

CENTRE OF GRAVITY: SECURITY AND DEFENCE IN THE INDO-PACIFIC – WHAT ROLE FOR THE EUROPEAN UNION?

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CENTRE FOR SECURITY, DIPLOMACY AND STRATEGY

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The **Indo-Pacific region has emerged as the centre of gravity** of global military competition, economic growth, and technological innovation. Whatever happens in the Indo-Pacific is likely to have a pervasive impact on the structure and future of international order, and the norms and institutions Europeans hold so dear. Moreover, as the war in Ukraine shows, Indo-Pacific actors like China, Japan, the Republic of Korea, or Australia can have an impact on European security dynamics. Europe's growing attention to the Indo-Pacific is therefore explained by both the region's centrality in global politics and its increasing relevance to European geopolitics.

In recent years, several **European countries have begun to devise strategies towards the Indo-Pacific region**, and to strengthen their presence therein. Such moves are welcome. However, Europeans' ability to exercise a meaningful impact on the Indo-Pacific will depend to a large extent on coordination, not least in the framework of the European Union, which can bring to bear critical mass and an extensive suite of capabilities in key areas, including trade, technology, but also, potentially, security, and defence.

Taking the 2021 Joint Communication for the **EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific** as a point of departure, this study outlines a vision for the EU's approach to the Indo-Pacific in the area of security and defence, focusing on three concrete areas: **maritime security, non-proliferation, and hybrid threats**. Going forward, a key challenge for the EU will be to reconcile its traditional commitment to cooperation and multilateralism with the reality of growing geopolitical competition in the Indo-Pacific, and the increasing relevance of exclusive formats of cooperation, which often coalesce around the United States and China. In this regard, it is necessary to understand how the Union's approaches to cooperation can adapt to and take advantage of emerging trends in security and defence multilateralism (or lack thereof) in the Indo-Pacific region. The study poses three questions: 1) How can meeting the EU's Indo-Pacific strategic objectives in security and defence help the Union's **multilateral agenda** in the region? 2) Are there any trade-offs between pursuing the EU's interests in these policy areas with the expressed objective of **promoting multilateralism** in the Indo-Pacific? and 3) What is the **future of multilateralism** in the region when seen through the prism of security and defence? In what ways may the EU have to adapt its approach?

The analysis results in **20 specific recommendations**. It urges the Union to increase its presence in the Indo-Pacific by enhancing its physical presence in the Korean Peninsula to combat proliferation, deploying as part of Free of Navigation Operations in the region, developing naval capabilities and strategic enablers, conducting naval exercises with partners in new areas and supporting nuclear safeguard initiatives. The study recommends that the EU plan for the future by looking at increasing the Coordinated Maritime Presence to the South-East Asia and North-East Asia regions, and planning for how the European Peace Facility could be used in a Taiwan contingency.

Clearly, the EU needs to ensure coherence between various initiatives such as creating continuity between the Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific and the forthcoming revision of the EU Maritime Security Strategy. However, **the Union urgently needs to strengthen its role in multilateral and unilateral fora** including by both developing relations with the Quad and continuing to raise security and defence issues through the ASEAN Regional Forum. Additionally, the study recommends that the EU organise an annual ministerial meeting with Indo-Pacific states. The EU also needs to work with partners to build capacity in the areas of countering seaborne crime; illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing; and hybrid threats, as well as supporting law enforcement and border management initiatives. Such efforts can be complemented by military-educational exchanges between military staff in the region and partners from the Indo-Pacific should be invited to mutually develop and participate in tabletop exercises for crisis response in the region.

ABBREVIATIONS

ADMM+	ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus
ARF	ASEAN Regional Forum
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
ASEM	Asia-Europe Meeting
AUKUS	Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
CMP	Coordinated Maritime Presences
CPTPP	Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Transpacific Partnership
CRIMARIO	Critical Maritime Route Wider Indian Ocean
CSDP	Common Security and Defence Policy
DPRK	Democratic People's Republic of Korea
ECC	Enforcement Coordination Cell
EEZ	Exclusive Economic Zone
EPF	European Peace Facility
ESIWA	Enhancing Security Cooperation In and With Asia
EU	European Union
EUNAVFOR	European Union Naval Force
FONOPS	Free of Navigation Operations
IPMDA	Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness
INF	Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty
IORA	Indian Ocean Rim Association
IUU	Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated
MAICC	Maritime Area of Interest Coordination Cell
MDA	Maritime Domain Awareness
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
NPT	Non-Proliferation Treaty
NWIO	Northwestern Indian Ocean
PASSEX	Passing Exercises
PBP	Partners for the Blue Pacific
PIF	Pacific Islands Forum
PLA	People's Liberation Army
PSMX	Pacific Security Maritime Exchange
UNCLOS	United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
USINDOPACOM	United States Indo-Pacific Command

1. INTRODUCTION

European leaders often refer to the intensifying geopolitical, military, economic, and technological competition between the United States and China as the main structuring factor in contemporary international politics.¹ While US-China competition may be global in scope, its centre of gravity no doubt lies in the Indo-Pacific. According to the 2022 US National Security Strategy, “[n]o region will be of more significance to the world...than the Indo-Pacific”.² Whatever happens in the Indo-Pacific is likely to have a pervasive impact on the structure and future of international order, norms, and institutions and, arguably, upon Europe’s own geopolitical and security architecture. Indeed, as the fulcrum of global economic growth, technological innovation, military spending, and geopolitical competition shifts from the Euro-Atlantic to the Indo-Pacific, **developments in and around Europe will be increasingly affected by dynamics emanating from the Indo-Pacific**. The recent war in Ukraine is a good example. Without China’s tacit support, Russia’s war on Ukraine, and its ability to withstand international sanctions, would arguably be much harder to sustain.

Europe’s growing attention to the Indo-Pacific is therefore no doubt explained by that region’s newfound centrality in global politics, as well as its increasing relevance to European security. Ultimately, **Europe’s ability to remain a global and “systemic” player will in no small part hinge on its ability to affect strategic dynamics in the Indo-Pacific**. Key European players like France³ or the United Kingdom⁴ have stepped up their presence and relationships across the Indo-Pacific region in recent years. Other countries, like Germany⁵ or the Netherlands,⁶ have also taken note of the Indo-Pacific’s growing relevance in global geopolitics, and have devised region-specific strategies or guidelines in recent years. These moves are welcome. However, Europe’s ability to exercise a meaningful impact on the Indo-Pacific will depend to a large extent on coordination, not least in the framework of the European Union, which can bring to bear critical mass and an extensive suite of capabilities in key areas, including trade, technology, but also, potentially, security and defence. We should note that the EU has also devised its own Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific in September 2021.⁷

1 See, for example, Ministère de l’Europe et des Affaires Étrangères, “Emmanuel Macron speaks at the UN General Assembly”, 22 September 2020, <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/french-foreign-policy/united-nations/news-and-events/unit-ed-nations-general-assembly/unga-s-75th-session/article/emmanuel-macron-speaks-at-un-general-assembly-22-sept-2020>; J. Borrell, “The Sinatra Doctrine: How the EU Should Deal with the US-China Competition”, IAI Papers 20, 24 September 2020; and J. Borrell and T. Breton, “For a United, Resilient and Sovereign Europe”, European Commission, 10 June 2020.

2 US Government, “National Security Strategy”, October 2022, p. 38, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf>.

3 French Government, “France’s Indo-Pacific Strategy”, 2018, https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/en_dcp_a4_in-dopacifique_022022_v1-4_web_cle878143.pdf.

4 UK Government, “Global Britain in a Competitive Age: The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy”, March 2021, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/global-britain-in-a-competitive-age-the-integrated-review-of-security-defence-development-and-foreign-policy>.

5 German Federal Government, “Policy Guidelines for the Indo-Pacific”, 2020, <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/blob/2380514/f9784f7e3b3fa1bd7c5446d274a4169e/200901-indo-pazifik-leitlinien--1--data.pdf>.

6 Dutch Government, “Indo-Pacific: Guidelines for Strengthening Dutch and EU Cooperation with Partners in Asia”, 2020, <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/publicaties/2020/11/13/indo-pacific-een-leidraad-voor-versterking-van-de-nederlandse-en-eu-samenwerking-met-partners-in-azie>.

7 European Commission and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, “Joint Communication for the EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific”, JOIN(2021) 24 final, Brussels, 16 September 2021, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/joint-communication-indo-pacific_en. Note that this Joint Communication was preceded by Council of the EU Conclusions on 16 April 2021 for an “EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific”, 7914/21, Brussels, 16 April 2021, <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-7914-2021-INIT/en/pdf>.

As they devise and implement their Indo-Pacific strategy, **Europeans must navigate the tension between their commitment to cooperation and inclusive forms of multilateralism** on the one hand, **and the salience of geopolitical competition and growing polarisation in the Indo-Pacific** on the other. While the EU strives to look at the Indo-Pacific through a lens of economic opportunity and interdependence and continues to underline its willingness to mitigate security dilemmas through cooperation and multilateralism,⁸ it faces a context of heightened Sino-American competition. These two powers are increasingly looking at international institutions and norms as part and parcel of their great power competition. Their growing disputes in the context of institutions like the World Trade Organisation or World Health Organisation (WHO) is evidence of this fact, but so is the proliferation of multiple minilateral initiatives in the Indo-Pacific, often clustered around the US or China, and excluding the other great power. The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (“Quad”), Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the strengthening of minilateral security fora (e.g. the Quad) bear witness to this trend.

The Union’s stated aim in its strategy for the Indo-Pacific is that the EU will protect its interests, promote its values, and push back when fundamental disagreements with China exist. In theory, this should make the Union’s balancing between multi-, mini- and bilateral forms of cooperation easier. However, we should recognise that discussions about cooperative frameworks are necessarily bound up with broader debates about **cooperation with “like-minded” partners or those countries that share interests with the EU rather than values**. With the US increasingly seeing the world through the prism of “democracy vs. authoritarianism”, the EU must tread carefully between the need to cooperate with like-minded liberal democracies, democracies that do not entirely share the Union’s values and those authoritarian states in the Indo-Pacific that are vital for cooperation on specific issues (e.g. climate change). Indeed, a symptom of this complex set of relations can be best seen in the Union’s tryptic approach to China as a partner for cooperation, an economic competitor, and a strategic rival. The added challenge for the EU is stitching together a coherent Indo-Pacific strategy when states in the region have proverbially different “shapes and sizes” in terms of values and interests.

However, the EU will increasingly struggle to reconcile its commitment to inclusive forms of multilateralism with the emergence of more exclusive forms of multilateralism – often referred to as “minilateralism”. Indeed, the **EU’s approach to the Indo-Pacific walks a fine line between preserving links with China and appealing to a broad and inclusive conception of multilateralism** on the one hand, and prioritising cooperation with like-minded partners (including the US), and values on the other. Importantly, the perception of China across the EU has taken a negative turn in recent years, i.e. in light of the management of the Covid-19 pandemic, China’s human rights records and sanctions on European citizens and, more recently, Beijing’s tacit support of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and the growing Russia-China partnership.⁹ Conversely, since President Biden’s arrival in office, transatlantic cooperation has boomed, with the EU and the US having set up dedicated dialogues about China, the Indo-Pacific, and security and defence.

8 J. Borrell, “The EU Approach to the Indo-Pacific”, speech by the HR/VP at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies, Jakarta, 3 June 2021, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/node/99501_fr.

9 Office of the President of Russia, “Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People’s Republic of China on the International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development”, 4 February 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/supplement/5770>.

In contrast, the latest shifts in China's domestic and military posture since the 20th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party, held in October 2022, is a major source of concern with regard to Beijing's strategic intentions.

Arguably, the negative turn in EU-China relations, growing transatlantic cooperation, and the EU's preference for engaging with like-minded partners – as expressed in the Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific – shows that the EU's commitment to inclusive multilateralism does not come at any cost, and debunks any myths about European geopolitical equidistance between Washington and Beijing. Having said that, **the EU remains reluctant to fully embrace a paradigm of great power competition and continues to work towards inclusive forms of multilateral governance**, even as it recognises challenges along that path. For example, the German Chancellor's November 2022 visit to China (along with several members of the German business community) was preceded with his calls for greater cooperation with Beijing.¹⁰ While the EU has a stated policy of supporting multilateralism in the Indo-Pacific, the realities of its security and defence engagement with the region tell a different story.

EU security and defence and the Indo-Pacific

While economic policy and the fight against climate change can take on more inclusive forms of multilateralism, in the area of security and defence the EU has not been able to pursue a genuinely multilateral approach, and it has had to balance its multilateral and bilateral efforts. For example, it is not sparing any effort to join multilateral endeavours such as the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus (ADMM+) forum, which brings together 10 Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) members and non-ASEAN partners. Likewise, the EU is playing an active role in the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), where it is not only a founding member but also engaged in promoting dialogue, political consultation, and financial support to the ASEAN secretariat. However, **the EU has stressed the importance of its bilateral ties** to selected partners like Japan, the Republic of Korea, Australia, or Singapore. Elsewhere in the region, the EU is not part of fora like the Quad or Five Power Defence Arrangements and it is faced with a range of other growing bilateral relationships in the region (e.g. China and Russia).

Ever since the Council of the EU adopted its Conclusions on the Indo-Pacific in April 2021, the EU has worked on crafting a more strategic approach to the region. Security and defence is an essential element of this approach. Indeed, the September 2021 **Strategy for EU Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific outlines seven core priority areas and security and defence** ranks high among them. For the EU, security and defence cooperation with countries from the Indo-Pacific should contribute to an open and rules-based regional security architecture in the region. The EU Strategy makes clear that security and defence cooperation, in combination with trade and economic relations, is the key way to manage intense competition in the region, especially the significant military build-up of China and the growth of regional hotspots and conflict.¹¹

The Union's recently published Strategic Compass only underlines this point when calling for a deepening of partnerships and more live naval exercises and port calls.¹²

¹⁰ O. Scholz, "We Don't Want to Decouple from China, but Can't Be Overreliant", Bundeskanzler, 3 November 2022, <https://www.bundeskanzler.de/bk-en/news/chancellor-guest-article-politico-china-2139576>.

¹¹ European Commission and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, "Joint Communication for the EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific".

¹² Council of the EU, "A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence: For a European Union That Protects Its Citizens, Values and Interests and Contributes to International Peace and Security", 7371/22, Brussels, 21 March 2022, <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-7371-2022-INIT/en/pdf>.

In this respect, the EU's Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific builds on concrete examples of cooperation on security and defence. For example, since 2016 there have been over 10 joint naval exercises by naval forces under EU command and the navies of India, Japan, Republic of Korea, and more. We should also recognise that **the EU has sought to develop strong security and defence relations with close like-minded partners**, such as has been the case with Japan and the 2018 Strategic Partnership Agreement that has allowed much closer security coordination, dialogue, and information exchange. In February 2022, the EU also extended its maritime security architecture (known as the Coordinated Maritime Presences [CMP]) to the Northwestern Indian Ocean (NWIO), which will build maritime capacity and information exchange in addition to its naval operation European Union Naval Force (EUNAVFOR) Atalanta and other, non-EU, initiatives such as Operation Agénor in the Strait of Hormuz.

The EU has an ambition to build on these experiences and the recently published EU Strategic Compass for Security and Defence only re-emphasises the Union's future approach to the region. Indeed, the Strategic Compass stresses the importance of security and defence partnerships in the Indo-Pacific and it also underlines the necessity of building up the EU's maritime presence in the region.¹³ **The Strategic Compass clearly calls for the Union to invest in tailored security and defence partnerships in the Indo-Pacific**, while also underlining its ambition to join multilateral fora such as the ADMM+ and remaining actively engaged in the ARF. Nevertheless, the compass also calls on the EU member states to increase the number of live military exercises and port calls in the region. This implies that the EU and its member states need to rapidly increase its naval power in the region while also working with regional partners to mitigate risks to maritime security, counter hybrid threats, and avoid the harmful consequences of a military build-up in the region, especially in terms of proliferation.

Of course, **Russia's war on Ukraine raises serious questions about the EU's strategic bandwidth to engage in the Indo-Pacific** in the short term. Faced with a revisionist and aggressive Russia, the EU and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) will be focusing their short-term security and defence efforts on the eastern neighbourhood. The Union's provision of lethal equipment to the Ukrainian armed forces and its sanctions on Russia are proof enough of the present approach. Yet, if anything, the war on Ukraine signifies that the EU cannot afford to neglect the broader geopolitical currents. Certainly, the EU's interests in the Indo-Pacific mean that it cannot take a Russia-centric view of the world – not least because Russia poses, along with China, a global threat to the EU's interests and values.¹⁴ In this respect, the EU will need to take the longer-term view on how it addresses maritime security, hybrid threats, and proliferation in the Indo-Pacific. How multilateral solutions can be developed to meet these three specific challenges will be of vital importance for the Union up to 2030.

¹³ As the Compass states, "building on the ongoing experience in the Gulf of Guinea and in the Northwest of the Indian Ocean, we will expand our Coordinated Maritime Presences to other areas of maritime interest that impact on the security of the EU and seek to associate relevant partners, where appropriate"; Council of the EU, "A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence".

¹⁴ Office of the President of Russia, "Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China".

The aim of this study

Despite the importance of security and defence to the EU and its Indo-Pacific relationship, there is a need to identify and analyse the evolving dynamics of political relations and security in the region. **Without a degree of strategic foresight about the region, it will be difficult for the EU and its partners to navigate the geopolitical challenges that are emerging in the Indo-Pacific.** In particular, it is necessary to understand how the Union's approaches to cooperation can adapt to and take advantage of emerging trends in security and defence multilateralism (or lack thereof) in the Indo-Pacific region. To this end, this study builds on existing research conducted in the context of the Indo-Pacific Futures Platform (INFORM) project and five policy papers focusing on trends related to geopolitics, security, governance, geo-economics and technology were published in September 2021 as a basis for this study.¹⁵

Building on these analytical trends, **this study is concerned with providing more detailed scenario analysis on the specific area of security and defence in the Indo-Pacific.** In this respect, this study poses three questions: 1) How can meeting the EU Indo-Pacific strategic objectives in security and defence support the Union's multilateral agenda in the region? 2) Are there any trade-offs between pursuing the EU's interests in these policy areas with the expressed objective of promoting multilateralism in the Indo-Pacific? 3) What is the future of multilateralism in the region when seen through the prism of security and defence? In what ways may the EU have to adapt its approach? This study will address each of the aforementioned questions by focusing on three core areas of security and defence: **maritime security, non-proliferation, and hybrid threats.**

In addition to this introduction, this study is structured in four main parts mainly consisting of sections on maritime security, non-proliferation, and hybrid threats.¹⁶ In each of the three main sections, the authors introduce the **main security and defence trends in the region up to 2030.** In outlining these trends, each section assesses whether multilateralism can be strengthened over the course of the 2020s or whether a deterioration in the overall security environment could lead to a weakening of multilateralism in the Indo-Pacific. Each section also analyses the consequences of the major trends and events identified, especially as they relate to the shape and nature of multilateralism in the Indo-Pacific. The study ends with a conclusion and policy recommendations for the EU.

The analysis contained in this study is the fruit of **research collaboration between researchers and analysts from Europe and the Indo-Pacific.** The study also benefits from the direct input of key stakeholders such as government and EU officials, academia and think tanks and civil society from the region, and the feedback attained from two workshops in Japan (held on 24 and 26 October 2022, respectively) are reflected in our conclusions. We would specifically like to acknowledge the support of officials from the European External Action Service.

¹⁵ See: L. Simón, "The Geopolitics of Multilateralism: What Role for the EU in the Indo-Pacific?", CSDS Policy Brief, No. 14, 2021, brussels-school.be/sites/default/files/CSDS%20Policy%20brief_2114_0.pdf; C. Pajon and E. Pejsova, "A Region of Flash-points? Security in the Indo-Pacific", CSDS Policy Brief, No. 15, 2021, brussels-school.be/sites/default/files/CSDS%20Policy%20Brief_2115_0.pdf; R. Emmers, "A Gap in Governance? Politics and Society in the Indo-Pacific", CSDS Policy Brief, No. 16, 2021, brussels-school.be/publications/policy-briefs/gap-governance-politics-and-society-indo-pacific/; R. Pacheco Pardo, "Geo-economic Megatrends in the Indo-Pacific: Integration or (Partial) Decoupling?", CSDS Policy Brief, No. 17, 2021, brussels-school.be/sites/default/files/CSDS%20Policy%20brief_2117.pdf; and D. Fiott, "Knowledge Is Power? Technology and Innovation in the Indo-Pacific", CSDS Policy Brief, No. 18, 2021, brussels-school.be/sites/default/files/CSDS%20Policy%20brief_2118.pdf.

¹⁶ Following consultations with EU officials, these three areas have been selected on the basis of three criteria: 1) their importance to the EU and the latter's comparative advantage in addressing challenges related to those areas; 2) their relevance for regional security dynamics; and 3) the opportunities those areas offer in the context of the EU's cooperation with regional partners.

2. MARITIME SECURITY

Asian waters are increasingly crowded.¹⁷ Triggered by the Chinese rapid naval build-up (Beijing is building the equivalent of the French naval capabilities every four years, and has recently launched its third aircraft carrier), countries of the region, including in Southeast Asia, are modernising their naval equipment and acquiring anti-ship missiles to protect their shores.¹⁸ Japan has transformed its flagship carrier into a fully fledged aircraft carrier capable of accommodating US and Japanese F-35 fighters, and Tokyo has announced a “considerable” rise in its defence spending for the coming years. Australia has chosen to enter an arrangement with the US and UK to develop nuclear-powered submarines and cooperate on innovative technology such as quantum computing and artificial intelligence for defence purposes. With the war in Ukraine having demonstrated the deterrence power of nuclear weapons and the importance of alliances, **it is likely that US allies in Asia will ask Washington to provide security reassurance regarding nuclear extended deterrence** – including by deploying capacities in the region.

These trends might create a stability-instability dilemma: as it continues to modernise its nuclear deterrent and close the conventional military gap with the US in East Asia, China might take advantage of its position to multiply naval incursions and continue to push its expansion in the East and South China Seas. **China will remain a formidable military power in the region, and asymmetry in military capabilities will remain a key feature of the regional security environment.** Capable neighbours will complicate China’s calculations, but also raise the likelihood of an unexpected incident at sea that could be a trigger for the Chinese leadership to drive toward a bigger conflict, especially in the Taiwan Strait. In this respect, we should note that the EU has acknowledged the 2016 unanimous ruling against China for its expansive claims and militarisation in the South China Sea and the Philippines precisely. **The EU needs to stand ready to support and help enforce the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).** This will be a growing need, not least because sea lanes of communication and subsea critical infrastructure are particularly vulnerable to geopolitical tensions and conflict. Indeed, worldwide support for UNCLOS is a major element of the EU’s existing maritime security strategy¹⁹ and its associated action plan.²⁰

During the Summer of 2022, China stepped up its aerial incursions in Taiwan’s Air Defence Identification Zone, as well as naval patrols beyond the median line in the south and centre part of the Taiwan Strait, changing the status quo. Beijing argues that the Taiwan Strait is not international waters, hence directly challenging the law of the sea. The naval and aerial movements by the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) could eventually lead to a possible blockade of the strait, with disruption of key maritime routes and huge economic losses for Asian and European countries.²¹ Military sources from Taiwan and the US have reported that China would have the capacity and the will to make such a move by 2027.²² While uncertainty prevails over the next moves by Beijing,

17 S. Lee, “Crowded Waters: Naval Competition in the Asia-Pacific and the ADF”, The Strategist, Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 2 July 2015, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/crowded-waters-naval-competition-in-the-asia-pacific-and-the-adf/>.

18 J. Guild, “Is There an Arms Race Underway in Southeast Asia?”, Diplomat, 8 February 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/02/is-there-an-arms-race-underway-in-southeast-asia/>.

19 Council of the EU, “European Union Maritime Security Strategy”, 11205/14, Brussels, 24 June 2014, <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST%2011205%202014%20INIT/EN/pdf>.

20 Council of the EU, “Council Conclusions on the Revision of the EU Maritime Security Strategy Action Plan”, 10494/18, Brussels, 26 June 2018, <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-10494-2018-INIT/en/pdf>.

21 “How China Could Choke Taiwan”, New York Times, 25 August 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2022/08/25/world/asia/china-taiwan-conflict-blockade.html>.

22 “China Able to Take on Taiwan, Allies by 2027: Ministry of National Defense”, Taipei Times, 6 June 2022, <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/front/archives/2022/06/06/2003779417>; J. Saballa, “China to Develop Ability to Seize Taiwan by 2027: US Intel”, Defense Post, 21 September 2022, <https://www.thedefensepost.com/2022/09/21/china-seize-taiwan-us-intel/>.

the current domestic economic, social, and political difficulties created by the Covid-19 pandemic, the real-estate crisis and harsh climatic conditions could embolden the political leadership in China to multiply the provocations in the Taiwan Strait, including by seizing some Taiwanese islets such as Kinmen or Matsu.²³ In reaction to China's growing assertiveness, the US and Japan are tightening their defence cooperation and investing in their own military capacities.²⁴ **The Taiwan Strait is thus a traditional hotspot that is likely to remain a top priority to monitor for the coming years**, as any crisis in the area would trigger huge disruptions, directly impacting European security interests.

A rather new factor that should be scrutinised is the growing naval coordination between China and Russia in Asia, which has accelerated since the early 2020s and is likely to continue out to 2030. Since the start of the Russian war in Ukraine, for example, Japan noticed a growing frequency (up to 2.5 times more than usual) of high-level, coordinated air and sea manoeuvres between the Chinese and Russian forces.²⁵ **The balance of naval power and the strategic calculus will be affected if Moscow decides to back Beijing in its territorial disputes** with Japan and Southeast Asian countries. The war in Ukraine will likely accelerate the Russian economic dependency on Beijing. In addition, the two partners might encourage and support third countries to reactivate territorial disputes with Western powers to keep their naval forces busy.

This form of political action could be the case with Mauritius and the Chagos Islands, which are controlled by the UK and host a US base in Diego Garcia.²⁶ It could also be the case with Mauritius claiming the French Scattered Islands in the Mozambique Canal, or Vanuatu disputing the St. Matthew and Hunter Islands with France in the South Pacific. Hence, these maritime tensions have driven the requirement for greater maritime surveillance capabilities. **Among the maritime hotspots that will likely emerge over the next decade, the Mozambique Channel and the Pacific Islands region are prominent.** In recent years, an insurrection in northern Mozambique has led to disruption in the Mozambique Channel, a key global shipping route where the EU has key interests, including territory.²⁷ Recently, China has stepped up its presence and influence in the South Pacific region, signing a security and infrastructure deal with the Solomon Islands that could give way to a limited, but still worrying military presence in the island country.²⁸

All the above maritime security challenges are – and increasingly will be – severely exacerbated by ongoing unconventional security trends, notably related to unprecedented global warming and fierce competition over decreasing marine natural resources. Aggravated by tectonic movements, flooding, cyclones, and man-made shore modification, the sea level has risen by 3-5mm per year for the past 40 years in the region²⁹ leading to, among other things, the progressive loss of freshwater

23 K. Everington, "China 'Very Likely' to Seize Taiwan's Kinmen as Distraction: Official", Taiwan News, 20 April 2022, <https://www.taiwannews.com.tw/en/news/4513028>; T. G. Carpenter, "China Could Start a Mini 'Island War' with Taiwan", CATO Institute, 8 August 2022, <https://www.cato.org/commentary/china-could-start-mini-island-war-taiwan#>

24 W. Sposato, "Beijing's Taiwan Aggression Has Backfired in Tokyo", Foreign Policy, 8 August 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/08/08/china-taiwan-japan-military-response/>.

25 K. Shiozaki, "China, Russia Military Activity near Japan up 2.5 Times Since Ukraine", Nikkei Asia, 14 July 2022, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/China-Russia-military-activity-near-Japan-up-2.5-times-since-Ukraine>.

26 S. Farran, "Chagos Islands: Mauritius's Latest Challenge to UK Shows Row over Sovereignty Will Not Go Away", Conversation, 21 February 2022, <https://theconversation.com/chagos-islands-mauritiuss-latest-challenge-to-uk-shows-row-over-sovereignty-will-not-go-away-177381>.

27 A. Salmon, "Japan Wades into China-Solomon Islands Pact Panic", Asia Times, 25 April 2022, <https://asiatimes.com/2022/04/japan-wades-into-china-solomon-islands-pact-panic/>.

28 D. Brewster, "The Mozambique Channel Is the Next Security Hotspot", Interpreter, 19 March 2021, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/mozambique-channel-next-security-hotspot>.

29 J. Connell, "Last Days in the Carteret Islands? Climate Change, Livelihoods and Migration on Coral Atolls", Asia Pacific Viewpoint, Vol. 57, No. 1 (April 2016), <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/apv.12118>.

reserves and making many of the low-laying atolls uninhabitable by 2050.³⁰ The depletion of fish stocks is also a major concern with, for example, fish stocks near the 200 million-strong coastal population of the Bay of Bengal now severely depleted.³¹ According to the Food and Agricultural Organisation, aquatic food production is set to further increase by 15% by 2030.³² Needless to say, mass migration and the displacement of populations is an inevitable consequence of these trends, but so too is the **rise of piracy, armed robberies at sea, and drugs and human trafficking.**

Finally, the global demand for energy has accelerated the race for the exploitation of oil and gas, but also deep seabed mineral resources needed for the production of batteries. China, India, Japan, Australia, small nations in the South Pacific, but also European actors have stepped up efforts to access the precious ores scattered on the oceans' floors. The precious ores are contained in polymetallic nodules, polymetallic sulphides, and ferromanganese crust, and they are particularly concentrated in the Western Pacific and Indian Oceans. Besides the rich mineral resources, the deep seas are also home to the global communication infrastructure, with undersea cables carrying 99% of the world's data flows. The submarine cable network covers over 1.2 million kilometres and carries close to US\$10 trillion worth of financial transactions a day, not to mention the precious personal data collected by internet users from all around the world.³³ **The need to access, secure, and defend undersea cables as strategically critical infrastructure has quickly made its way into the highest priorities of major global navies** – indeed, the (still unattributed) attack on Nord Stream 2 shows that the taboo on targeting undersea infrastructure seems to have been broken. This new competitive dynamic opens the door to tensions among involved powers over the control of the maritime areas lying beyond national jurisdictions, which may quickly spin out of control.

The future of multilateralism at sea

Given the complexity of the regional maritime security environment, the room to manoeuvre and the effectiveness of existing multilateral structures is limited. The US-China rivalry being at the epicentre of the regional strategic dynamic, the main organisations (be it ASEAN-centred, Indian Ocean Rim Association [IORA], or the Pacific Islands Forum [PIF]) are useful platforms to encourage dialogue among its members, as consensus-based institutions, but they become paralysed when it comes to addressing strategic or security-related issues.

ASEAN, the “glue” of regional multilateralism, continues to be a useful platform to discuss and build capacity on functional maritime security concerns (illegal, unreported, and unregulated [IUU] fishing, piracy, and environmental and marine natural hazards). Here, the EU plays a key role as a founding member of the ARF, which gives the Union a unique opportunity to raise security challenges within ASEAN. Yet, the divergence of ASEAN member states impedes its capacity

30 C. Storlazzi, S. B. Gingerich, A. van Dongeren, O. Cheriton, P. W. Swarzenski, E. Quataert, C. I. Voss, D. W. Field, H. Annamalai, G. A. Piniak, and R. T. McCall, “Most Atolls Will Be Uninhabitable by the Mid-21st Century Because of Sea-Level Rise Exacerbating Wave-Driven Flooding”, *Science Advance*, Vol. 4, No. 4 (April 2018), <https://advances.sciencemag.org/content/4/4/eaap9741>.

31 Q. Ahsan and A. Haque, “Dead Zone in the Bay of Bengal”, *South Asia Journal*, October 2020, <http://southasiajournal.net/dead-zone-in-the-bay-of-bengal/>.

32 “The State of World Fisheries and Aquaculture 2022: Towards Blue Transformation”, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, Rome, 2022, <https://www.fao.org/3/cc0461en/online/cc0461en.html>.

33 D. Brake, “Submarine Cables: Critical Infrastructure for Global Communications”, Information Technology & Innovation Foundation, April 2019, <https://www2.itif.org/2019-submarine-cables.pdf>.

to address more serious security challenges – notably in the South China Sea. The PIF is in crisis with Kiribati's recent decision to withdraw from this key regional political organisation, threatening Pacific unity.³⁴ A few weeks earlier, China's proposal of a security treaty highlighted divergence within the Oceanic countries.³⁵ Similarly, the IORA constitutes a welcome forum to discuss functional maritime cooperation, without providing leverage to great power competitive dynamics in the region.

Despite these limitations, **ASEAN and the PIF have been requested to remain at the centre of regionalism in Southeast Asia and the Pacific Islands** region respectively, raising the question of the efficiency of this approach for regional stability. These two institutions gather smaller-size countries that often do not want to be pushed to choose a side between China and the US, or, for Southeast Asian countries, on Russia's invasion of Ukraine. How to constructively engage with these countries and how to respond to their national security priorities is another important question. The creation of a US-led Partners for the Blue Pacific (PBP) initiative in June 2022 has also seen the US, Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and the UK engage Pacific partners in areas such as climate change and disasters, resilient technology and connectivity, resources and economic development, and political leadership and regionalism, among others.

In contrast to the sclerosis of traditional multilateral settings, recent years have seen the emergence of new, more exclusive minilateral cooperative schemes in Asia. This dynamic reflects the need for the US and "like-minded", liberal-democratic countries of the region to come together and enhance their dialogue, coordination, and cooperation on several key issues. This is important for them in order to keep an upper hand on China and preserve the current balance of power. The security pact between Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States (AUKUS), formed in September 2021, is the latest geopolitical development of such an arrangement that will have a major impact on the regional maritime security environment in the coming decades (nuclear submarines should be delivered to Australia in 2040). The Quad, gathering the US, Japan, Australia, and India is also symbolic of the efforts deployed by US partners and allies to network. It is fuelled by a shared acknowledgement that the maritime democracies of the Indo-Pacific should coordinate to uphold the rules-based order threatened by the disruptive attitude of an authoritarian China.

The Quad has been growing in importance since 2020, with the expansion to new domains of cooperation (health governance and crisis management, resilience of supply chains, climate change, critical technologies), as well as new partners (a so-called "Quad-Plus" dialogue was set up in March 2020 with South Korea, New Zealand, and Vietnam [a country with which cooperation on common interests, rather than on common values, prevails]). The latest Quad Summit that took place in May 2022 in Tokyo announced an important initiative for maritime security: "The Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness"³⁶ (IPMDA) to offer "a near-real-time, integrated, and cost-effective maritime domain awareness picture" to countries of the region. Here, synergies with the EU's Critical Maritime Route Wider Indian Ocean (CRIMARIO) initiative, which was launched in 2015 to enhance security in the Western Indian Ocean, could be sought.

34 K. Lyons, "Kiribati Withdraws from Pacific Islands Forum in Blow to Regional Body", Guardian, 10 July 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jul/10/kiribati-withdraws-from-pacific-islands-forum-pif-micronesia>.

35 "10 Pacific Island Countries Reject China's Regional Security Pact", NDTV, 30 May 2022, <https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/10-pacific-countries-reject-chinas-regional-security-pact-3022158>.

36 White House, "Fact Sheet: Quad Leaders' Tokyo Summit 2022", 23 May 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/05/23/fact-sheet-quad-leaders-tokyo-summit-2022/>.

In sum, the future Indo-Pacific cooperative landscape will be shaped by several interconnected features. Sino-American rivalry will provide a broad structure under which third countries will navigate to garner the benefits and hedge against risks. At the same time, more cooperation is likely to develop on an ad-hoc basis to tackle specific issues. These flexible frameworks create some breathing room for countries that do not want to be pressured to pick sides and empower middle powers that will have greater responsibility to build up synergies to allow for legitimate and concrete actions. This being said, the **demand for greater EU engagement in the region for maritime security is clear**: there are greater demands for the EU to support freedom of navigation, to assist like-minded partners to secure critical infrastructure such as subsea cables, and to engage in intelligence sharing in the maritime domain.

3. NON-PROLIFERATION

Apart from non-proliferation efforts regarding the Democratic People's Republic of Korea's (DPRK) nuclear weapons development, **non-proliferation and arms control are nowadays not attracting much attention**. This should be more of a cause for alarm, as the mechanisms of arms control and counter-proliferation are either failing to achieve their aims (as in the case of DPRK and emerging types of weapons) or are actually following a retrograde trend (e.g. the lapse of the Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty under the Trump Administration).

The broader context in the Indo-Pacific region surrounding non-proliferation is **following a trend resembling an arms race rather than arms limitation**. Many countries in the region, most notably China, have been increasing defence expenditures over the past decade or two, and expanding and modernising their arsenal and capabilities, not least naval and air assets, un-transparently and free of any arms control and disarmament restraints. In addition, nuclear weapons have been proliferating in the region – China, Russia, and the US being nuclear weapons states recognised by Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and DPRK being a de facto nuclear power, in spite of attempts to enforce a United Nations Security Council (UNSC) mandated counter-proliferation sanctions regime. Talks focused on the denuclearisation of DPRK have all but stalled and there is no prospect of getting the process moving again any time soon.

The prospect of non-proliferation and arms control – be it bilateral, minilateral, or multilateral – is therefore quite dim, and is likely to remain that way until 2030. This is, in fact, evidenced by the fact that the EU Strategic Compass of March 2022, while calling for the advancement of disarmament, non-proliferation, and arms control, fails to refer to any concrete measures in this regard.³⁷ **Although the EU's related competences in this area might be said to be limited, there is nevertheless scope to consider a more pro-active approach.**

³⁷ Council of the EU, "A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence".

Shifting conventional balance

Regarding conventional weapons, **there have been little arms control efforts among the countries in the Indo-Pacific and it is one of the fastest growing regions in terms of defence spending.** First and foremost, the arms expansion in the region is led by the rise of China. The country is becoming more assertive and expanding its areas of interest and activities, most notably over Taiwan by intimidating the Taipei regime and in the South China Sea by building and militarising the islands there.³⁸ Second, the other countries in the region, including Japan, have also been increasing defence spending, not least as a response to China's military build-up, or trying by other means (e.g. Australia's shift to nuclear powered submarines) to maintain the military balance vis-à-vis China (though it is increasingly untenable).³⁹ Third, while regional tensions cause concerns, it is also natural that the countries whose economies are expanding also increase their defence spending. Since their economies are likely to keep growing, military spending in the region is set to increase further in the coming years and probably decades.

The failure of agreements and processes to control proliferation trends for existing categories of nuclear and conventional weapons is bad enough, but the unhindered emergence of new types of weapons such as hypersonic missile systems and unmanned underwater vehicles is an indication that **technological proliferation in the Indo-Pacific is advancing at a rate that is outpacing the process of arms control diplomacy.**

Looking at specific areas of military balance between China, on the one hand, and the US and its allies in the region, on the other, reveals that currently the biggest conventional gap is in the domain of ground-based intermediate-range missiles. The Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty prohibited the US and Russia from developing and deploying such missiles within a range of 500 and 5,500 kilometres. In the meantime, China is believed to possess thousands of such missiles, making the "missile imbalance" or "strike gap" a strategic challenge for the US and its allies in the region.⁴⁰ There has been speculation that America's withdrawal from the INF Treaty was linked to the fact that this mechanism designed for arms control in Europe was prohibiting the US from deploying this class of weapons to counter the Chinese military build-up in Asia.⁴¹ Since leaving the INF Treaty, the US has been developing ground-based intermediate-range missiles – not nuclear-armed, but all conventional. Yet, it is still in a nascent phase and years away from actual deployment in the region. In military terms, deploying those missiles in Japan and South Korea makes sense but it would not be problem free. In the meantime, both **Japan and South Korea are developing their own intermediate-range weapons**, which could contribute to the overall deterrence posture of their respective alliances with the United States. The case of theatre-range missile proliferation is an example of how the arms racing momentum in the Indo-Pacific is overpowering and outpacing commitment to arms control diplomacy.

38 Department of Defense, "Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China - 2021", <https://media.defense.gov/2021/Nov/03/2002885874/-1/-1/0/2021-CMPR-FINAL.PDF>.

39 D. Lopes da Silva, N. Tian, L. Béraud-Sudreau, A. Marksteiner, and X. Liang, "Trends in World Military Expenditure, 2021", SIPRI Fact Sheet, April 2022, https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2022-04/fs_2204_milex_2021_0.pdf.

40 J. Cohn, "Leveling the Playing Field: Reintroducing U.S. Theater-Range Missiles in a Post-INF World", CSBA Report, 2019, https://csbaonline.org/uploads/documents/Leveling_the_Playing_Field_web_Final_1.pdf.

41 "Russia Says Bolton's Account of INF Treaty Talks Distorted", Reuters, 3 July 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-usa-arms-idUSKBN24422L>; A. Baklitskiy, "What the End of the INF Treaty Means for China", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2 December 2019, <https://carnegiemoscow.org/commentary/80462>.

Submarine competition and the nuclear non-proliferation dimension

In light of the shifting military balance between the US and China, **Washington welcomed and accepted Australia's request to have nuclear-powered submarines**, which led to the announcement of the new framework, called AUKUS, in September 2021. Although AUKUS is intended to cover not just nuclear submarines, but other advanced defence technologies like quantum and artificial intelligence and hypersonics and unmanned underwater vehicles, the main part of the new framework remains the programme to provide nuclear submarines to Australia. Australian submarines operating in close coordination with – or most probably under direct command of – the US are in Washington's interest as the underwater balance between the US and China is also shifting and US supremacy can no longer be taken for granted. Another added value of AUKUS has to do with the fact that the UK will also commit more to the Indo-Pacific region in the generations to come within this framework, in line with the "tilt" to the Indo-Pacific, pronounced by Britain's Integrated Review of March 2021.⁴² It is of no surprise that China strongly criticised AUKUS and it has been voicing concerns related to nuclear proliferation.

How to ensure the safeguarding of nuclear materials, particularly highly enriched uranium needed for US and UK nuclear propulsion, is not a trivial matter and Australia and other AUKUS partners will need to come up with a convincing set of measures to assuage any international concerns China and other countries may have, while suspecting that China's complaints will be rather hollow given its own military developments.⁴³ Securing nuclear materials is relevant beyond AUKUS in view of the fact that other countries could follow suit in pursuing nuclear submarines in the future, not least Brazil and South Korea. Therefore, establishing a mechanism relying solely on Australia's record of credibility in non-proliferation might not be sufficient – something that could be confidently applied to other countries will be needed. In this regard, European countries that have nuclear expertise like France and Sweden, or Euratom, could play a certain role, including providing expertise or endorsing the new safeguard arrangement.

Re-investing in multilateral approaches to nuclear non-proliferation

A pertinent challenge regarding nuclear arms control and disarmament in the Indo-Pacific region has to do with China's nuclear arsenal. China is the only NPT-recognised nuclear power that is increasing the number of nuclear warheads it has (though the UK expressed its readiness to increase its number of warheads, it does not seem to be actually increasing its nuclear arsenal). It has been reported that Beijing is building a number of Inter-Continental Ballistic Missile siloes in multiple locations deep inside the country.⁴⁴ More and more Americans, including both Democrats and Republicans, argue that for the US to strike a new nuclear arms control and disarmament deal with Russia, it needs to involve China as well, in light of the narrowing gap between the size of the nuclear arsenals of the US and Russia on one hand and that of China on the other.

42 UK Government, "Global Britain in a Competitive Age: The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy", 16 March 2021, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/global-britain-in-a-competitive-age-the-integrated-review-of-security-defence-development-and-foreign-policy>.

43 L. Zhen, "China Protests to International Atomic Energy Agency over Aukus Nuclear Safeguards", South China Morning Post, 14 September 2022, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3192519/china-protests-international-atomic-energy-agency-over-aukus>.

44 M. Korda, and H. Kristensen, "A Closer Look at China's Missile Silo Construction", Federation of American Scientists, 2 November 2021, <https://fas.org/blogs/security/2021/11/a-closer-look-at-chinas-missile-silo-construction/>.

The immediate challenge for the international community, including the EU therefore, is to have China stop increasing its nuclear arsenal. What makes things complicated is the positions of the UK and France (particularly the latter), as they fear pressure from other countries concerning unwanted nuclear disarmament. The EU as such cannot be an independent actor in this field.

Despite the fact that few in the region believe that denuclearisation of DPRK is still possible in the short term, **the credibility of commitment to the global non-proliferation regime and that of multilateral approaches under the UNSC requires the international community to continue pursuing that goal.** The region's unilateral framework, the six-party talks, has long been moribund, if not officially disbanded. While the EU, as a major actor in non-proliferation efforts in the world, has repeatedly expressed its interest in joining the talks, which has not materialised yet, the practical value of seeking to join the six-party talks, ironically, seems to be exceedingly limited.

It would be wrong to portray the situation as devoid of opportunities, however. **European participation in the monitoring of UNSC sanctions coordinated from a base in Japan is a rare bright spot in this field** that perhaps deserves a closer look. Over the last four years, ships and surveillance aircraft from France, the UK, and Germany have joined like-minded partners from navies of Japan, the US, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and South Korea in the waters and airspace around the Korean peninsula to collect information under the guidance of a coordination mechanism called the "Enforcement Coordination Cell" based in Yokosuka, Japan. Information they collect is fed back via a fusion process called the "Pacific Security Maritime Exchange" based in Washington DC into reports received by the UN Committee that deals with the sanctions imposed by the Security Council since 2006.

While units under ECC coordination do not conduct interceptions or boarding of suspect vessels, the actions of identifying, tracking, and reporting on the vessels involved in the illicit smuggling of oil "does lead to many of these vessels ultimately getting scrapped; Raising the cost of sanctions evasions. Identifying smuggling ships raises the cost for the DPRK to undermine UN sanctions, forcing the DPRK to attempt to create ever more intricate smuggling networks, usually involving multiple vessels, to transfer just one load of oil; Disrupting black market networks.

By identifying illicit maritime activity, the PSMX helps disband entire networks of people and entities helping the DPRK violate UN sanctions".⁴⁵

⁴⁵ K. Crummit, "Nations Collaborate to Prevent North Korea from Evading UN Sanctions", United States Department of State, 15 April 2022, <https://www.state.gov/dipnote-u-s-department-of-state-official-blog/nations-collaborate-to-prevent-north-korea-from-evading-un-sanctions/>.

Notwithstanding the efficacy of this monitoring activity for delivering results in terms of countering proliferation, the participation of EU member states like France and Germany in these operations is a highly visible demonstration of European commitment to upholding the multilateral order in the region, most obviously in terms of UN sanctions, but also in terms of the exercise of freedom of navigation and overflight. Compared to the modest Passing Exercise (PASSEX), port call, or counter-piracy drill exercises the EU carries out in other areas of the Indo-Pacific, **operational activity in this framework represents a relatively strong example of the European contribution to security in the region.** Considering the experience the EU has gained in its own more robust mission enforcing UNSC sanctions with regard to Libya in the Mediterranean, the Union can also bring some expertise to bear.⁴⁶

4. HYBRID THREATS

The fact that the Indo-Pacific has been free of large-scale war since the late 1970s, but not free of conflict, might be read as an indication that hybrid approaches – in the sense of attempts to achieve foreign policy and security objectives without breaching the threshold separating peace from war – are nothing new in the region. **One might even say such a hybrid approach is the default mode for Indo-Pacific security.** Indeed, such hybrid or “grey zone” approaches as they are also known in the region (instances of which may be coded subjectively as “hybrid threats” or “hybrid war”), can be observed in the region corresponding to each of the axes commonly used to define the term “hybrid”: above/below the threshold of war and peace, across the civil/military boundary, and along the coercive/subversive spectrum.⁴⁷

Sub-threshold: The Indo-Pacific region is host to a number of enduring border disputes, from the Himalayas through the Thai-Cambodia border on to overlapping claims to islands and features in the South and East China seas. All have exhibited potential for flaring up over past years, sometimes with violent and deadly results, yet none have triggered a state of war between the antagonists. For instance, Pakistan is seen as waging hybrid warfare towards India, which Delhi takes as a key security challenge.

⁴⁶ EUNAVFOR MED IRINI is the EU’s Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) naval operation enforcing UN Sanctions pursuant to UNSC Resolutions 1970 (2011) and 2292 (2016), designed to prevent illicit supply of weapons to Libya and prevent its export of contraband, including oil. IRINI goes beyond observation, tracking and reporting, conducting hailings, “friendly approaches”, boardings and diversions. The mission also conducts more traditional CSDP tasks such as capacity building and training of the Libyan Coast Guard and Navy, as well as the disruption of human smuggling and trafficking networks at sea. See: <https://www.operationirini.eu/about-us/>.

⁴⁷ European External Action Service, “Countering Hybrid Threats”, Fact Sheet, March 2022, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/2022-03-28-countering-Hybrid-Threats_NewLayout.pdf.

In 2020, although the antagonists were uniformed soldiers in a formal chain of command, it is hard to imagine a reason why Chinese PLA and Indian Army units used clubs and fists rather than firearms in deadly clashes if not to keep the confrontation from escalating above the threshold of conventional war.⁴⁸

Civil/military: China's deployment of maritime militia, defined as "a force that primarily consists of vessels ostensibly engaged in the business of commercial fishing, but whose true occupation is in achieving Chinese political and military objectives" and the posting of security officials on civilian fishing boats have given a "hybrid" flavour to confrontations over fishing, including in waters inside the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) of disputed territories, and claims of rights over waters around shoals and other features in the South China Sea.⁴⁹

Coercive / subversive: Singapore has been prompted to counter an increase in disinformation and what the EU calls Foreign Interference and Manipulation of Information by means of legislative, as well as operational countermeasures set up in the last few years.⁵⁰ Singapore's Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act, also known as the "fake news law", came into effect on 2 October 2019.

Notwithstanding concerns about its consistent and unbiased political application,⁵¹ emerging legislation covers measures to deal with online Hostile Information Campaigns conducted by foreign parties, as well as measures dealing with foreign interference through local proxies.⁵² A case related to the latter problem had occurred in 2017, when the Singapore government found a professor at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy "working with a foreign government to influence Singapore's foreign policy and public opinion" and cancelled his permanent residency status.⁵³

A lot of the hybrid threat activity trending up throughout the Indo-Pacific region over the past several years is identified with actions by China. For instance, when a judgment concerning territorial disputes in the South China Sea went against PRC interests, that was followed by an upsurge in cyberattacks and hacking activity against government entities with which China has territorial disputes.⁵⁴ According to some reports, China bombards Taiwan with up to 2,400 different pieces of false material each day.⁵⁵

48 N. Mandhana, R. Roy, and C. Han Wong, "The Deadly India-China Clash: Spiked Clubs and Fists at 14,000 Feet", Wall Street Journal, 17 June 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/spiked-clubs-and-fists-at-14-000-feet-the-deadly-india-china-clash-11592418242>.

49 G. B. Poling, T. G. Mallory, and H. Prétat, "Pulling Back the Curtain on China's Maritime Militia", CSIS, 18 November 2021, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/pulling-back-curtain-chinas-maritime-militia>.

50 L. M. Zhang and H. Baharudin, "Singapore's Battle against Disinformation and Foreign Influence Bids", Straits Times, 28 August 2022, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/politics/singapores-battle-against-disinformation-and-foreign-influence-bids>.

51 L. L. Ying, "Pofma Correction Orders Issued to ex-GIC Economist, TOC over False Claims on Past Reserves and HDB Loss", Straits Times, 14 October 2022, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/pofma-correction-orders-issued-to-ex-gic-economist-toc-over-false-claims>.

52 "Second Reading of Foreign Interference (Countermeasures) Bill", a speech by Mr K. Shanmugam, Minister for Home Affairs and Minister for Law, 4 October 2021, <https://www.mha.gov.sg/mediaroom/parliamentary/second-reading-of-foreign-interference-countermeasures-bill-speech-by-mr-k-shanmugam/>.

53 R. Sim, "LKY School Professor Huang Jing Banned, Has PR Cancelled, for Being Agent of Influence for Foreign Country", Straits Times, 4 August 2017, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/lky-school-professor-huang-jing-banned-has-pr-cancelled-for-being-agent-of-influence-for>.

54 A. Piiparinen, "China's Secret Weapon in the South China Sea: Cyber Attacks after the South China Sea Ruling, China Throws Another Digital Tantrum", Diplomat, 22 July 2016, <https://thediplomat.com/2016/07/chinas-secret-weapon-in-the-south-china-sea-cyber-attacks/>.

55 S. W. Harold, N. Beauchamp-Mustafaga, and J. W. Hornung, "Chinese Disinformation Efforts on Social Media", RAND Corporation, 2021, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR4373z3.html.

The PRC used economic coercion against the Republic of Korea when the latter agreed to host an air defence system that Beijing had opposed.⁵⁶ During the Covid-19 pandemic, the PRC used authentic public worries about the introduction of vaccines and data privacy to create and spread conspiracy theories that threaten the legitimacy of democratic institutions while also utilising the internet for a pro-China propaganda push, especially in India.⁵⁷ Aggressive interceptions by PLA Air Force fighters against Australian and Canadian maritime surveillance aircraft – even when engaged in UN sanctions monitoring – over the East⁵⁸ and South China Sea, mentioned in the section above on proliferation, may also be counted as a form of grey zone or hybrid coercion.⁵⁹

Chinese strategic writings on “Unrestricted Warfare” argue that actors do not just use “armed force to compel the enemy to submit to one’s will”,⁶⁰ and so hybrid threats from China have evolved over the recent decades on a doctrinal level. Such a well-thought out and historically documented approach to understanding hybrid threats by the country’s government makes communities, organisations, and countries it “attacks” all the more susceptible to manipulative persuasion and exploitative behaviour.

The use of legal warfare as part of the Three Warfares is largely overlooked, despite being heavily employed in the Indo-Pacific domain. China’s **“Lawfare” aims to rewrite the rules to give life to “historical fantasies” and retrospectively legalise illegal conduct.**⁶¹ For instance, China passed the Land Borders Law to promote its Himalayan territorial revisionism and the Maritime Traffic Safety Law and the Coast Guard Law in order to further its territorial expansion in the South and East China Seas, if not its outreach in the Indian Ocean region.

Beyond China, actors like DPRK and Russia also pose critical threats to the EU. In order to achieve its strategic objectives, Pyongyang’s employment of hybrid tactics remains connected to its isolation and relative lack of military and political might.⁶² Meanwhile, the conflict in Ukraine has offered a vivid illustration of Russia’s hybrid warfare.⁶³ In addition to its armed troops, Russia has used economic pressure against Ukraine through its control of food and oil supplies as well as political subterfuge.

In order to combat hybrid threats, awareness- and information-raising campaigns are crucial. **In the Indo-Pacific, such a shared comprehension of hybrid threats seems to be lacking.** Despite these rising problems with hybrid approaches, Indo-Pacific states lack a regional network or institution to support the countering of hybrid warfare. This weakness limits collective action and leaves states with varying levels of institutional capacity to fall back largely on national strategies.

56 C. Kim, and J. Chung, “South Korea Complains to WTO over China Response to Missile System”, Reuters, 20 March 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-southkorea-china-thaad-idUSKBN16R03D>.

57 Australian Strategic Policy Institute, “Covid-19 Disinformation & Social Media Manipulation”, 27 October 2020, <https://www.aspi.org.au/report/covid-19-disinformation>.

58 “China Accuses Australia and Canada of ‘Disinformation’ over Jet Encounters”, Guardian, 7 June 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jun/07/china-accuses-australia-canada-jet-encounters>.

59 “Australia Says a Chinese Fighter Jet Intercepted Its Plane in May”, Al Jazeera, 5 June 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/6/5/australia-says-chinese-fighter-jet-intercepted-its-plane-in-may>.

60 Q. Liang and W. Xiangsui, “Unrestricted Warfare”, PLA Literature and Arts Publishing House, February 1999, <https://www.c4i.org/unrestricted.pdf>.

61 J. Osawa, “Hybrid Warfare in a Taiwan Contingency”, Sasakawa Peace Foundation, https://www.spf.org/iina/en/articles/osawa_01.html.

62 D. Kang, “The Multi-Domain Operations Viability as a Future War Concept of the Republic of Korea Military: Can It Counter North Korean Hybrid Warfare?”, Defense Technical Information Center, 2020, <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/citations/AD1124669>.

63 Osawa, “Hybrid Warfare in a Taiwan Contingency”.

Indo-Pacific hybrid threats and Europe

The majority of the sources of hybrid threats for the EU – in the form of revisionist states like China and Russia, rogue nations like DPRK, and threat organisations working transnationally like Al-Qaeda and Hezbollah – arise in the Indo-Pacific region.⁶⁴ **The hybrid threats emanating from China are shaped via its Three Warfares:**⁶⁵ public opinion warfare (as seen by the employment of mass media in a way that strengthens China’s favourable image in Europe’s BRI⁶⁶ member countries), legal warfare (implemented in domains of cybersecurity⁶⁷ as well as outer space politics) and psychological warfare (China’s political clout⁶⁸ in Eastern Europe has allowed it to use countries like Greece⁶⁹ and Hungary⁷⁰ to block EU moves on topics pertaining to China).

The EU’s overall approach to the Indo-Pacific has already shown signs of awareness towards this emergent threat. The European Parliament’s report on security challenges in the Indo-Pacific has made provisions for “enhancing partnerships with regional organisations and democratic countries” on hybrid threats a “priority areas for cooperation with partners”.⁷¹ Importantly, it identifies the need for “EU and Indo-Pacific partners to enhance cooperation in the fight against hybrid threats, including disinformation campaigns” and build “mechanisms aimed at sharing evidence and intelligence that would serve as a basis for issuing cyber sanctions” therein, putting special focus on technology, cyberspace, air, and space dimensions. Additionally, while assessing EU’s stakes in security and defence in the Indo-Pacific the European Parliament has called on the EU and NATO to build a focus on hybrid threats.⁷² Here, common strategic partners like the Indo-Pacific states of India, US, Australia, Japan, and South Korea can emerge as key partners, especially as they themselves are prone to hybrid attacks from Beijing.

The situation in 2030

Based on current trends, **by 2030 it is reasonable to expect hybrid approaches will continue to be adopted as much or probably more than they have been for the preceding years.** The factors driving this are: (i) the extension of digital and cyber networks across the region offers richer targets and a wider attack surface for enacting and concealing hybrid threats; (ii) continued arms racing in parallel with increased economic integration within the region will reinforce incentives

64 C. Atkinson and G. Chiozza, “Hybrid Threats and the Erosion of Democracy from Within: US Surveillance and European Security”, *Chinese Political Science Review*, Vol. 6 (2021), pp. 119-142.

65 E. Iasiello, “China’s Three Warfares Strategy Mitigates Fallout from Cyber Espionage Activities”, *Journal of Strategic Security*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (2016), pp. 45-69.

66 R. Turcsanyi and E. Kachlikova, “The BRI and China’s Soft Power in Europe: Why Chinese Narratives (Initially) Won”, *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*, Vol. 49, No. 1 (2020), pp. 58-81.

67 B. Austin, “Reordering the Law for a China World Order: China’s Legal Warfare Strategy in Outer Space and Cyberspace”, *Journal of National Security Law & Policy*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (2020), pp. 1-50.

68 E. Brattberg, P. Le Corre, P. Stronski, and T. De Waal, “China’s Influence in Southeastern, Central, and Eastern Europe: Vulnerabilities and Resilience in Four Countries”, *Carnegie*, 13 October 2021, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/10/13/china-s-influence-in-southeastern-central-and-eastern-europe-vulnerabilities-and-resilience-in-four-countries-pub-85415>.

69 R. Emmott and A. Koutantou, “Greece Blocks EU Statement on China Human Rights at U.N.”, *Reuters*, 18 June 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-eu-un-rights-idUSKBN1990FP>.

70 J. Chambers and R. Emmott, “Hungary Blocks EU Statement Criticising China over Hong Kong, Diplomats Say”, *Reuters*, 16 April 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/hungary-blocks-eu-statement-criticising-china-over-hong-kong-diplomats-say-2021-04-16/>.

71 European Parliament, “Report on the EU and the Security Challenges in the Indo-Pacific”, 4 April 2022, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-9-2022-0085_EN.html.

72 R. Pacheco Pardo and N. Leveringhaus, “Security and Defence in the Indo-Pacific: What Is at Stake for the EU and Its Strategy?”, *European Parliament*, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2022/653660/EXPO_IDA\(2022\)653660_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2022/653660/EXPO_IDA(2022)653660_EN.pdf).

for hybrid approaches that enable conflict without crossing the threshold into economically self-defeating formal states of war; and (iii) as more countries and multilateral groupings from outside the Indo-Pacific enter the region, they will potentially carry with them conflicts from outside, as we see currently in the case of Russia's war on Ukraine and the effects on relations between Japan and Russia and between Russia and the DPRK. While external conflicts cannot reach any settlement through actions in the Indo-Pacific, the Indo-Pacific is more likely to be a theatre for sub-threshold or "hybrid" activity designed to indirectly tip the balance of power and influence against an adversary.

By 2030, the creation of a multilateral network – supported by the EU – of Indo-Pacific states to focus on hybrid threats would be a valuable addition to its strategy for the region, especially as a number of Indo-Pacific partner countries face near-continuous hybrid attacks from sub-threshold, subversive, and influence operations. **Europe is evolving a sophisticated system to comprehending and thwarting hybrid threats**, both at the national level and through the EU and NATO, via its Hybrid Centre of Excellence in Helsinki. Exporting research collaboration with the centre – or establishing an Indo-Pacific/Asia arm of the same – would be a valuable addition to the EU's Indo-Pacific outlook. As compared to collaboration with the US on this front, the EU emerges as a safer partner for smaller states, especially as they continue to balance precariously between the US and China.

Some features of geography and the history of political development in the Indo-Pacific will also inform the directions open to European participation in countering hybrid threats through a multinational approach in this region. Compared to Europe, with its more continental focus, the maritime nature of much of the Indo-Pacific regional environment colours the regional hybrid threats agenda. Such ground realities will stimulate fresh thinking on the EU's approach to understanding hybrid threat perceptions and considering multilateral approaches to closer cooperation with its Indo-Pacific partners. Wider differentials of scale among Indo-Pacific states are also a point of difference with consequences for hybrid approaches and countermeasures. For instance, Chinese sub-threshold and influence operations in the Indian Ocean region can use an advantage of scale against smaller economies. Furthermore, the plethora of languages within countries – along with weaker literacy rates – makes countering influence operations sub-regionally a more tedious process requiring focused efforts.

Finally, **the political traditions prevailing in the region are much more diverse than in the European context**, and often take a different view on principles like sovereignty, individual liberty, and privacy. The transgressive nature of hybrid approaches with regard to the boundaries that govern relations between states, among state institutions, and between individuals and government, makes the identification of shared approaches across such a region, and between the European and Indo-Pacific regions, significantly more complex and challenging. So, although many states share concerns about hybrid threats, a multilateral approach to security cooperation in this area also presents unique challenges.

Overcoming those challenges may require an imaginative and fresh approach to framing principles that can both command broad acceptance and support operational success. **Exploring engagement in a multilateral framework that helps develop protection against hybrid threats** could be the EU's first attempt at entering the Indo-Pacific's security-driven response to assertive actors outside the purview of US-led mechanisms in the region, Brussels' bilateral partnerships, or economics-driven outreach.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Security and defence is an integral part of any steps by the EU to support or reinvigorate multilateralism in the Indo-Pacific. However, as **this study has shown, multilateralism is facing a number of challenges in the region**, not least because of shifting power balances and the growth of unilateral and bilateral cooperative formats. Elements of this study have pointed to a need for the EU to be increasingly aware of what it means by multilateralism in the Indo-Pacific and to be cognisant of the limitations of multilateralism. In some respects, the EU can try to engage with unilateral formats so as to enhance their multilateral appeal. Given the EU's political power and legitimacy as an international actor, the Union could strive towards making unilateral formats more multilateral or quasi-multilateral in nature.

However, any EU move in this direction risks prioritising multilateralism rather than the effectiveness of cooperation in security and defence. In this sense, the EU should recognise that beneficial security and defence outputs are created by unilateral settings, and this should be the main priority of any EU engagement with the region. The risk with this approach, of course, is that prioritising effectiveness over inclusion may exclude or possibly alienate certain actors like China. **The EU should be aware of the signalling that the promotion of multilateralism entails in the region** – some EU partners interpret the calls for multilateralism in the Indo-Pacific as a way to include China, even when this is undesirable for many states in the region. Nevertheless, out to 2030 this study has shown that the EU needs to be bolder and more flexible with the cooperative formats it engages with on security and defence in the Indo-Pacific – the Union should not let the perfect be the enemy of the good!

Any steps to promote multilateralism in security and defence in the Indo-Pacific is likely to come up against broader geopolitical and geoeconomic trends such as the deterioration of free trade, economic decoupling, and targeted measures related to semiconductor and chip security of supply. Overall, **US-China competition has imposed parameters on the EU's ability to promote multilateralism in the region**. This may, in reality, mean that the Union has to decompartmentalise its approach to the Indo-Pacific. For example, in North-East Asia the EU is confronted with a very volatile security context of proliferation, military modernisation, and territorial disputes (e.g. Taiwan, EEZs, and Senkaku Islands). In this part of the Indo-Pacific, the Union will have to make difficult decisions about its relationship with China. In other parts of the Indo-Pacific, however, the EU could engage nonaligned states such as India to bolster existing fora such as ASEAN or develop new multilateral formats. Of course, this second approach would still imply the exclusion of certain states, not least China, the US, and those more closely aligned with each.

Nevertheless, **the EU has a number of avenues through which it can promote multilateralism in security and defence in the Indo-Pacific region**. First, while the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) is currently hamstrung because of the geopolitical tensions with Russia, the EU and its partners have continued multilateral engagement through the Ministerial Forum on Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific. While the forum is not a replacement for ASEM, it has allowed the EU27 member states and 30 partners from across the Indo-Pacific to meet to discuss important issues such as UNCLOS and security and defence matters. The first such Ministerial Forum was held in February 2022 and it should be actively supported as an annual event that can offer a multilateral alternative to cooperation in the Indo-Pacific. Second, the EU continues to play a key role in the ARF and this gives the Union a unique opportunity to promote multilateralism in the region on security and defence matters.

The EU has strong limitations to the security and defence role it can play in the Indo-Pacific. The most obvious sense in which this is true relates to the lack of European naval capabilities. To the extent that the EU can claim to hold any naval power in the Indo-Pacific, it does so on the backs of European navies such as France, Germany, and the Netherlands and through its naval operation off the Horn of Africa (EUNAVFOR Atalanta). Most militaries in the EU are geared towards land and air warfare, and this will be even more the case in the context of Russia's war on Ukraine. More pooling of personnel and opening up of platforms to a wider range of navies can go some way towards mitigating this situation. However, **without enlarged naval capabilities the EU will suffer in terms of its political presence in the Indo-Pacific** and its potential for building partnerships. In addition to a need for enhanced naval capabilities, there is a need for the Union to inject far greater ambition in its military cooperation with partners, especially in relation to naval exercises.

To date, key EU partners such as Australia and Japan have actually preferred to develop naval cooperation with the United Kingdom and the United States rather than with EU member states. This points to a need for the EU to bolster its partnerships with the United States and the United Kingdom. With regard to the US, the Union should continue to use the dedicated US-EU Dialogues on security and defence and the Indo-Pacific to develop closer and more ambitious cooperation in the region. President Biden recently offered to increase the US' "support and material contributions to air and maritime deployments" conducted by European nations in the region⁷³. This could also include a decision to exchange officers between security and defence formats – for example, an EU liaison officer could be embedded in the US Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM) and a US exchange officer could be brought into the Maritime Area of Interest Coordination Cell (MAICC) of the CMP, which is located in the EU Military Staff. With the UK, cooperation in the area of security and defence is not so obvious since Brexit and AUKUS. Nevertheless, the Indo-Pacific could be the one area that sparks closer EU-UK cooperation. In this regard, the UK and EU may want to commonly develop capacity building efforts in the region, jointly participate in live exercises, and even eventually coordinate efforts on China via the European Political Community or a dedicated EU-UK Defence Dialogue – mirroring that which the Union has already with the US.

This is not to say that the EU is failing to build up its maritime presence in the Indo-Pacific. Indeed, the EU Strategic Compass of March 2022 and the EU's Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific of September 2021 clearly call for an expansion of the CMP concept into the Northwestern Indian Ocean. In doing so, the EU hopes to build on existing regional military and capacity-building efforts such as EUNAVFOR Atalanta or the non-EU initiative Operation Agénor. The CMP provides the Union with a flexible tool that allows EU and partner navies to share maritime information. This will be a potentially invaluable tool in terms of maritime surveillance capacities, and it also allows for increased cooperation with partner countries, but it also assumes that EU member states will have to deploy additional naval assets to the region. That is, **there is a limitation to the gathering of maritime surveillance data and intelligence through space-based assets and regional maritime information hubs**. Being able to put to sea credible and sizeable naval assets is a necessary addition to existing maritime surveillance and capacity-building initiatives.

73 White House, "Joint Statement Following the Meeting between President Biden and President Macron", 1 December 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/12/01/joint-statement-following-the-meeting-between-president-biden-and-president-macron/>.

Out to 2030, the EU will need to give due consideration to a further expansion of the Coordinated Maritime Presences concept in the Indo-Pacific. So far, the initiative has been judged based on its performance in the Gulf of Guinea and over the next two years it will be applied to the Northwestern Indian Ocean. Due to the security environment in the Indo-Pacific, however, it is worth considering expanding CMP further into, for example, the South-East Asia and North-East Asia regions. Not only would CMP in these regions allow the Union to play a more substantive role with regard to UN Resolutions on the DPRK and FONOPs in the South and East China Sea, but it would allow the Union to initiate a maritime relationship with core partners such as Australia, Japan, South Korea, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

Accordingly, the EU should use the European Defence Fund and Permanent Structured Cooperation to launch capability programmes that lead to the production of credible naval vessels and assets. The EU is currently prioritising naval strategic enablers and its core ambition with regard to naval vessels is the development of a European Patrol Corvette. Such vessels do not only respond to capability gaps in the EU, but they could eventually be sold to partners in the Indo-Pacific. This could pave the way for an Indian Ocean patrol boat programme to meet the needs of coastal countries in the Indo-Pacific region. **This is not an adequate level of ambition if the Union wants to exert political influence in the Indo-Pacific.** Out to 2030, the Indo-Pacific will be the location of considerable naval mass and capability modernisation and the EU must keep pace with this trend. In this respect, the Union should also reckon with the possibility of Taiwan calling for European arms and ammunitions deliveries under the EPF in case of any hot war with China.

Furthermore, **the EU needs to be far more ambitious with naval exercises with partners from the Indo-Pacific.** To be sure, the EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific and the EU Strategic Compass call for more naval exercises and port calls. This ambition should be lauded but PASSEX are insufficient alone to build genuine defence partnerships in the region. The EU has already engaged in light PASSEX drills with Djibouti, Oman, India, Indonesia, Japan, Pakistan, and South Korea but the EU could be more ambitious with, for example, joint surveillance and tracking exercises (geared around sanctions or trafficking), anti-submarine exercises, or anti-mine exercises. Additionally, so far the EU has structured its naval exercises through EUNAVFOR Atalanta and so the Union should reflect upon whether the CMP can be used in future to frame joint exercises at sea, especially given the ongoing evolution of EUNAVFOR Atalanta.

In addition to the CMP, enhanced naval capabilities and naval exercises, **the Union needs to clearly articulate an overall crisis response strategy for the region.** For example, partners in the region are pressing the EU to be clear about the possible contribution they would make in case of any Chinese aggression towards Taiwan.⁷⁴ This would imply a need to think about the future potential delivery of lethal arms and equipment to Taiwan through the EPF and a potential naval response for the delivery of arms and equipment, but it would also mean a pre-positioning with regard to sanctions towards China in case of aggression and continued European naval deployments to the region. This is also an area where stronger EU cooperation in the field of hybrid threats could yield dividends. In this respect, the EU should urgently invest in developing its own response strategy as well holding tabletop exercises with partners in the region.

⁷⁴ This was reflected by discussions and comments with Japanese and other Asian officials and experts in recent months.

Additionally, the EU should make good on its objective in the Strategic Compass to increase its **network of military advisors** in the world, and preference can be given to naval attachés in places such as Australia, India, Indonesia, Japan, and Singapore. The defence attachés can either be deployed to EU Delegations in the Indo-Pacific under an EU flag or EU member states could designate individuals to serve a double-hatted role. This would enable the EU delegations to enhance their knowledge of security and defence in the region, provide Brussels with a more credible maritime information picture, and provide partners in the region with a military-to-military interlocutor to boost the Union's credibility and have in place crisis response networks already in place.

Maritime capacity-building remains essential. In practical terms, deepening functional maritime security cooperation and sharing EU experiences with key partners, notably with India, Indonesia, Japan, the ROK, Singapore, and Vietnam, has been part of the “Enhancing Security Cooperation in and with Asia” (ESIWA) initiative since 2020. Building capacities of smaller regional countries in addressing functional maritime security challenges – such as seaborne crime, IUU fishing, border management, and law enforcement – through bilateral initiatives as well as through existing multilateral initiatives (ASEAN, ARF, the Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission) is and should remain an underlying working thread to enhance the EU's credibility in the long term. In time, the EU should invest in creating a Centre of Excellence on Maritime Domain Awareness in Djibouti. This centre could not only build on the EU's naval presence in the region, but allow the EU to complement and extend existing MDA capacity-building efforts in the region.⁷⁵

The EU should be prepared to engage with fora in the Indo-Pacific that it is not currently part of. For example, the Quad project might offer opportunities for the EU to associate or coordinate, even if, for now, it stands more as a competing project. Furthermore, the IPMDA project seeks to “extend support for information-sharing across existing regional fusion centres”, but this overlaps with what the EU has been doing for years in the Indian Ocean, and now in Southeast Asia, through its CRIMARIO and other initiatives. Synergies should be found. Another relevant initiative is the US-proposed PBP⁷⁶ gathering Australia, Japan, New Zealand, the UK, and the US to help promote Pacific regionalism and address Pacific Islanders' concerns, including in maritime security. Here again, **France and the EU could step up their contributions once the multilateral nature of the initiative is strengthened and thorough consultations with Pacific Islands countries are conducted.**⁷⁷ While the PBP and CRIMARIO are different initiatives and used different maritime surveillance systems, synergies should be sought between the two initiatives.

75 L. Simón and T. Satake, “Rules-Based Connectivity, Maritime Security and EU-Japan Cooperation in the Indian Ocean”, Elcano Royal Institute, 14 May 2020, <https://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/en/analyses/rules-based-connectivity-maritime-security-and-eu-japan-cooperation-in-the-indian-ocean/>.

76 White House, “Statement by Australia, Japan, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States on the Establishment of the Partners in the Blue Pacific (PBP)”, 24 June 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/06/24/statement-by-australia-japan-new-zealand-the-united-kingdom-and-the-united-states-on-the-establishment-of-the-partners-in-the-blue-pacific-pbp/>.

77 US Department of State, “Joint Statement on Partners in the Blue Pacific Foreign Ministers Meeting”, 22 September 2022, <https://www.state.gov/joint-statement-on-partners-in-the-blue-pacific-foreign-ministers-meeting/>.

The need to think and act for non-proliferation in the Indo-Pacific is a pressing need but the EU's scope for leading efforts is limited. Due to the rise of China, there has been a surge in weapons production and development and procurement. Globally, arms control has become weakened by the demise of the INF Treaty and there is a proliferation of technology in the Indo-Pacific. There are, however, some potential ways in which the EU and its member states can help build credible non-proliferation in the region. First, the rise in the acquisition of nuclear submarines in the region will lead to questions about safeguarding nuclear materials and highly enriched uranium. Here, European countries such as France and Sweden with nuclear expertise, or Euratom, could play a role in creating and endorsing a new nuclear safeguard arrangement in the region. Second, European countries can and do play a role in monitoring and enforcing UNSC sanctions in places such as the Korean Peninsula, especially with regard to illicit smuggling. **The Union as a whole should assess how better they can help enforce sanctions against the DPRK, especially by contributing to monitoring operations.**

Capacity-building more generally in security and defence is likely to be an effective tool for the EU to promote multilateralism in the Indo-Pacific. Moving beyond just maritime capacity-building, **the EU should consider building capacity in the area of countering hybrid threats** such as disinformation, "lawfare", cybersecurity, and critical infrastructure protection. Attention should certainly be placed on working with countries in the Indo-Pacific through a dedicated centre or body modelled on the existing European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats in Helsinki, Finland. Such a recommendation has already been offered elsewhere,⁷⁸ but the EU has a unique role to play given its own growing institutional tools and bodies. First, the EU could encourage closer cooperation between the Helsinki-based Centre of Excellence and governments in the Indo-Pacific. Second, it could help **support the creation of a stand-alone Centre of Excellence in the region.** Such a centre would work on understanding the nature of hybrid threats, plus develop best practices and counter strategies.

Such a measure would help the EU build and strengthen partnerships to counter hybrid threats and provide an additional multilateral layer to its relations with the Indo-Pacific. However, beyond creating a Centre of Excellence the EU should start reequipping its civilian capacity-building missions under CSDP. In future, the EU could be called upon to deploy a civilian CSDP mission to help counter hybrid threats in the Indo-Pacific and the Union should be prepared for this. The creation of the EU Hybrid Rapid Response Teams called for in the EU Strategic Compass should be stood up immediately and be prepared to assist Indo-Pacific countries. Such teams can either be deployed alone or as part of a wider CSDP civilian mission that assists countries in the region in developing best practices in domestic law as geared towards countering hybrid threats such as foreign manipulation. Here, the EU has attained a wealth of experience that can be shared with partners in the Indo-Pacific.

78 L. Seebeck, E. Williams, and J. Wallis, "Countering the Hydra: A Proposal for an Indo-Pacific Hybrid Threat Centre", Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 7 June 2022, <https://www.aspi.org.au/report/countering-hydra>.

Recommendations – a summary

1. Ensure that the Ministerial Forum on Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific is held every year from 2022.
2. Continue to raise pressing security and defence issues within the ASEAN Regional Forum.
3. Work closely with the United States and United Kingdom in the Indo-Pacific and use the Indo-Pacific to build a security and defence partnership with the UK.
4. Ensure freedom of navigation and safety by deployments of European navies to the Taiwan Strait and the East and South China Seas through FONOPS.
5. Consider the broader Indo-Pacific as a “European Maritime Area of Interest”, explore possible expansion of the CMP to the region, and use sanctions monitoring as an anchor for cooperation with like-minded partners.
6. Assist with the creation and implementation of a nuclear safeguard agreement in the region.
7. Boost Europe’s capacities for monitoring and enforcing UNSC sanctions related to illicit activities and proliferation in the Korean Peninsula with a specific focus on the DPRK.
8. Develop naval vessels and strategic enablers to allow the EU to play a sustained naval role in the Indo-Pacific.
9. Develop naval exercises with partners in areas such as anti-submarine and anti-mine warfare.
10. Establish a Centre of Excellence on Maritime Domain Awareness in Djibouti.
11. Deploy military advisors, with an emphasis on naval expertise, to close partners in the Indo-Pacific and (co-)locate them in EU delegations.
12. Embed an EU liaison officer in USINDOPACOM and bring a US exchange officer into the MAICC located in the EU Military Staff that guides the CMP.
13. Encourage and strengthen military-educational exchanges between the EU and the Indo-Pacific through the European Security and Defence College.
14. Invite Indo-Pacific partners to participate and mutually develop tabletop exercises for crisis response in the region.
15. Consider how the EPF would apply in case of armed aggression on Taiwan.
16. Continue to help build maritime cooperation in the region through ESIWA and engage smaller regional countries to counter seaborne crime, IUU fishing, law enforcement and border management.
17. Engage with fora and structures in the Indo-Pacific that the EU is not yet part of including the Quad, the IPMDA, the Partnership for the Blue Pacific and more. Where possible, seek synergies with initiatives such as CRIMARIO.
18. Ensure the maritime security recommendations made here are integrated into the ongoing revision of the EU’s Maritime Security Strategy.
19. Assist with developing closer relations with the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats and Indo-Pacific countries and eventually help create a stand-alone centre in the region.
20. Work to immediately stand up the EU Hybrid Rapid Response Teams and re-tool civilian CSDP missions to be able to provide counter hybrid capacity building in the Indo-Pacific.

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