compellence is broad though the scope and intensity varies widely depending on the target. It would encompass (potentially) aircraft carriers, carriers, frigates, and attack submarines (though the latter are less useful for signalling). While similar to deterrence and compellence, warfighting requires greater levels of preparedness, logical preparations for sustainment, and larger reserve stocks. Oilers and supply ships then become crucial.

Sea denial is generally considered less demanding than control, but they overlap. Sea denial can be achieved in multiple ways, including surface vessels (frigates), subsurface vessels (submarines), sea mines, as well as standoff weapons launched from the land, air or sea. Achieving control may include challenging an adversary who already exerts control over both the surface and potentially subsurface,<sup>94</sup> which is primarily obtained through land- and/or carrier-based aircrafts.<sup>95</sup> Sea control assumes the ability to prevent the adversary's military and/or commercial vessels from passing through choke points,<sup>96</sup> requiring multiple ships and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities. In turn, naval power projection and expeditionary operations need forces like large warships, support vessels and corresponding logistical arrangements which are difficult and costly to develop.<sup>97</sup>

## 4.2. Different objectives and tasks, thus require different intensity

This section considers the relationship of these naval tasks, aligned to particular objectives, to the intensity of their investment and duration. This will have a direct bearing on the signalling effect the respective tasks aim to achieve, the potential political impact thereof, and of the effect of differing coalition actions on the original strategic objectives set out above. The respective intensity is outlined below in Table 3.

91 Till, *Seapower*, 149.

92 Till, 149; Speller, *Understanding Naval Warfare*, 115; Stöhs, *How High?*, 61; Masters, "Sea Power: The U.S. Navy and Foreign Policy"; Haydon, *Sea Power and Maritime Strategy in the 21st Century*.

93 Stöhs, *How High?*, 61.

94 Vego specifies the methods for obtaining sea control as the destruction of enemy forces, containment of enemy forces, choke point control and capturing important enemy positions and basing areas Milan Vego, *Maritime Strategy and Sea Control*, 0 ed. (Routledge, 2016), 75, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315694528>.

95 Vego, 74.

96 Vego, 193.

97 Stöhs, *How High?*, 67. For example, the German government acknowledges that Germany lacks the capabilities of a medium-sized navy like joint support ships capable of launching and supporting, amphibious operations from the sea and hard-power capabilities. Sebastian Bruns, "The Baltic Sea and Current German Naval Strategy," CIMSEC, July 20, 2016, <https://cimsec.org/baltic-sea-current-german-navy-strategy/>.

**Table 3. Tasks and their burden**

Tasks	Investment	Duration	Intensity (1-5)
Counter-piracy	Low	Semi-permanent	2
Counter-terrorism	Low	Semi-permanent	2
Humanitarian assistance	Low	Infrequent	1
Blue-water warfighting	High	Permanent	5
Brown-water law enforcement	Medium	Semi-permanent	4
Freedom of navigation operations	Medium	Infrequent	3

In terms of military capability, there is a strong level of complementarity between European and Indo-Pacific naval forces, due in no small part to the significant amount of sales and transfers from European states to regional ones. Since 1990, the UK, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, and the Netherlands transferred dozens of various ship classes to regional states, often variants of ship classes in use in their own respective navies. Annex I shows this in detail, and it is useful to note that this extends beyond maritime platforms and can also be seen in the cases of fighter aircraft, helicopters, and missiles.

Naturally, this does not immediately create complementarity between forces. Differing operational concepts, shipboard systems, and even language barriers can hinder interoperability between prospective operational partners. The increased engagement described earlier, however, takes steps towards mitigating these 'software' issues in interoperability.

An additional aspect that requires stressing is basing rights. There are a number of key lynchpin states that provide deepwater ports and naval access rights that will be essential to support many of the potential coalitions. Singapore, the UAE, and Djibouti are especially vital in this aspect. Already host to a large number of foreign forces (including China in the case of Djibouti), they provide significant forward logistics, maintenance, and personnel support facilities. The UAE alone plays host to British, French, Italian, Dutch, American, and Australian naval support activities, including frequent port visits by various ships. Should any future naval strategies within or between European states stress coalition building or a more routine forward presence in the Indo-Pacific, establishing and maintaining relations with these major port states will be crucial.

Building and maintaining a politically cohesive and combat effective coalition is difficult enough in a wartime alliance against an existential threat. In peacetime, balancing between these numerous, competing objectives would require significant diplomatic and political capital. Nevertheless, European states have committed to an increased role in the Indo-Pacific and will have to muster such capital. This will cost time and money, and could have intense impacts on the region it aims to keep free, open, and stable.

There is a strong level of complementarity between European and Indo-Pacific naval forces.

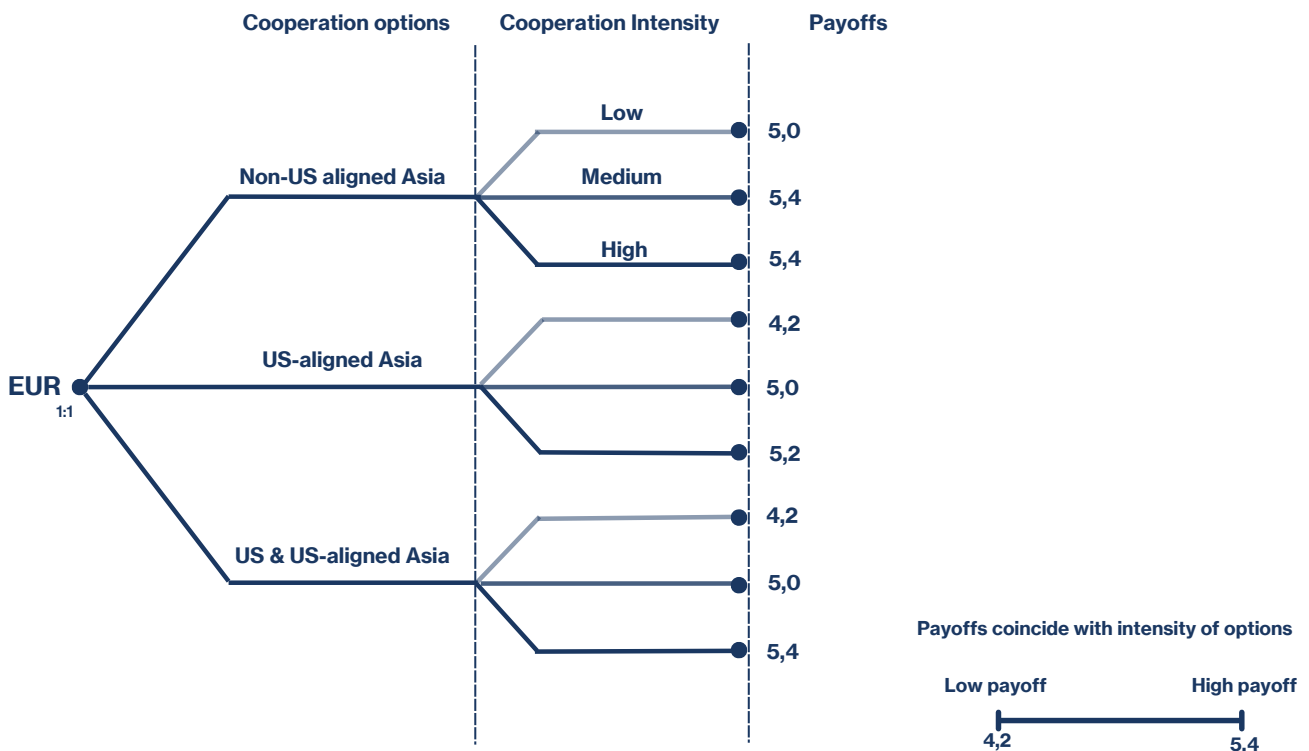
### 4.3. Tensions, trade-offs, and competing coalition options

Turning now to possible coalitions between European and Indo-Pacific states the question is which groupings, based on the lists above, would actually be the most effective from both the political and military perspectives? The relative intensity of different naval activities will have a material impact on the objective sought by European states, based on the likely perceptions of China, Washington, U.S.-aligned states, and more independent Indo-Pacific powers. The differing intensities will impact the payoffs of different efforts, as explored further below.

Figure 1 portrays a game tree were the European states, including France, Germany, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Italy, and Spain, are put forward as one decision maker. These states have been specifically chosen due both to their expressed political intent for increased maritime involvement in the Indo-Pacific, as well as for their advanced naval capabilities.

This game tree is the visual representation of a game theoretic model.<sup>98</sup> For the purpose of visualising the potential coalitions and corresponding trade-offs, the game tree portrays Europe as a single decision-maker. Europe is confronted with three possible cooperation options, all pertaining to a difference of alliances between Asia and the United States.

Figure 1: Assessment of payoffs for various cooperation options



98 Specifically, a non-cooperative sequential game in a competitive environment. In this case the strategic actor, Europe, who is the sole decision-maker first takes a decision about coalitions and then about the intensity level pertaining to the possible actions they can take.



Regional states include those listed above in earlier sections which are: Australia, New Zealand, Japan, South Korea, India, Indonesia, Vietnam, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Thailand. Depending on the chosen cooperation option, Europe is presented with a second choice regarding the relative intensity of different naval activities. These will have a material impact on the objective sought by European states. The objectives corresponding with the different intensity levels are visualized in the table below.

The game tree produces different end states, or payoffs, that are dependent on the chosen cooperation agreement and its intensity. The purpose of this is to visualize stability of coalitions. Europe is portrayed as a single strategic decision-maker confronted with needing to take two sequences of actions related to forming coalitions. In this exercise, we assume that Europe, as the main strategic actor, has complete information regarding their preferences and the possible strategies of the other actors. Europe thus, does not coordinate with the other actors in regard to achieving a joint optimal objective. The assumption is made that Europe is only interested in maximizing their own outcome, which is the ultimate payoff. This payoff is made up of the degree in which the objectives, shown in the table below, are achieved. Lastly, we assume perfect recall in terms of decisions made.

The objectives are considered to be of equal importance and are weighted on a scale of 1 to 5. This scale shows how the objectives should be satisfied depending on the chosen level of intensity: 1-Unacceptable; 2-Not preferred; 3-Acceptable; 4-Preferred; 5- Strongly preferred.

This weighting is done for each possible coalition and filled in per combination of objective and intensity level. In order to calculate the ultimate payoff for the nine possible outcomes, the objectives thus need to be weighted for each of the nine possibilities. On the basis of this weighting system, the payoffs are calculated for each possible scenario. After doing this exercise, the game tree shows that in each case choosing for high intensity actions delivers the most desirable outcome. Likewise, it shows that the third possibility of alliances, that of forming a coalition with non-US-aligned Asia, provides the highest payoff on average.

## Case Study: America's *Prosperity Guardian* vs. Europe's *Aspides*

As of this writing, there is an ongoing coalition formation dynamic occurring in the wider Indo-Pacific region, one that highlights many of the dynamics that would influence future efforts.

In response to attacks on global shipping in the Red Sea by the Houthi rebels in Yemen in response to the Israel-Gaza war, both the United States and European states have responded with military force. The U.S.-led mission, Operation *Prosperity Guardian*, currently includes Britain, Canada, Australia, Bahrain, Denmark, Greece, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Singapore, and Sri Lanka. These states have committed to different degrees, with some such as Britain providing frigates while others sending staff officers to the mission headquarters in Bahrain. An alternative mission, led by the European Union called Operation *Aspides*, is soon to launch and will include French, Italian, German, and Dutch ships.

How can this study inform thinking about these different missions? First, consider the political aims. The U.S.-led mission is much more influenced by the aims to both permanently remove the threat of Houthi missiles and wider power in the country. Indeed, the U.S. and Britain have undertaken airstrikes to this effect, though not as part of the international operation. The EU mission is more narrowly focused on protecting shipping from incoming missiles. Secondly, consider the military capabilities. The U.S. mission is based from a permanent military presence in the region that benefits from an on-station carrier strike group. The EU's mission is less intense, with several frigates likely to patrol on a semi-permanent basis in the area, possibly based from Djibouti.

Two key questions arise looking at these missions: 1) can they hold together for a longer period and 2) how will they impact relations with states in the Persian Gulf, wider Middle East, and east Africa. Much remains to be seen, but by the logic of this study, the more intensive U.S. mission could very well negatively impact its relations with Arab states in the region (given its concurrent support for Israel's operations in Gaza) and risks escalation with Iran, which has arguably already occurred. The EU mission, alternatively, is less risky in terms of escalation and relations with regional states, but could be an irritant in Washington should it continue to limit its mission to protection rather than strikes against Houthi targets in Yemen.

# 5. Conclusion:

## towards the next generation of maritime coalitions

States will be unconvinced of efforts that are out of synch with their own threat and power perceptions.

---

This study has sought to argue that European strategy is being left adrift in the Indo-Pacific by failing to realise the impact of its choices in regional partners and specific naval tasks. It has provided an overview of the competing, or indeed mutually exclusive, objectives and perceptions between European capitals, regional capitals, Washington, and Beijing. It has shown that different naval tasks are associated with these objectives, and that undertaking these more or less intensive efforts impact those objectives. This is to show that 'comprehensive' style strategies such as the EU Indo-Pacific Strategy is at best ineffective and at worst actively counter-productive by failing to reconcile crossed purposes.

Importantly, it has also shown that the most logical use of European naval capabilities does not lie in the Western Pacific, where there are risks of being dragged into or even inflaming the Sino-American rivalry and alienating regional ASEAN states, but rather in the Western Indian Ocean, where there is a much more coherent strategic logic to maintaining the openness of sea lines of communication upon which Europe relies. This preferences security relations with states such as India, who has a shared interest in these lanes.

There is an enduring maxim when it comes to coalition and alliance formation that must be constantly borne in mind: "One country may support another's cause, but will never take it so seriously as it takes its own."<sup>99</sup> European states must be aware that as they work to engage in the Indo-Pacific region, those states will be unconvinced of efforts that are out of synch with their own threat and power perceptions. Similarly, regional states should be cautious of misinterpreting commitments from either Europe or Washington as an undying bond to the total defence of their states. International coalitions are messy, often internally contradictory, and quite often fail.<sup>100</sup> They require deft diplomacy backed with meaningful capabilities. They must take into account the broader political economy into which they are stepping, or they risk worsening tensions or being left irrelevant.

99 Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. Michael Eliot Howard and Peter Paret, Revised ed. edition (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1989), 603.

100 Scott Wolford, *The Politics of Military Coalitions* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

With this, several generalisable recommendations can be made for European and Asian policy-makers to consider:

- Coordinate closely between diplomatic and military efforts to ensure that European military efforts do not clash with regional aims and objectives. Be willing to subordinate a military aim to the maintenance of the regional political economy.
- Design regional strategies with specific objectives and theories of how to implement them in mind. Avoid compromising clarity with a laundry-list of incompatible aims.
- Develop regional strategies with regional states' preferences reflected and to support the efforts of both states and regional organisations in supporting dialogue building efforts in the Pacific.
- Invest in 'fungible' military assets which can be used flexibly across tasks of differing intensity, including frigates, amphibious landing ships, and logistics vessels.
- Consider investing more heavily into a presence in vital sea lines of communication to Europe, namely Suez, Bab-el-Mandeb, and Hormuz. Do so bearing in mind the aim is not conflict but protection.



The Hague Centre  
for Strategic Studies

**HCSS**

Lange Voorhout 1  
2514 EA The Hague

**Follow us on social media:**

@hcssnl

**The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies**

Email: [info@hcss.nl](mailto:info@hcss.nl)

Website: [www.hcss.nl](http://www.hcss.nl)