

Maritime Strategies in the European Union for the Indo-Pacific - What Role for Africa?

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<https://doi.org/10.35293/srsa.v44i2.4419>

Abstract

The European Union and its member states have developed a set of strategies for the Indo-Pacific region. Recognising that regions are constantly subject to reinterpretation, negotiation, and contestation, this paper analyses the EU's framing of the Indo-Pacific as an exercise in territorial delineation, justifications for interference, projected regional attributes, and relations with actors in the region. Particular attention is dedicated to the role attributed to the African countries constituting the western shore of the Indo-Pacific.

The paper examines the four Indo-Pacific strategies that have emerged since the EU 2018 within, namely the strategies launched by France, Germany, the Netherlands, and the EU. It highlights and compares the differences and similarities between them and argues that although the four strategies agree on many priorities, especially commercial interests, there are notable differences in terms of projected military involvement and the framing of China. Considerable divergences unfold with respect to Africa, both regarding its belonging to the Indo-Pacific and the role it is expected to play. Only the EU and French documents develop a strategic approach towards Africa, notably



through regional organisations. Yet they concede little agency to the African actors. Given the fragmented and unilateral approach of the four strategies, the scope for Euro-African collaboration in the Indo-Pacific remains uncertain.

1. Introduction

Although world regions tend to be presented as geographic facts, their shape and identity are permanently subject to reinterpretation, negotiation, and contestation. What and who is part of a region can be defined on multiple political, social, economic, and historic criteria, and the dominant narrative can rapidly evolve. Even where regions have become institutionalised with rigid borders, as in the European Union (EU), the territorialisation and the delineation of borderlines is a dynamic process, not least with every member state that leaves and joins the EU.

World regions are predominantly defined as an amalgamation of national territories, where the oceans have a liminal or even marginal function. The latter are usually considered to divide world regions rather than to constitute the centre of a region. This terra-centric division of the world poses a challenge to understanding regional dynamics that span over two or more continents. Maritime regions that are centred around an ocean rather than divided by it will invariably be constituted by states belonging to different regions. This poses a challenge for foreign and security policy, which is structured around territorial compartmentalisations that assume commonalities and specificities within a region and is therefore treating regions distinctly from each other. Although the terra-centric division of the world allows for functional transcendence, coastlines remain fundamental barriers. For instance, the European Union has a long tradition of institutionalised trade and development relations with a group of former European colonies in Africa, the Caribbean, and the Pacific. However, despite the interregional nature of this group, the maritime spaces linking the countries are only considered marginally important.

The challenge is thus not primarily theoretical, as the concept of regions allows in principle for maritime spaces to occupy a central role in generating interdependence between riparian societies, even if oceans are in themselves not permanently inhabited. It is rather the dominant interpretation and application in foreign and security policies that provides obstacles to engaging with maritime spaces. To break terra-centrism in its regional and interregional approaches, the European Union has engaged in several attempts over the past decades to delineate regions around maritime spaces. However, the outcome has been mixed. Attempts to generate momentum around the Mediterranean and the Black Sea are largely seen as failures, while Arctic as well as Baltic Sea cooperation have produced a number of results (Kausch and Youngs 2009; Ciută 2008).

Recently, a new maritime space made its entry into the regional imaginary of the European Union and has, despite its topographic distance from EU capitals, generated an unprecedented production of maritime strategies: the Indo-Pacific.

From around 2005, analysts and politicians from India, Australia, and Japan heavily promoted the notion of conflating the Indian and Pacific oceans into one regional space. The US followed suit as part of its “Pacific Pivot,” and eventually the EU and several of its member states developed their own interpretations of what the Indo-Pacific should entail and advocated for a prominent role for themselves within this regional delineation (Medcalf 2019).

Notably, this is not the first time that Europeans have promoted the notion that the Indo-Pacific should be conceived as one natural, social, and political space. During the Weimar Republic and the Third Reich, German geographer Karl Haushofer advocated for an Indo-Pacific that would constitute a common political space to be freed from the UK, the US, France, The Netherlands, and Portugal (Li 2022). However, contemporary foreign policy-making does not situate itself in this tradition. This paper examines the Indo-Pacific strategies that have emerged within the EU since 2008. It highlights the differences between them and the place in terms of territorial delineation, justification, projected attributes, and relations with actors in the region. Given the scope of the journal, particular attention will also be given to the role attributed to Africa as the western shore of this maritime space, as well as concrete initiatives under the Indo-Pacific umbrella that involve Africa.

The four strategies are France’s 2019 Indo-Pacific Strategy, the German Policy Guidelines for the Indo-Pacific from 2020, the Dutch 2020 Indo-Pacific Guidelines for Strengthening Dutch and EU Cooperation with Partners in Asia, and finally the European Union’s 2021 Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, which provides a framework for coherent foreign policy of all 27 member states. The four strategies differ in terms of their formal status and their prescriptive weight (Wacker 2021), but they all reflect the strategic importance that is attributed to the region. Other EU countries have so far not developed their own strategy, suggesting that they have other geographic priorities, especially Eastern European countries, but also Spain and Portugal, which, like France and The Netherlands, have an imperial legacy in the Indo-Pacific, which could be indicative of the EU strategy serving as a consensual substitute for additional national strategies.

2. Territorial delineation

Although the Indo-Pacific carries a number of oceanographic and geological connotations that cannot be altered, the delineation of the region is nevertheless subject to political narratives and imaginaries. The inclusion and exclusion of specific countries follows ideological, geostrategic, and commercial logics. Both external and internal actors take advantage of the opportunity to delineate the borders of the Indo-Pacific to their advantage and according to their worldviews.

The European Union and its members are no exception. They define the boundaries in sufficiently vague terms to be compatible with the conceptions of other actors and to leave sufficient space for adaptations in the future.

The EU and France adopt the same delineation of the Indo-Pacific as a “region spanning from the east coast of Africa to the Pacific Island States” and a “space [...] extending from the eastern shores of Africa to the Pacific” respectively. This notion is particularly broad by only defining the lateral borders, without clearly defining where this space ends in terms of latitude. The delineation also provides a self-centred frame, as the French (and hence EU) overseas territories are precisely located off the eastern coast of Africa and in the South Pacific Ocean.

The German notion is even broader, encompassing “the entire region characterised by the Indian Ocean and the Pacific”. Since both the Indian Ocean and the Pacific are highly interpretable terms, the conflation is equally generic.

The Netherlands is more specific by referring to “the countries around the Indian and Pacific Oceans, including the South China and East China Seas. The shipping routes through the Indian and Pacific Oceans that link Europe with Asia and Oceania are central to the concept. The region extends from Pakistan to the islands of the Pacific.” This definition emphasises the Indo-Pacific as a lane of transport and therefore implies a more functional understanding, though a continuity with the historic space of the Dutch Empire can also be inferred.

3. Justification

The EU and its members did without strategies for the Indo-Pacific for a long time and have not devised strategies for each and every world region. In addition, there is no documented demand from the Indo-Pacific region toward the EU and its members to

come up with a strategy. Therefore, all four strategies need to justify their existence, not least due to the resource allocation they imply. Perhaps unsurprisingly, since it sees itself as an integral part of the Indo-Pacific, France is rather unapologetic in its strategy, while the Netherlands, given their less prominent role in global affairs, go to great lengths to justify the existence of their strategic approach.

All four actors highlight how economically and geopolitically important they consider the Indo-Pacific. The extensive size of the region is exacerbated by the generous inclusion of territories that are remote from the sea, and allows to attribute a major share of the world's population and economy to the region. Although this attribution easily provides a rationale of importance, it is too generic to provide a strategic notion, as other delineations such as Asia would provide similar or higher numbers. The same applies to narratives of climate change, the SDGs or development aid, which remain too generic to warrant a specific Indo-Pacific strategy.

A more compelling justification can be found in the notion of competition. All documents describe the attempts of regional and global actors to increase their influence in the region. Although it remains unclear how influence is measured, there is a sense of having to halt a process that would result in a marginal position in the region (Kirchner 2022).

Security concerns also play a prominent role in the justifications for the strategies. This entails rising tensions such as border disputes, piracy and militarisation. The potential for escalation, including use of nuclear weapons, is comparatively high, thus providing the region with a distinctive security character (López-Aranguren 2022). Germany and the Netherlands tend to frame security concerns through a commercial lens, as they are primarily seen as detriments to the trade lanes and value chains their economies are involved in. In addition, there are pertinent concerns for international law and borders.

France also emphasises its own role within the multilateral international order, which is supported by its substantial military presence in the region and underpins ambitions to be involved in the main critical junctures, specifically between China and its neighbours as well as between South and North Korea. The overseas territories also mean that France conceives the Indo-Pacific as its immediate neighbourhood (Haldar 2022). Economic development and a conflict-free environment are thus part of a strategy to ensure the prosperity of its own citizens in the region.

4. Projected attributes

Closely linked to the justification for an Indo-Pacific strategy is its practical purpose, which can be derived from the functional attribution that is made to the region. Producing a region can serve a range of functions along political, economic, cultural and social lines, and in the case of the Indo-Pacific there is notable conflation of defining the region in terms of its commercial and security dimensions. The four strategies outline a number of characteristics for the space that the EU and its members seek to foster.

Several elements that are projected to the Indo-Pacific reflect the values that the European Union has defined for itself. Most prominently, the promotion of the Indo-Pacific as a democratic, multilateral and rules-based space reflects foreign policy visions based on international law and human rights. The projected Indo-Pacific also seeks to serve the European economies, notably by safeguarding the French Exclusive Economic Zones and by providing the EU's industries with essential goods and services for their value chains. To this effect, the Indo-Pacific should be bound by trade and investment treaties with the EU that also promote European standards and norms. In terms of security, the strategies foresee an Indo-Pacific where existing conflicts are not necessarily solved but at least give way to a stable status quo that prevents further tensions. France in particular highlights its ambitions in terms of military cooperation, and on the EU-level the Operation Atalanta is also seen as a mission that has showcased the willingness and capacity to become a security provider in the Indo-Pacific (Pejsosa 2019). There is no ambitious aspiration of turning the Indo-Pacific into a space free of nuclear weapons or a demilitarised zone, but there is a clear interest in enabling a region where military powers are counterbalanced in a way to prevent escalation. The Indo-Pacific is furthermore defined as a biosphere under threat, with the projection of climate change mitigation and sustainable ocean management as areas where the EU sees itself as a global leader. The Indo-Pacific as a digitally connected region is also highlighted in the strategies with a projection of technological transfer as well as research and innovation.

5. Relations with actors in the Indo-Pacific

The strategies do not only outline what they pursue in terms of activities - from trade agreements to conflict mediation - but they also define who the preferred partners are.

The four strategies put particular emphasis on relations with regional organisations in the Indo-Pacific. Although there is no overarching institution encompassing the entire Indo-Pacific, regional organisations cover its sub-sections. Working with and providing support to regional organisations is closely linked to the EU's aspiration to enhance its own international status (Mattheis and Wunderlich 2017). The EU does not only consider itself to be a multilateral actor, but also a successful instance of regional integration, which warrants recognition and emulation elsewhere. Although there are limits to the influence of the EU in regional organisations in the Indo-Pacific, interregional relations are vital, as they offer the EU with an entry point among peers inside the region, for instance through the institutionalised Asia-Europe Meetings (ASEM).

The regional organisation that is most frequently mentioned in the strategies is the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN), which has strong ties with the EU, both in terms of financial support and transfer of ideas (Wacker 2021). As a result, the relationship with ASEAN has been upgraded to a strategic partnership in 2020, which entails more high-level encounters and an increase of development aid to the organisation. France also underlines the Indian Ocean Commission and the Indian Ocean Rim Association, given that the country is a full member thanks to its overseas territories. Germany also enumerates a number of organisations that it has been supporting with development aid, such as the Mekong River Commission and the Pacific Island Forum. The strategies thus reflect the ambition to not only deepen existing ties with regional organisations, but also to develop a joint interregional approach to the Indo-Pacific, which would constitute a competitive advantage for the EU over other external actors that appear as individual nation-states. Gaining influence in regional organisations holds the promise of fostering groups of allies that are able to provide a counterbalance to other powers, in particular China.

The strategies take stock of the countries in the Indo-Pacific that already have a productive and institutionalised relationship with the EU, and that could serve as pillars for a more concerted approach to the Indo-Pacific. Thailand, Malaysia and the Maldives are mentioned by the EU, while France highlights India, Japan, Indonesia, Singapore, Vietnam, Malaysia, South Korea and New Zealand. Meanwhile, the Netherlands and Germany mention bilateral ties for specific policy fields but are more cautious in singling out specific countries by more generically speaking of like-minded countries to allude to partnerships that should be deepened.

The EU also spells out that institutionalised relations are needed with the country

that is in all strategies implicitly or explicitly considered as posing the biggest challenge to implementing the ambitions for the Indo-Pacific, namely China (Mohan 2020). Even though all strategies identify the rivalry between China and the US as a source of concern, they diverge in terms of whether to consider China a rival of the EU. While Germany highlights the cooperation with China, France more openly frames China as a source of challenges to the desired vision of the Indo-Pacific. Finding a balance between increasing the EU's presence as a security actor and preventing a backlash by China thus remains delicate (Nováky 2022). Such differences are reflective of a broader dissonance within the EU, with some countries becoming deeply entangled economically and with hard infrastructure, and others being more wary of China's relationship with human rights and international law (Pejsova 2021). In this perspective, promoting the Indo-Pacific as a region is also an attempt to create a region that is large enough for China not to be the unequivocal dominant power.

With respect to other countries perceived as problematic in the Indo-Pacific, the strategies prefer to circumvent or even bracket them. In particular, Iran and Saudi-Arabia, though riparian states, are usually excluded from the projected Indo-Pacific cartography, and Somaliland is not referred to.

6. The role for Africa

One of the aspects where the four strategies differ substantially is the role provided to Africa within the Indo-Pacific. To Germany and the Netherlands, Africa is simply not part of the Indo-Pacific as they conceive it and the continent is therefore excluded from their strategies altogether. France explicitly includes all African states that border the Indian Ocean, which reflects the location of its overseas territories Mayotte and Réunion. It is a member state of two regional organisations that are either otherwise composed of African states (the Indian Ocean Commission, IOC) or at least inclusive of African states (the Indian Ocean Rim Association).

The IOC is a peculiar organisation because it operates outside the realm of the African Union. It is composed of five member states (Union of the Comoros, France, Madagascar, Mauritius and the Seychelles) and provides regional governance in the fields of economy, development and security. The bulk of the funding is provided by France and the EU (France Diplomacy n.d.).

Being a full member of an organisation composed of smaller states provides France with the opportunity and legitimacy to act as a regional power by intervening

in domestic crises, such as the coup d'état in Madagascar (Witt 2020). Through the funding of regional programmes of the IOC, the EU also exerts influence in shaping policies, notably in the field of maritime security, by promoting cooperation between national law enforcement. The IOC also serves as a platform to amplify European influence by expanding IOC programmes such as the Promotion of Maritime Security and involving other regional organisations that are covering the African shores of the Indo-Pacific, such as the East African Community, in the combat against piracy and other security challenges.

Like France, the EU is also considering Africa to be part of the region and particularly underlines the established interregional relations with organisations such as the African Union, the Southern African Development Community and the East African Community. It also frames the institutionalised relations with the Organisation of African, Caribbean and Pacific States as being conducive to Indo-Pacific cooperation, thus positioning the EU as a common hub for states in the region.

At the country level, only South Africa is mentioned as the potential regional power to collaborate with in the Indo-Pacific. Among the absences, Kenya is the most notable, especially given the importance that other actors such as Japan have given to the country in their approach to the Indo-Pacific.

7. Concrete initiatives involving Africa

Prior to the publication of the four strategies, the European Union and its member states were already carrying out or taking part in multiple initiatives in the Indo-Pacific region, both on traditional maritime security issues such as freedom of navigation and the fight against piracy, as well as on emerging challenges such as climate change. While there are some initiatives with a special focus on Asia, such as the EU-ASEAN High level on Maritime Security Cooperation launched in 2013, or the ESIWA Project (Enhancing Security Cooperation in and with Asia) established in 2020 and funded by the EU, France and Germany, a notable number of initiatives are taking place on the east and south coasts of Africa.

The main EU actions involving Africa are either funded and implemented by the EU and/or its member states, or funded by the EU and/or its member states, but coordinated by regional and multilateral organisations such as the IOC, The Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA), East African Community (EAC), The Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) and international

organisations such as The International Criminal Police Organisation (INTERPOL) or the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC).

The maritime capacity building initiative CRIMARIO (Critical Maritime Routes Indo-Pacific) is an example of EU funding and implementation by a member state (expertise by France). CRIMARIO is a project launched in 2015, extended in 2020 until 2024 and aims to improve security and safety in the Indian Ocean. Among the key objectives of this project is the promotion of information exchange and analysis between the countries of the Wider Indian Ocean, with a particular focus on some countries and archipelagos of East Africa. The Indo-Pacific Regional Information Sharing (IORIS) platform has been one of the relevant initiatives to meet this objective, as well as capacity building and training activities (CRIMARIO n.d.).

The EU Naval Force Somalia - Operation Atalanta is another relevant initiative on the African coast. The operation was launched in 2008 and in 2020 was extended to December 2022. Its mandate has been evolving but maintaining the focus of protecting the vessels of the World Food Program and preventing and combating piracy and armed robbery at sea. In addition to the Somali Coastal territory, territorial and internal Waters, Operation Atalanta covers the Southern Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden and a large part of the Indian Ocean. Its funding comes from EU member states, but participation in the operation has included third states such as Norway, Montenegro, Serbia and Ukraine (EUNAVFOR n.d.). Similarly, in a non-military approach, the EU is pursuing another initiative to contribute to the development of maritime security in Somalia. Through its Capacity Building Mission in Somalia (EUCAP Somalia) established in 2012 and extended until 2022 in 2020, the EU aims to contribute to the development of a self-sustaining wider policy capacity (EUCAP 2022).

Among the main EU initiatives in which regional and international organisations participate in the implementation is the Regional Programme for the Promotion of Maritime Safety (MASE), linking together several regional organisations. Although MASE ended in 2020, Under its framework two centres were established: the Seychelles Regional Operational Coordination Centre (RCOC) and the Regional Maritime Information Fusion Centre (RMIFC), based in Madagascar. The RMIFC is responsible for exchanging and sharing maritime information and alerting the RCOC of any abnormal activity at sea, while the RCOC is responsible for carrying out joint actions at sea (RCOC 2019).

The Port Security and Safety of Navigation programme for Eastern and Southern Africa is another EU-funded initiative but implemented by other actors with stakes in

the Region's security challenges . This programme launched in 2020 with a four-year mandate and is coordinated by the IOC and implemented jointly by the International Maritime Organisation (IMO), INTERPOL and UNODC. The programme benefits nine countries on the east and southern coasts of Africa and among its objectives are the strengthening of national capacities to secure maritime passage (UNODC n.d.).

Taken together these concerted efforts to intervene directly in the regional security architecture highlight the relevance of interregionalism and development aid for the European approach to the Indo-Pacific. They also document the increasing geographic expansion of maritime security initiatives in Africa, which has not yet fully connected with the Indo-Pacific at large, but provides an institutional foundation to position the EU as a central actor in this field.

8. Conclusions

The four Indo-Pacific strategies by the EU and three of its members (France, Germany, and The Netherlands) represent a sustained effort to take part in the creation of the Indo-Pacific as a region, by advocating for specific delineations, attributes and partnerships which should define this space.

By putting the maritime space at the centre of geostrategic thinking, the strategies differ substantially from most interregional approaches pursued by the EU and its members which tend to be confined to terra-centric containers. Engaging with the Indo-Pacific in a dedicated manner entails entangling some of established intercontinental relationships. In particular, this shift of demarcations has the potential to unhinge interactions with Africa, especially if regional organisations such as the IOC or the EAC are being situated in an Indo-Pacific rather than African context.

The four strategies agree on many fundamentals, in particular regarding how the governance of the Indo-Pacific should be based on international law, multilateralism, free trade, connectivity with Europe, and climate change mitigation.

The strategies also agree on the importance of cooperating with regional organisations in the Indo-Pacific, which is in line with the own regional integration process in the EU. The EU is already well placed to be an influential position in many regional organisations in the Indo-Pacific and fostering those organisations has the potential to reduce, or at least curb, the dominant position of regional powers and provide the EU and its members with the legitimacy to be involved in regional policy-making.

However, there are also notable differences between the four strategies in terms of projected military involvement, the framing of China, and the role of Africa. Several differences can be traced back to the unique position of France, which - unlike other EU members - does not consider itself to be an external actor but an integral part of the region through its territories in the Indo-Pacific. By being a full member of the IOC and the IORA, France depicts clear ambitions to assume the role of a regional power, similar to its entanglements in Central Africa (Mattheis 2021). This assertiveness entails a different approach to regional security and geopolitical rivalry in comparison to the German and Dutch strategies, which tend to associate security with the facilitation of commercial activities.

The commercial emphasis of these two countries on trade routes and value chains also help to explain the exclusion of Africa from the Indo-Pacific. By contrast, France and subsequently the EU are unambiguous about the necessity to include the Western shores of the Indian Ocean, not least because the overseas territories and the influence in regional organisations in eastern and southern Africa provide the basis to consolidate and expand the EU's and France's presence to other parts of the Indo-Pacific. Yet, even though these two strategies explicitly include Africa, they concede little agency to African actors. How Euro-African collaboration could look like in the wider Indo-Pacific, remains unclear. It thus has to ultimately be up to the political forces in Africa to claim their agency and to define how the EU and its members can contribute to an African interpretation of the Indo-Pacific.

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