

Varieties of engagement in the Indo-Pacific: A comparison of the EU Big Four

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Abstract

This paper compares the Indo-Pacific policies of four EU Member States with significant trade and investment interests and a military presence in the region—namely France, Germany, the Netherlands, and Italy. Using a pluralist theoretical framework, it situates each country along a continuum between ideal-typical realism and liberalism: France as a defensive realist, the Netherlands as a moderately assertive mercantilist, Germany as closer to a strategic multilateralist, and Italy as a reactive pragmatist. The heuristic value of this framework lies in its ability to capture persistent differences among the four countries' Indo-Pacific policies that are expected to shape debate within the Union. At the same time, this classification accounts for emerging areas of convergence and ambiguity resulting from changes in international and domestic politics. On this basis, the paper draws implications for the European Union's capacity to project power, coordinate action, and enhance its presence in the region.

Keywords: Indo-pacific; European Union; France; Germany; The Netherlands; Italy

Introduction

The Indo-Pacific has recently emerged as an area of interest for European Union (EU) Member States. France was the first to act in 2018, with the publication of a dedicated strategy. The German and Dutch Ministries of Foreign Affairs issued strategic papers on the Indo Pacific in 2020. The Commission and the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (2021) presented an Indo-Pacific Strategy on 16 September 2021, and it was only after the speech of the US Secretary of State Antony Blinken (2021) in Jakarta, titled 'A Free and Open Indo-Pacific,' that Italy elaborated its strategy towards the region in 2022.

The EU's Indo-Pacific strategy aims to strengthen the Union's presence in the region through both trade and security policies and is notable for its ambitious normative component (Abbondanza & Grgić, 2025). In terms of trade, the EU has successfully pursued several agreements with countries in the region since 2021, including with New Zealand, Indonesia, and India, as well as a digital trade agreement with Singapore. In contrast, European security policy has been marked by ambiguity and a

lack of a unified strategic vision, due to limited resources and the differing strategies of Member States (Van Willgen & Blarel, 2024; Jopp & Pollack, 2025).

Despite the rich literature on the European Indo Pacific Policy, there is a lack of comparative studies on the EU Member States' strategies. Relevant exceptions include Grare and Reuter's (2021) analysis of the way stakeholders in EU Member States view the borders of the region; the insightful special issue and volume by Abbondanza and Wilkins (2023) and Abbondanza and Grgić (2025), which compare the approaches to the Indo-Pacific of EU Member States, with a focus on economic, security, and normative drivers; and Tercovich and Meijer's (2025) explanation of divergence in the strategies of Member States towards a critical Indo-Pacific issue such as Taiwan. This paper seeks to complement the aforementioned studies. It categorises the differences in how France, Germany, the Netherlands, and Italy approach the Indo-Pacific, placing them on a continuum between ideal-typical realism and liberalism. These theoretical frameworks offer clear criteria for comparing the distinct strategies and foreign policies of each country.

The paper uses the method of qualitative document analysis and integrates discourse data with quantitative data concerning trade flows and military deployments. It outlines the emergence of four types of actors, namely the realist (France), the strategic multilateralist (Germany), the moderately-assertive neo-mercantilist (The Netherlands), and the reactive pragmatist (Italy). Using the image of the continuum has the heuristic potential of capturing the distinctive roles the 'EU big four' are playing *vis a vis* the Indo-Pacific, while recognizing that elements of realism and liberalism merge, in different ways and with different degrees of intensity, in the foreign policies of the four countries. By rejecting rigid theoretical dichotomies, this classification captures the hybrid and dynamic nature of the foreign policy decisions within the EU. Moreover, it accounts for emerging areas of convergence and ambiguity resulting from changes in international and domestic politics.

This paper is structured as follows: the first part is devoted to the research method, the second part discusses the contribution of IR theories to the study of EU Indo-Pacific policy, the third part analyses the discourse and policies of the four actors, while the fourth part synthesises the findings of the comparative exercise. Finally, conclusions discuss the implications of the comparative analysis for the coherence and impact of the EU Indo-Pacific policy.

Research method

This paper employs a comparative research design to discern differences and similarities in the approaches of EU Member States toward the Indo-Pacific from the early strategies in 2018 to early 2026. It focuses on the big four Member States concerning trade and security relations with Indo-Pacific nations. Grare and Reuter (2021, p. 18) note "Only France, the Netherlands, and Germany have the security capabilities and the willingness to protect Europe's interests." However, Italy has also followed suit by drafting an Indo-Pacific strategy and increasing its trade and military presence in the region.

The paper uses the theoretical lenses of realism and liberalism to analyse empirical evidence. It conceives the two paradigms as ideal types and represents them as the two opposite poles of a continuum. This method allows us to identify the key drivers of the

foreign policy decisions in the four countries. The paper uses the following criteria for comparison: the timing of the elaboration of national strategies; the responsible ministry; the geographical definition of the Indo-Pacific region according to official documents; the trade vs. security focus; the support for actions under the EU umbrella (as a proxy for the degree of Europeanisation of the four strategies); the support for ASEAN as a key actor in the region (as a proxy for the unilateral/multilateral approach); and the approach of the governments of the big four toward the main regional emerging powers, namely China, India, and towards the US.

The paper traces the strategies and policies of the four countries over time. To this end, it analyses official documents and speeches from the four governments. Using qualitative document analysis (Bowen, 2009) allows us to “uncover meaning, develop understanding, and discover insights” (Merriam, 1988, p. 118) regarding both the differences and the areas of overlap and convergence among the four strategies. This approach enables us to identify the declared intentions and the significance that the four governments attribute to their relations with Indo-Pacific countries. We complement this analysis with quantitative data on trade and investment flows, as well as military deployments.

The comparative method and the selection of these four cases allow us to capture the most relevant patterns in the EU’s diverse responses to the challenges posed by the Indo-Pacific. A limitation of this approach, however, is that it does not permit a detailed reconstruction of the decision-making processes behind each country’s foreign policy, nor an in-depth analysis of the coherence—or lack thereof—between governmental rhetoric and concrete actions.

IR theories and EU-Indo-Pacific relations

Realism and liberalism can be represented at opposite ends of a continuum, ranging from a conflictual to a cooperation-oriented understanding of international relations. Both approaches highlight the rational calculations behind actors’ decisions. However, realists perceive international relations as fundamentally conflictual. Defensive realists argue that responding to international threats and safeguarding a state’s national security and relative power are the primary drivers of foreign policy (Waltz, 1979). The realist notion of national security also encompasses economic security, making trade policy a tool to support national security objectives (Yoshimatsu, 2025). In contrast, liberals contend that trade interdependence and institutionalised international cooperation can produce shared benefits for all participating states (Ikenberry, 2001). From this perspective, trade agreements institutionalise mutually beneficial interdependencies and generate gains for both parties. Furthermore, interregional cooperation can reduce conflicts and address common threats.

Positioned between the two extremes, but closer to realism, mercantilism views international relations as a zero-sum game, interpreting states’ pursuit of economic gains and control over markets and resources as the main drivers of foreign policy (Wigell, 2016). Moving further along the continuum toward the liberal pole is an approach that can be termed reactive pragmatism. Rather than following a coherent long-term strategy, reactive pragmatist governments tend to respond to events, adjusting their policies and strategically calculating what is reasonably achievable on an ad hoc basis (Gough, 1992; Wivel, 2014; Zapata, 2026). Reactive pragmatism can be seen as a vulnerability, but also as “the ability to accept a messy approach to

international affairs and the policy contradictions arising from it” (Lane, 2007, p. 182). Finally, strategic multilateralism lies even closer to the liberal extreme. This approach involves adapting to global power fragmentation by acting strategically—sometimes using bilateral cooperation as leverage—while pursuing multilateral solutions (Helwig, 2023).

Defensive realists interpret the EU’s increasing focus on the region as part of a broader balancing strategy. From this viewpoint, the EU’s Indo-Pacific strategy primarily responds to China’s increasing assertiveness in the South China Sea and in Taiwan, as well as the emerging global competition in the Indo-Pacific arena. From a liberal perspective, the Indo-Pacific is viewed as an ‘institutional setting’ meant to establish the foundations for international cooperation across the two oceans (He, 2018). Confirming this thesis, several authors (Giese et al., 2023; Hwee, 2023; Zajackowski & Aryal, 2025) emphasise that the EU aims to emerge as a promoter of multilateralism in the region, considering ASEAN a privileged partner. Positioned between the two extremes, mercantilist scholars interpret EU Indo-Pacific policy as driven by the unilateral pursuit of the economic interests of its Member States (Pugliese, 2023), whereas pragmatist scholars highlight the EU’s attempt to strike a careful balance between its interests and the defence of its fundamental values (Pennisi di Floristella & Chen, 2022; Cottey & van der Harr, 2025).

These differing interpretations provide a framework for comparing the foreign policies of EU Member States.

A domestic politics analysis, moreover, helps accounting for variations over time in each country’s foreign policy. This perspective emphasises the way the constellation of interests and ideas shaping policy-making within the political system of the EU Member States and of other major players, such as the US, affect the approaches of those countries to the Indo-Pacific. By pointing at the impact of government changes, party politics, interest groups mobilisation and public opinion, it sheds light on contradictions and changes over time in their Indo-Pacific policies (Pugliese, 2023; van Willigen & Blarel, 2024).

French Realism

France is the EU country that can be placed most closely to the ideal type of a realist player. Yet, its focus on security and assertiveness in the South China Sea coexists with its reluctance to fully decouple from trade and investment cooperation with China.

France holds a unique position in the region due to its overseas territories located in the Indian Ocean and in the Pacific. As the French Defence Ministry clearly stated, France is a “resident power” (Ministry of Armed Forces of France, 2019, p. 2). The French definition of the Indo-Pacific widely aligns with realist expectations. According to the Ministry of Armed Forces of France (2019, p. 2), the region “forms a security continuum spreading from the East African coastline to the Western American seaboard” and, therefore, includes all the above-mentioned French territories.

Given these premises, tensions in the Indo-Pacific directly affect French foreign policy. The French government has an interest in preventing the escalation of conflicts and 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 de l’Europe et des Affaires étrangères 2018, p. 3).

On defence issues, France has pursued a ‘more assertive presence’ in its territories (Ministry of Armed Forces of France, 2019, p. 16). It is no coincidence that the first two important documents delineating the French Strategy toward the region were drawn up by the Ministry of Defence. France has launched various initiatives in the region and privileged strategic relations with countries such as India, Australia and Japan (Heiduk & Sulejmanović, 2021). Between 2021 and 2025 it deployed five naval missions in the region (Jeanne d’Arc, Amphibious, Marianne, Pegase and Clemenceau 2025). Formal talks between France and Japan on a reciprocal troop deal concerning the Russia-Ukraine war and the Indo-Pacific region intensified in 2025, when both countries agreed to strengthening ‘bilateral collaboration (...) in defence equipment and technology’ (Japan Ministry of Defence, 2025, p. 1).

French security concerns include China’s cooperation with Russia, support to North Korea, strategic partnership with Pakistan, border issues with India, and disputes in the East and South China Sea. The French government shares with the US and India the representation of Chinese assertiveness as an attempt to redefine the regional balance of power (Esteban & Armanini, 2021). As the French strategy towards the Indo-Pacific (Government of France, 2019, p. 2) warns, ‘the Indo-Pacific is an area that is seeing profound strategic changes. China’s power is increasing, and its territorial claims are expressed with greater and greater strength’.

Nevertheless, the document, published during the first Donald Trump administration, hardly mentions the US. The French Indo-Pacific policy appears, instead, deliberately distinct from that of the US. Both in terms of trade and security policies, France has tried to play a balancing role between China and the US in the region. The French president and Indian prime minister, in turn, share an understanding of the Indo-Pacific concept as a means to contain Chinese power (Krishnamurthy, 2023). Arms trade flows represent a further confirmation of the consolidated special relations between the two countries on security matters. From 2020 to 2024 the biggest share of French arms exports (28%) went to India (Djokic et al., 2025).

The realist connotation of French foreign policy also emerges from the government’s approach to multilateralism. The Ministry of the Armed Forces (2019, p. 16) sees the growing tension between the US and China as a problematic factor for the stability of the area: growing “diverging interests” and the “promotion of alternative frameworks” led to a decline in multilateralism in the region. In response to this challenge, the government has pursued bilateral and minilateral cooperation with India, Australia, the US and Japan, listed as “privileged partners”, and “other partners” such as Malaysia, Singapore, New Zealand, Indonesia and Vietnam. Curiously, the US is only mentioned once in connection with the fact that US-China relations “will be crucial in determining balances in the Indo-Pacific” (Ministry of the Armed Forces of France, 2019). This defensive realist stance also explains the absence of a confrontational approach to the Taiwan issue. The “great risk,” according to Macron, is becoming “caught up in crises that are not ours” (Anderlini & Caulcutt, 2023).

The security-focused dimension of the French strategy, particularly its containment policy toward China, coexists with an ambivalent approach to trade cooperation with the Asian power. The government decided in 2023 to implement foreign investment

control measures affecting Chinese investments. However, trade and investment cooperation between the two countries remained robust, and the economy and finance minister Bruno Le Marie in 2023 clarified that “decoupling” from China “is an illusion” (Deutsch Welle, 2023). Trump’s tariffs war, started in 2025, made decoupling even less strategic. The trade minister Laurent Saint-Martin claimed France will adjust to a world where trade is increasingly becoming an “instrument of power” and will deepen economic ties with China, albeit with caution (Manzanaro, 2025). This partial openness can be interpreted in realist terms as an attempt to avoid “anti-China” and “bloc” mentalities, or, from a domestic politics perspective, as the result of bargaining between the French trade and foreign policy ministries (McDougall, 2023).

An updated Indo-Pacific Strategy in 2025 further developed such a realist perspective, aimed at “Guaranteeing France’s sovereignty” and making the country “an independent, singular voice” in the Indo-Pacific (French Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs 2025, p. 15).

German strategic multilateralism

German foreign policy towards the Indo-Pacific stands in contrast to that of its three European neighbours for its support of multilateralism as the preferred method. This approach has a strategic dimension, since it allows the government to refrain from committing itself to single partners and simultaneously to advance cooperative trade relations with all the major Asian economies.

Unlike France, Germany seems to lack a natural role in the Indo-Pacific region. Consequently, it approaches the region with caution, aiming to defend European economic interests and ensuring the proper functioning of maritime commercial lines. Germany’s initial strategic document, drafted under Angela Merkel’s government, considered the Indo-Pacific to encompass the entire region characterised by the Indian Ocean and the Pacific (Federal Foreign Office of Germany, 2020, p. 8). This definition aligns with Germany’s self-perception as a ‘Handelsnation’ (a trading state) proposing a rules-based international order.

Germany’s agenda in the Indo-Pacific is broader than the French one, and less centred upon security issues. The government’s guidelines identify eight main interests, including peace and security, diversifying trade relations, open shipping routes, open markets, digital transformation, protecting the planet, and access to fact-based information. This agenda encompasses areas such as digital transformations and environmental policy, with no explicit mention of the defence of national interests. It promotes a more gradual and inclusive approach, advocating for the opening of new ports, joint military exercises, and the protection of sea routes. The positions of the German government reflect the pressures of the Federation of German Industries (BDI) (2019), which simultaneously identified China as both a ‘partner’ and a ‘systemic competitor.’ The German Federal Foreign Office (2020, p. 47) highlighted China’s importance for German industries and emphasised that relations with China must not be jeopardised: ‘Nearly 50 percent of German foreign trade in the Indo-Pacific region is with China. Both sides benefit from this’. German Indo-Pacific policy echoes a refrain often heard in Berlin: “We don’t want to choose sides between the US and China” (Duchâtel & Mohan, 2020).

While France prioritises bilateral and trilateral agreements, the German government has defended the centrality of ASEAN and a multilateral approach, aiming to diversify relations both geographically and substantively, avoiding unilateral dependencies and strengthening ties with emerging global players. According to the Policy Guidelines for the Indo-Pacific Region, “No country should - as in the time of the Cold War - be forced to choose between two sides or fall into a state of unilateral dependency” (Federal Foreign Office of Germany, 2020, p. 9). The first objective of the strategy is coordinated action at the EU level: Multilateralism comprises close integration of the region into international organisations and cooperation with ASEAN (Federal Foreign Office of Germany, 2020).

Like the French strategy, the German document was written during the first Trump presidency. Perhaps for this reason, the document did not take a clear position on cooperation with the US in addressing the challenges emerging from the Indo-Pacific. During the more friendly Joe Biden’s administration, instead, the German government joined as a partner the US-led informal ‘Partners of the Blue Pacific Initiative’, launched in 2022 with the aim of coordinating efforts of like-minded countries in the Pacific Islands. The then newly elected Chancellor Olaf Scholz (2021–25) even joined President Biden in initiating a process of de-risking from China (Damm, 2025). However, Scholz’s foreign policy advisor Jens Plötner specified in 2022 that decoupling from China could lead to the self-fulfilling prophecy of strengthening cooperation between China and Russia (Ulatowski, 2023).

The government also followed the French lead by contributing to naval deployments in the South China Sea (Pejsova, 2023), making the Indo-Pacific deployment the priority security and defence cooperation project of the German navy in 2024. In contrast to France, however, the military presence of Germany is much more limited. Then Vice Chancellor Habeck clarified that “ASEAN’s negotiations on a code of conduct for the South China Sea is (...) of the utmost importance” (Şimşek, 2024). Finally, in line with liberal expectations, Olaf Scholz remarked in March 2024 that the German position on Chinese territorial claims over the South China sea “is about adhering to international law, ensuring the freedom of navigation”. The Chancellor specified that ‘de-escalation must always be our priority’ (Şimşek, 2024). According to the Progress report on the implementation of the Indo-Pacific guidelines for the year 2024 of the Federal Republic of Germany (2024, p. 2), ‘inclusive cooperation’ should be pursued. Ambassador Fanghänel in Singapore further specified that this approach is needed in order to avoid a bipolar world (German Embassy Singapore, 2024).

Germany’s diversification strategy is opening new avenues for strategic bilateral partnerships beyond China. Germany elevated Japan to the status of a *Wertepartner* (value partner) (Akagawa, 2024) and concluded a defence export deal with Australia (Grgić, 2024). The Merz-led government (2025–), elected during the tariff war initiated by the second Trump administration, further promoted the diversification of Germany’s trade relations (Szymanowski & Anusik, 2025), reinvigorated a de-risking approach toward China, and simultaneously opted to strengthen bilateral ties. The Chancellor’s visit to India in January 2026, his first trip to the region as head of government, can be understood in this framework. It is, however, too early to conclude that Germany’s posture has moved away from multilateralism. As a matter of fact, while pursuing this strategy—and in line with liberal expectations—the government has played a key role in facilitating the conclusion of a European trade agreement with India in 2026 (Reuters, 2026).

Dutch (moderately assertive) mercantilism

The Dutch approach to the Indo-Pacific emerging from its strategic documents and foreign policy is widely consistent with mercantilist expectations. However, the Netherlands recently aligned with the French and German defence operations in the region.

The Netherlands adopted an Indo-Pacific strategy in October 2020, reflecting its historical tradition of an investment-oriented foreign policy (Government of the Netherlands, 2020). The Netherlands is the largest EU Member State as a trade and investment partner of South East Asian countries. Two-way trade with these countries has increased from USD 40.54 billion in 2019 to USD 6.1 billion in 2022 (ASEAN, 2023).

Although it lacks territories in the region, its colonial legacy in Indonesia, New Guinea, and Sri Lanka has shaped its long-standing investment interests in the region. Therefore, the dominant definition of the Indo-Pacific in the Dutch government is a restrictive one. It includes countries from Pakistan to the area of the Pacific (Grare & Reuter, 2021, p. 6).

The designation of the Foreign Affairs Ministry as the responsible institution confirms the secondary role of the Dutch security interests in the region. Dutch foreign policy also confirms mercantilistic assumptions because it seems to prioritise bilateral relations and cooperation on an *ad hoc* basis rather than adopting multilateralism as the overarching strategy and to pursue an approach oriented towards maximizing relative gains. Even though promoting a 'European vision' and supporting the promotion of international law in the region, the Dutch document emphasises the fact that the 'geo-economic balance of power is shifting rapidly' and the need to 'adequately promote Dutch (...) economic and political interests there – the world's primary growth region' (Government of the Netherlands, 2020, 1).

In contrast to the German strategic document, the Dutch strategy considers cooperation with ASEAN only as a second-order goal and specifies that cooperation with the countries in the region will be on an *ad hoc* basis. 'Partnerships will take different forms in different countries depending on the extent of shared interests and the degree of like-mindedness' (Government of the Netherlands, 2020, p. 1).

It lists Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia and Vietnam as the priority ASEAN members for deepening existing bilateral partnerships in the region. Other like-minded member states listed in the strategy include Australia, India, Japan, South Korea, New Zealand.

The Netherlands tried to capitalise on the window of opportunity opened by Brexit to gain the position of main gateway for India to the EU (Srichandan, 2023). India emerged as an indispensable partner in dealing with key challenges confronting the Indo-Pacific, namely 'climate change, international security, cybersecurity, maritime security, global value chains, global health, poverty, migration, human rights and the international legal order' (Government of the Netherlands, 2020). In 2022 and 2023 the Netherlands became India's largest trading partner in the EU and the fourth largest investor in the country (Embassy of India, 2024) and in the 2024-5 period it moved from the 11th to the 9th largest trading partner of India in the world (Embassy of India, 2025).

Moving beyond the group of like-minded countries, trade relations with China displayed an exponential growth from 2015 to 2021 notable for its intensity and steadiness in contrast to the figures of French, German and Italian trade relations. Dutch investments in China also experienced rapid growth. By the end of 2021, the Netherlands established itself as the second-largest investment source in China among the EU Member States after Germany (Brancaccio, 2024). However, signs of a more cautious approach to trade cooperation with China first appeared in 2019. The policy memorandum ‘Netherlands-China: a new balance’ (Government of the Netherlands, 2019) suggests that the Dutch economy should be substantially open to Chinese imports, but also protective, where necessary. The Dutch People’s Party for Freedom and Democracy especially voiced the concerns of interests groups affected by Chinese investments (in the sectors of medical goods, natural resources, technological development and more) and, in 2022, was able to gain wide support in the Dutch parliament for a motion calling for a strategy to reduce dependency on Chinese investments (Martin, 2022). The Netherlands shared with the Biden administration the perception of the need for indirectly containing Chinese economic power. Nevertheless, Prime Minister Mark Rutte (2010-2024) resisted Biden’s call to join the US in the ‘chip war’ against China. In 2025, the government reiterated its intention to promote an open, but cautious trade partnership with China (Government of the Netherlands, 2025a), to uphold the ‘protect when necessary’ principle (Government of the Netherlands, 2025b).

Despite their commercial focus, the Dutch guidelines pointed at China’s destabilizing role and violation of international law in the South China Sea. They emphasised that China’s “Economic, political, military, cyber, security and intelligence activities are interwoven in the centralised Chinese system and cannot be viewed completely independently from one another” (Government of the Netherlands, 2020, p. 1). Thus, the guidelines foresee a moderately assertive security policy in the region. On this basis, the government engaged in ‘naval signalling’ – that is, naval deployment as a form of diplomatic signalling and deployed the HNLMS Evertsen, a Dutch frigate, as part of a mainly British aircraft carrier strike group, in the South China Sea in July 2021. Evertsen represents a fourth of the frigate capacity of the Netherlands (Caverly, 2023).

The assertiveness of the government in the region faced domestic resistance. The military deployment has raised domestic contestation, which suggests that military presence in the region involving the Dutch government will be a rare event (Okano-Heijmans & Van’t Klooster, 2021). Yet, the newly elected Prime Minister Dick Schoof (2024) reiterated the interest of the government to maintain a military presence in the Indo-Pacific and sent a Dutch frigate through the Taiwan Strait (Lau, 2024). Naval signalling continued in 2025 and caused an incident when Chinese fighter jets and a helicopter allegedly harassed the HNLMS Tromp (Jarkovský, 2025).

Italian reactive pragmatism

Italy was a latecomer in the region. This is not surprising if one considers that, due to its peninsular geographical features and exposure to migration routes and the lack of colonial history in the region, the foreign policy interests of the Italian government are mainly restricted to the Mediterranean. Under this perspective, the Indo-Pacific is connected to the Mediterranean through the Bab-El-Mandeb strait (a vital chokepoint for EU and international trade), on the one hand, and Yemen on the other hand. Thus,

the decision of the Chinese government in 2017 to build a military base in Djibouti with the capacity of supplying Chinese military navy ships operating in the whole region alerted the Italian government and contributed to shifting its attention to the Pacific region. Moreover, interest in importing liquified natural gas from Qatar has influenced the decisions of the Italian government concerning the Indian Ocean (Pugliese, 2023). Thus, the dominant definition of the Indo-Pacific among Italian stakeholders includes states from the Eastern coast of Africa to the Islands of the Pacific (Grare & Reuter, 2021). Yet, it was only in January 2022 that the Ministry for External Affairs and International Cooperation published the document titled ‘The Italian contribution to the EU strategy for the Indo-Pacific’ (Ministero degli Affari Esteri, 2022). Despite the publication of that strategic paper, in contrast to other European players, Italy still lacks a formal Indo-Pacific policy (Abbondanza, 2026).

While Italy lacks ‘a strong geopolitical perspective on Asia’ (Pal Chaudhuri, 2023, p. 162), its foreign policy towards the region has traditionally had an economic focus. This is especially evident in relations with China as a way to project its export-led economy to East and South East Asia. The Italian strategy mainly aims at securing raw materials and a market for exporting its goods. The centrality of trade interests also emerges in the decision to attribute the implementation of the Italian Indo-Pacific strategy to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Development Cooperation.

As the title of the strategic paper ‘The Italian contribution to the EU Strategy for the Indo-Pacific’ suggests, Italy has adopted a multilateral approach to the region, framing its relations with the region through a European lens. Its multilateralism is also evident in its promotion of an inter-regional approach. In this respect, the Italian document singles out all the “initiatives aimed at strengthening economic and strategic ties (...) with ASEAN” (Ministero degli Affari Esteri, 2022, p. 2).

Following the gradual embrace of a security component in the Indo-Pacific postures of the other EU governments, though, the Italian military airforce launched a bilateral training initiative with Japan in August 2023. The Italian government further deployed its Morosini offshore patrol vessels from April to September 2023 to perform joint exercises and other operations with Indo-Pacific partners. The aim of these initiatives is to prevent the exclusion of the Italian government from the hot spot of European security policy (Stringa, 2023) and to reinforce the traditional Atlanticist connotation of Italian foreign policy (Fasola & Lucarelli, 2024). According to Termine and Natalizia (2025), U.S. pressure has been the most significant external factor shaping Italy’s approach to the Indo-Pacific.

At the same time, the government emerged as a key sponsor of an EU combined army, that, in the words of the Italian Foreign Minister Antonio Tajani, could help protect European citizens “in a world with powerful players like the United States, China, India, Russia – with crises from the Middle East to the Indo-Pacific” (Reuters, 2024).

Italian trade relations with China have developed pragmatically. Italy has been the largest EU member that has joined the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative in 2019, under the coalition government of the Five Stars party/Lega. Italian bilateral trade in goods with 100 of the largest trading nations in the Indo-Pacific has risen by 16.4% from 2011 to 2021 (Abbondanza, 2023). Under the new coalition of Meloni’s Fratelli d’Italia (Brothers of Italy), Lega and Forza Italia government (since October 2022), which pursued an alignment policy with the US and NATO in the Russia-Ukraine war, the

partnership started to creak. In a carefully calibrated language confirming the ‘in-betweenness’ posture of the government vis a vis China and the US (Gallelli & Zappa, 2025), Meloni’s spokesperson suggested the intention of the government to consider abandoning the initiative in September 2023, claiming that the president had decided to push cooperation with China on the initiative ‘up to the highest levels of interlocution’ G20, Meloni, 2023). In a pragmatic move aimed at avoiding Chinese retaliation, in December 2023, the government officially declared its exit from the partnership in a letter to President Xi Jinping while promising that Italy will engage in, and even strengthen, cooperative relationships with China on a bilateral level.

At the same time, India has emerged as a new strategic ally for Italy. After a nine-year-diplomatic crisis linked to the case of two Italian marines charged by the Indian court of murdering Indian fishermen in 2012, concluded by the decision of the Hague International Court in 2021 to bring the case under the Italian jurisdiction, the Meloni and Modi governments resumed talks and launched a new era of cooperation between the two countries on the economic front. Rejuvenating cooperation with Italy was part of the post-Brexit attempt of India to look for European trade partners (Pal Chaudhuri, 2023). Such a renewed cooperation ultimately led to the Joint Strategic Action Plan (2025-29) between the two countries in 2025.

European Indo-Pacific policies between realism and liberalism

Despite the fact that the Indo-Pacific has only recently appeared on the radar of European foreign policies and, therefore, necessarily has a reactive connotation when compared to that of other international players, the EU big four have, so far, developed distinct ways of conceptualizing relationships with the region (Table 1).

Compared to the other European countries, France stands out as a nation strongly characterised by a defensive realist-inspired stance. The government did not take side in the competition between the US and China. Instead, it opted for further diversifying trade and investment relations in order to reduce dependency on a single partner. Its cautious approach towards the proposition of full decoupling from the Asian economy can be read under this perspective.

Germany, on the other hand, adopted a more evidently liberal-inspired approach. Its actions in the Indo-Pacific are primarily trade-related, shaped by the principles of multilateralism and regionalism. The latter is meant both as a full support for a European common position on the region and for the role of ASEAN. German multilateralism, though, cannot be reduced to a mere idealistic posture. The government has clear economic interests at stake, voiced by the Federation of German Industries, and aims at strengthening its trade and investment partnerships with large Asian economies. Moreover, the dialogue pursued by the Merz government with individual Indo-Pacific countries appears to challenge the representation of German Indo-Pacific policy as univocally multilateral and leaves the question of a bilateral turn to future research.

The Netherlands and Italy fall between the two extremes in the continuum between realism and liberalism, albeit for different reasons. The Netherlands has placed a clear emphasis on the economic rationale for its presence in the Indo-Pacific, potentially prioritizing national interests over the common European interest. Consequently, multilateralism does not emerge as a top concern for the Dutch government.

Throughout the period under analysis, the government consistently pursued a policy of openness toward India. Moreover, it has been involved in naval signalling operations in the South China Sea, which shows the intent to join the US-led group of increasingly assertive countries in their relations with China. At the same time, it preserved its autonomy from the transatlantic counterpart in dealing with aggressive Chinese trade policy.

Finally, Italy appears to be the last of the EU big four to formulate a position on the Indo-Pacific. This decision is driven by the necessity of aligning with the broader EU and US strategies and the need to create new markets for its exports. Economic considerations and the change in the government coalition in 2022 underlie an overall ambiguous stance towards China. Consequently, Italy has withdrawn from the Belt and Road Initiative agreement while concurrently seeking more structured economic relations with India. However, the government has specified that the possibility of new collaborations with China remains wide open.

Conclusions

This paper contributes to literature on the European strategies towards the Indo-Pacific by identifying the distinctive features of the foreign policies of the main EU Member States involved in the region. At the same time, it shows that their foreign policies have blurred boundaries and partially overlap.

French foreign policy in the region, with its strong security component and assertive attitude, can be placed closer to realism; Germany, has prioritised multilateral agreements and emerged as a supporter of ASEAN as a key player in the region, to liberalism; whereas both Italy and the Netherlands seem to fall in between the two opposite ideal-types. While sharing the US opposition to Chinese territorial claims in the Indo-Pacific, France and the Netherlands have adopted a distinctive and more autonomous role from the US than Italy and Germany.

Along with these distinctive features, this comparative exercise has detected a certain level of ambiguity in the approach of each of the four EU Member States to the Indo-Pacific challenges. This is in a way unavoidable given the complexity of those challenges and the interference of domestic politics pressures within the Member States.

In addition, this paper has identified areas of partial convergence in the foreign policies of the four countries that can be attributed both to Europeanisation processes and to rising common threats. The security turn in the French Indo-Pacific policy has influenced the foreign policy decisions of the other Member States. In contrast to the French military missions, though, the German, Dutch and Italian military deployments can be better conceived as signalling rather than fully defensive operations. Be that as it may, the growing relevance of the security dimension in the Indo-Pacific policies of the EU Member States represents a major change in the traditionally trade-oriented foreign policy of the EU towards the region. Another element of convergence is the attitude of the four countries towards India. The latter is emerging as a like-minded country and as a crucial trade partner in the region. Its increasing importance for the EU Member States, though, is not expected to replace China as a preferential trade partner in the near future. The four European countries have demonstrated different attitudes towards China, from the most assertive approach of France to the most

cooperative one of Italy. None of them, though, has pushed competition with China to full decoupling. Finally, the second Trump administration has revitalised pressures for trade diversification of each of the EU Member States.

These findings have implications both for the coherence and the effectiveness of the EU Indo-Pacific strategy.

The fragmented responses of the four countries and the ambiguous stance that EU Member States have shown toward China will inevitably affect the EU's pursuit of 'strategic focus, presence, visibility, and actions in the Indo-Pacific' (Council of the EU, 2025). Consequently, the EU is likely to lag behind other major players in its efforts to help shape the regional balance of power in the Indo-Pacific. At the same time, the inherent ambiguity of European foreign policy can also turn out to be a strength, enhancing the EU's ability to adapt to external pressures. The second Trump administration has significantly weakened the U.S. role as a trade partner in the Indo-Pacific, creating opportunities for the EU and its member states to recalibrate their relations with countries in the region and act in a coordinated way to increase the Union's presence in that strategic area. The trade agreement concluded with India in 2026 can be read as a step in this direction.

Table 1. Differences in the policies of the four EU Member States toward the Indo Pacific (2018-early 2026)

	France <i>The realist</i>	Netherlands <i>The moderately assertive mercantilist</i>	Italy <i>The reactive pragmatist</i>	Germany <i>The strategic multilateralist</i>
Timing	First comer	Early comer	Late comer	Early comer
Responsible ministry	Armed force	Foreign Affairs	Foreign Affairs	Foreign Affairs
Geographical definition of the Indo-Pacific	Large area, includes French territories in the Indian and Pacific oceans	Restricted area: from Pakistan to the area of the Pacific	Medium area	Unclear borders
Focus on economics	Medium	High	High	High
Focus on security	High	Low	Low	Low
Support for a European framework	Low	High	High	High (until 2025)
Support for ASEAN	Low	Low	High	High
Approach towards the US	Distinctive	Autonomy	Aligned	Inclusive (until 2024)

Approach towards China	Assertive (but unwilling to 'decouple')	Competitive (but unwilling to 'decouple')	Ambiguous	Inclusive
Approach towards India	Cooperative	Cooperative	Cooperative	Cooperative

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