

Panel title: Maritime security in the Indo-Pacific: perspectives from the EU

Chair: Avinash Paliwal, SOAS

Panel abstract: The European presence in the Indian Ocean and the wider Indo-Pacific has increased in the past years. Risks and threats to maritime security in key transit routes have grown in intensity, whether from piracy and terrorism, to the attacks by the Houthis on shipping in the Red Sea. At the same time, the concept of freedom of the seas is under attack in the Western Pacific, specifically the tensions in the South China Sea, the East China Sea, and the Taiwan Strait. European preferences for a free and open Indo-Pacific are clear, yet how these ends are best achieved is not. What are EU's privileged partners in the region? Through which formats (minilateral or EU-wide frameworks) can the EU act efficiently? Which issues are crucial for the EU and how many resources should be expended? This panel looks to answer these questions.

Paper 1: Guarding the Maritime Highways: Europe's Role in the Indo-Pacific

Paul van Hooft, Benedetta Girardi, Davis Ellison, Tim Sweijs (HCSS)

While trite to say, the world's geopolitical and geoeconomic centre of gravity has shifted to the Indo-Pacific. Trade between the EU and Asia is massive and almost exclusively waterborne, with the Indian Ocean being the hub, while high-tech supply chains now focus on multiple states in the Western Pacific. A European role in the Indo-Pacific is unavoidable but demands significant resources in an era of concurrent challenges in the Euro-Atlantic following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. A naval presence is a powerful signal of interest, but European naval capacity is limited. How and with whom can these naval assets be deployed, and what are the central trade-offs? The paper tackles these issues, by spelling out the relative costs, risks, and benefits for various European coalitions of naval powers that look to build their presence in different parts of the Indo-Pacific.

Paper 2: The EU in the Indo-Pacific: a security actor sui generis

Eva Pesjova (VUB)

The EU's interest to play a role in Indo-Pacific security is rooted in the realization that European prosperity is inherently connected to and dependent on a stable and peaceful regional environment. Brussels has been advocating a more proactive engagement in the region already in its 2016 Global Strategy. The EU "Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific", published in 2021, explicitly highlights security and defense as one of the key priority areas for cooperation.

While the rationale stands, the exact contours and content of this engagement remain often unclear and misunderstood. Indeed, as a trading power with no army nor military leverage, the EU's capacity to effectively contribute to the region's traditional security hotspots is limited. However, such view fails to consider the evolving nature of security, which has become increasingly defined by hybrid tactics and all-encompassing weaponization. At the same time, it omits the importance of everyday functional security concerns that have been sidelined in the context of great power politics.

This paper argues that the EU can play a constructive role in the Indo-Pacific at several levels. First, it can leverage its economic, technological, and normative heft in areas such as economic security, emerging and disruptive technologies, and governance of global commons, including the maritime, the outer, and the information space. Secondly, its expertise in addressing non-traditional security

challenges such as illegal fishing, transnational crime, or environmental degradation, is of great value to many developing countries in the region. Finally, its effort to forge a third way in the escalating Sino-American rivalry echoes the sentiments of many regional partners, building its image as a trustworthy, stabilizing force.

Paper 3: Politics of Undersea Cables: The India-EU Maritime Network by 2030

Jagannath Panda, Stockholm Center for South Asian and Indo-Pacific Affairs at the Institute for Security and Development Policy, Sweden

Undersea cables are the “superhighways” in today’s hyper-connected world. India, which is aiming to become a US\$10 trillion economy by 2035 and whose international bandwidth demand is expected to become tenfold by 2028, is no exception to increasing its stakes in the undersea cable infrastructure. Fears arising out of India’s active hostilities with China due to the unresolved border tensions, in particular, have also necessitated enhanced partnerships with like-minded partner states, primarily France, Japan, and the US whose companies have dominated the supply and installation of these cables, as well as Australia, a leader in subsea cable network legislation. But amongst these tech giants, does India have the capabilities and the political intent to thwart China’s technological, and military disruption attempts in the Indo-Pacific? Can India tamp down China’s growing influence in India’s backyard of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) by asserting Indian digital ascendance and by making full use of its sharp, effective multi-alignment pointed diplomacy with like-minded partners? Could the EU emerge as a partner with India in the Undersea cable network? This paper first looks at the growing undersea cable network in the IOR and contextualizes it within India’s and the EU’s maritime strategy. Second, it uncovers the fears around China’s potential misuse of its growing technological might to control the undersea cable architecture through the lens of the US-China rivalry and finds complementarity between the EU’s Indo-Pacific strategy and India’s maritime strategy.

Paper 4: The EU’s naval signaling in the Indo-Pacific

Nicolas Blarel and Niels van Willigen, Leiden University

In 2021, the Indo-Pacific suddenly and unexpectedly rose on top of the foreign policy agenda of the European Union (EU). The publication of the EU’s Indo Pacific Strategy (henceforth ‘Strategy’) in September 2021 showed that the EU considers the region of great geopolitical interest with important security challenges. The Strategy laid down the EU’s policy preferences and at the same time was an instance of signaling to various audiences. We argue in this paper that the EU, as a regional organization with intergovernmental and supranational elements, signals as well, albeit differently. We sketch what have been the most effective signals of the EU’s interests in the Indo-Pacific since the launch of the Strategy, as well as some of the limitations. We focus on the EU’s naval strategy and related signaling such as the EU Maritime Strategy. First, because a free and open Indo-Pacific (which the naval strategy aims to underpin) is a necessary condition to achieve many of the other European policy objectives. Secondly, because the EU’s naval strategy directly shapes the maritime security interests of countries in the region as well as external great powers.