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The European Union and an “Indo-Pacific” Alignment

GIULIO PUGLIESE

The European Union (EU) is deepening its political and security engagement in the so-called Indo-Pacific mega-region. Aside from alluring economic drivers, this article argues that growing suspicion vis-à-vis the People’s Republic of China (PRC) has been accompanied by a multilayered set of ententes with “like-minded” Asia-Pacific partners, starting with the United States of America (US), all the way to Japan, South Korea, and Australia. This effort has been facilitated and hastened by US policy under the Biden administration and Russia’s war in Ukraine. On the basis of first-hand elite interviews over the course of many years of fieldwork, as well as documentary evidence, including those in the Japanese language, the article argues that the EU and major member states have recalibrated earlier aspirations for effective multilateralism and strategic autonomy to more forcefully align with a concert of Indo-Pacific counterparts, led by the United States. The case of the EU-Japan strategic partnership is indicative of such trends, as it covers traditional and non-traditional security domains.

Introduction¹

The European Union (EU) is seeking to increase its political, economic, and military presence in the so-called Indo-Pacific, a mega-region stretching from the east coast of Africa to the Pacific Islands,

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as per the EU's geographic definition. The reason is simple: economic allure and geopolitical risks. The region accounts for 60% of global GDP and contributes about two-thirds of global economic growth. Moreover, and according to the EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, the region comprises three-fifths of the world's population and contributed to two-thirds of pre-pandemic global economic growth, but it is characterized by "intense [geopolitical] competition [and] military build-up including by China," and current regional dynamics testify to growing frictions in trade and supply chains, as well as in the technological, political, and security spheres (European Commission 2021). Although Europe's contribution to regional security is growing cautiously and gradually, trade and investment remain at the heart of the EU's external action and often mercantile and economic considerations lie behind the EU and its member states' security overtures, sometimes at the expense of a common EU dimension (Pugliese 2023). The connectivity agenda itself, often presented as a geopolitical tool to provide alternatives to Chinese loans, masks investment goals that suggest a socialization of European development financing practice with long-standing mercantile ones typical of major East Asian countries. Given their economic and strategic potential, India and countries making up the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) are at the very core of the EU's regional engagement.

The EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, along with the 2022 EU Strategic Compass for Security and Defence (European External Action Service 2022a), suggests an expansion of European security engagement in the region, with an emphasis on the maritime domain. At the same time, some member states have demonstrated a willingness to enforce or monitor United Nations sanctions against North Korea and to engage in military presence that supports the freedom of navigation and overflight in the South China Sea or, less often, across the Taiwan Strait. Security cooperation with regional partners has increased too, including collaboration, exchange of best practices and/or capacity-building in new fields such as cybersecurity and combating disinformation, as evidenced by the Enhancing Security Cooperation in and with Asia (ESIWA) Project under

the Commission’s Foreign Policy Instrument mechanism, led by the development and international cooperation agencies of France and Germany.

Aside from a willingness to preserve an effective multilateral order that is not dictated by the “law of the jungle,” a mission dear to an intergovernmental and supranational organization made up of mostly small and middle powers, national interests lies behind said security overtures. Testimonies by a number of European diplomats and defence officers from several EU member states suggest that the French government has been particularly skillful at coating its national interests in the Indo-Pacific (IP) with an EU mantle. The very embrace of the concept was a byproduct of France’s stakes in the region: territories, citizens, and resources. Similarly, expansive capacity-building initiatives, such as the potential to leverage data and analysis aimed at maritime domain awareness through the EU’s Indian Ocean Regional Information Sharing (IORIS) platform, re-labelled as Indo-Pacific Regional Information Sharing, part and parcel of the EU CRIMARIO and CRIMARIO II projects, would have aided France directly and indirectly (Interviews 2022d; 2022e). Along these lines, an Enhancing Security Cooperation in and with Asia (ESIWA)-sponsored Track 1.5 dialogue organized by this author testified to the link between European and Italian best practices in the use of unmanned vehicles for maritime domain awareness and the potential for collaboration (and, implicitly, exports of platforms, components and military technology) to Indo-Pacific counterparts. In the face of higher security engagement, the very desire by EU member states to fly the national flag, and to showcase their military contribution to local partners away from an EU dimension (Interview 2022c), suggests momentum for a concert of “like-minded” powers as well as at strong intra-European competitive dynamics.

Earlier scholarship suggested the EU was distinctive in its security approach towards the region (Casarini 2022). This author suggested that the EU and its member states were still somewhat cautious of the zero-sum logic embedded in Sino-American great power competition by emphasizing the multilateral logic of their engage-

ment (Pugliese 2023). Instead, this article demonstrates that the EU has shifted away from a “third way” and aligned closer with the US and other Indo-Pacific players, such as Australia and Japan. On the basis of a multitude of primary sources, especially elite interviews conducted in Western and East Asian capitals, as well as English and Japanese-language documentary evidence, this article disentangles the strategic drivers behind the European Union’s acceptance of the Indo-Pacific concept starting with a recognition of the concept’s composite definitions, one that has been distinctively geopolitical to start with. This (recent) history-based analysis provides valuable clues to understand the growing alignment between the EU and allies and regional partners, starting with the Biden administration’s United States of America. Lastly, to emphasize the formative role of the war in Ukraine in hastening security cooperation in tackling China, the article shows how the EU and Japan strategic partnership has evolved. The article relies on multiple years of fieldwork and interviews conducted in Europe, East Asia, and the United States.

(Geo)political relevance of the “Indo Pacific”

In order to understand the European evolving perspective on the so-called “Indo-Pacific,” it is first necessary to comprehend its gestation and conceptualization. The complex genealogy of a geographic re-mapping of half of the world map is germane to a deeper appreciation of the nature of the EU’s (and other actors’) engagement there. Since its very formation, the idea of the “Indo-Pacific” has been a political construct, one characterized by deep geopolitical and strategic roots but scarce foundations as a viable regional setting (Kolmaš et alia 2024). Its initial purpose was an attempt—by the Japanese government—to counterbalance the People’s Republic of China by diluting its presence via overtures to India and, eventually, by aiming at China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) policy narrative (Khurana 2017). China balancing has been a mission dear to the very first Abe Shinzō administration (2006-07), whose Foreign Minister Asō had announced an Arc of Freedom and Prosperity that orbited around China and encompassed the Eurasian landmass, thus covering the Pacific and Indian Oceans. In other words, from its very con-

ception, the Indo-Pacific was meant to be a counter narrative charged with strategic connotations, to balance, contain or simply dilute China’s regional footprint and further Japan’s diplomatic outreach with potential “like-minded” players (Interview 2022a; Pugliese 2023). Abe’s comeback would testify to the consistency of such efforts, coalescing into a Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategic vision that took shape in late 2016.

The government of Japan itself—the earliest state impresario behind the IP—has been showing an intentional inconsistency in defining its Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategic narrative, a practice that has been aimed at highlighting only certain normative aspects, according to situational (geo)political considerations. The Japanese government has in fact proactively lobbied for a broad international endorsement of the IP strategic vision by placing more or less emphasis on specific selling points depending on the context and on the target audiences: while the emphasis of advocacy and diplomatic activities in Washington, DC was on a forceful pushback against China (Interview 2022g; 2023f), a more inclusive vision nominally assuaged relations with China to woo Southeast Asian target audiences and Beijing itself (Kyodo News 2018). The concept’s ductility is evident from India’s balanced overtures towards Southeast Asia (Sullivan De Estrada 2023), which Japan echoed by 2018.

Testimonies by Japanese diplomats, one of whom has been a high-ranking official tasked with public diplomacy, further reinforce the concept’s chameleon-like attributes (Interview 2022b; 2023e). Normatively, the protection of effective multilateralism as well as the fundamental principles of the international community, of a free and open world economy, of peace and stability, and of the maritime commons are often presented as capstones of Japan’s FOIP vision. Still, these normative capstones have been adjusted depending on target audiences and the international and domestic political context. Thus, in the face of regional and global democratic backsliding, in 2023 the government of Japan unveiled a “new plan” for FOIP (MOFA 2023), one that further downplayed the relevance of democracy and human rights as key drivers because it would have narrowed

Tokyo's diplomatic space vis-à-vis key regional players such as India and Southeast Asian nations and the so-called "Global South" writ-large. Universal values were originally insisted upon in Japan's (grand) strategic narratives to "embrace" the US, especially during the George W. Bush administration and with the prospect of a Democratic Party-led presidency (Pugliese 2017), but the effort lost steam already in Japan's FOIP messaging towards the Trump administration, given the US President's lack of interest in the democracy promotion agenda (Interview 2019), and due to broader trends in Southeast Asia (Koga 2020: 63-66). Still, universal values were and have been insisted upon with European and EU counterparts as a pillar of diplomatic and political affinity. This logic successfully allowed foreign states and polities to "buy into" the Indo-Pacific by announcing official strategies, while Japan retained substantial flexibility: to date, Tokyo has *not* produced a public written strategy. As this author has argued elsewhere, the Indo-Pacific is to all effects a global "Rorschach test," not unlike China's pliable and relatively ductile BRI narrative (Pugliese 2019).

There's also a mismatch between official accounts and reality on the ground concerning the concept's gestation. Japanese official accounts on the birth of the IP concept suggest a coherent and linear process (NHK 2021). Authoritative testimonies from the Trump administration too—such as the very high-ranking official behind the landmark Indo-Pacific strategic framework (see below), later to become Deputy National Security Advisor—suggest a coherent and consistent message coming from Abe's Japan (Pottinger 2022). In fact, the birth of Japan's FOIP was a messy one, with trial balloons and a cacophony of messages that sometimes ran parallel to or counter to each-other: the afore-mentioned Arc of Freedom and Prosperity from 2006-07, the 2012-13 Asia's Democratic Security Diamond, the "free and open oceans and two continents" referenced in Abe's 2016 speech on occasion of the sixth Tokyo International Conference on African Development and often associated with the birth of FOIP, or the 2017-18 India-Japan Asia-Africa Growth Corridor are notable examples of a crowded narrative environment (House of Representatives – Foreign Affairs Committee

2018; Interview 2022h). An interview with a Japanese diplomat directly involved in the gestation of Japan’s Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategic vision suggests that FOIP and the IP concepts were thought out in response to China’s BRI, and that there were multiple alternatives (three) taken into consideration around 2016-18. The Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC) was one of them, and it co-existed with the nascent FOIP alternative over the course of 2017-18, but was effectively discarded as other polities, starting with Australia, the United States and India, embraced the latter in 2017-18, in no small part thanks to the Japanese government’s advocacy activities. Moreover, and more importantly, the AAGC sounded like China’s “One Belt One Road” (Interview 2022h). Such complex (and, clearly, highly political) genealogy of what is to all effects an artificial narrative construct deserves scrutiny, not least the successful advocacy activities—at the governmental, think-tank, media and academic levels—aimed at selling it worldwide by the Japanese government and, with time, its closest “like-minded” partners starting with the United States (see below).

The European perspective from Brussels has also been ambiguous and evolving. The European Union had initially been watchful of the geo-politically charged Indo-Pacific idiom, especially during the early days of its appearance in late 2016 up until 2019. The Union was already active in the Asia-Pacific, South Asian, and East African region(s) through a series of wide-ranging policies, including in the realm of non-traditional security: conflict prevention, anti-piracy, non-proliferation, anti-terrorism and anti-crime capacity building, as well as fighting transnational threats such as health crises and climate change (Kirchner 2022; Bozzato 2024), but the EU and key member states still considered China the focal economic and political pivot (Christiansen et alia 2019). By 2018-19, some EU member states would approach the “Indo-Pacific” with the simple goal of expanding and improving their relations with regional actors, while other key member states—first and foremost Angela Merkel’s Germany—were quite suspicious about the term due to sensitivity towards China’s initial position as well as tense US-EU and US-Germany relations under Trump.

Under the Trump administration, the US government's definition of the "Indo-Pacific" became synonymous with Sino-American strategic rivalry. The Japanese government was able to successfully sell the concept to US counterparts already by Spring 2017. The Trump White House—dominated by mid-ranking personnel from the national security establishment often in their first government experience—would be responsible for a paradigmatic shift in post-Cold War US foreign and security policy, kickstarting a set of policies of containment aimed at China, as evidenced by the declassified Indo-Pacific strategic framework set up by the US National Security Council (US National Security Council 2018). As US-China rivalry deepened, policymakers in Beijing would publicly loathe the Indo-Pacific term (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC 2018), but as it acquired currency—including in Southeast Asia—they would aim especially at the American reading of the same. The famous Russia-China joint statement from February 4, 2022 makes it clear that the two parties "remain highly vigilant about the negative impact of the United States' Indo-Pacific strategy" (Kremlin, 2022). The rhetorical emphasis on *Washington's* definition of the Indo-Pacific further reinforces the ductility of an ambiguous geopolitical re-mapping of world politics, one that allows room for diplomatic maneuvering, while hinting *de facto* at a less China friendly approach.

Indeed, in 2019 the European Commission concurrently introduced a tri-partite approach on China, viewed as a systemic rival, an economic competitor, and a partner for cooperation and negotiation (European Commission 2019a), but the reception of this new line among member states varied. The view of China as an "economic competitor" is perhaps the dominant one to date (Small 2022), especially in Western Europe, but the EU remained overall watchful of the Trump presidency, and of its "America First" policies that opened rifts with several global political actors—including the EU.

France—an atypical actor considering its overseas territories and citizens scattered across the mega region—was instead the EU member state that adopted the "Indo-Pacific" term at an early stage and backed up its words with actions. It committed to regional security matters since the mid-2010s by taking part in joint military signal-

ling and by furthering coordination with local actors that shared an active interest in preserving the regional status quo and the preservation of international law. These “like-minded” countries generally defended freedom of navigation and overflight as well as strong support to the so-called “rules-based international order,” perhaps the key embedded (and ill-defined) normative aspect of FOIP and an indication of a “narrative alliance” (Homolar and Turner 2024), if compared to the Indo-Pacific slogan. By 2018 the French Ministry of Defense adopted the Indo-Pacific concept, and the Quai d’Orsay announced its own version of it in 2019 (Wacker 2021).

As the appeal of the region grew and relations with China soured, in 2020 Germany and the Netherlands published their policy guidelines on the Indo-Pacific and together with France these governments successfully pushed for the EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, announced on April 16, 2021 by the 27 Foreign Affairs Ministers. Prior to the political endorsement by EU Foreign Ministers, the EU Council had also heard from Japan’s Foreign Minister Motegi Toshimitsu Japan’s (then) definition of its Free and Open Indo-Pacific, the first time a Japanese counterpart was allowed to participate in an EU Council meeting (MOFA 2021). These Indo-Pacific documents, however, showed a willingness to improve cooperation with regional partners and focused on inclusivity, but overlooked the role of the US, emphasizing instead European interests. In short, the above preliminary history of the Indo-Pacific—if not of FOIP—suggests that definitions are contingent to time and space, and with specific domestic and international interests at play to relevant parties.

More recently, the key external player behind the embrace of the Indo-Pacific concept, and greater engagement there, has been the US government. With the advent of the Biden administration, Washington departed from the more clearly transactional—and at times unilateral—approach of its predecessor. Moreover, thanks to the ascent of a more seasoned, nuanced and strategically-minded group of policymakers in government, the Biden administration was able to recover diplomatic leadership, especially in the Asia-Pacific. Thus, it actively pursued collaboration with its allies, striving to create a

unified front. While the overarching strategy is rooted in power politics, prioritizing purposeful military alignments on an *ad hoc* basis, it also aimed at courting third parties away from China by providing international public goods through diplomatic and economic alignments. This strategic shift stems from the conviction held by US policymakers that China's influence has effectively stymied multilateral mechanisms. Consequently, under Biden, Washington has been working to establish innovative types of mini-lateral cooperation to counterbalance China's sway and military power.

These alignments also entail rhetorical ententes around the “Indo-Pacific” narrative, with the US playing a key role. As a result of US overtures, the Republic of Korea (ROK) government under the conservative presidency of Yoon Suk-Yeol declared in December 2022 an Indo-Pacific Strategy, whose crafting the head of state explicitly delegated to the North America Affairs Bureau of its Ministry of Foreign Affairs, thus hinting at the need to echo Washington's desiderata and, secondly, to engage with like-minded players such as Europe and the EU (Interview 2022i). This logic is also hinted at in the case of Italy. As of this writing, the Italian parliament is conducting formal hearings in the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Chamber of Deputies with the explicit reference to the need to boost up regional presence, along with the EU Strategy, and in close partnership with regional players, first and foremost the United States of America (Camera dei Deputati 2024). Primary testimonies suggest proactive lobbying by the US government, especially under the Biden administration, to have, and partly support, democratic Western allies' engagement in capacity-building activities aimed at littoral states with disputes with China (Interview 2022j), or to show military presence—and potentially engage in Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs), passage through the Taiwan Strait, or activities aimed at monitoring UN sanctions against North Korea, which often take place north of Taiwan—all the way to the South and East China Seas; said presence is also quietly welcomed by the Japanese government (Interview 2024). Since the European Union's Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific explicitly focuses on cultivating partnerships with states and political entities that have embraced an

“Indo-Pacific” approach, this article demonstrates concrete instances of such cooperation among middle powers, one that suggests, however, closer alignment also through the intercession of the Biden administration.

The stakes of the EU in the Indo-Pacific: trade and transport links, resource issues and competitive dynamics

As mentioned, the Indo-Pacific region exerts a gravitational pull due to geopolitical friction as well as its mercantile potential. The trade and connectivity agendas play a vital role in the amalgamation of strategic and economic interests by providing economic opportunities and alternative avenues to the growingly cumbersome geopolitical and economic shadow of Beijing (Berkofsky et alia 2019). The economic rationale of forging trade and investment agreements with “Indo-Pacific” players fits also with the EU’s “de-risking” agenda aimed at reducing over-dependencies (especially those connected with strategic sectors), moving supply chains and sourcing key technologies and critical raw materials away from China, not unlike initiatives taken in Washington, DC minus the China containment element still strong there (Interview 2023; Interview 2023). The Global Gateway, the EU’s long-awaited geo-economic connectivity policy officially launched in 2021 with hesitation and internal infighting (South China Morning Post 2023), is often coated in strategic and values-based terms as if it were to compete and provide alternatives to China’s Belt and Road Initiative, but the underlying goals are fundamentally economic (and with a heavy dose of sloganeering). In fact, the announced €300 billion the EU intends to raise by 2027 will, yes, leverage a “Team Europe” approach that encompasses EU agencies, EU development finance institutions, and member states, but especially relies on the ingenuity and capital mobilization of the private sector: this, in particular, will allow for more efficient use of public funds and of good administrative practices. “Connectivity,” in other words, often rhymes with state-supported private investment to secure first mover advantage and/or facilitate commodity imports, as per the testimony of key players from major policy banks (Interview 2023a). At any rate, half of the Global Gateway promised

finances will go to the African continent, which will be also on top of the Italy-led G7 agenda, but preliminary analysis suggests connectivity financing also in the Pacific Islands (Bozzato 2024).

The EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific and the 2022 EU Strategic Compass do not make a secret of the economic importance of the Indo-Pacific region, yet they simultaneously focus on the goal of furthering European security engagement (European External Action Service – EEAS 2022a). Multiple interviews also suggest that there is a deep-rooted willingness in the EU to preserve a true multilateral order as a key driver of the Union’s Indo-Pacific overtures (Interviews 2022c, 2022d, 2022e). Upholding the international rule of law is essential to accomplish the aforementioned strategic and mercantile goals, too. In particular, some authors believe that the EU and its member states would do so in a less assertive manner than that of the US and occupy a space that still tackles a rising China threat perception (Meijer 2021). As a result, experts described the initial Indo-Pacific approach of the EU and European actors as a “third way” (Casarini 2022) that entailed a certain autonomy vis-à-vis the US-China rivalry. Understandably, thanks to historical, political, and cultural reasons as well as in consideration of shared values and the alliance with the US, the EU can hardly be understood as equidistant between the two great powers (Interview 2023b). However, a number of European states could join a “coalition of middle powers” that would also serve as an alternative to China or to the US, as per the suggestion of the outgoing head of the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) (Kitaoka eds. 2021). This alternative would offer a strong respect for the sovereignty of local actors, while also allowing to pursue mercantile and security objectives. Selling defense systems and other tools—in a flourishing market such as this one thanks to the aforementioned strategic tensions—is therefore one of these objectives (Pugliese 2023).

Thus, mercantile competitive dynamics may hinder joint EU projects or EU-US cooperation, but the opposite has been true at the strategic level, partially as a result of the war in Ukraine. The EU Strategic Compass—endorsed unanimously—and the new NATO 2022 Strategic Concept present similar perspectives and overall con-

verging strategic assessments. In particular, they describe a chaotic and disputed world dominated by power politics amid Russia’s challenges to the international system and severe international law violations, and China’s increasingly assertive posture and revisionism (EEAS 2022a, 18; NATO 2022a, 5). Indeed, the EU’s Strategic Compass and the new 2022 NATO Strategic Concept also focus on expanding cooperation with Indo-Pacific players. While NATO is a military alliance, the EU can translate shared and similar commitments into a series of activities aimed at preventing non-traditional security threats. European players can also exploit their geopolitical and economic leverages to provide whole-of-government responses (Interview 2022f). When it comes to collaboration with IP partners, the EU and NATO are therefore cozying up—also in their need to build strategic partnerships with Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand. The PRC is now openly considered, in a tough strategic assessment of the European External Action Service, to be a direct economic and political competitor, a vision somewhat similar to NATO’s strategic assessment (Financial Times 2022).

What’s the broader rationale behind this hardened stance? To be certain and as hinted above, Xi Jinping’s China has been seen with a growingly nervous and anxious gaze in Europe. The COVID-19 pandemic and ancillary events since 2020, such as the suppression of human rights in Xinjiang and autonomy in Hong Kong, hastened negative perceptions. Beijing’s self-condoning narratives, on one hand, painted China as the world’s saviour and, on the other hand, chastised the West through its “wolf warrior diplomacy”—while Europe found itself over-dependent on personal protective equipment imported from China. These actions have serious implications for both the “rules-based international order” and China’s future behavior: the Hong Kong case demonstrated Beijing’s willingness to renege on pledges made in an international treaty, the 1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration, not unlike Beijing’s decision to altogether dismiss the 2016 ruling on its expansive claims in the South China Sea, a ruling that was handed down by an arbitration tribunal set up through provisions contained in the United Nations Convention of the Seas (UNCLOS). Those actions, along with China’s deepened

autocratic rule under Xi, the Chinese government's coercive overreach against European sanctions on human rights abuses in Xinjiang, its economic bullying of Lithuania and, by Spring of 2022, China's ambiguous positioning on the Ukraine War, crystallized Europe's adversarial posture vis-à-vis Beijing.

Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine compounded the above geo-economic awakening of Europe. It moreover fostered pessimistic scenarios (and misguided analogies) concerning a supposed authoritarian axis, as well as China's sabre rattling across the Taiwan Strait, especially throughout 2022 and earlier half of 2023 (Financial Times 2023a). Germany has published a new strategic document on China, preceded by a national security strategy, in 2023 and business leaders and, especially, politicians from the Social Democratic Party of Germany's coalition parties, have suggested the need to avoid over-dependence on potential systemic rivals. This is clearly a by-product of the deep reconsideration concerning over-dependence on Russia's energy exports; strong intra-G7 coordination to sanction Russia following the 2022 aggression also hints at the possibility, in a Taiwan contingency scenario, for Europe to leverage its economic and technological might to enforce sanctions against China. Finally, by cementing Transatlantic bonds (see below), the war in Ukraine has made the Russia-China "Comprehensive Strategic Partnership of Coordination for the New Era" stickier, although China has demonstrated that it hasn't been fully supportive of Russia in Ukraine—for instance by allowing Chinese-made drone and components into Ukraine or allowing Huawei to pull out of Russia—it still needs Russia to counter Western influence, especially perceived US hegemony in international and regional order-building (Odgaard 2023).

The EU's economic security/geo-economic push clearly aims at China. The 2023 adoption of legislation aimed at an Anti-Coercion Instrument, stricter inbound investment screening and the potential for an outbound one, and growing momentum for more concrete connectivity partnerships under the EU's Global Gateway, with the implicit aim of wooing the so-called Global South, suggests growing momentum between the EU and "like-minded" G7

players, starting with the United States and Japan. In short, *prima facie* the war in Ukraine might have driven Europe towards a more inward-looking and more China-accommodating posture. On balance, however, the opposite result has been the case.

Secondly, NATO’s inclusion of China in its new Strategic Concept shows a systematic and proactive lobbying action that Washington undertook to win over European players. An example for the increasingly negative views on China—and growing connections with Washington or, rather, a shrinking space of manoeuvre vis-à-vis Washington’s leverage and China’s fence-sitting following Russia’s war in Ukraine—is provided by Estonia and Latvia, which in 2022 followed Lithuania (2021) in quitting the 17 + 1 framework of cooperation with China; and Baltic and Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries had already joined the US-led Clean Network initiative dealing with 5G networks by the end of the Trump administration. Vilnius’ move to accommodate a Taiwan Representative Office too, while indicative of a more pugnacious Lithuanian government, also likely triangulated its moves with Washington. With the war in Ukraine, there is growing evidence that CEE countries have a more important sway in intra-EU security dynamics in setting the agenda, especially as France and Germany grow increasingly inward looking and witness a serious lack of coordination if not intra-EU infighting (The Economist 2024).

In connection to the above and apart from CEE, Europe as a whole is increasingly reliant on both military, energy and economic support from the United States in its efforts to address challenges posed by Russia. Biden’s emphasis on mini-lateral ad hoc coalitions has thus helped to revamp NATO and the EU-US entente, as evidenced by the new cooperative momentum in multiple security agenda items: from economic security cooperation via the EU-US Trade and Technology Council to combating disinformation through an EEAS-Global Engagement Centre agreement (European Council 2023). Still, an undeniable military dependence is accompanied by a heightened willingness to align with Washington’s prioritization of competition with China as a central concern. In essence, the EU has developed a “strategic dependence” on US military aid for Ukraine

and the importation of Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG). In fact, imports of LNG have experienced a substantial increase of 137% compared to the previous year, establishing the United States as the primary supplier of LNG to Europe. In the 2022 Strategic Concept, the EU is prominently featured as NATO's primary institutional partner, and vice-versa. US policymakers are taking advantage of their renewed importance in EU politics, both in Brussels and in European capitals. Hence, at the political level, disagreements within the Franco-German axis, US leverage within Europe, and an increasingly "geopolitical" European Commission are collectively guiding the Union away from a "third way" Indo-Pacific security engagement.

Thirdly, in recent years, we have witnessed a proactive approach to diplomacy at both the bilateral and mini-lateral levels by regional Indo-Pacific players who aligned themselves against Russia's actions in Ukraine, and with the United States, thus allowing for the political merger of the two theatres, the Euro-Atlantic and the Indo-Pacific. These efforts are evidenced by functional cooperation in security and economics, with Japan, South Korea and Australia taking the lead in bridging the gap between "like-minded" actors across the opposite corners of Eurasia. Japan and South Korea, in particular, stood out for providing financial and military support—also indirectly via triangulation—to Ukraine. These initiatives closely aligned with the US government's strategy, which aimed to bypass the perceived dysfunctionality of the UN-based multilateral system by forging ad hoc coalitions among democratic allies. Examples of this approach can be seen in initiatives like AUKUS, the Quad, the Partners of the Blue Pacific, and closer engagement with the G7, which was notably led by Japan in 2023, and sometimes—with a modular geometry—expanded to include India, Australia, and South Korea, among others, on an *ad hoc* basis.

The 2022 NATO Summit, along with the incorporation of Japan, Australia, South Korea, and New Zealand as partner countries in the Indo-Pacific within the new Strategic Concept, serve as clear indicators of this trend. As effective multilateralism, characterized by its openness and inclusiveness, grapples with challenges arising from war, great power competition and the pluralization of global

governance structures, mini-lateral functionalist cooperation has emerged as a prominent approach. The EU’s Indo-Pacific Strategy aligns with this shift by specifically concentrating on states or entities with Indo-Pacific orientations. While the European Union places significant importance on India and the ASEAN region due to their economic and political significance, it has established more comprehensive strategic relations with NATO’s “Asia-Pacific Partners” (AP4) [also known as Indo-Pacific 4 – IP4], especially Japan, South Korea, and Australia. This dovetails with the growing entente within the remit of the Enhancing Security Cooperation In and With Asia (ESIWA) project, which also includes security cooperation—especially of the maritime type—with India, Viet Nam, and Indonesia, but reportedly works particularly well with Japan and South Korea.

Fourthly, Indo-Pacific actors showed their solidarity with Europe amidst the Ukraine crisis, thereby enhancing collaboration in both the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific regions. This convergence aligns with the goals of the Biden administration and is exemplified by recent developments in EU-Japan relations. Tokyo has a long-standing partnership with the EU, which underscores the Union’s strategic engagement with the region and the unity within the “Western” coalition. In contrast to India, the Japanese government has taken an assertive stance against Russia’s aggressive actions. Japan joined the G7 in imposing coordinated sanctions on Russia, despite its investments in the Sakhalin 1 and Sakhalin 2 gas and oil pipelines. Moreover, Japan provided approximately USD700 million in humanitarian aid and USD600 million in financial assistance to Ukraine and its neighboring countries, according to the most recent information (Prime Minister’s Office of Japan 2023).

Japan’s decision to extend military support to Ukraine was remarkably quick, considering Japan’s history and its firm anti-militarist legal and constitutional framework. While the majority of the aid consisted of non-lethal military equipment such as helmets, body armor, and civilian drones, this decision was not an easy one. The Kishida administration also engaged in significant diplomatic efforts to persuade several Southeast Asian countries to denounce

the Russian aggression against Ukraine, although these efforts were not successful in the case of India in South Asia. Within the NATO framework, in 2022 Japan deployed warships for joint exercises alongside Italian and Turkish vessels in the Mediterranean (NATO 2022b), although the author was reminded that the crew was relatively young and on training (Interview 2023c). Moreover, primary testimonies gained in Taiwan suggest that Tokyo and senior military figures willingly emphasized Ukraine-Taiwan analogies and the risk of cross-Strait tensions for political and strategic gains, including to legitimize security reforms throughout 2022 (Interview 2023i). In summary, the Japanese government has taken both verbal and tangible actions to reinforce the principles of the “rules-based international order” of which it considers itself a flag-bearer, but it was effectively concerned with its neighborhood; Tokyo’s swift action in support of Ukraine (and of Israel too, effectively), including through arms export triangulations through the decision on December 2023 to provide PAC-2/PAC-3 interceptors to the US and mulling over exports of 155 mm ammunition to the UK (NHK 2023; Asahi 2023; Financial Times 2023b) aimed at fostering reciprocity and potential dependency on Japan’s exports in the future (Interview 2023d).

Further evidence of convergence between the EU and Japan can be observed in recent developments. Following the EU-Japan bilateral meeting in May 2022, Tokyo and Brussels released a joint statement that emphasized Tokyo’s support amid the Ukrainian conflict and reiterated Japan’s stance of opposing any unilateral efforts to change the status quo regarding the “Senkaku Islands” (and there was no reference to the existence of a dispute, or to the Chinese appellation). This joint statement also highlighted a dedication to “cooperation for a *free and open* Indo-Pacific,” echoing Tokyo’s preferred approach to the region (European Council 2022); similar wording is also becoming common in UK-Japan statements. The EU-Japan Summit in 2023 and Japan’s successful G7 summit in 2023 further testified to the growing geopolitical entente, widening its scope to collaboration and/or coordination on the economic security and de-risking agendas, in the semiconductors industry and on non-traditional security items, such as cybersecurity, combating

hybrid threats and disinformation, now commonly referred to as Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference. It is all the more indicative that similar agenda items have been replicated also in the aforementioned EU-US strategic partnership. These trends suggested an important evolution in the EU-Japan strategic partnership, culminating in an incoming EU-Japan Security and Defense Partnership. This partnership, the first of its kind for the EU (and the Republic of Korea was reportedly next), promised to further deepen the institutionalization of EU-Japan relations through regular ministerial meetings and broaden its remit, to include coordinated policies on emerging and disruptive technologies. In short, the EU’s deepened entente with regional “like-minded” partners clearly originate from a terser view of the People’s Republic. Said alignment through multi-layered ad hoc bilaterals, or minilaterals, may also hedge against the resurface of a more transactional US administration and may superficially hint at the EU’s pursuit of a “third way.” This is not the case, however, because these networks have been actively institutionalized, cajoled, or blessed, by the Biden administration for the twin purpose of balancing China and caging a resurgent Trump administration. The EU’s “Indo-Pacific” alignment is no exception.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the EU’s more recent geopolitical turn in the Indo-Pacific stems, yes, from economic and multilateral interests, but has been alimeted by a more sombre take on the nature of the China challenge. This article has demonstrated that the EU is increasingly aligning itself with the US regarding its views and recommendations concerning the challenges posed by China, also thanks to the Biden administration’s nuanced power political approach towards China. The decline of China’s image in Europe has been accelerated by the conflict in Ukraine, with many Europeans interpreting China’s response as tacit support for Russia’s aggression. Since the beginning of the Trump administration, the US has urged NATO allies to incorporate the China challenge into the alliance’s agenda. The Biden administration’s support toward allies and, especially, the conflict

in Ukraine has further reinforced Europe's increasing "strategic dependence" on the US in both military and energy aspects. As a result, the EU has espoused NATO and the US as its most important strategic counterparts and has also duplicated, or harmonized, some elements of its cooperative security agenda. One such case has been the clear and more concrete security cooperation with "like-minded" players in the Indo-Pacific. In fact, support from major American allies in the region, which are now NATO partners, has cemented a security entente among the EU and countries like Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand. With the exception of New Zealand, these three actors are central naval, technological and/or like-minded powerhouses which prominently feature in recent "G7 plus" summits and also figure highly in US-led regional mini-laterals. Given this growing alignment—at least at the time of writing and in the short term—the prospect of pursuing an EU "third way" posture appears less likely, instead feeding into a more proactive geopolitical posture: from economic security to maritime security and all the way to non-traditional security cooperation.

The prevailing direction points toward increased mini-lateralism and *ad hoc* collaborations among "like-minded" actors. It is yet to be determined, however, whether such a change will have an impact on the European Union's multilateral endeavors and more generally on global governance dynamics. There is indeed a tension between the EU's nominal pursuit of effective multilateralism and emphasis on salvaging the normative architecture of global governance. The deepening balkanization of global governance is however evidenced by the dysfunctionality of the UN-based system and of plurilateral fora that were meant to salvage a modicum of cooperation, as evidenced by the 2023 G20 and the ASEAN Summits in India and Indonesia, respectively. In comparison, US-led (or US-revitalized) mini-lateral fora and initiatives such as the G7, Quad, AUKUS, the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) and the like demonstrate vitality—including in terms of provision of international public goods, however, or rather, precisely because of the underlying competitive premises.

We are however witnessing widening rifts among major powers, not to mention growing frustration among rising and emerging powers vying for status and greater sway in the international chessboard. Will the EU and its member states be able to pool resources and adjust their normative approach to international politics in favor of the new geopolitics, particularly evident in the Indo-Pacific? The EU has traditionally leveraged market access and its economic prowess for political and normative gains, but can it find effective “actorness” as a foreign policy player while the Union is more clearly challenged from within and in many different strategic directions, from coping with the migration crisis in Southern (and Central) Europe, to Central and Eastern European fears of Russian encroachment (Grgić 2023)? In light of the aforementioned balkanization of global governance, should the Union and its member states prefer instead to align with *ad hoc* coalitions or would this presage a more contested international space? In light of economic and geopolitical calculations, Southeast Asia and India are ever more relevant, but how to ameliorate said engagement with the growing reality of regional democratic backsliding? These are some of the very hard questions that the EU and its member states’ governments will have to address if they want to be taken as serious geopolitical players.

Finally, and more importantly, EU member states crucially need to prove their ability to consistently and prolongedly play this more central role in the Indo-Pacific. After all, European priorities are in Europe, and its commitments outside of the continent are—and probably will be—secondary and thus necessitate a cost-benefit analysis. Nevertheless, the EU and key Indo-Pacific players may expand cooperation in various areas beyond traditional military matters, such as international law, cybersecurity, strategic communications, and addressing transnational threats related to food, climate, energy, and economic security. The war in Ukraine, China’s behavior (and US-China dynamics) in its near abroad—especially across Taiwan—and towards European players, along with the domestic politics of the US and of key EU member states will necessarily dictate the tenability of these new Indo-Pacific geopolitics. Still,

two prolonged (or stalled) wars in Europe's near abroad, the likelihood of a more insular US posture, as well as meager economic prospects—if not outright stagflation—coupled with an ongoing migration crisis and domestic political turmoil within the EU suggest that the EU and its member states may have to prioritize the neighborhood at the expenses of an over-ambitious Indo-Pacific political and security projection. This will be especially so if Trump makes a comeback to the White House, forcing many European countries to devote their energies to their immediate neighborhood.

Note

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