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**Prospects for EU's Maritime Strategy
in the Indo-Pacific**

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Introduction

The narratives of the maritime order in the Indo-Pacific have undergone a transformation due to the profound geopolitical tilt towards the region with increasing economic development in Asia and particularly the massive growth of China. The parallel rise of the United States and China has altered the power dynamics and has given rise to stiff competition. In order to heighten its presence in the Indo-Pacific, the European Union (EU) has attempted to formulate its Indo-Pacific maritime strategy to underline its role as the global maritime security provider in a rule-based maritime architecture.

The EU's Indo-Pacific Strategy outlines the significance of the maritime dimension in its engagement with the region, highlighting the trade routes, security of the maritime commons, and preservation of the international rule of law. One of the priority areas of the strategy is the effective ocean governance with a particular focus on the United Nations Convention on the Law Of the Sea (UNCLOS) and sustainable ocean development.

Besides, China's naval expansion and its growing assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific, especially the South and East China Seas and Western Indian Ocean, has profound consequences on the region's security architecture, which has created significant security threats for the EU. Therefore, the EU needs to amplify its strategic collaborations in the region. However, without the adequate naval presence and with lack of active interest by many member states in the Indo-Pacific security, it is rather difficult for the EU to deter threats emanating from Beijing and other non-state actors.

The order of the Indo-Pacific is disruptive and divided with Chinese expansion and US proactive presence in the Indo-Pacific. Hence to set sail successfully for the Indo-Pacific with a well-defined geographical set-up, the EU must address the gaps in its overseas naval presence and leverage its strengths to balance its major economic partner, China and its traditional security partner, the US.

The Present Juncture

The security of the Indo-Pacific waters is essential for the EU as it hosts many trade routes and chokepoints for the European Union - Strait of Hormuz, Taiwan Strait, Luzon Strait, Sunda Strait, Lombok Strait, Malacca Strait, the Suez Canal, and the Bab el-Mandeb Strait - which are crucial for a smooth and unrestricted movement of European vessels

(Hooft, Girardi and Sweijs, 2022, p.7). Moreover, the turbulence in these Sea Lines of Communications (SLOCs) is a repercussion of traditional (like excessive militarization, arms race, regional disputes) and non-traditional threats (like piracy, terrorism, over-fishing, climate change), making it unquestionably critical for the EU to participate in the regional affairs proactively.

Traditionally, the EU naval diplomacy with the Indo-Pacific states has primarily revolved around economic and developmental dimensions. Security collaboration remained a minor aspect of its engagement, especially maritime security, which suffered from the lack of naval presence and proper coordination in the Indo-Pacific (Grare and Levaillant, 2022, p.1). The security policy was mainly dedicated to fighting maritime crimes and law enforcement but largely ignored the great power competition and increasing militarization of waters (Grare and Levaillant, 2022, p.1).

However, in the past few years, the EU engagement has considerably increased as it made its Indo-Pacific naval debut in 2008 with its operation “*ATLANTA*” and NATO’s mission “*OCEAN SHIELD*” to address increased piracy and terrorism in the Northwest Indian Ocean (Frühling, 2022, p.1). Furthermore, in 2011, along with the US administration and allied countries, the EU recognized the geostrategic developments in East Asia and issued guidelines on its security and foreign policies in the region, highlighting the preservation of UNCLOS in the South China Sea (Frühling, 2022, p.1) (Odgaard, 2019, p.138).

The next paradigm shift was in 2014 when the EU launched its Maritime Security Strategy and in 2016 with its global strategy Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe, which reiterated the importance of the mechanism of the International Tribunal for the Law of Sea, freedom of navigation, and peaceful settlement of maritime disputes, which unfortunately lacked practical measures (Odgaard, 2019, p.138). In 2019, the EU formulated an independent China Policy focusing on trade conflicts and market regulations (Odgaard, 2019, p.137). Additionally, a few individual European countries, particularly France, Netherlands, and Germany, devised plans to reach out to the Indo-Pacific countries and put forward security initiatives representing the greater EU principles.

However, after years of ambiguity on the geographical scope, the European Union “*Joint Communication on the Indo-Pacific Cooperation*” (2021) outlines the significance of ocean governance and the promotion of rule-based security architecture in the Indo-Pacific region (European Commission, 2021). Furthermore, the renewed focus identifies security issues in the Taiwan Strait and the South and the East China Sea as a direct impact on European security (European Commission, 2021, p.2). The strategy also sets the tone for the EU’s role as a global security provider and the centrality of the Indian Ocean security (Grare and Levailant, 2022, p.5).

Japan, India and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) are tagged as the most important partners of the European Union to actualize its maritime strategy in the region. Japan and the EU both recognize the naval issues in the East and South China Seas and their repercussions on the economic and territorial stability. The EU - Japan Summit held in May 2021 emphasized peace and stability in the Taiwan Straits and the upholding of the international maritime laws (EU - Japan Summit 2021 Joint Statement, 2021).

Additionally, New Delhi has welcomed the EU’s naval ventures in line with India’s Indo-Pacific Oceans’ Initiative and a commitment to “*free, open, inclusive and rules-based maritime order in the Indo-Pacific region*” (ANI, 2022). During the 2nd EU - India Dialogue on Maritime Security, both parties reiterated the need for cooperation in maritime domain awareness, capacity building, and joint naval exercises (ANI, 2022).

Furthermore, the 29th EU - ASEAN Joint Cooperation Committee (JCC) held in February 2022 highlighted the importance of maritime security and freedom of navigation in the EU - ASEAN partnership (asean.org, 2022). The EU also encouraged ASEAN members to incorporate a more prominent role of Europe’s Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP) in furthering a secure maritime order (asean.org, 2022). ASEAN has been an indispensable partner of the European Union for decades and is vital for implementing its strategy in the Indo-Pacific.

The EU Naval Force Somalia (EUNAVFOR Somalia) - Operation “*ATLANTA*” and EU Training Mission Mozambique (EUTM Mozambique) are two primary military operations carried out by the EU in the Western Indian Ocean (European Commission, 2021, p.13). These operations work towards operational training, capacity building, and

countering piracy and terrorism (Ministry of Defense, Spain, no date). Further, the strategy stresses the EU's goal to expand and diversify its naval exercises and port calls with the Indo-Pacific countries (European Commission, 2021, p.13).

Joint naval exercises are crucial to facilitating increased interoperability, sharing information, and developing credible response mechanisms to regional threats. In June 2021, the Indian Navy participated in a joint naval exercise in the Gulf of Aden with the European Union and its members France, Spain, and Italy, which involved high tempo-naval operations at sea, including anti-submarine and advanced air defense exercises, among others (Express News Service, 2021). The EU also conducted naval training with Japan's Maritime Self-Defense Force off the coast of the Gulf of Aden and the Arabian Sea in October 2021, focusing on anti-piracy (EEAS, 2021). A similar exercise was conducted with the Djibouti Naval and Coast Guard and Japan earlier in May 2021 (EEAS, 2021).

Moreover, the French Presidency (first semester of 2022) has served the objectives of the EU well as Paris leads the Indo-Pacific strategy through effective maritime diplomacy and security collaborations. France organized the "*One Ocean*" Summit and formulated the "*Brest Commitments for the Oceans*" addressing issues like marine plastic and illegal fishing and promoting the strengthening of international ocean governance and protection of marine ecosystems (www.oneplanetsummit.fr, 2022). Additionally, France is a regular participant in joint military and bilateral and trilateral naval exercises with Indo-Pacific partners, including India, Japan, and UAE.

The French Navy conducted a naval exercise, "*La Perouse 21*" with Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) members, which enhanced naval capabilities and served as a strategic signal to China (Japan Ministry of Defense, no date). Besides, with other exercises "*Croix du Sud*," "*Equateur*," and "*Marara*," France attempts to increase interoperability and enhance cooperation on Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) operations with Western Pacific states and its overseas territories (Inaugural Australia - France 2+2 Ministerial Consultations Joint Statement, 2021).

Germany has also acted to establish and strengthen its presence in the region by sending its Frigate "*FGS Bayern*" on an Indo-Pacific voyage from August 2021 to February 2022 with multiple port calls, including in Pakistan, Australia, Japan, South

Korea, and India, among others (Sakaki and Swistek, 2022). Dispatching a German warship in international waters manifested Berlin's political will to engage with the region and endorsed its future initiatives for a strategic presence in the Indo-Pacific (Sakaki and Swistek, 2022). Furthermore, Germany signed an agreement with the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) for the association on organizational development and priority areas, including maritime security, disaster risk management, and climate change, underlining the importance of multilateral fora in its Indo-Pacific strategy (IORA News, 2022).

Another EU member who has shown active interest in the maritime dimension of the Indo-Pacific is Greece which conducted a bilateral dialogue with India regarding the security concerns in the region and stressed on protection of international maritime laws (Hellenic Republic Greece in India, 2022).

Identifying Threats and Limitations

The European Union's ambitions are challenged by severe security concerns emanating from the East and the South China Sea with continuous Chinese aggressive maneuvers. The hard-power projection of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) is evident from the rigorous modernization of its offensive defense capabilities and excessive militarization of artificial islands in the South China Sea (Balasubramaniam and Murugesan, 2020). In addition, the wide-ranging ballistic missiles, nuclear-powered submarines, and surface combat ships in the Indo-Pacific waters pose a direct security threat to the littoral states and the safety of the SLOCs (Balasubramaniam and Murugesan, 2020).

Moreover, China's continuous attempts to coerce Taiwan by military intimidation and frequent transgressions signal Beijing's compulsive need to take over Taiwan and Xi's expansionist policies. Furthermore, growing regional disputes in the East and South China Seas and Taiwan Straits endangers the crucial shipping lines and uninterrupted trade of Europe. Besides, the blatant violation of the UNCLOS by the PLA Navy by conducting illegal activities in Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) of other countries is contrary to European and international norms for a rule-based order.

Yet another concern for the EU is Illegal, Unreported, Unregulated (IUU) fishing in the Indian and Pacific Oceans waters. Even though many state and non-state actors frequently engage in IUU fishing activities, the share of Beijing remains massive (Grare, 2021). Besides, China's fishery policies are extremely exploitative and a medium to further its expansionist agenda. Beijing has been deploying its fishing fleets to work as research vessels - often dubbed Auxiliary Naval Forces of the PLA Navy - illegally in the Indian Ocean to collect oceanographic data and intelligence to tweak its submarine deployments (Kanodia, 2021). Regular incursions by Chinese trawlers in distant waters serve the dual motive of control over fishery resources and the militarization of oceans (Grare, 2021).

This impacts European and Indo-Pacific states as it jeopardizes the safety of crucial chokepoints and ship movements. Moreover, IUU fishing also leads to piracy, especially in the Western Indian Ocean, which aggravates the port security of the littoral states. Hence, this is a serious threat that opposes Europe's commitment to sustainable development and fishery management in the Indo-Pacific.

However, the EU faces several limitations in implementing its strategy and actualizing its maritime goals. Firstly, the sheer naval absence of Brussels is a result of a lack of proper coordination and mobilization of resources which reflects the inadequacy in the articulation of its strategic terms (Grare and Levaillant, 2022, p.1). Moreover, the current naval presence of EU members is acutely skewed in favor of France and its former member, the United Kingdom, with moderate deployments of the Netherlands, Germany, and Spain (Hooft, Girardi and Sweijs, 2022, pp.60-61).

The EU's naval operations have been largely absent, with Operation "ATLANTA" being the only significant operation still functional in the Indian Ocean (Grare and Levaillant, 2022, p.3). Furthermore, the complete dependence of the EU External Action Service on the consensus among the member states makes it challenging to implement overseas security operations (Grare and Levaillant, 2022, p.3). Yet another constraint is the scope of CSDP as opposed to Coordinated Maritime Presence (CMP), as they are relatively limited in scale and focus on low-intensity operations, whereas CMP allows permanent access to naval capabilities and more flexibility at sea (Grare and Levaillant, 2022, p.3).

Moreover, the de facto refusal to coalesce its non-traditional security involvement with strategic threats has marginalized the EU's role as a security actor in the Indo-Pacific (Grare and Levallant, 2022, p.1). The lack of political will and internal divergences in member states' perceptions has rendered ineffectiveness of the strategic aspect of the institutional strategy in the region. Member states also have poor coordination in prioritizing maritime issues that need more attention and effective deployment of naval assets (Grare and Levallant, 2022, p.4). And all these together indicate the weakness of the EU's deterrence in countering threats posed by China and other non-state actors.

Steering Ahead

Even though a major security crisis is still unfolding in its backyard, a 360-degree focus on foreign policy matters is indispensable for the European Union to elevate its global stature and emerge as a dynamic, influential force. The present hardships only revitalize the ambition of the EU to focus on its security and augment its presence in the Indo-Pacific region. The region is at the helm of significant power competition between the world and regional powers, and the EU needs a balanced approach to accomplish its objectives.

The importance of the Indo-Pacific has been acknowledged by the former and current Presidents of the European Council, France and the Czech Republic, respectively (CEPS, n.d.). With the French Presidency of the European Union, the freshly formulated EU strategy got a kickstart owing to Paris's intensive Indo-Pacific. However, the momentum in the maritime policy needs to be maintained with upcoming presidencies and the development of the strategic vision in Indo-Pacific naval security.

The first step toward an effective maritime strategy is to do away with the generalization syndrome and formulate a clear articulation of maritime goals. The EU needs to recognize priority marine areas that require attention and launch more region-specific missions while expanding the scope of existing ones. EU members should more regularly participate in naval exercises and enable strategic signaling to China by supporting regional countries (Frühling, 2022, p.9). Expansion of CMP missions to the Western Pacific could improve the EU's deterrence with respect to China (Frühling, 2022, p.9). It must introduce more projects like the EU CRIMARIO (Critical Maritime Routes Indian Ocean) to other parts of the Indo-Pacific and work towards building maritime

capacity and interoperability. Moreover, increased alignment of national strategies of the European states could help in the effective mobilization of resources and realize sub-regional security threats. Brussels should address the knowledge gaps in the Maritime Domain Awareness and engage in increased collective awareness programs.

There is plenty of fish in the sea for the EU to forge strategic collaborations with middle-income countries and sub-regional powers and leverage those to manage the China threat. The convergence with Indo-Pacific partners India, Australia, Taiwan, and the Philippines can play an indispensable role in furthering EU maritime objectives and creating a counterbalance of power. With their concerns vis-a-vis Beijing, these countries can support the EU's bid for a rule-based international order.

Additionally, the EU should form synergies with organizations like the IORA at the institutional level and take collaborative measures on non-traditional maritime threats like IUU fishing. The EU should also bring together like-minded partners and forge formal multilateral forums like the QUAD to pool diverse perspectives with respect to contemporary realities. These forums can enable capacity building, enhance crisis management capabilities, and develop effective counter-terrorism and counter-piracy missions.

With the current war between Ukraine and Russia, it is imperative for the EU to continuously adjust its strategy in line with the security threats at its borders. Besides, the spillover on the Indo-Pacific is significant in terms of the increasing closeness of China and Russia, which could prove to be a catastrophe for both European and Asian security. Moreover, the colossal magnitude of destruction in Ukraine shows the relevance of conventional arms-dominated warfare in the present age of technological advancement and the plausible possibility of military domination in the Taiwan Strait and at the India-China borders. This makes the security framework of the Indo-Pacific in deep waters.

To ensure peace and stability in the region, Brussels needs to amplify its engagement with partners in the Indo-Pacific based on the collective power of cyber security, space technology, and nuclear deterrence along with conventional naval power. Furthermore, it needs to strengthen its alliances by upholding its democratic values and respect for a rule-based international order and continuously revising its policies in line

with the rapid alterations in the region. Hence, the evolving landscape of the Indo-Pacific calls for a definitive and concrete EU maritime security strategy.

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