



HAL
open science

Europe's Pivot to Asia: The EU's Odyssey to the Indo-Pacific

Sebastian Contin Trillo-Figueroa

► **To cite this version:**

Sebastian Contin Trillo-Figueroa. Europe's Pivot to Asia: The EU's Odyssey to the Indo-Pacific. China-US Focus, 2023. hal-04038846

HAL Id: hal-04038846

<https://hal.science/hal-04038846>

Submitted on 21 Mar 2023

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Europe's Pivot to Asia: The EU's Odyssey to the Indo-Pacific

Mar 21, 2023

Tweet



Sebastian Contin Trillo-Figueroa

European Union consultant, AsiaGlobal Fellow at Asia Global Institute, HKU

At the Raisina Dialogue in Delhi last week, we gained insights into India's evolving foreign policy and its approach to tackling some of the world's most pressing geopolitical issues.

One of the pillars considered are if new partnerships and coalitions, which are smaller and nimbler yet also more tactical, add up to an alternative governance architecture. Surprisingly, the [European Union Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific](#), released on September 16, 2021, was not specifically analyzed as one of the new platforms, considering it is the core of the EU's foreign policy in the region and outlines priorities and objectives.

Despite India being designated as a significant partner in the EU's strategy, there was no explicit evaluation carried out between EU and Indian representatives even one year and a half after its approval. The only indication of this strategy was [a self-effacing remark made by the Italian Prime Minister](#). Unexpectedly, the EU's top diplomat [did not make any reference to this plan during the India-Europe Business and Sustainability Conclave](#), which would have been a fitting platform to discuss it. This conspicuous absence of any dialogue on the subject could suggest a lack of resolve or foresight in following through with the strategic plan.

Upon careful analysis, it appears that the unexpected apathy observed can be ascribed to three distinct factors, which may have individually or collectively contributed to the observed phenomenon:

1. There has been a conspicuous absence of noteworthy progress in the strategy for the past year and a half;
2. The conflict in Ukraine has necessitated the EU to realign strategic priorities, primarily strengthening the Transatlantic Alliance;
3. The main emphasis of the strategy has shifted away from India, Japan, and the surrounding region, towards China and the U.S. as key global players, which could undermine the broader geopolitical EU objectives in the region.

To comprehend the extent and the lack of implementation, it is crucial to note that the Indo-Pacific strategy entails a novel European multilateral leadership following an ambitious 'strategic sovereignty' roadmap, aiming at "maintaining a free and open Indo-Pacific for all while building strong and lasting partnerships," deepening its engagement to respond to emerging dynamics that are "affecting regional stability."

The strategy points out how “the Indo-Pacific and Europe account for over 70% of the global trade in goods and services, and over 60% of foreign direct investment flows.” In fact, trade exchanges between the Indo-Pacific and Europe are higher than between any other geographical regions in the world: the EU officially branded both as “natural partners.” In truth, the futures of the EU and the Indo-Pacific are “inextricably linked given the interdependence of the economies and the common global challenges.”

The strategy commences with a substantial declaration regarding the new world’s center of gravity: “The Indo-Pacific is increasingly strategically significant for Europe.” By employing the phrase “increasingly strategically significant,” the EU highlighted its imperative to confront the growing influence of Asia in the global economy, despite being relatively late compared to other powers.

In reality, the EU also adopted the strategy as a means of communicating with global superpowers, exhibiting a comprehensive grasp of Heydarian’s concept of ‘Pax Chimerica’ in the region, where China dominates the economy and the U.S. the security, as AUKUS -a trilateral security pact between the U.S., Australia and the United Kingdom announced the day before the EU Indo-Pacific strategy- evidenced.

As nothing is coincidental in matters of politics, both the Global Gateway (a EU project considered as an alternative to the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative and the U.S. B3W- PGII, which to date [has not satisfied the goals](#)) and the Indo-Pacific strategy were advanced together in what seemed a EU firm stance to China and the U.S.

Undoubtedly, the U.S. “Pivot to Asia” strategy marked then-President Obama’s significant shift towards the Indo-Pacific in 2011. It took Europe another decade to develop the Global Gateway, after China had launched the BRI. Prior to the war in Ukraine, the EU had been taking prolonged periods to come to an agreement on geopolitical plans. However, [the battle served as a geopolitical wake-up call](#), prompting the twenty-seven to take more decisive action.

While the ‘Pivot’ aimed to enhance involvement with Asia, as a means of maintaining American influence in the region and countering China’s ever-increasing power (the [U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy was updated in February 2022](#), consolidating this perspective), the EU’s objective is to expand its involvement in the crucial global trade routes, the hub of global production, and the epicenter of geopolitical decision-making, which will remain so for many years to come.

Furthermore, the strategy indicates Europe’s view of China as the regional hegemon to engage with through a multifaceted approach, emphasizing the necessity to enhance relations while also acknowledging certain concerns. Human rights are referred to twelve times, voicing “fundamental disagreements.” The strategy also highlights China’s actions in the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait, stating that “there has been a significant military build-up, including by China that may have a direct impact on European security and prosperity.” The EU did not separate from its commitment to the One-China policy, yet somehow it inclined towards Kaplan’s ‘Asia’s Berlin’ theory in case “Taiwan’s de facto independence [could] ever be seriously compromised by China.” On the flip side, the EU’s stance on Taiwan’s ‘reunification’ may be subject to reconsideration in light of the developments surrounding the War in Ukraine, with several EU leaders becoming increasingly vocal about the issue.

Concerning other regional powers, the EU stresses more partnerships with like-minded ally Japan (in July 2018 both signed the EU-Japan Strategic Partnership Agreement) and India (in February 2023 they launched a bilateral Trade and Technology Council), which is increasingly drawing attention in the EU as a means of countering China’s power.

Last, the EU designed seven priority areas, building “more resilient value chains,” and diversifying. With semiconductors, “it will do so with partners such as Japan, the Republic of Korea and Taiwan.” Additionally, “completing EU trade negotiations with Australia, Indonesia and New Zealand ... starting investment negotiations with India ... assessing the possible resumption of trade negotiations with Malaysia, the Philippines and Thailand, and the eventual negotiation of a region-to-region trade agreement with ASEAN,” or pursuing “to conduct more joint exercises and port calls with Indo-Pacific partners [...] to ensure maritime security.”

Eighteen months subsequent to its adoption, the EU Indo-Pacific strategy lacks an efficient execution plan. Conversely, it has already had two different EU Special Envoys. The last relevant official meeting was the [Ministerial Forum for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific](#) celebrated on February 22, 2022 under the French EU Presidency. Accordingly, France has been the most actively involved EU member state in the development of the region, [with a more decisive strategy](#). This is partly due to the fact that two million EU citizens reside on EU soil in the region, primarily on French territories.

There exist three inquiries yet to be addressed: In what ways can the EU establish a more effective and well-structured role in the Indo-Pacific? What actions has the EU taken to engage with various countries and initiatives mentioned in the strategy? Can the EU truly establish a strong and influential presence in the region?

Regardless of the situation, the EU Indo-Pacific strategy represents a significant milestone in two aspects: Firstly, it demonstrates a new level of strategic sovereignty, boosting multilateralism and avoiding isolation; Secondly, it aims to engage with the world’s trade hub through a negotiation-based approach, while also strengthening ties with key allies.

In conclusion, the window of opportunity for taking action has not yet closed: the EU needs to reevaluate its Indo-Pacific strategy and set new goals that account for the evolving dynamics in the region, such as the U.S. strengthening alliances in Asia, India’s growing importance, and the ongoing tensions in the region boosted by the U.S. and China.