

European Strategy in the Indo-Pacific Region

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https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Collins_class_submarine_with_the_aircraft_carrier_Charles_de_Gaulle_in_May_2019.jpg



The ongoing geostrategic competition in the South Chinese Sea and the Indo-Pacific region, more broadly, is frequently thought of as a struggle between the USA and China. However, the deployment of both British and French naval assets in the Indo-Pacific makes clear that it is very much a European issue as well (Jennings, 2018; Loh, 21). This notion has been recently confirmed by a report compiled on behalf of the European Union Parliament, which voices concern over potential threats to the European Union's (EU) security and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific Region (Pardo & Leveringhaus, 2021). In this sense, the situation in the Indo-Pacific region is an important test case for the ability of the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) to protect the EU's interests abroad. Moreover, individual European powers, particularly France and the United Kingdom, but also Germany, have formulated their strategy for the region. Accordingly, this Info Flash seeks to clarify the situation in the Indo-Pacific by discussing the context of the region, establishing its relevance for Europe, and shedding some light on the various European strategies at play in the region.

From Asia-Pacific to Indo-Pacific

Neither Asia-Pacific nor Indo-Pacific are strictly geographic terms. Asia-Pacific is commonly understood as a signifier for "a region that includes some of the countries of East and Southeast Asia and the Pacific Rim" (Macmillan, 2020). The term is generally associated with economic issues and gained popularity in the 1980s and 1990s as China, and then the Four Asian Tigers (Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan) became increasingly relevant to global trade and finance. However, in the last ten years, the term Indo-Pacific has been steadily replacing Asia-Pacific in the vocabulary of international organisations and government policy papers. As a geographic construct, Indo-Pacific is somewhat less clear-cut – the relationship between the signifier and what is being signified is contextual. Different states have divergent definitions of the context. Whereas the United States defines the Indo-Pacific as "stretching from the waters off the west coast of the U.S. to the western border of India, and from Antarctica to the North Pole" (USINDOPACOM, 2022) other countries like India maintain a conception that is narrower (see Fig. 1).

Even in Europe, Indo-Pacific is a heterogeneous concept. EU institutions define the Indo-Pacific as the "region spanning from the east coast of Africa to the Pacific Island States." (EU Commission, 2021, p. 1). However, this definition diverges somewhat from how the EU's individual member states define the Indo-Pacific (Grare & Reuter, 2021). Member states' respective definitions range from minimalist conceptions of the Indo-Pacific ranging from Pakistan to the Pacific Island States to the more maximalist conception of the Indo-Pacific encompassing the area from the eastern coast of Africa to the Western Coast of the Americas (see Fig. 2). The latter, the maximalist conception, is notably shared by a majority of EU Member States. This large degree of divergence emphasises the political nature of the term and shows that it is "never merely descriptive or value-neutral" (Heiduk & Wacker, 2020, p. 8). States' (often rival) conceptions of the Indo-Pacific region are the result of boundary-drawing exercises that rely on "inclusion and exclusion mechanisms," which are employed for the pursuit of certain political goals.

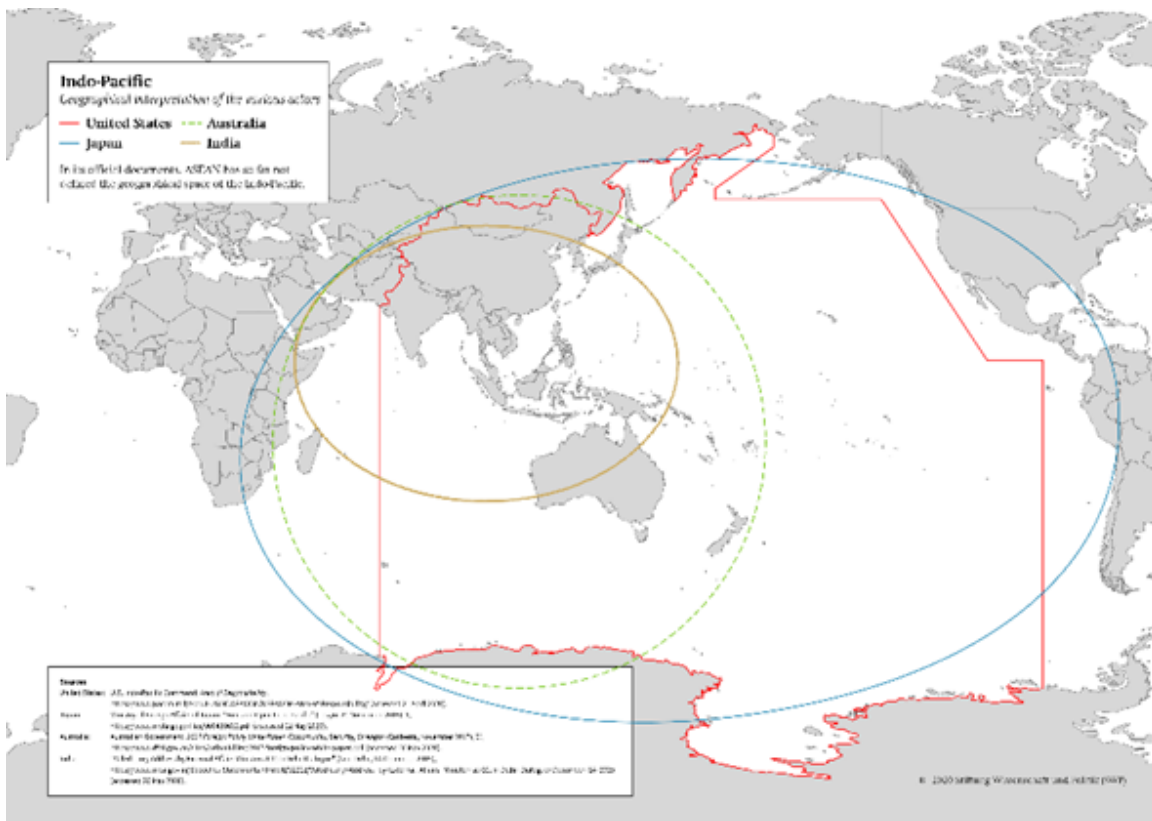


Fig 1. Indo-Pacific: Geographic interpretations of various actors [Heiduk & Wacker, 2020, p. 10].

One such political goal is the containment of China, an objective pursued by the United States. Starting with the Obama-era Indo-Pacific Economic Corridor (IPEC), which was undertaken in the context of the much-discussed ‘Pivot to Asia’ (Shambaugh, 2013), successive administrations have endeavoured to maintain the USA’s privileged position in the region. For instance, the Trump administration launched its Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy in November 2017 (see Ford, 2020). The main emphasis of the FOIP strategy is on security and defence policy. The USA seeks to promote security cooperation with existing regional partners, such as Japan and Australia, and “intensify cooperation” with South Asian countries, such as “Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Bangladesh, and Nepal” and Southeast Asian countries, such as “Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia, Cambodia, Laos, Brunei Darussalam and the West Pacific Island states” (Heiduk & Wacker, 2020, p. 14). This security and defence cooperation will primarily take the form of arms sales but also includes “joint manoeuvres, and training programs for (foreign) military personnel in the United States.”

Views of the geography of a strategic concept

Where is the Indo-Pacific?

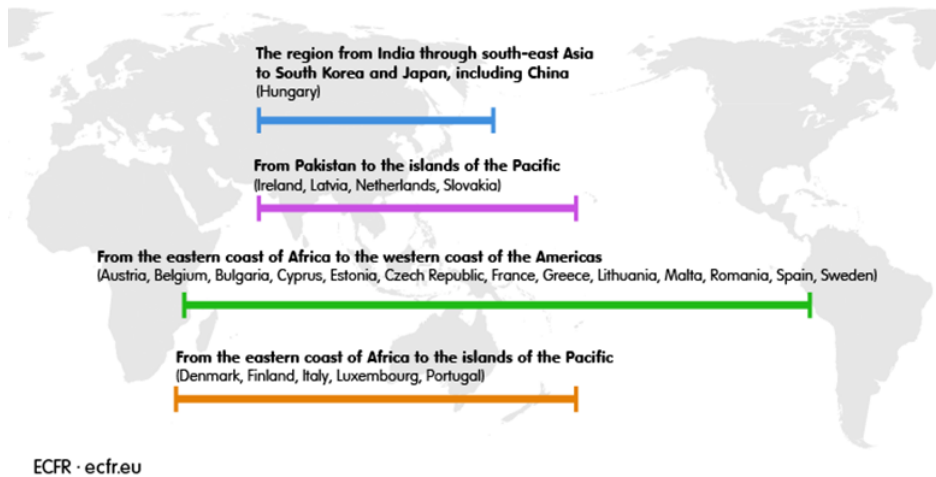


Fig 2. European geographic conceptions of the Indo-Pacific. [Grare & Reuter, 2021].

Beyond security and defence policy, the USA has also rolled out several initiatives aimed at economic development, such as the Better Utilization of Investments Leading to Development Act (BUILD Act) and the Asia Reassurance Initiative Act (ARIA). Through these initiatives, the USA is seeking to counter Chinese influence and provide an alternative to China's Belt and Road initiative (Heiduk & Wacker, 2020, p 14-16; see, also, Huang, 2016). In this context, the USA has increasingly made demands that countries in the region should "choose" between the USA and China, as was done by then Defence Secretary Mark Esper at the Munich Security Conference in 2020 (Heiduk & Wacker, 2020, p. 11). Consequently, the term Indo-Pacific, when employed by the USA's government, signifies a counter vision to Chinese ascendancy, in general, and the BRI, in particular. Crucially, the political situation, codified in government strategy, determines the geographic conception of the Indo-Pacific

The relevance of the Indo-Pacific region to Europe

Before giving an overview of the various European strategies at play in the Indo-Pacific, the region's significance to European interests must be noted. The Indo-Pacific when understood as the region "spanning from the east coast of Africa to the Pacific Island States" is a vast space (EU Commission, 2021, p. 1). This Indo-Pacific inhabits 60% of the world population and "produces 60% of global GDP." This 60% of global GDP is closely connected to the EU, which already is "the top investor, the leading provider of development cooperation, and one of the biggest trading partners in the Indo-Pacific region". Of further note is the large volume of trade exchange between the Indo-Pacific and Europe. In 2019, the annual trade exchange between the two regions reached EUR 1.5 trillion, making it "higher than between any other geographical regions in the world."

Moreover, since the Indo-Pacific region includes most of the Indian and Pacific Oceans, and, in particular major waterways, such as the Malacca Straits, the South China Sea, and the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, the region is also of vital importance to global trade (EU Commission, 2021, p. 2). The “vast majority of the world’s goods, but also energy supplies are transported via sea routes” that cross the Indo-Pacific. Consequently, the security of the region is intimately tied up with the global economy. The EU, its member states, and other European powers like the UK are increasingly worried that tensions in the Indo-Pacific may, in the future, spill over into outright conflict, which beyond the obvious human cost in the region, would also have devastating knock-on effects on European economies. The EU, similar to the USA, albeit somewhat less directly, has also singled out China and its military build-up as the main driver of tensions. Accordingly, the EU fears that the “display of force and increasing tensions in regional hotspots such as in the South and the East China Sea and the Taiwan Strait may have a direct impact on European security and prosperity” (EU Commission, 2021, p. 2, emphasis added).

European Strategies in the Indo-Pacific Region

Given the substantial importance of the Indo-Pacific for Europe, it is prudent that the EU, and its eminent member states, such as France and Germany, have developed formal (security) strategies governing their conduct in the region. France was the first European power to formulate an official security policy regarding the region, first as an Asia-Pacific policy in 2016 and then as an Indo-Pacific policy in 2019 (Heiduk & Wacker, 2020, p. 35). The change in title from Asia-Pacific to Indo-Pacific further demonstrates, as elaborated upon above, that the term Indo-Pacific is a political construct and should be understood as a “geopolitical nomenclature” (Ibid, p. 7). France’s interest in the region stems from France being a resident power in the region. Because of prior colonial ‘adventures,’ the French still maintain overseas territories, among which are: “[...] islands in the South Pacific and Indian Oceans and some of the East African coasts such as Mayotte, Scattered Islands, Réunion” (Heiduk & Wacker, 2020, p. 36; see, also, Morcos, 2021). Although rather small in terms of landmass, these islands come with extensive Exclusive Economic Zones totalling a rather stunning 9 square kilometres. Additionally, France also maintains garrisons on some of its islands. The French Indo-Pacific policy is a policy designed to deepen French involvement in the region, in particular, in light of recent tensions.

France, perhaps like all states, seeks to defend its national interests and preserve its sovereignty (Heiduk & Wacker, 2020, p. 36). However, for France, this project is intimately tied to the preservation of the rules-based international order. To this end, France has sought to pursue initiatives to strengthen the rules-based order. Primarily, this endeavour has taken the form of “strategic partnerships in the Indo-Pacific with countries such as India, Japan, Australia, Malaysia, Singapore, New Zealand, Indonesia and Vietnam” (Ibid, p. 36-7). Additionally, France is also an active contributor to “security formats and dialogues.” Another key aspect of France’s Indo-Pacific strategy is tied to military exercises; France has conducted joint naval manoeuvres with India since 2014 and has signalled its commitment to the region by conducting military operations. Indeed, the Operation Clemenceau in 2019 saw the deployment of the aircraft carrier Charles de Gaulle to the region, a mission in which the USA and “a small number of other EU Member States – Italy, Austria, Portugal, and Denmark [participated]” (Ibid, p. 37).

Since 2020, the EU has followed suit and devised its strategy for the Indo-Pacific. Naturally, there is some overlap between EU and French aims in the region. The EU, like France, sees its interest tied to the strengthening of rules-based international order (EU Commission, 2021, p. 1). However, the EU is further interested in explicitly tying its efforts to the promotion of particular political goals, such as “democracy, the rule of law [and] human rights.” Moreover, the EU’s engagement with regional partners is further contingent on the nominal respect for “universally agreed [sic] commitments such as the 2030 Agenda and its Sustainable Development Goals, and the Paris Agreement on Climate Change.” To accomplish these goals, the EU is employing what might be termed a multi-vector approach as it seeks to approach its Indo-Pacific partners in bilateral, regional, and multilateral contexts” (Ibid, p. 2).

Nevertheless, the EU also underpins its engagement strategy with a security and defence policy based on establishing a “meaningful European naval presence in the Indo-Pacific” (Ibid, pp. 13; see also Luthra, 2021, pp. 4-6). This naval presence will ideally work “against drug trafficking, human trafficking and wildlife crime, and also illicit financial flows linked to terrorism” (EU Commission, 2021, pp. 13-4). To further signal the EU’s commitment to promoting peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region, it seeks “to play a stronger role in the ASEAN security architecture and participate in the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM+) structures and the East Asia Summit” (Ibid, p. 14). Ongoing EU military operations, such as the anti-piracy mission EUNAVFOR Somalia – Operation Atlanta, have already conducted “joint naval activities with Indo-Pacific partners, including Japan, Pakistan, India and Djibouti.”

Lastly, Germany has also devised a set of “guidelines” for its strategic conduct in the Indo-Pacific. Not unlike the EU and France, Germany seeks to strengthen “peace and security” in the region, especially in light of “numerous smouldering internal and trans-border conflicts” (Auswertiges Amt, 2020, p. 9). The German foreign ministry particularly highlighted in its policy paper the potentially dramatic result of conflicts occurring in a region with three nuclear powers (India, China, and Pakistan). To achieve this de-escalation, Germany seeks to diversify and deepen relations with local states, particularly emphasising the importance of multilateralism and allowing a security environment to foster, in which, unlike the cold war, no state is forced to align itself with a certain power. Instead, Indo-Pacific States should be able to freely choose in which economic or security frameworks to participate.

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