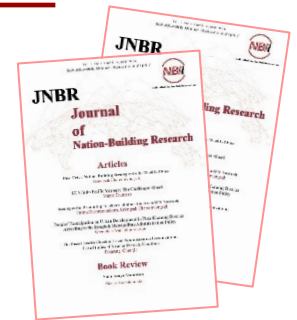


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EU's Indo-Pacific Strategy: The Challenges Ahead

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ABSTRACT

The article explores the European Union's strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region, initially presented in a joint communication on September 16, 2021, by the European Commission and the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. This document represents a significant attempt by the EU to develop a strategy in a region whose economic and political weight is crucial for influencing the global order. The article analyzes the key components of the EU's new Indo-Pacific strategy and the decision-making process that led to its adoption, with particular attention to the positions of France and Germany, the two most active member states in developing the strategy. These two countries exemplify the debate within the EU: they express different positions on issues such as the geographical definition of the Indo-Pacific region, the objectives that the country sets in the area, the privileged policy areas of intervention, the relations with China, and the approach to negotiations. The article concludes with a brief assessment of the strategy itself and the main challenges the EU will face in exerting an effective position in the region.

Keywords: EU's new Indo-Pacific strategy, Indo-Pacific region, ASEAN centrality

Introduction

According to a strategic paper published by the Australian Government in 2012 “The Indian Ocean is surpassing the Atlantic and Pacific oceans as the world’s busiest and most strategically significant trade corridor”. As a consequence, “the western Pacific Ocean and the Indian Ocean would come to be considered as one strategic arc” (Australian Government 2012, 74). From this consideration arises the idea that an area that goes under the title of “Indo-Pacific” is emerging as central to the economy of the world, which could take the place of relevance of that area baptized, about thirty years ago, “Asia-Pacific” (Heiduk & Wacker 2020).

More recently, the same considerations have breached numerous European Union (EU) documents. For example, in the opening speech of the first edition of the Brussels Indo-Pacific Forum on November 2022, the Higher Representative for EU Foreign and Security Policy Josep Borrell declared that “the Indo-Pacific region is where the future of our planet and of history will be decided” (Borrell 2022a). Some figures explained this sharp judgement: the Indo-Pacific creates 60% of global Gross Domestic Product (GDP), it is vital to the EU exports, some of the Indo-pacific states are among the top ten EU trading partners, the Indo-pacific region is a fast-growing economy, and, finally, the EU is the top partner for Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) for the Indo-Pacific region. Moreover, Borrell recalled, “by 2030, the overwhelming majority - 90% - of the 2.4 billion new members of the middle class will come from this region” and “The region holds the arteries of the global economy: one-third of the global maritime trade - by volume - goes through the South China Sea. And 40% of the EU’s trade passes through the Taiwan Strait”. For this reason, Borrell emphasized the EU direct interest for this region.

The EU is not the only organization paying attention to the Indo-Pacific: the end of the “Pax Americana”, understood as the centrality of the United States (US) as a stabilizing element of the Asian region; the loosening of the institutional links that linked Asia and the Pacific; and the growing role and weight of China, capable of changing the economic, political and military balances in the area (and beyond), are among the factors explaining the rise in the attention paid by the countries and regions well beyond the EU.

This paper analyzes the strategic position taken by the EU towards the Indo-Pacific. The Conclusions of the Council of the EU of 16 April 2021 and the Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council entitled “The EU Strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific” released by the European Commission and the High Representative on 16 September

of the same year show how the EU aims at playing an important role in the region. More specifically, the paper aims to answer the following research question: Why are the EU's policy and strategy towards the Indo-Pacific difficult to achieve? To address this, the paper pays particular attention to the positions France and Germany, the two EU Member States more active in the development of the EU strategy and the two European countries crucial for the development of the EU international projection. These the countries have different views on issues such as the geographical definition of the Indo-Pacific region, the objectives that the country sets in the area, the privileged policy areas of intervention, the relations with China, and the approach to negotiations. Although with their diversity of purposes and accents, all the EU strategic documents and the papers elaborated by France and Germany testify to the effort to re-elaborate the meaning of the (new) presence of the EU in the Indo-Pacific. Finally, the conclusion identifies the divergences among its Member States as the main challenge that the EU will have to face if it wishes to exercise an effective position in the Indo-Pacific, a challenge that the Strategy still leaves unresolved. A specific attention is devoted to EU-ASEAN relations. The EU has always been committed to promoting multilateralism and ASEAN has always been considered by the EU a privileged partner. However, there is no doubt that a broader engagement with the whole Indo-Pacific region could lead the EU to recognize ASEAN as only one of the important players to negotiate and confront.

The EU and the Indo-Pacific

The EU unveiled its Indo-Pacific policy after other international players, including the governments of Australia, Japan, India, and the US. The EU's internal conflicts when dealing with strategic matters, its decision-making process, and many European nations' lack of interest in the Indo-Pacific region are the causes of this delay. As Grare & Reuter (2021, 3) clearly emphasize, "despite the region's growing economic and political importance, indifference to it prevails in many EU Member States".

The first official EU document mentioning the Indo-Pacific is the "Partnership on Sustainable Connectivity and Quality Infrastructure between the European Union and Japan" of September 2019 (EU & Japan 2019). There isn't even a mention of the Indo-Pacific in the September 2018 document "Connecting Europe and Asia - Building blocks for an EU Strategy" (European Commission & High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy 2018), which is specifically focused on relations between Europe and Asia.

The Indo-Pacific finds a new quote in the “Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the European Council and the Council: A New EU-US Agenda for Global Change” of December 2020, which says:

Increased EU focus on the challenges and opportunities in the Indo-Pacific region will help deepen cooperation with like-minded partners in the region. Working closely with the US to align our strategic objectives and support democratic progress in Asia will be essential (European Commission & High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy 2020).

On 19 April 2021, the Council of the EU adopts, by written procedure, Conclusions in which it sets out the formulation of an EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific aimed at “reinforcing its strategic focus, presence and actions in the Indo-Pacific with the aim of contributing to the stability, security, prosperity and sustainable development of the region, based on the promotion of democracy, rule of law, human rights and international law” (Council of the European Union 2021, 2). The aim is to contribute to the stability, security, prosperity and sustainable development of the region at a time when it is affected by growing challenges and tensions. Furthermore, the Council instructs the High Representative and the Commission to present a Joint Communication on cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region by September 2021.

In its Conclusions, the Council identifies the following priority objectives:

- strengthening the EU strategic orientation, its presence and its actions in the Indo-Pacific, with the main objective of contributing to stability, security, prosperity and development sustainable development of the region;
- a long-term EU commitment to promoting in the Indo-Pacific a perspective based on support for democracy, human rights, the rule of law and respect for international law;
- fostering the international order based on rules and equal conditions, as well as an open and fair environment for trade and investment, reciprocity, strengthening resilience, combating climate change and supporting connectivity with the EU. Ensuring free and open maritime supply routes that are fully compliant with international law remains crucial for the EU. The EU will seek to work with its partners in the Indo-Pacific region on issues of mutual concern;

- developing partnerships in the fields of security and defense, including maritime security, malicious cyber activities, disinformation, emerging technologies, terrorism and organized crime;
- working with regional partners to mitigate the economic and anthropogenic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and also working to ensure an inclusive and sustainable socio-economic recovery.

It could hardly be assumed that in less than two years after the introduction of a new geostrategic idea into an official document, a Strategy would have been developed. Moreover, the adoption of the Conclusions by the Council of the EU forces all 27 Member States to confront an issue that, for many of them, is substantially new. At the beginning, only France, the Netherlands and Germany have developed their own strategies toward the Indo-Pacific. The speed with which the traditionally cautious (at least in the field of Foreign and Security Policy) EU elaborated this strategy is probably indicative of a profound change of perspective and the acknowledgment of the potential risk that an eventual destabilization of that area could have entailed for the EU itself. However, this awareness also relates to factors transcending the EU. The US Presidency of Donald Trump's confrontational policy towards China has confronted the EU with the need to choose to what extent to confirm its traditional Atlanticism. At the same time, China's increasingly assertive policy towards Hong Kong and Xinjiang has contributed to reducing European optimism towards the democratization of the Asian giant. Moreover, the Chinese health and vaccination policy in several Asian countries during the Covid-19 pandemic has been interpreted by the EU as a new form of diplomacy and presence in the region.

Therefore, on September 16, 2021, the Commission and the High Representative publish the Joint Communication "The EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific" (European Commission & High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy 2021a). The Strategy outlines a series of actions, broken down into seven priority areas, that the Union intends to take to intensify its strategic engagement with the Indo-Pacific to build partnerships that promote rules-based international order and access to open markets, ensure a stable business environment, address global challenges and lay the foundations for a rapid, just and sustainable economic recovery that creates long-term prosperity and helps accelerate green and digital transitions.

This commitment – the Joint Communication declares – should help strengthen Europe’s strategic influence and security and ensure the resilience of its supply chains, which have been severely tested by the pandemic crisis and will be based on the promotion of democracy, rule of law, human rights and universally shared commitments such as the 2030 Agenda and its Sustainable Development Goals and the Paris Agreement on climate change. Additionally, President Von Der Leyen repeated these ideas in his State of the Union address on September 15, 2021, the day before the Joint Communication was published. In her speech, the President of the Commission reiterates that:

If Europe is to become a more active global player, it also needs to focus on the next generation of partnerships.

In this spirit, today's new EU–Indo-Pacific strategy is a milestone. It reflects the growing importance of the region to our prosperity and security. But also the fact that autocratic regimes use it to try to expand their influence.

Europe needs to be more present and more active in the region (von der Leyen 2021).

The Joint Communication ends with an invitation to the European Parliament and the Council to work together on the implementation and evaluation of the indicated actions. In its resolution of 6 October 2021 on the future of EU-US relations, the European Parliament “welcomes the recent progress on the EU’s Indo-Pacific strategy; calls for its swift and comprehensive implementation as it is in the EU’s interests and would promote its values, and highlights the relevance of this geostrategic region, which is home to common transatlantic democratic friends and partners such as Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand, as well as Taiwan, and calls for an enhanced EU-US partnership and coordination on the Indo-Pacific region; recalls the importance of fostering strategic ties with the ASEAN members and with the Pacific Island Forum (PIF)” (European Parliament 2021).

Subsequently, the Foreign Affairs Committee (AFET) of the European Parliament adopts on 22 March 2022 an own-initiative report entitled “EU and the security challenges in the Indo-Pacific” voted in plenary on 7 June 2022 (European Parliament 2022a). In parallel, the International Trade Committee (INTA) adopts, again on 7 June 2022, a “Motion for an EP resolution on the Indo-Pacific strategy in the area of trade and investment”, voted in plenary on 5 July 2022 (European Parliament 2022b).

It is rather surprising that the EU was able to formulate its strategy in a short time. For example, the Indo-Pacific area is not uniquely defined among European countries: the different way in which European countries define the Indo-Pacific depends on their national interests, the history of their presence in the area, but also on the degree of involvement they wish to have in EU policies towards the Indo-Pacific. Moreover, as clearly emerges from Grare & Reuter (2021, 18), European capitals, overall, have not fully grasped the importance of recent strategic changes in the region and their impact on Europe's ability to take action. Economic opportunities and a commitment to strategic neutrality are common among Member States, reflected in strong support for collaboration with organizations like ASEAN. Only France, the Netherlands, and Germany possess both security capabilities and the willingness to safeguard Europe's interests in the Indo-Pacific, providing military support to nations facing challenges. Some European countries, particularly the Baltic states, acknowledge security challenges but may lack significant contributions. While leaders recognize the need for greater strategic engagement in the Indo-Pacific to define Europe's global role, most aim to do so at minimal cost, with few ready to fully commit. Many European capitals view strategic autonomy as a declaration of neutrality, avoiding a choice between the US and China, rather than leveraging collective power for active decision-making and political influence.

France and Germany: two European powers with (partially) different points of view.

To fully understand the differences across European countries, it may be useful to analyze more closely the strategic documents drawn up by France and Germany. In these pages the contribution of the Netherlands is not taken into consideration: France and Germany represent the two extremes of the continuum of the positions expressed by the EU Member States, with the Netherlands positioned somehow in the middle of these positions.

While it is beyond the scope of this article to interpret the positions of France and Germany in theoretical terms, it is useful to note that Brunazzo & Sicurelli (2024) have described the French position in realist terms and the German position as a form of strategic multilateralism or liberalism. According to these authors, both approaches underscore the rational calculations behind the decisions of the EU and its member states but differ in their views on the nature of international relations and cooperation. Realists view international relations as fundamentally conflictual, with cooperation occurring primarily on an ad hoc basis and predominantly benefiting hegemonic states. In contrast, liberals argue that interdependence and institutionalized international cooperation can yield mutual benefits for all involved states.

Realists focus on states' foreign policies driven by the interest in safeguarding national security from interference by other states, while liberals emphasize economic cooperation.

To reconstruct the French position it is crucial to take into consideration the speech of the President of the Republic Emmanuel Macron at the naval base of Garden Island in Australia in May 2018 (Macron 2018), the document of the French Ministry of Defense of 2018 entitled "France and Security in the Indo-Pacific" and the updated version of this document published in 2019 entitled "France's Defense Strategy in the Indo-Pacific", as well as the White Paper of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of 2018 entitled "Stratégie française en Asie-Océanie à l'horizon 2030. Vers un espace asiatique indopacifique inclusif". In the case of Germany, on the other hand, it is necessary to analyze the policy guidelines published in September 2020. Five dimensions of these documents will be analyzed here: the geographical definition of the Indo-Pacific region, the objectives that the country sets in the area, the privileged policy areas of intervention, the relations with China, and the approach to negotiations.

The geographical definition of the Indo-Pacific region

For France, the region "constitutes a maritime and land geographical area, shaped by interactions around centers of gravity – India, China, Southeast Asia, and Australia. It comprises the Indian, Pacific and Southern Oceans and forms a security continuum spreading from the East African coastline to the Western American seaboard" (Ministry of Armed Forces of France 2018, 1). It is noteworthy that this definition allows France to define itself as a "resident power" in the Indo-Pacific (Ministry of Armed Forces of France 2018, 2). In particular, after Brexit, France is the only EU country that still has territories in the Indian and Pacific oceans (Wacker 2021). For this reason, France is also more inclined to talk about Indo-Pacific than Asia-Pacific. As the defense ministry clearly states,

France is rooted in the southern part of the Indian Ocean [...]. France is also anchored in the Pacific Ocean [...]. Our armed forces stationed overseas, and our permanent military basing allow France to fulfil the security responsibilities of a resident power of the Indo-Pacific (Ministry of Armed Forces of France 2018, 2).

Germany, on the other hand, doesn't seem to naturally fit into the region, therefore it is more careful to protect its interests in Europe inasmuch as they are connected to the political, economic, and military dynamics of the Indo-Pacific, ensuring the proper operation of the

maritime trade lines. Therefore, Germany is not particularly interested in a precise geographical definition of the area: “The Indo-Pacific region is not clearly delineated in geographical terms and is defined variously by different actors. The Federal Government considers the Indo-Pacific to be the entire region characterized by the Indian Ocean and the Pacific. Strategic projections compete with each other and global value chains are intertwined here” (Federal Foreign Office of German 2020, 8). This definition also depends on Germany’s self-perception as a *Handelsnation* (a trading state) proposing a rules-based international order.

The objectives that the country sets in the area

France sees the Indo-Pacific as “an inclusive space of balance, development, security and diversity, where attempts at hegemony must be discouraged along with temptations of division or confrontation” (Ministère des Affaires étrangères 2018, 3). From this point of view, the French strategy shows a full compatibility with the most salient elements of the American approach, as defined in the strategic document published by the US State Department in November 2019, and based on a Pacific free of coercion; adherence to international law; and the key importance of openness and transparency for trade and investment (Duchâtel & Mohan 2020).

In the guidelines of the German government, eight main interests of the country are indicated:

- Peace and security
- Diversifying and deepening relations
- Neither unipolar nor bipolar
- Open shipping routes
- Open markets and free trade
- Digital transformation and connectivity
- Protecting our planet
- Access to fact-based information

Compared to the French agenda, this one is significantly more comprehensive and includes particular references to topics like environmental policy and digital developments. The issue of security (particularly in the sense of defense of national interests) is never mentioned.

The priority policy areas

France comes seen as more adamant than Germany on defense-related topics. It is no coincidence that two important documents were drawn up by the Ministry of Defense. Already in 2016, the then Minister of Defense Jean-Yves Le Drian (who later became Minister for Foreign Affairs) argued that “if the law of the seas is not respected today in the China seas, it will be threatened tomorrow in the Arctic, the Mediterranean and elsewhere” (cit. in Duchâtel & Mohan 2020). France has therefore launched various initiatives in the region, ranging from the missions of the Charles de Gaulle aircraft carrier to the inauguration of privileged strategic relations with countries such as India, Australia and Japan (Heiduk & Sulejmanović 2021, 14-17).

Germany is more careful in this case as well, supporting the need for a more gradual and inclusive strategy, ranging from the opening of new ports and joint military exercises to the protection of sea routes. Similarly, the two countries also differ on the broader strategy that the country must follow: for France, it is a matter of acting as a middle-power between the USA and China, while for Germany of diversifying partnerships, opening economic markets, liberalizing trade and develop physical and digital infrastructures that favor connectivity and contribute to solving the problem of climate change. It is not surprising, therefore, that for France an essential role is played by bilateral and trilateral agreements, favoring dialogue in particular with Australia, India and Japan. Germany, on the other hand, defends the centrality of ASEAN and a multilateral approach. The German government guidelines emphasize well this approach:

Reliable partnerships are the foundation for effective and sustainable action in the 21st century. Germany already enjoys friendly relations with almost all Indo-Pacific countries, as well as strategic partnerships with a number of them. The Federal Government will continue to diversify its relations both geographically and in substance – to avoid unilateral dependencies and to strengthen ties with the global players of tomorrow (Federal Foreign Office of Germany 2020, 9).

Relations with China

Additionally, France and Germany’s positions regarding China diverge from one another: in general, the former prefers to consider itself a “balancing power” (*puissance d'équilibre*) and sets itself the goal of balancing military power and Chinese political influence

in the region, the latter seeks to be more inclusive, opening up to the possibility of collaboration with China on issues such as climate change. For this reason, Germany reaffirms its “reluctance to align with Washington. In this sense, the guidelines echo the refrain often heard in Berlin: ‘we don’t want to choose sides between the US and China’. Germany opposes both unipolarity and bipolarity in the Indo-Pacific and doesn’t specify what role, if any, it expects the US to play” (Duchâtel & Mohan 2020).

More specifically, France does not exclude confronting China, particularly in the economic sphere (but also in the context of 5G, cyber espionage, the South China Sea and more), but only to the extent that it believes that this confrontation can lead China to be more constructive.

For Germany, however, relations with China must not be jeopardized: “China alone accounts for roughly one-third of global economic growth. To the German economy, the country is extremely important. Nearly 50 per cent of German foreign trade in the Indo-Pacific region is with China. Both sides benefit from this. China is also the most important trading partner for Indo-Pacific countries. That said, efforts should focus on harnessing the potential of the Indo-Pacific region as a whole” (Federal Foreign Office of Germany 2020, 47).

The approach to negotiations

France and Germany both see multilateralism as a privileged approach, and for this reason they both see ASEAN as a privileged actor to deal with in the region. However, France, in particular, sees the growing tension between the US and China as a problematic factor for the stability of the area and as a challenge to multilateralism: growing “diverging interests, challenge[s] to [multilateral] principles, and [the] promotion of alternative frameworks” led to a decline in multilateralism in the region (Ministry of Armed Forces of France 2019, 5). This could lead France to develop privileged relations with other Indo-Pacific countries, such as India and Australia. Moreover, as a resident power, France has specific interests to defend and can take advantage of its military presence. This allows France to exercise a more assertive role (Ministry of Armed Forces of France 2019, 16).

Therefore, France tries to build relations also based on bilateralism or minilateralism. The paper of the Ministry of Defense defines India, Australia, US and Japan as “privileged partners”, and as “other partners” Malaysia, Singapore, New Zealand, Indonesia and Vietnam (Ministry of Armed Forces of France 2019, 18). Curiously, China is not included in this list and the US is mentioned only once in connection with the fact that the relations between them

and China will be critical in determining balances in the Indo-Pacific (Ministère des Affaires étrangères 2018, 3).

For Germany, multilateralism is essential. According to the Federal Foreign Office of Germany (2020, 9), The promotion of hegemony and the establishment of bipolar structures pose a threat to fostering a strategy of enriched and varied partnerships within the region. No nation should find itself compelled, as was the case during the Cold War, to make a choice between two factions or succumb to a condition of one-sided reliance. The essential element for Indo-Pacific countries lies in maintaining the freedom to choose their affiliations with economic and (security) policy frameworks. Moreover, multilateralism is indicated as the second of the seven principles that must guide German action in the region (the first objective is coordinated action at the EU level):

Stronger political, economic and security policy networks in and with the region leads to a reduction of unilateral dependencies and preserves both the ability to act and sovereignty. Germany and the EU are committed to the close integration of the region into multilateral organizations and forums such as the G20 and to the promotion of regional multilateral structures within the framework of a network of partnerships, provided that – as in the case of ASEAN – the participating states enjoy a level playing field. Multilateral agreements are the most effective way to make progress in climate and environmental protection, rules-based trade, disarmament, arms control and nonproliferation, as well as the protection of human rights (Federal Foreign Office of Germany 2020, 11).

Conclusion and Discussion: the challenges for the EU

There are many challenges still open that the EU Strategy and, more generally, the European presence in the Indo-Pacific poses to the EU itself.

A precondition for a greater European presence in the region can only start from the recognition that **the Indo-Pacific area is not currently uniquely defined**. Many documents of the EU and its Member States try to define the borders of the region. However, instead of trying to find a common geographical definition, it is more important for the EU to define the area according to its interests and the actions and programs to be undertaken. It is not just a question of irreconcilability between the different definitions of EU Member States: many of the contemporary problems (such as technological challenges, the preservation of value chains

and the fight against disinformation) transcend borders and the definition of specific areas. As Mohan (2019, 34) recalls, most debates in Europe have focused on the technical definition of the Indo-Pacific, and, considering the China opposition in using these terms, some of the EU policymakers are looking for alternatives. However, the critical importance of engaging with the region does not rely on nomenclature. As already written in the different French strategic documents, the Indo-Pacific Strategy does not only touch upon issues such as integration and economic interdependence but also addresses the challenges related to the issue of security. This is a significant change for the EU, traditionally more inclined to the former than to the latter. In fact, trade policy is a supranational matter, while security policy is an intergovernmental matter. It will not be easy to define its presence in the Indo-Pacific in terms of security in agreement among the EU Member States. And, again, it will not be easy to find a conciliation and coordination between economic and security initiatives (Lieberherr & Maduz 2022).

This risk is even more evident when one considers that **the EU is a trading partner of many Indo-Pacific countries**. The interdependence that emerged in recent years with the pandemic, first, and with the war in Ukraine, later, has also shown how dependent the EU is on non-European countries, many of which are located in the Indo-Pacific region. The changes induced by these dynamics and the need for the EU to become less subject to pressure from non-European countries could lead to a redefinition of the EU's economic and trade policy and, in any case, to connect this to the issue of security policy: the EU sees a fundamental interest in the pacification and stability of the Indo-Pacific area because peace is the necessary condition for a trade policy that can benefit all partners.

Of course, these considerations will apply all the more in the definition of **the relations that the EU will want to maintain with China**. China has become an important player in the Indo-Pacific at various levels, it is the EU's most important trading partner and the main economic interlocutor of the economically strongest country of the EU itself, Germany. To what extent will the EU be able to find a common (possibly even critical) position towards China within the broader Indo-Pacific strategy?

The shift from a multilateral to a minilateral or bilateral logic typical of many agreements in the Indo-Pacific region also poses challenges to the traditional European diplomatic approach. The EU has always been committed to promoting multilateralism (Atanassova-Cornelis & Pejsova 2021, 5), and ASEAN will continue to be a privileged partner, at least until the EU will promote the doctrine called "**ASEAN centrality**". During his visit to

the ASEAN countries in August 2022, High Representative Borrell highlighted this approach (Borrell 2022b) with the signing of the EU-ASEAN Plan of Action 2023-2027 (EEAS 2022) and, in October 2022, the EU and ASEAN signed an ambitious Comprehensive Air Transport Agreement (CATA) (European Commission 2021). However, as the English say recalls, “it takes two to tango”. To secure better access to opportunities in the region’s market, the EU started negotiations with ASEAN for a region-to-region free trade agreement (FTA) in 2007. However, negotiations were suspended and in 2009 the EU decided to pursue bilateral trade agreements with the individual ASEAN Member States. To date, negotiations started with six ASEAN states, and have already been concluded with two of them, namely Singapore and Vietnam. In the EU perspective, these bilateral FTAs would allow the establishment of a region-to-region FTA, which remains the EU’s ultimate ambition.

Relations between the EU and ASEAN had already been relaunched in December 2020 during the meeting of the foreign ministers of the two regional blocs (Council of the European Union 2020) and the relevance of ASEAN for the EU emerges clearly from the research carried out on the opinions of governments of EU Member States (Grare & Reuter 2021, 8). Moreover, there is no doubt that a broader engagement with the whole Indo-Pacific region could lead the EU to recognize that ASEAN is only one of the important players to negotiate and confront. In its Strategy, the EU explicitly states that it seeks an approach “inclusive of all partners in the region” (Council of the European Union 2021) and in the 2022 EU’s Strategic Compass the EU included ASEAN as only one of the strategic partners to work with (Council of the European Union 2022).

There is little doubt that economic cooperation will remain an essential element of the European presence in the Indo-Pacific. The EU and its Member States are direct investors in many countries in that region. As a consequence, the EU will continue to promote connectivity activities, as outlined in the EU-Asia Connectivity Strategy of 2018 (European Commission & High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy 2018) and in the Global Gateway Strategy of 2021 (European Commission & High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy 2021b; see also Tagliapietra 2021.) Like the US and Japan, the EU also sees the construction of infrastructures (including digital and technological ones) as a way to counterbalance the growing Chinese influence in the region. At the same time, the EU will continue to promote free trade agreements with Asian countries, as it has done with South Korea, Japan, Singapore and Vietnam. It will do so even if the US have second thoughts in this area, as happened under the Trump Presidency. This

approach has also been reiterated under the rotating French Council's Presidency in the first half of 2022. Together with the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, France hosted a ministerial forum in February 2022. On this occasion, EU Member States, the European Commission and some thirty Indo-Pacific partner countries, including India, Indonesia and Japan, have addressed the implementation of the EU Indo-Pacific Strategy and the Global Gateway Initiative. In discussing potential areas for strengthening European cooperation and concrete projects for implementation, participants highlighted areas such as coordinated maritime presence and cooperation on vaccines (French Presidency of the Council of the European Union 2022).

However, in pursuing their **Indo-Pacific policies, EU Member States will have to balance their interests and resources with the expectations of all partners in the region.** And this is a double challenge. On the extra-European level, the position of the Indo-Pacific partners towards the presence of the EU is varied and not always consistent (Mohan 2019, 7); on the intra-European level the same heterogeneity is also present (Lieberherr & Maduz 2022).

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