

Building Connections Within and Beyond the Indo-Pacific Region: A European Perspective

By Ramon Pacheco Pardo

Ramon Pacheco Pardo, Professor of International Relations at King's College London & KF-VUB Korea Chair at the Brussels School of Governance, explains that "outside of relations with the United States, Europe's strategic approach is leading to the prioritization of cooperation with Japan and South Korea—as well as Australia..."

A key pillar of the US's Indo-Pacific Strategy is to build connections within and beyond the region. This is based on the understanding that alliances and partnerships are a distinct advantage for the United States in the Indo-Pacific, particularly when compared with China. It is also based on the belief that allies and partners boost Washington's power projection capabilities across the region.

The European Union (EU) and Europe share this belief. The Indo-Pacific strategies of the EU, France, Germany, the Netherlands, and the UK, as well as the North American Treaty Organization (NATO) emphasize the importance of building regional partnerships. This includes bilateral partnerships and, increasingly, minilateral frameworks as well—even if, in the case of the EU, historically, multilateralism has been prioritized over minilateral frameworks.

Building Meaningful and Impactful Partnerships

The key question is how to build connections within and beyond the Indo-Pacific region that have a meaningful impact. Both the US and Europe lay out a long list of (potential) partners and issue areas to focus on. Yet, capabilities are limited. As Russia's invasion of Ukraine seems to be nowhere near its end, a substantial amount of resources will have to be dedicated to Europe, which could have otherwise gone to the Indo-Pacific region.

Considering resources and diplomatic bandwidth are finite, working with partners requires a strategic approach. Outside of relations with the United States, Europe's strategic approach is leading to the prioritization of cooperation with Japan and South Korea—as well as Australia, even if lingering resentment over the snub of France to launch AUKUS still affects the willingness of some Europeans to work with Canberra. These three actors share values and interests with Europe, and, crucially, have strong economic, military, and diplomatic capabilities to deliver on their commitments. Thus, their prioritization. In addition, other partners in the region, such as India, Indonesia, New Zealand, Singapore, and Vietnam also matter.

Regarding issue areas, the European perspective prioritizes maritime security, cyber security, supply chains, advanced technologies, economic security in general, and capacity-building. Of course, this does not mean that other issue areas such as health, climate change, development, infrastructure, or energy security should be ignored. But as the EU and European countries have become more strategic in their approach towards the Indo-Pacific, they are building on their areas of strength and focusing on those issues in which they feel they have more to gain from cooperation.

From a European perspective, minilaterals such as AUKUS, US-Japan-South Korea trilateralism, the Chip 4 Alliance, Partners in the Blue Pacific, or Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF) are illustrative of partnerships that deliver. These platforms focus on specific issues, have clear motivations and deliverables, and, especially in the case of the first four, their membership makes sense in relation to their objectives. To this point, AUKUS and Partners in the Blue Pacific include European members. Similarly, other European countries would like to join the Chip 4 Alliance, and a growing number of European officials see the benefits of trilateral cooperation with Japan and South Korea—together with the United States. The EU's principle of support for

multilateralism continues to be in place, but a growing number of Europeans understand that they need to adapt to the reality of the region.

At the same time and related to the above, there is a perception that when it comes to economics, the United States is losing out to China in terms of forging partnerships. The Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), with China as a core member, includes US allies Australia, Japan, and South Korea. The Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) brings together countries on both sides of the Pacific Ocean. Still, there is no prospect of the United States joining, whereas China has applied. Moreover, the Digital Economy Partnership Agreement (DEPA) could very well set up digital standards for the region, with China among the applicants to join. IPEF probably will not be enough to counter these agreements.

Then there is the question of the Quad, or even Quad-Plus. India's reaction to Russia's invasion of Ukraine has made many European policymakers have second thoughts about the value of the Quad, even if its focus is on the Indo-Pacific theatre rather than the Euro-Atlantic. But the growing number of disparate issue areas on which the Quad focuses has also led to doubts about its utility. Moreover, compared to other multilaterals, the Quad seems to lack a clear focus.

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Two Theatres or One?

Europe's emphasis on partnerships is increasingly predicated on the idea that the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific theaters are merging into one. This shift is due to the leading role of the United States in both regions, growing cooperation between China and Russia, and the way in which the latter's invasion of Ukraine has—from a European perspective—global implications. While many Asian countries, including regional powerhouses such as Indonesia or India, do not share this view, it informs Europe's Indo-Pacific approach.

In this respect, the role of NATO has grown in importance as an organization helping to transform the two theaters into one. The NATO Asia-Pacific partners (AP4) framework, which brings together Australia, Japan, South Korea, New Zealand, and NATO members, is leading the organization to cooperate more closely with its Indo-Pacific partners in areas such as cyber security, weapons systems, or new technologies. The fact that the AP4 are among the few countries across the world supporting Ukraine as it fends off Russia's invasion has further cemented the burgeoning links between the transatlantic organization and its Indo-Pacific partners.

There is also the question of the obsolescence of the G7 under its current configuration. With the "decline of the West and the rise of the rest," including several Asian and Indo-Pacific countries, it is difficult for the G7 to have influence beyond Europe and on a declining number of issues. Thus, there is a question as to whether the G7 would need to attend to the realities of the 21st century and invite Australia, India, and South Korea to join as formal members or permanent guests. G7 members, such as the UK and the United States, invited the three Indo-Pacific nations to their last summits—even if Washington's summit was canceled due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Expanding the membership of the G7 would reflect the idea that the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific theaters have merged into one.

As the United States thinks about ways to build connections within and beyond the Indo-Pacific, it should be assured that Europe agrees on the importance of partnerships to have a stronger voice in the region. The United States is seen as a natural partner in the Indo-Pacific, but Europe also believes that specific countries and multilaterals with clear deliverables should also be positioned to become more vital regional actors, particularly if the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific theaters do indeed merge.

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