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Security Conference, 5 September 2022

ANALYSIS

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1. Introduction

The Indo-Pacific (INDOPAC) region is an increasingly congested space. Congested economically, home to the largest share of fish stock worldwide, featuring most critical maritime trade routes and boasting a large share of global Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Congested demographically, with the largest share of the world's population and the highest concentration of mega cities. Congested in terms of threats, both traditional – peer and near-peer confrontation – and non-traditional – illegal activities, non-state armed groups, climate change – affecting regional waters. And, as a result, congested strategically, for indeed all these key features attract a lot of attention from regional and international world powers claiming interests and stakes in the region.

As the world we live in becomes ever more interconnected, with threats in one area posing indirect challenges in another, what does this congested INDOPAC region mean for regional and international actors? With a multitude of countries defending a wide variety of interests and stakes, and therefore drafting INDOPAC strategies that are both at odds and coherent with each other, how can such diversity be reconciled to foster a more free, open and peaceful region? How can international regional actors such as the European Union (EU) and NATO support the development and functioning of INDOPAC regional structures for peace and cooperation?

Bringing together a wide variety of experts from multiple fields and different countries - from Europe, the US and Asia - the Indo-Pacific security conference organised in Hamburg on 5 September 2022 sought, under Chatham House Rule, to find answers to such questions, collaboratively. This document aims to present the main conference findings in the manner of a research paper, focusing more on the what and how rather than the who.

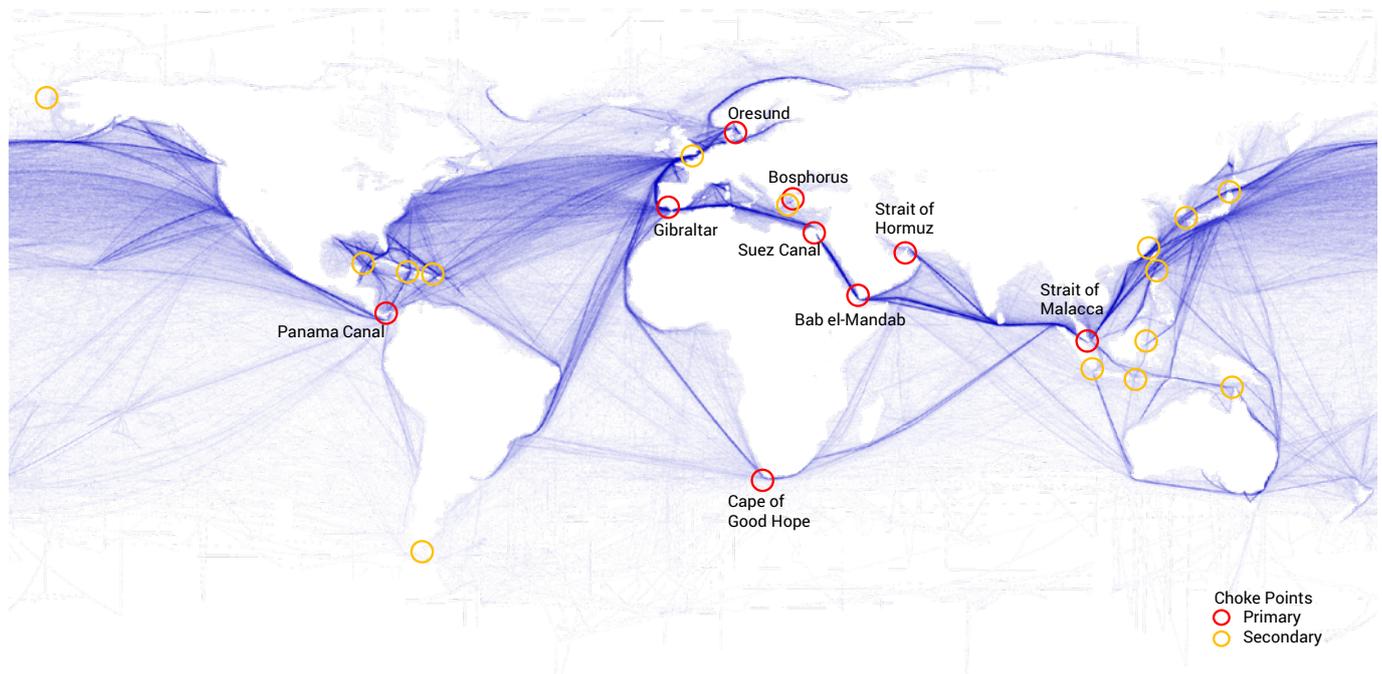
2. Geostrategic numbers

As former US President Barak Obama administration's 'Pivot to Asia' strategic 2011 announcement demonstrates, the INDOPAC region has been gaining importance on the international stage over the past decade. In fact, it had been gaining importance in previous US administrations already, but it is only in recent years that national – such as UK and France – and regional – EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific – strategies have evidenced more targeted and diverse interests East of the Suez Canal.

Economically, the INDOPAC region is one of the key worldwide transit regions for maritime trade: 60%¹ of maritime trade by value passes through Asia, transiting through two of the main routes connecting Asia to Europe and three of the key choke points – Straits of Malacca, Hormuz and Bab-el-Mandeb.² Moreover, over 70% of the world's fish stock caught in seas across the world in 2018 came from the Indian and the Pacific Oceans. Finally, the INDOPAC region boasts 32 of the top 50 container ports in the world.³

Demographically, 60% of the world's population lives in the INDOPAC region⁴, producing approximately 60% of the global GDP.⁵ Unsurprisingly, these trends are reflected in the fact that the region also concentrates 20 of the world's 23 megacities, and accounts for one-third of global Greenhouse Gas (GHG) emissions and 60% of the world's coal consumption.⁶

Map 1 | Main Maritime Shipping Routes and Chokepoints.



Source: Wiki Commons plus own depiction

¹ <https://www.ifri.org/en/publications/publications-ifri/articles-ifri/regional-economic-order-four-scenarios>

² https://porteconomicsmanagement.org/wp-content/uploads/Map_Main-Maritime-Routes.pdf

³ <https://www.worldshipping.org/top-50-ports>

⁴ <https://asiapacific.unfpa.org/en/populationtrends>

⁵ https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu-strategy-cooperation-indo-pacific-0_en

⁶ <https://www.worldbank.org/en/region/eap/brief/climate-and-development-in-east-asia-and-pacific-region>

3. Regional non-traditional threats

If it is true that with great power come great responsibilities, it is equally true that the INDOPAC's economic and demographic assets come with great consequences – and therefore responsibilities as well.

Economic threats

While its great fish stocks have the potential to improve the livelihoods of regional populations – Asia employs nearly 80% of the world's population working in fisheries⁷ – it is also a growing source of concern. In Southeast Asia alone, 64% of fisheries are at medium to high risk from overfishing⁸. Furthermore, in 2021 Asia remained the region of most concern regarding Illegal, Unregulated and Unreported (IUU) fishing⁹ – with China scoring the worst IUU fishing index worldwide, followed closely by Russia. Worldwide, IUU endangers the livelihoods of as many as 39 million fishers,¹⁰ a significant share of the INDOPAC population when considering it employs 80% of the world's population working in fisheries. It also endangers people's nutritional needs. In Indonesia, for example, fish and seafood constituted over 60% of per capita consumption in 2015¹¹, yet the country ranked 20th out of 152 countries in IUU scores.

The significant presence of key maritime trading routes and container ports in the region is also as much of a security concern as it is an economic opportunity. In 2020, Asia remained one of the main hot spots for piracy in the world – second only to West Africa.¹² Stable Seas, one of many piracy reporting mechanisms in the region, recorded a total of 103 incidents in 2020, a 16% increase from 2019 indicating that the threat remains high. More specifically, robberies and attempted robberies of commercial vessels in the Malacca and Singapore Straits remained high – 35 reported incidents, similar to 2019 – and the region also featured a number of robberies and attempted robberies at ports and anchorage.

Finally, 13 of the 30 countries most vulnerable to climate change are located in the INDOPAC region, which contributes to the problem through its GHG emissions and extensive use of coal. According to the World Bank, without concerted action this could result in an additional 7.5 million people falling into poverty.¹³

Terrorism

Bordering the Horn of Africa, and including the Persian and Oman Gulfs, the INDOPAC region is also regularly affected by the complex geopolitics of its Western-most regions.

Since Houthi insurgents¹⁴ took control of Yemen's capital in 2014, the war in Yemen has had a significant impact on security in the adjacent maritime region. Houthi rebels are known to have undertaken a sophisticated campaign of strategically relevant attacks at sea and in the air. In the past five years, using anti-ship missiles¹⁵ as well as remotely controlled explosive boats, they have damaged beyond repair approximately 10 ships and attacked strategically relevant Saudi infrastructure. Moreover, using Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV) technologies,¹⁶ they have also carried out a number of air strikes against strategically relevant targets – mainly oil fields.

Iran also remains an important concern in the area. It is debatable whether it would go as far as closing the Strait of Hormuz to disrupt critical Sea Lines Of Communication (SLOC), as this would also disrupt Iranian exports and have negative consequences for its strategic partners – including China. Nevertheless, over the past decade it has been operating in the grey zone, disrupting operations in the Strait through coastguard inspections and detentions, military exercises, accidents and covert attacks in the region. While closing the passage – or indeed avoiding passage – in the Strait is not an option for anyone – including Iran – this has had important consequences on safe passage in the area. For instance, a number of merchant ships have been choosing less navigable routes – therefore impacting safety of navigation – simply to avoid Iranian waters.

⁷ <https://www.fao.org/state-of-fisheries-aquaculture>

⁸ <https://asiafoundation.org/2018/03/28/southeast-asias-fisheries-near-collapse-over-fishing/>

⁹ <https://iuufishingindex.net/downloads/IUU-Report-2021.pdf>

¹⁰ <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2022/02/01/an-indo-pacific-test-case-tackling-illegal-fishing-with-counternarcotics-tactics/>

¹¹ <https://oceanpanel.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Illegal-Unreported-and-Unregulated-Fishing-and-Associated-Drivers.pdf>

¹² <https://www.stableseas.org/post/state-of-maritime-piracy-2020>

¹³ <https://www.worldbank.org/en/region/eap/brief/climate-and-development-in-east-asia-and-pacific-region>

¹⁴ Shiite rebels with links to Iran known for their stance against the Sunni government

¹⁵ Mainly of Soviet and Chinese origins, such as SS N 2 D STYX and C802

¹⁶ Qasef 2k (Striker 2k) Tactical UAV and Sammad 3 (Invincible 3) Strategic UAVs

4. Regional traditional threats

The strategic importance of the INDOPAC region for international powers around the world is not new. Shifting regional power – and therefore security – dynamics have been a growing source of concern for a number of countries for over a decade. More specifically, China's return to the international scene as a key geopolitical power has become a challenge for both regional and international actors.

The issue of Taiwan

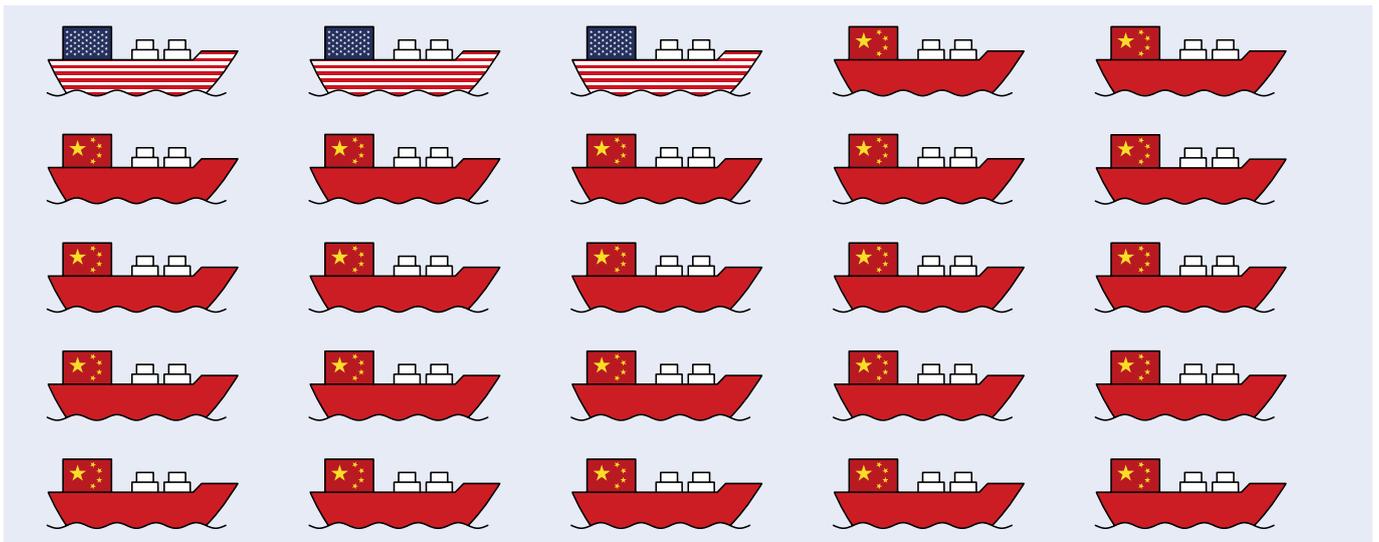
At the regional level, China's increasingly aggressive stance toward Taiwan is raising important questions on security in the East and South China Seas. Over the past ten years, China has been putting significant efforts into building up the People's Liberation Army (PLA), and more specifically its Navy (PLAN). These efforts are particularly evident when compared to naval build-up in other world powers, such as the US Navy (USN): in 2021 the PLAN commissioned 22 warships, while the USN commissioned only three – a 7 to 1 ratio. Perhaps even more alarmingly, beyond the quantity of warships it has been building and commissioning, it has also increased their 'punch'. For instance, the Type 055 cruiser has a displacement of 12,000t and features 112 Vertical Launching Systems (VLS) that can fire land attack cruise missiles, surface-to-air missiles and supersonic anti-ship cruise missiles with 300km ranges. Six such ships are already operational and two more are under construction.

In addition to building up its capabilities, the PLAN has also been ramping-up its shows of presence in the East China Sea, around Taiwan. In the first three weeks of May 2022, a PLAN's aircraft carrier, accompanied by a seven ships surface action group, conducted training evolutions east of Taiwan. This could be considered as the PLAN's largest and most ambitious show of force in the region yet. Furthermore, in August 2022, as US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi was making her way to Taiwan for a visit, China protested the visit by launching multiple excursions beyond the median line of the Taiwan Strait. Crossings of this line, which divides between China's and Taiwan's Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) in the Taiwan Strait, have happened in the past – allegedly four times since its inception in 1955 – but never with such intensity and over such a short period of time.¹⁷

Finally, over the past 20 years the PLAN has been developing its rocket forces significantly. It has fielded operational anti-carrier Ballistic Missiles (BM) systems and has been building rocket force test ranges. Just as importantly, in August 2020 the PLA rocket force test-launched DF21D and DF26 anti-carrier BM at moving targets – a critical challenge – and was reportedly successful in its trials.

As noted during the conference, while China wishes to be able to incorporate Taiwan into the administration of mainland China without using force against it or its allies, there can be no doubt that it is ready to do so if push comes to shove.

Graph 1 | Commission ratio of warships US/China in 2021



Source: Own depiction

¹⁷ According to the Diplomat, "these 'combat drills' involved flying drones over the Kinmen islands, firing 11 Dong Feng ballistic missiles over Taiwan (five of which landed in Japan's Exclusive Economic Zone), carrying out land attack and sea assault drills, island attack drills, and launching large-sortie incursions into Taiwan's ADIZ. Taiwan blasted China's drills as a practice for a "blockade." <https://thediplomat.com/2022/08/crossing-the-line-the-makings-of-the-4th-taiwan-strait-crisis/>

China's Blue Ocean Information Network

Further south, in the South China Sea, China has been developing its 'Blue Ocean Information Network'. Built up, for the most part, by China's defence electronics state-owned enterprise CETC¹⁸, it is a network of sensors and communication capabilities that aims to "establish seabed observation systems in the East China Sea and the South China Sea, and realise all weather, real time and high resolution multi interface three dimensional comprehensive observation from the seabed to the surface."¹⁹

While the network focuses on underwater detection, it would be a mistake to assume that its capabilities are limited to the underwater domain. In fact, national sources reveal that the artificial islands China has been building over the past years are also part of this sensor network. The installations on these islands act as nodes within the wider network. Similarly, it is highly likely that the Chinese dedicated satellite constellation – Hainan – will also be part of the Blue Ocean Information Network.

Increasing tensions across regional seas

During the conference, tensions around the Japanese EEZ were highlighted as well. Beyond non-traditional threats such as IUU, marine environmental protection and piracy, Japan is also worried about China's increasingly aggressive behaviour. The two countries have been involved, since 1971, in a dispute over the contested Senkaku Islands, and over the past decade, Japan has seen a significant increase in the number of vessels identified within what Japan considers its territorial waters. These vessels, though mainly Chinese, have also been identified as Taiwanese – the third country involved in the islands dispute. Additionally, China has been carrying out live firing tests of missiles, with five of the nine tests carried out thus far reaching inside the Japanese EEZ.

Japan, moreover, literally faces the constant traditional threat of North Korea. While North Korean nuclear tests and BM launches are not new, the past seven years have seen a significant increase in such events: in 2016 alone, North Korea carried out a total of 23 events²⁰ related to nuclear tests; in 2019 these events had gone up to 25.²¹

Finally, Japan has ongoing territorial disputes with Russia – over the Kuril islands – and with South Korea over the Dokdo/Takeshima islets.

Over in the Indian Ocean, China's increasing presence in the area has brought the importance of the region back to the fore for India. Its regular passages, the development of military bases such as the one in Djibouti, and the fact that China is the only country with an embassy in each of the six Indian Ocean island nations, are all factors attesting to China's desire to establish itself as a credible security actor in the region. Along with its regular contributions to anti-piracy missions, these also prove that China is progressively seeking to secure its interests and protect its assets in the Indian Ocean. For India, such developments, when compounded with increasing Russian presence as well²² and non-traditional security threats, have translated into a renewed interest in the maritime domain – thus far more limited due to what it perceived as more pressing continental security challenges.

¹⁸ China Electronic Group Corporation

¹⁹ The nightmare of American and Japanese submarines is coming, China has invested heavily in 2 billion to build a submarine observation network (美日潜艇的噩梦将到来 中国 20 亿巨资打造海底观测网), Sina.cn, 31 May 2017, <https://jmqqil.sina.cn/wqzb/doc>

²⁰ E.g. Intermediate Range BM (IRBM), Submarine Launched BM (SLBM), Inter-Continental BM (ICBM), Short- and Medium-range BM (SRBM/MRBM)

²¹ https://www.mod.go.jp/en/d_act/sec_env/pdf/dprk_d-act_e_220104.pdf

²² In 2020 it announced the establishment of a new naval base in Sudan for a period of 25 years

5. Addressing INDOPAC security threats – A European approach?

European countries have important interests in the INDOPAC region. In addition to the region being home to four of the European Union's (EU) ten biggest trading partners, making it the second largest destination of EU exports, it hosts major waterways critical to EU trade. Recognising the high stakes that such interconnectedness has created, in April 2021 the European Council adopted conclusions on an EU Strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific. A joint communication, presented by the Commission and the High Representative, followed shortly in September 2021, highlighting seven priority areas for EU action in the region: Sustainable and inclusive prosperity; Green transition; Ocean governance; Digital governance and partnerships; Connectivity; Security and defence; Human security.²³

In the implementation of these priority areas, the EU has declared that it is highly committed to working with partners in the INDOPAC. More specifically, concerning the area of 'security and defence', the EU intends to build on the experience it has gained through collaboration in regional security mechanisms such as Operation ATALANTA.²⁴ Additionally, leveraging the new Coordinated Maritime Presences tool, it will seek to enhance the coordination "of the existing Member States' naval and air assets present in specific areas that are of interest to the EU, around the world, to increase the EU's capacity to act as a reliable partner and maritime security provider."²⁵

A region of multiple national strategies

Yet despite its best intentions, the EU effectively comprises 27 Member States (MS), with 27 different national references for the region, 27 different levels of abilities to commit financially and with capabilities, and 27 different conceptual approaches of dealing with China.

France, for example, has a very strong presence in the INDOPAC, with territories in both the Indian²⁶ and the South Pacific²⁷ Oceans. A legacy of historical ties with the region, this presence implies responsibilities, duties and engagement. It also requires developing strong ties with regional neighbouring countries to ensure peace and stability. To tend to these responsibilities, France can count on a French military presence in both oceans, with bases²⁸, capabilities²⁹ and approximately 8000 troops permanently stationed in the areas of interest.

Additionally, France has also been working in close cooperation with several countries in the region, including but not limited to: India, through an annual strategic dialogue, the sale of military capabilities, such as the Rafale and submarines, and joint military exercises; Japan, through a comprehensive maritime security dialogue and joint military exercises; Australia, with the latest joint statement of strategic partnership³⁰; and, Indonesia, through the sale of military capabilities such as Rafales and submarines.³¹ More generally, France is also an observer at the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting plus (ADMM+)³² and has recently become a member of the Information Fusion Centre³³ (IFC) in Singapore.

Besides France, the UK also seeks to become an important partner in the region. This is evident not only in UK forces' involvement in regional exercises, but also in the latest key strategic papers issued by the government. In May 2021, the British government released its Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy.³⁴ As it describes the vision for the UK's role in the world over the next decade, it puts particular emphasis, among other things, on the importance of the INDOPAC region and the necessity to work in close cooperation with regional partners and allies.

²³ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/QANDA_21_4709

²⁴ Originally developed as an anti-piracy operation off the coasts of the Horn of Africa, its success in significantly curbing piracy in the region has culminated in the extension of the mission in 2020. Today, the mission not only protects vessels against piracy, but it also works to monitor IUU activities and prevent illegal smuggling – mostly weapons and drugs. <https://eunavfor.eu/mission>

²⁵ https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/coordinated-maritime-presences_en

²⁶ La Réunion and Mayotte

²⁷ Wallis et Futuna, New Caledonia, French Polynesia, and Antarctic territories

²⁸ Djibouti, New Caledonia, and French Polynesia

²⁹ Ships, aircraft and helicopters

³⁰ <https://www.pm.gov.au/media/joint-statement-france-and-australia>

³¹ <https://www.janes.com/defence-news/news-detail/indonesia-france-line-up-collaboration-on-scorpene-submarines>

³² <https://admm.asean.org/index.php/about-admm/about-admm-plus.html>

³³ https://www.ifc.org.sg/ifc2web/app_pages/User/commonv2/aboutus.cshml

³⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/global-britain-in-a-competitive-age-the-integrated-review-of-security-defence-development-and-foreign-policy>

One year later, in May 2022, the British government released its Defence White Paper³⁵, which reflects the priorities outlined in the Integrated Review – including the ongoing commitment to permanently deploy two UK patrol vessels in the INDOPAC.

Finally, in August 2022, the British government also published its National Strategy for Maritime Security.³⁶ In line with the two previous documents, it highlights the importance of maritime security in the INDOPAC, recognising the “importance of the region.” A number of key objectives outlined in the strategy mirror this “Indo-Pacific tilt”, including supporting and defending the UN Convention of the Law Of the Seas (UNCLOS), promoting freedom of navigation, and supporting a secure and resilient ocean. Throughout all these key strategic documents, the British government strongly focuses on the importance of partnership both at national – between competent authorities – and regional i.e. INDOPAC – levels.

Alongside France and the UK, other European countries are seeing the importance of the INDOPAC and are seeking to contribute to security and stability in the region. This is particularly the case of Germany, who sent an important signal with the deployment of the frigate Bayern in the region. Spanning over six months, and making port calls in several INDOPAC countries³⁷, the Bayern deployment was the first of its kind in 19 years and signalled Germany’s commitment to upholding its Guidelines for the Indo-Pacific region³⁸, published in September 2020.

A fragmented European approach

These are but a few examples of INDOPAC strategies being released by European governments. Yet they successfully highlight the fact that, while the European Union seeks to build a coordinated, comprehensive approach to the INDOPAC, national priorities and strategies currently prevail and often differ in their goals and ambitions. This is not only due to the wide variety of interests in the region and the significant disparities between countries in their ability to tackle areas of concern. It is also evident in their attitude toward China.

For instance, when comparing the French strategy with the German guidelines, it is clear that while France seeks to prevent the emergence of a new hegemon and to re-establish a level playing field in Europe’s relationship with China, Germany only alludes to the notion of countering China – most of the guidelines are instead focused on regional economic opportunities. Similarly, a European Council of Foreign Relations survey reveals that for 13 European Member states, the strategic interest of the region lies mostly in economic opportunities.³⁹

The result is a lack of coherence in European INDOPAC strategies, which translates also in a piecemeal approach to security. For example, only 12 Member States⁴⁰ would be willing to participate in Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOP) in the region.

This fragmented approach is also being perceived by (potential) partners in the region. As Germany was deciding which ports the Bayern frigate would call at, doubts regarding whether a port visit to China would take place sent mixed signals to the region. Ultimately, China retracted its port visit invitation and the stop was removed from the route, but the overall positive political and operational outcome of the mission has been tainted by this earlier uncertainty. More generally, during the conference it was made clear that these multiple varied strategies were seen as a hindrance to effective and efficient collaboration with regional partners.

³⁵ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/defence-in-a-competitive-age>

³⁶ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1100525/national-strategy-for-maritime-security-web-version.pdf

³⁷ Including (but not limited to): India, Sri Lanka, South Korea, Japan, Australia and Singapore). <https://www.bundeswehr.de/en/organization/navy/news/indo-pacific-deployment-2021>

³⁸ <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-en/news/indo-pacific-1781916>

³⁹ Grare, F. and Reuter, M (2021), Moving Closer: European Views of the Indo Pacific, European Council on Foreign Relations. Available at: <https://ecfr.eu/special/moving-closer-european-views-of-the-indo-pacific/>

⁴⁰ Belgium, Cyprus, Estonia, France, Italy, Latvia, The Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Spain, Sweden

6. Partnering for a more peaceful, stable INDOPAC future

Despite what may be perceived as mixed European political messages, there is a strong desire, from partners in the region, to cooperate with the European Union on security and stability in the INDOPAC.

Tackling non-traditional threats collaboratively

Regarding non-traditional threats, while international and regional agreements are an important common basis to build on, they are largely insufficient. Indonesia's work to tackle the issue of IUU, which required concerted efforts from multiple regional countries to stop fishing in Indonesian waters, is a good example of moving past international inertia. Going beyond international IUU rules, regulations and agreements, Indonesia successfully worked with its neighbours to stop all fishing activity in certain territorial waters to allow fish stocks to replenish. The next step in this scenario would be to declare IUU a transnational organised crime, since these ships are also often involved in the illegal smuggling of drugs. On that basis, further actions – from more actors – could be taken. Similar cooperation can be undertaken concerning a wide variety of non-traditional threats, including maritime environmental protection and piracy.

Addressing traditional threats – cooperation

Regarding more traditional threats, increased naval presence and coordinated action in the region can go a long way in signifying Europe's commitment to the INDOPAC. The new Coordinated Maritime Presences tool is a good start, but more can be done. For instance, part of the feedback from the Bayern deployment lamented the lack of operational training organised during that time at sea. The crew would have benefitted from more training in the region with partners to increase collaboration, maintain critical skills, and send a clearer message. For India, whose Navy has historically been the regional first Humanitarian Assistance/Disaster Relief (HA/DR) responder as well as a security provider, logistics exchange pacts with European partners would greatly increase its ability to deploy a sustained presence across the vast Indian Ocean.

Addressing traditional threats – technological edge

European partners could also do more concerning technological transfers and sales. A number of capability programmes – such as submarines – focus on both capability development and Transfer of Technology (ToT) to increase regional competences, skills and autonomy. Yet as the threat of peer and near-peer competition progressively re-emerges, European countries could provide critical assistance to their regional partners by sharing new technologies. This is particularly true in the realm of Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA).

Unmanned systems, for instance, are becoming ubiquitous to MDA strategies across the world, and regional partners could greatly benefit from them. Whether Aerial (UAV), Surface (USV) or Underwater (UUV), these systems can be part of a network of sensors and communication relays that would considerably support missions such as Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR). These systems can also be part of a wider network of multi-domain awareness, much like the Chinese Blue Ocean Information Network.

Furthermore, the emergence and evolution of both kinetic⁴¹ and non-kinetic⁴² threats is highlighting the importance of Electronic Warfare (EW). EW can be used in a number of ways. It can leverage the electromagnetic spectrum – radio, infrared or radio signals – to sense, protect and communicate while seeking to avoid detection. Playing with different signals and bandwidths, it facilitates navies' ability to engage in a game of cat and mouse with adversaries, all the while avoiding direct confrontation. Should a kinetic threat be detected, however, such as a missile – EW can also provide navies the tools to jam or deceive the threat.

These different technologies may not always succeed in preventing direct confrontation, but they are critical in providing additional decision-making time – especially when enhanced with Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning. In an environment where saturation of adversary defences and the growing speed of threats are becoming increasingly frequent, this cannot be underestimated. European countries should work more closely with regional partners to increase cooperation and integration with these technologies. It would avoid latency in the control room and provide a tactical edge in the information wars now being fought at sea.

⁴¹ Direct military confrontation

⁴² Non-direct confrontation

7. INDOPAC, a region of multiple interests, actors and priorities

The Indo-Pacific Security Conference fostered interesting and important debates around a wide range of key topics at the heart of security in the region. Certainly, one of the main findings is that, while there is a considerable need to improve coordination between regional and international actors' INDOPAC strategies, there is a strong common desire to maintain peace and stability.

What may perhaps cast a shadow on such an objective is the complexity of relations and the power China maintains and exercises in the region. Perceived as a potential security threat by many regional and international actors, it is nonetheless an equally important economic partner for many. As such, while some countries, such as India – which has its own security challenges with China – and France – which has multiple territories in the region – may be willing to take a harder stance towards China, others such as Singapore and Sri Lanka – who rely on China for much of their trade – are more cautious in their approach.

Certainly, reconciling security needs with economic interests will take time and compromises if peace and stability are to be maintained in the region. The role of the EU in such an endeavour was regularly highlighted. In contrast, there was consensus on the fact that the region falls outside of NATO's responsibility; it should, instead, focus on the potential impacts INDOPAC security may have on the Euro-Atlantic area. Ultimately, the most important step in addressing existing and emerging security challenges is understanding where obstacles and contradictions lie. Only then can key regional and international actors really start working on identifying solutions through fair compromises. The conference was, in this sense, perceived as a success.

The Author



Dr Alix Valenti is a defence and security expert with over 15 years of international work experience. As a defence and security journalist she focuses on naval procurement and technological trends around the world, and regularly contributes to a wide range of defence media including IHS Jane's, Shephard Media and Armada International. She was also Editor in Chief of Naval Forces for two years. Dr Valenti holds a PhD in Development Planning from UCL, where she studies the impact of international organisations on the institutional and urban reconstruction of countries after conflict.

