



## A sea of troubles: Addressing the EU's incoherence on the Indo-Pacific

by Christina Keßler, 8 January 2024

**A security crisis in the Indo-Pacific would severely affect European interests. To play a constructive role in upholding peace and security in the region, however, the EU needs to address its internal divisions.**

In 2021, the EU adopted an [Indo-Pacific strategy](#), designed to promote an open and rules-based regional security architecture in the Indo-Pacific region. In the strategy, the EU also outlined its efforts to step up its presence there. Implementation of the strategy, however, largely depends on the member-states. [France](#), [Germany](#), the [Netherlands](#), the [Czech Republic](#) and [Lithuania](#) have each published Indo-Pacific strategies or guidelines. While the member-states understand that Europe's security is influenced by what happens in the region, they have different ideas on how to contribute to its stability and what to do if a crisis erupts. They need to develop a more unified approach.

The EU's strategy for the Indo-Pacific defines the region as stretching from the east coast of Africa to the Pacific Island States. This huge area contains a number of potential conflicts. One hot spot that is often cited as a possible trigger for war between China and the US is Taiwan, which is regarded by China as a rebellious province but for which the US is legally obliged to provide adequate defence. But Taiwan is far from the only potential hot spot that could affect the EU's interests. Tensions also run high in the South China Sea, where various states, including China, have competing territorial claims. North Korea's ballistic missile and nuclear weapons programmes continue, raising concerns both in the country's immediate neighbourhood and globally. While the East China Sea is not as hotly contested as the South China Sea, China and Japan also have competing territorial claims there. The border disputes between China and India could also spark a conflict. Additionally, there are tensions in the region that do not involve China, such as the longstanding enmity between India and Pakistan. Finally, the possibility of an accident should not be ruled out. An unplanned collision between two ships from mutually hostile countries, for example, could quickly escalate into a conflict, especially as the waters of the Indo-Pacific become increasingly crowded.

### The EU's interests in the Indo-Pacific region

The EU's main immediate interest in the Indo-Pacific region is economic. Bilateral trade exchanges

between the two regions are the highest of any two regions in the world. In [2021](#), imports from the Indo-Pacific to the EU were €844 billion and exports from the EU to the Indo-Pacific were €583 billion. [Almost 90 per cent](#) of the EU's external trade in goods is seaborne. Much of this trade passes through maritime chokepoints in the Indo-Pacific region such as the South China Sea and the Malacca Strait. The South China Sea alone sees an [estimated 40 per cent](#) of EU foreign trade passing through. The Indo-Pacific region is thus crucial to the trade-intensive European economy.

Another major interest for the EU in the region is the preservation of the rules-based international order. Domestically, the effective functioning of the EU depends on its own member-states acting according to the rules. The Union needs an international system which works in the same way, as it is not built to compete in a world of 'might makes right'. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine poses a threat to the EU because it involves a neighbouring state, but it also challenges the fundamental principles of territorial integrity and international law. While the Indo-Pacific is more geographically distant from Europe, developments in the region that challenge international law or restrict freedom of navigation have a similar negative effect on EU interests.

Finally, developments in the region can affect European security in multiple ways. The EU's [Strategic Compass](#), which provides a guiding framework for EU security and defence up to 2030, states that the EU "has a crucial geopolitical and economic interest in stability and security in the [Indo-Pacific] region". The main risk here is not so much a direct threat posed by the appearance of Chinese naval vessels in the Mediterranean or the Baltic Sea, or even potential intercontinental ballistic missiles or cyber-attacks. Instead, the biggest security risk for Europe is indirect. European security and defence are in large part dependent on the US and the role the country plays in NATO. The US's ability to act as a security provider for Europe could be weakened if Washington had to respond to a conflict in the Indo-Pacific. Despite its enormous defence budget, the US might well struggle to resource a major conflict in the Indo-Pacific region while upholding credible deterrence in Europe at the same time. Washington would certainly expect its European allies to support it in various ways – something that the Europeans might be neither willing nor able to do.

### **The EU's current presence and engagement in the Indo-Pacific**

There are several ways in which the EU already engages as a security actor with the Indo-Pacific region. Security co-operation is one of the pillars of the EU-ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) partnership. This strategic partnership commits both regions to hold regular summits at leaders' level and work together in several areas. The EU participates in the annual ASEAN regional forum and was recently allowed to participate in the annual East Asia Summit. EU defence ministers and the High Representative Josep Borell participate in the Shangri-La Dialogue, an annual security conference in Singapore. Security is also an important dimension of the relationship between the EU and individual Indo-Pacific partners, such as Japan. In recent years, several EU countries have sent ships to the region to engage in freedom of navigation exercises.

However, when it comes to EU missions and operations, there is a mismatch between the allocation of resources within the region and the highest priority problems. The EU sees the Taiwan Strait, the South China Sea and the East China Sea as the key security challenges in the region – all located in the Pacific Ocean. Yet the EU's modest presence in the Indo-Pacific is much more focused on the Indian Ocean. The EU has established a so-called Co-ordinated Maritime Presence (CMP) in the North West Indian Ocean. The CMP is a framework to co-ordinate EU member-states' existing naval assets that are already present in the region. Apart from supporting the EU's and member-states' activities, the CMP promotes

co-operation with partners. The EU has also decided to reinforce EU Naval Force (EUNAVFOR) Atalanta, an anti-piracy operation focused on the waters off the horn of Africa.

### **Divergent views among EU member-states...**

Unless the EU is united in its approach to the key challenges in the Indo-Pacific region, it will be unable to defend its interests effectively. Unfortunately, EU member-states have quite different perspectives on many of the important issues. Their divergences mainly arise from differing views of China. For some countries, including Germany, trade and economic interests have traditionally predominated (though German views have evolved in recent years, from a focus solely on economic opportunity towards a more cautious stance that also emphasises de-risking). For others, including many Central European countries, issues of human rights and democracy are particularly important. For many, again including Central European and Baltic states, supporting the US globally in order to ensure the US's continued commitment to Europe's security is of central importance. [Research by the European Council on Foreign Relations \(ECFR\)](#) confirms that different EU member-states have very different understandings of the aim of the EU's Indo-Pacific strategy, with some viewing it as a way to show Europe's strategic autonomy by pursuing an independent European approach to the region, others as a tool to be used against China, and others as a means to manage the transatlantic relationship and more or less explicitly align with the US.

Recently, the EU's internal differences have been especially visible in relation to the Taiwan issue. Different EU leaders have made seemingly contradictory statements on Taiwan. French President Macron [stated](#) after a China trip in April 2023 that the EU should not get "caught up in crises that are not ours". EU Commission President von der Leyen, who travelled to China with Macron, [chose instead](#) to underline the "paramount importance" of stability in the Taiwan Strait and warned that the "threat or use of force to change the status quo is unacceptable". [Germany's China strategy](#) emphasises the country's 'one China' policy and simultaneously stresses that "The status quo in the Taiwan Strait may only be changed by peaceful means and mutual consent" and that a "military escalation would also effect German and European interests". Meanwhile, some EU member-states, particularly in Central Europe and the Baltics, have been deepening their relations with Taiwan, with a growing number of Taipei representation offices opening in recent years.

Differences among member-states could damage the EU's ability to respond to challenges arising from the Indo-Pacific and to defend its own interests. For the moment, this incoherence among EU member-states is manageable, but the EU should start addressing this issue now. If a security crisis emerges in the Indo-Pacific, Europe would be faced with difficult decisions and would no longer be able to muddle through as it has been doing. Just as Europe's partners in the region, like Japan and Australia, have backed the EU in relation to Ukraine, for example by imposing sanctions on Russia, these countries would look to Europe for support. And after supporting its European allies in the past, the US would expect them to repay the favour. However, it is questionable to what extent the EU would be willing to provide any support. Both providing and not providing support would come at a cost. Meanwhile, the EU might be faced with the US no longer able or willing to maintain current levels of support for European security, and as a result, have to play a stronger role itself.

### **... and how to overcome them**

It is in the EU's interest that peace and stability are upheld in the region. The EU could potentially contribute to this goal in a variety of ways, but will be unable to do so if it is internally divided.

The EU should organise several scenario-based discussions among member-states' representatives to achieve this. The first set of discussions should focus on the different ways in which the EU could support peace and prevent a security crisis around the Indo-Pacific flashpoints – diplomatically, economically, and militarily. A second set of discussions should focus on the role the EU and the member-states should play if a security contingency arises in one or more of the flashpoints.

Keeping the two discussions separate would help find as much common ground as possible, as would starting from the points on which there is likely to be the biggest overlap among member-states' positions. EU member-states are more likely to find common ground on crisis prevention than on crisis management and response, as the latter involves decisions on issues that are more politically controversial as well as more costly to member-states – eg questions such as whether to provide military aid or implement sanctions.

For the scenario-based discussions to add value, and not just result in the same general statements that have been covered in past documents, they should be specific to potential flashpoints in the region. For example, they should cover a potential escalation in the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea. Additional scenarios could cover the East China Sea or an escalation involving North Korea. The scenarios discussed should be prepared with the advice of EU diplomatic representations in the Indo-Pacific. Further, the input of regional partners like Japan and Australia should be sought and taken into account in the scenario-building.

The discussions must cover different cases, not just the most extreme ones – be they the best or the worst case. For example, discussions on a potential Taiwan contingency should cover scenarios such as a cyberattack, which might be difficult to attribute to a specific actor, and not just a military assault.

The goal of these discussions would not be to find a completely unified EU position, but to establish and understand member-states' particular interests, positions and preferred visions of the EU's role in the Indo-Pacific. If the EU is more aware of the different positions, it could then try to manage differences effectively, and see where common ground can be found despite them. Building on this understanding, member-states could then talk about the further steps that they and the EU could take to contribute to security and stability in the Indo-Pacific. Here, the EU should also try to use the differences between member-states, if at all possible, to the Union's advantage – for example, by making use of the fact that some member-states have close economic or diplomatic ties to certain countries in the region.

The EU might not feel a great sense of urgency regarding the Indo-Pacific right now. But a relaxed approach would be misguided. In 2024, the US could elect a president a lot less committed to European security than the current one. EU-US relations might then significantly worsen. This would make it difficult for the EU to take up any independent role it potentially might want to play in the Indo-Pacific, while making discussions on the region with the US less productive. The time to have difficult internal conversations and work towards a common EU approach is now.

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