

## The European Union in the Indo-Pacific

By Tara Varma

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the Brookings  
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on the United  
States and Europe,  
explores the  
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the EU Indo-Pacific  
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France was the first European country to articulate an Indo-Pacific strategy, thereby expressing its willingness to assume a present and active role in the region. In May 2018, President Emmanuel Macron gave a speech in Sydney, Australia, laying the foundation for [France's Indo-Pacific strategy](#). France sees itself as a resident power in the Indo-Pacific, with regard to its territories both in the Indian and Pacific oceans. France has long encouraged a similar perspective among its European partners. However, most of these partners were skeptical of the "Indo-Pacific" label as few were maritime powers. Moreover, when the idea of the Indo-Pacific was first brought about, it was conceptualized in traditional security terms.

When the 2019 Covid pandemic hit, it laid bare the vulnerabilities, especially in value chains and production, Europe had voluntarily imposed on itself. The Pandemic also helped change the European mindset as to the readiness and capacity of adversaries to weaponize such vulnerabilities. Thus, it was unsurprising that the Europeans started looking at Asia and the Indo-Pacific region beyond the usual trade interest prism. In 2020, [Germany](#) and the [Netherlands](#) published their own Indo-Pacific guidelines. Both documents defended multilateralism despite growing tensions, championed ASEAN centrality, acknowledged that a significant share of the world's future economic growth will happen in the region, and extolled the necessity of a European Indo-Pacific strategy to defend the region's political and economic interests.

The public debates on these national Indo-Pacific strategies culminated in the September 2021 adoption of the [European Union Indo-Pacific strategy](#). The European Union (EU) strategy aims to be comprehensive and has seven pillars: security and defense, sustainable prosperity, green transition, ocean governance, digital governance, connectivity, and human security. This holistic vision of security is at the core of the European Union's vision of the global role it could take. It is not just about defense—as a matter of fact, the EU itself could not be a major defense player in the region, though certain member states could. While defense will not be the EU's strongest suit, it does bring a positive agenda to the table in the Indo-Pacific, particularly when it comes to mitigating and adapting to the effects of climate change and fostering connectivity.

The dragon in the room remains the relationship vis-à-vis China, the perception of which can differ a bit between the United States and the EU. US and EU views converge on the point that China is increasingly putting pressure on the international system and trying to challenge it from within. The support, official and unofficial, provided by Beijing to Moscow, in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, has left Europeans dumbfounded, while America [very explicitly warned China](#) against providing such support to Moscow. Still, Europeans continue looking for ways to cooperate with China on global issues, and some nations are still very dependent on the Chinese market for their exports. US discussions on its bilateral relationship with China and its subsequent effects on the global stage are quite different. Recent US-China tensions around the spy balloons also demonstrate how sensitive the topic is in the United States. Viewed from Washington, it seems China permeates all issues of foreign policy. For this reason, the [EU-US Indo-](#)

[Pacific consultations](#), which help coordinate messaging and strategies, are crucially important. The consultations have now been held three times, and they confirm that US and EU Indo-Pacific agendas converge, notably when it comes to connectivity and resilience.

Transatlantic cooperation in the Indo-Pacific could take place under the helm of the Global Gateway. It was [announced](#) in December 2021 as the “new European strategy to boost smart, clean and secure links in digital, energy and transport sectors and to strengthen health, education and research systems across the world.” Even if the Global Gateway is not solely dedicated to the Indo-Pacific region, it does present the opportunity to make considerable inroads there. It aims to mobilize €300 billion in public and private funds worldwide for infrastructure investments abroad. It is supposed to be the concrete roll-out of the EU’s Green Deal, which is a package of policy initiatives by the European Commission to make the EU climate neutral by 2050. When the EU Commission came to power in 2019, its main goal was to achieve the climate and digital transformation of the EU. It is undergoing the transition internally in Europe now, but the idea was also for the Green Deal to be a European foreign policy vehicle. The Global Gateway can give the EU the opportunity to work with partners in Africa and Asia in mitigating and adapting to climate change, in developing digital and energy connectivity. Within the context of the war in Ukraine, the Global Gateway can assist EU partners in reducing their dependence on Russian gas and oil.

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Despite their initial reluctance, Europeans are now fully fledged actors in the Indo-Pacific. They are present geographically and are building and reinforcing bilateral, regional, and multilateral ties with countries in the region. They want to preserve stability in the region and are presenting partners with new avenues for cooperation that fight against climate change and that build more resilience for all. In a region increasingly affected by climate change, cyclones, typhoons, and other climate-related catastrophes, building resilience is about providing solutions for the immediate aftermath, but also preparing for a sustainable future. Europeans are ideally placed to work hand in hand with Indo-Pacific partners in building that sustainable future together. Such a strategic outlook should encourage the private sector to think about the region strategically too. If 40% of global trade is set to take place in the Indo-Pacific in the coming years, the opportunity exists now for European and Indo-Pacific partners to integrate sustainability and resilience in their cooperation and collaboration.

Both the political will and the economic means are there—the plan now needs to be implemented.

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