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The EU in the Indo-Pacific: A New Strategy with Implications for ASEAN

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EU's High Representative/Vice-President of the European Union, Josep Borrell, unveiling the EU's Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific in September 2021. Picture: European Union in Australia Facebook. <https://www.facebook.com/EUAustralia>

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The European Council reached agreement on an EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific in April 2021, and in September, it presented a Joint Communication providing further rationale for its strategy. This paves the way for the EU to join the other long-standing advocates of the Indo-Pacific strategy.
- This paper looks into the various dimensions of the EU's Indo-Pacific strategy and examines the similarity of its approach with the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) and how the two regional blocs may find synergy in implementing their respective guiding documents.
- The EU's Indo-Pacific strategy can add a strong normative dimension to the Indo-Pacific region to allow it to work closely with like-minded Indo-Pacific partners. As is the case with ASEAN, the EU places importance on building partnerships and reinforcing multilateral cooperation.
- The presence of the EU may help dilute major power rivalries in the region. ASEAN was mentioned 31 times in the EU's Joint communication on its strategy, including a specific section on the "Centrality of ASEAN". ASEAN appears to be at the core of the EU's Indo-Pacific strategy.

INTRODUCTION

On 19 April 2021, The European Council agreed on an EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific.¹ A Joint Communication was subsequently presented by the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy on 16 September 2021,² providing further rationale for its approach and to its strategy.

This paves the way for the EU to join the other long-standing advocates of the Indo-Pacific region, predominantly the members of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), i.e. Australia, India, Japan and the United States (U.S.), and other countries that have a lesser degree of Indo-Pacific commitment such as ASEAN member states, as well as New Zealand, the Republic of Korea and the United Kingdom – all of which are ASEAN’s dialogue partners.

This paper looks briefly into various dimensions of the EU’s Indo-Pacific strategy. Specifically, it examines the similarity of its approach to the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) and how the two regional blocs may find synergy in implementing their respective guiding documents.

WHY EU, WHY NOW

France, Germany and the Netherlands – countries of considerable economic and diplomatic influence in the Indo-Pacific region – first announced their policies on Indo-Pacific at the national level,³ and these then provided the push for an EU-wide strategy on that strategic region.

Even though several of the EU member states remain ambivalent and have no real foreign policy interest in the Indo-Pacific arena, the EU had realised that it could not afford not taking a position. This was because “the world’s centre of gravity is moving towards the Indo-Pacific, both in geo-economic and geo-political terms. The futures of the EU and the Indo-Pacific are interlinked”, according to EU’s High Representative/Vice-President Josep Borrell.⁴

The EU felt compelled to deepen its engagement with partners in the Indo-Pacific to respond to emerging dynamics in a region rich in trade and resources. It realised the importance of access to the open markets and the need to strengthen its supply chains. Equally important is its need to bolster its strategic reach and relevance.

Thus, the key tenet of the EU’s Indo-Pacific strategy is to shape a rules-based international order to better address global challenges, including climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic. The Indo-Pacific region also holds potential for the EU to reinforce its priorities such as the promotion of the 2030 Agenda, the Sustainable Development Goals⁵ and of a multilateral rules-based international order.

Another compelling reason is the need for the EU to offer a rules-based alternative to China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).⁶ In this aspect, the EU is also standing on the same

side as Australia, Japan and the U.S. in the promotion of quality and transparent infrastructure cooperation.⁷

A development running parallel to this was the adoption in 2019 of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP). ASEAN had also been gearing itself towards a new understanding of the Indo-Pacific.⁸ However, due to ambivalence among its member states, ASEAN's approach to the Indo-Pacific did not develop into a strategy but remains an outlook, as the name of AOIP implies. It was ASEAN's effort at coming up with its collective leadership to maintain its central role in the region which prompted the EU to ponder over its own hesitancy over the Indo-Pacific construct.

PREMISE OF THE EU'S INDO-PACIFIC STRATEGY IN THE REGION

Despite the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP)" concept originating from the Trump's Administration,⁹ the EU clearly does not have an outright intention to join a U.S.-led containment strategy¹⁰ directed against China,¹¹ neither does it exhibit any zero-sum mentality when it comes to the Indo-Pacific construct.

Although the EU is cautious of developments in China, including human rights violations and Beijing's military build-up in the Indo-Pacific, the EU stays clear of the rivalry between China and the U.S. Instead, it has explicitly stated that its approach to the region encourages cooperation, and not confrontation¹² and it would like to see an Indo-Pacific that is less securitised and politicised. In fact, the EU intends to encourage China to play a constructive role in the Indo-Pacific region. Some degree of balancing China may be acceptable, but economically, it does not wish to dissociate itself from China.

The EU's strategy also promotes a rules-based international order and other principles such as democracy, human rights, the rule of law, freedom of navigation, and international commitments. This has led some scholars to reason that the 'rules-based order' and 'Indo-Pacific strategy' may sometimes be used as omnibus terms for these high principles.¹³

Similar to the objectives of all other Indo-Pacific partners, the EU would like to keep ASEAN at the centre of the regional architecture. This is not only due to the geographical location of ASEAN, between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean, but also because all Indo-Pacific partners are also dialogue partners of ASEAN. They are all a part of one or more ASEAN-led mechanisms, such as the East Asia Summit (EAS), ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the ADMM-Plus, and therefore have vested strategic commitments to ASEAN.

What is positive for the EU is the fact that the Indo-Pacific is still a relatively young concept. There is no clear and single definition of its geographical scope, strategic objectives, or specific areas of cooperation. As such, it does not restrict the EU from defining its own strategy in accordance with its own normative interest in the Indo-Pacific region, and does not impose its alignment to any groupings, including the QUAD. The EU has a free hand in determining what it wants to bring to the Indo-Pacific region and how it wants to do it.

WHAT IS THE EU BRINGING TO THE INDO-PACIFIC?

While it may be hard to reconcile the diverse interests and aspirations of the various Indo-Pacific partners, some pragmatic cooperation among the partners may help shape some norms geared towards collaboration.

The EU is certain that its engagement in the Indo-Pacific region will be principled and long-term, and places emphasis on partnership, trade, and maritime security at the core of its Indo-Pacific strategy. It has identified seven priority areas, namely sustainable and inclusive prosperity; green transition; ocean governance; digital governance and partnerships; connectivity; security and defence; and human security.

These are in line with some of the priority areas found in the approaches taken by France, Germany and the Netherlands in relation to the Indo-Pacific.

Concretely, the EU has plans to (i) conclude Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (PCA) with several countries, including Malaysia and Thailand; (ii) complete or resume trade negotiations with several countries including a region-to-region trade agreement with ASEAN; (iii) forge green alliances in the fight against climate change; (iv) strengthen ocean governance; (v) establish Digital Partnership Agreements; (vi) implement connectivity partnerships including with India and Japan; (vii) enhance naval deployment in the Indo-Pacific and ensure maritime security; (viii) strengthen cooperation on research and innovation with like-minded partners; and (ix) reinforce support to healthcare systems and pandemic preparedness.¹⁴

Strategically, the EU has vested interests in the waterways of the Indo-Pacific; 40% of its foreign trade passes through the South China Sea.¹⁵ Hence, maritime security and governance is a key tenet of its strategy. Apart from the EU's support for Indo-Pacific countries' fisheries management and the fight against Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) fishing, it may have other security objectives.

The EU has plans to enhance the naval presence of its member states in the Indo-Pacific. Furthermore, it seeks to conduct more joint exercises and port calls with Indo-Pacific partners, including multilateral exercises, to protect freedom of navigation in the region.¹⁶ These could well align with the EU's principles of ensuring a rules-based maritime order, including the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), but could also be deemed as adding 'fuel' to a sea that is already packed with military vessels.

There is no doubt that the EU's Indo-Pacific strategy can add a strong normative dimension¹⁷ to the region. It also affords the EU to work closely with like-minded Indo-Pacific partners in addressing common challenges, build trust, set standards, and promote good regulatory practices in the region. Like ASEAN, partnership and reinforcing multilateral cooperation are at the core of the EU's Indo-Pacific strategy.

THE EU STRATEGY AND THE ASEAN OUTLOOK ON THE INDO-PACIFIC

The EU, being a regional organisation and sharing key similarities¹⁸ with ASEAN in its approach to the Indo-Pacific, affords some possibility of synergy. In addition, its presence may help dilute major power rivalries in the region.¹⁹

ASEAN and the EU are often seen as natural partners in integration. Both organisations are recognised for being successful regional organisations in their respective regions. A key premise for the ASEAN-EU strategic partnership is the shared values concerning effective and sustainable multilateralism, a rules-based international order, as well as free and fair trade.²⁰

Where ASEAN and the EU will strongly converge is really the strong values underpinning the Indo-Pacific order. In addition, there is also the strong focus they have on establishing partnership, working with like-minded partners in addressing common challenges and building trust – including with China.

As such, in the EU's Joint Communication on its strategy,²¹ ASEAN was mentioned 31 times. It also has a specific section on the "Centrality of ASEAN". The EU emphasised the dynamism and breath of its partnership with ASEAN and underscored its support of ASEAN centrality and other ASEAN-led processes.

Similar to the EU Indo-Pacific strategy, The ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP)²² was envisioned to be inclusive, and to promote key principles.²³ Four key areas of cooperation were identified, namely: (i) maritime cooperation; (ii) connectivity; (iii) UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 2030; and (iv) economic and other possible areas of cooperation.

The Outlook recognises the complementarity of existing cooperation frameworks such as the EAS, ARF and the ADMM-Plus. Hence, the establishment of new mechanisms or infrastructure is not necessary. ASEAN is currently working on how to further mainstream cooperation within the framework of the AOIP with its external partners. The EU has on several occasions, including at the ASEAN's Post-Ministerial Conference with the EU in August 2021, expressed its support for the AOIP. Furthermore, it has also indicated its interest in exploring synergy between the EU Indo-Pacific strategy and the AOIP.

There are several areas of potential convergence between the AOIP and the EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific. This includes broadly the following:

- (i) Working towards universally agreed commitments such as the 2030 Agenda and its Sustainable Development Goals, as well as the Paris Agreement on Climate Change including through high-level dialogues.
- (ii) Fostering inclusive economic growth and working towards a region-to-region trade agreement. This includes bridging the level of ambition between the two regions and finding common areas of focus.

- (iii) Further promoting connectivity including through the recently concluded ASEAN-EU Comprehensive Air Transport Agreement (CATA) encompassing 37 countries (the first region-to-region agreement), as well as EU's support for the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity 2025. This is worth noting that connectivity is a core component of ASEAN-EU relations.
- (iv) Enhancing dialogues on maritime security as well as other areas of security such as transnational crime, piracy, counterterrorism, cybersecurity, non-proliferation, and disarmament.
- (v) Accelerating green and digital transition, including support of the ASEAN Digital Masterplan 2025 and the development of standards in emerging technologies. This will help promote convergence between data protection regimes to ensure safe and free data flows.

Another potential area of cooperation is in strengthening both regions' preparedness and capacity to respond to the current and future health emergencies. The importance of jointly combating the COVID-19 pandemic and "build back better"²⁴ has been emphasised in all meetings between the ASEAN and the EU. EU's strong support for the ASEAN Comprehensive Recovery Framework will also be welcomed by ASEAN.

Strategically, the EU has also indicated its wish to establish maritime areas of interest in the Indo-Pacific and possibly for other Indo-Pacific partners to join in the initiative as well. It is also seeking a stronger role in the ASEAN security architecture through the request to participate in the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus) or at least in its Expert Working Groups (EWG). The EU's interest to join the East Asia Summit has also been noted by ASEAN. However, while recognising the EU's wish to play a stronger role in the region through ASEAN-led mechanisms, ASEAN is also mindful that the EU as a regional grouping (versus a sovereign state) brings with it other factors worthy of consideration.

According to a speech by Singapore's Minister of Education, Chan Chun Sing,²⁵ "Europe is neither the U.S. or China. It will have to develop shared perspective on its role in global affairs beyond European-centric issues. It will need new mechanisms to project its collective interests without being circumscribed by the lowest common denominator". As such, ASEAN and the EU will need to calibrate its cooperation in the Indo-Pacific and consider the diverse interests of its member states.

ASEAN and the EU will be celebrating the 45th anniversary of dialogue relations next year in Brussels. The occasion will present an opportunity for ASEAN and the EU to further discuss alignments in the Indo-Pacific, and to underscore the strong values of both blocs.

- ¹ Council of the European Union, Council conclusions on an EU strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, 16 April 2021, <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-7914-2021-INIT/en/pdf> (accessed on 23 November 2021).
- ² Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council, The EU strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, 16 September 2021, https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/jointcommunication_2021_24_1_en.pdf (accessed on 23 November 2021).
- ³ Rahul Mishra, The EU's Indo-Pacific Strategy is Good News for ASEAN, 4 August 2021, <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/eus-indo-pacific-strategy-good-news-asean> (accessed on 24 November 2021).
- ⁴ EU, EU and Indo-Pacific: natural partners, Press Release, 16 September 2021, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_21_4704 (accessed on 25 November 2021)
- ⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶ Rahul Mishra, The EU's Indo-Pacific Strategy is Good News for ASEAN, 4 August 2021, <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/eus-indo-pacific-strategy-good-news-asean> (accessed on 24 November 2021).
- ⁷ Dr Jeffrey Wilson, Diversifying Australia's Indo-Pacific Infrastructure Diplomacy, 16 April 2019, <https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/diversifying-australias-indo-pacific-infrastructure-diplomacy/>
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- ⁹ The Biden Administration has yet to release a new strategy on the Indo-Pacific. Secretary of State Antony Blinken has informed ASEAN Foreign Ministers that a new comprehensive strategy for the wider Indo-Pacific region will be released soon, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/blinken-says-us-soon-will-release-new-strategy-indo-pacific-region-2021-09-23/> (accessed on 25 November 2021).
- ¹⁰ According to a speech made by former Vice President Mike Pence, the U.S. "will continue to assert American interests across the Indo-Pacific.", Vice President Mike Pence's Remarks on the Administration's Policy Towards China, 4 October 2018, <https://www.hudson.org/events/1610-vice-president-mike-pence-s-remarks-on-the-administration-s-policy-towards-china102018>
- ¹¹ Felix Heiduk, Gudrun Wacker, From Asia-Pacific to Indo-Pacific, Significance, Implementation and Challenges, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP) Research Paper 2020/RP 09, 01.07.2020, 43 Seiten, (English Version of SWP-Studie 9/2020) September 2020, <https://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2020RP09/> (accessed on 23 November 2021).
- ¹² EU, Questions and Answers: EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, 16 September 2021, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/QANDA_21_4709 (accessed on 25 November 2021)
- ¹³ William Choong, The Quad and the Indo-Pacific: Going Slow to Go Further, FULCRUM, 4 October 2021, <https://fulcrum.sg/the-quad-and-the-indo-pacific-going-slow-to-go-further/> (accessed on 25 November 2021).
- ¹⁴ EU, Questions and Answers: EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, 16 September 2021, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/QANDA_21_4709 (accessed on 25 November 2021)
- ¹⁵ EU, Factsheet of the EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, September 2021, https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/eu-indo-pacific_factsheet_2021-09_final.pdf (accessed on 25 November 2021).
- ¹⁶ EU, Questions and Answers: EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, 16 September 2021, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/QANDA_21_4709 (accessed on 25 November 2021)
- ¹⁷ Rahul Mishra, The EU's Indo-Pacific Strategy is Good News for ASEAN, 4 August 2021, <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/eus-indo-pacific-strategy-good-news-asean> (accessed on 24 November 2021).
- ¹⁸ Ambivalence among ASEAN and EU member states will mean that the two partners can safely use a flexible approach and focus on soft issues. It can afford both partners the advantage of contributing to the region without being seen as a threat.
- ¹⁹ Gregory Tiberghien-Romer, Aadil Sud and Walter Brenno-Colnaghi, Enter EU: The Challenges and Cooperation Potential of the Indo-Pacific Strategy, EIAS Policy Brief, 19 October 2021,

<https://eias.org/policy-briefs/enter-eu-the-challenges-and-cooperation-potential-of-the-indo-pacific-strategy/> (accessed on 25 November 2021).

²⁰ EU Mission to ASEAN, EU ASEAN Strategic Partners Blue Book 2021, <https://euinasean.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Blue-Book-2021.pdf> (accessed on 30 November 2021)

²¹ Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council, The EU strategy for cooperation in the Ind-Pacific, 16 September 2021, https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/jointcommunication_2021_24_1_en.pdf (accessed on 23 November 2021).

²² ASEAN, “ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific”, 23 June 2019, https://asean.org/asean2020/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/ASEAN-Outlook-on-the-Indo-Pacific_FINAL_22062019.pdf

²³ These principles include openness, transparency, inclusivity, a rules-based framework, good governance, respect for sovereignty, and respect for international laws such as the UN Charter and the 1982 UNCLOS, among others.

²⁴ ASEAN and EU, Co-Chairs’ Press Release of the 23rd ASEAN-EU Ministerial Meeting, 1 December 2021, <https://asean.org/co-chairs-press-release-of-the-23rd-asean-eu-ministerial-meeting/> (accessed on 30 November 2021).

²⁵ Chan Chun Sing, Speech by Minister for Education, Mr Chan Chun Sing, at the 41st IISS-Asia Fullerton Lecture, “Singapore Amid Great Power Rivalry”, Ministry of Education Singapore, 9 November 2021, <https://www.moe.gov.sg/news/speeches/20211109-speech-by-minister-for-education-mr-chan-chun-sing-at-the-41st-iiss-asia-fullerton-lecture-singapore-amid-great-power-rivalry> (accessed on 24 November 2021).

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