

Policy Position

What will the EU's Indo-Pacific Strategy deliver?

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In April, the EU's member states approved the formulation of a European strategy for the Indo-Pacific region. To implement this new strategy, the EU has worked on a communication on cooperation in the Indo-Pacific. What can be reasonably expected from this long-awaited policy document? In this policy position, Anna Stahl argues why the EU needs an Indo-Pacific strategy and explains what it can deliver.

Back in April, the [27 member states tasked](#) the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and the European Commission to formulate a European strategy for the Indo-Pacific region – an area spanning from East Africa to the Pacific island states. Armed with this, the EU intends to promote a broad-based agenda in the region, covering matters like trade, connectivity, security, and multilateral cooperation. Tomorrow, comes at last its long-awaited joint communication on cooperation in the Indo-Pacific. Why does the EU need a strategy and what can we reasonably expect from it?

Why strategize about the Indo-Pacific?

High Representative Josep Borrell has highlighted his conviction that “[the Indo-Pacific region is the future](#)” and must become a strategic priority for the EU. Although the EU's immediate neighbourhood still straddles the EU's foreign policy agenda, there has been a growing realisation in Brussels that the Indo-Pacific must be brought within the scope of a common European foreign policy. Initially, the EU viewed the region through an economic lens. As home to three of the largest economies (China, India, Japan), the region has witnessed rapid economic growth. Consequently, the EU faces growing economic interdependence with Asia. Recently, a new geopolitical discourse about the “Indo-Pacific” has emerged, showing that the region has moved beyond being an economic priority to posing an array of geopolitical challenges. As underlined by some [experts](#), “Indo-Pacific” is a political term that serves as a response to China's economic and security expansion in the region. China's

growing military assertiveness, such as in the South China Sea, has provoked tensions with other regional players and contributed to a growing strategic rivalry with the U.S. Together with Australia, India and Japan, the U.S. has formed an informal security alliance known as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD). In this context, the EU has been under increasing pressure from the U.S. to play a bigger geopolitical role in the region. At the same time, Brussels has recognised the risk of growing U.S.-China big power competition not only for the region's security but also for broader European interests.

Responding to and moving beyond China- U.S. big power rivalry

In the past, the EU approached Asia mostly through a single-track focus on China and a policy of engagement with Beijing. However, with China now a major geopolitical force, Sino-European relations have become increasingly strained, and the EU has started to reassess its approach. In [2019](#), Brussels made it clear that it no longer views Beijing simply as a negotiating partner, but also as an “economic competitor” and a “systemic rival”. Through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Beijing is expanding its geopolitical footprint in the EU's neighbourhood and sapping the influence of Brussels. Tensions between the two became even more evident after the EU imposed sanctions over Beijing for human rights violations in Xinjiang in March, which led to a [freeze](#) of the EU-China Comprehensive Investment Agreement (CAI). Against this background, drawing up a distinct European Indo-Pacific strategy inevitably reflects growing Sino-European rivalry. It represents an attempt of the EU to pivot from China and position itself as a geopolitical player in its own right in the region.

The adoption of the “Indo-Pacific” concept shows that the EU is more aligned with the U.S. than with China in terms of values. This was further underlined by the launch of an EU-U.S. [strategic dialogue on China](#) in 2020. Yet, in contrast to the [U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy](#) that is aimed at countering China's “[repressive vision of world order](#)” in the region, the EU's Indo-Pacific approach is more inclusive and there is no direct mention of China. This shows that the EU does not want to take sides in the big power rivalry between Washington and Beijing. The European Indo-Pacific strategy is, rather, motivated by the EU's efforts to boost its so-called “[strategic autonomy](#)” from major powers. As highlighted by the [Indo-Pacific Council conclusions](#) in April, the EU's engagement in the Indo-Pacific “should contribute to enhancing the EU's strategic autonomy and ability to cooperate with partners in order to safeguard its values and interests”. Thus, the intensification of bilateral relations with partners in the region, such as Japan, India, Korea, Australia, New Zealand, Singapore, Indonesia and Vietnam as well as support for the ASEAN-led regional architecture, clearly signal the EU's drive to diversify and pursue its strategic autonomy agenda.

The added value of the communication

The objective of the joint communication on cooperation in the Indo-Pacific is to strengthen these [geopolitical ambitions](#). In 2019, both the new European Commission president, Ursula von der Leyen, and foreign policy chief, Josep Borrell, started to call for a geopolitical paradigm shift in EU external activities and stressed the urgent requirement to “[use the language of power](#)”. By publishing this joint document, the High Representative and the Commission want to endorse the EU's geopolitical agenda in the Indo-Pacific region and make sure the EU can enact it. In particular, the policy document should identify adequate tools for implementing the new strategy.

The policy document is also intended to send a signal of EU leadership to the 27 member states. So far, three member states (France, Germany and the Netherlands) have adopted

their own national guidelines for the Indo-Pacific. The communication should help to spell out common European interests in the Indo-Pacific. Unlike with other foreign policy issues, the Indo-Pacific region does not provoke significant disunity among the member states. Rather, most European states are indifferent to the region. The EU's communication could help shift the topic further up on national political agendas.

The communication is expected to introduce a broad range of policy areas. Advancing the EU's economic interests in the region through trade and protecting supply chains will top the agenda. Connectivity both to and within the Indo-Pacific region will be another key area. Following the 2018 [EU-Asia connectivity strategy](#), the EU is working on a [global connectivity strategy](#) that will also embrace the Indo-Pacific. A more novel area of cooperation will be security. To position itself as a geopolitical player in the Indo-Pacific, the EU needs to play a bigger role in maritime security there. Finally, the EU's geopolitical agenda in the region should strengthen rules-based multilateral cooperation.

The role of France and Germany

Given the far-reaching agenda of the European Indo-Pacific strategy, the EU must be able to count on member states' support in implementing its strategy. France and Germany have been driving forces behind the formulation of a European position on the Indo-Pacific. Due to its numerous overseas territories across the region, France was the first member state to develop its own Indo-Pacific strategy. Germany followed suit. Although the French strategy sets itself apart from the German one in [some aspects](#), both highlight the need for a common European approach. According to Germany, "[the EU and its member states can better protect and assert their interests by acting in a united and coherent manner](#)".

Notably in the field of security cooperation in the region, greater participation of Germany and France is required. Both the [French](#) and the [German](#) Indo-Pacific strategy have stressed the need to foster maritime security and solve tensions, including in the South China Sea. And in the field of connectivity, the EU also needs to rely upon France and Germany. Both countries' policy documents list connectivity as a top priority and express support for the EU connectivity strategy. That strategy does not only cover physical but also digital infrastructure. If the EU is to offer a realistic alternative to China's BRI, its connectivity efforts in the Indo-Pacific hinge to a large extent on the question of financial resources. In turn, the EU and its member states need to bundle together various sources of funding to pursue this strategy.

Outlook

If it is to assert itself as a meaningful player on the global stage, the EU should recalibrate its ties with the world's most dynamic region. The formulation of a common European Indo-Pacific strategy is a step in the right direction, but implementation will take time. The forthcoming communication is therefore only a starting point. The French EU Council Presidency in the first half of 2022 can play an important role in putting the EU's Indo-Pacific Strategy to work. In particular, in the area of security, where France launched a [dedicated working group on the Indo-Pacific within the European Intervention Initiative](#). Given that French President Emmanuel Macron is a [strong supporter of European strategic autonomy](#), the French Presidency could also help the EU to better plot its geopolitical path in the Indo-Pacific in line with its strategic economic and political interests there.

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