THE INDO-PACIFIC AND THE EUROPEAN APPROACHES TO THE REGION

IMPLICATIONS FOR ITALY

Edited by Giuseppe Gabusi

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The Indo-Pacific and the European Approaches to the Region Implications for Italy

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Introduction

Giuseppe Gabusi
University of Turin and T.wai

As widely known, in International Relations, the regions of the world are not geographically fixed, but are a social construct: the very idea of a region defines its boundaries. Since the beginning of the 21st century, following an insight from the Japanese government[1], a new vision of East Asia – expanded to encompass the area stretching from the coasts of India in the east to the Western Pacific – has gained ground, not only amongst policy-makers but also in academic studies[2]. It is a vision that includes Australia, New Zealand and the islands of Oceania too.

Previously, the region was defined as the "Asia-Pacific", reflecting an era in which the United States, through bilateral alliances (*hub-and-spoke*), engaged partners within the vast network of institutions and regimes that defined the liberal order established at Bretton Woods in 1944. Against a backdrop characterised by Washington's relative distraction – as it was engaged on the Middle Eastern front with the "War on Terror" – and by the growing assertiveness of the People's Republic of China (PRC), Tokyo's initiative aimed to strengthen ties with India, with a view to maintaining free and open trade routes linking the Pacific and Indian Oceans via the South China Sea – the waters of which are disputed between China and its South-East Asian neighbours. It is no coincidence, therefore, that the proposal for a *Free and Open Indo-Pacific* (FOIP) was perceived in Beijing as an attempt to contain China's rising power. Indeed, the very reconfiguration of the region reflects a growing "securitisation of the area", in which there is a risk of 'threat inflation"[3].

In a context characterised by the need to reduce economic dependence on China by diversifying trading partners, and to reassure the neighbours of this formidable Asian neighbour, the new social construct of the Indo-Pacific was gradually but firmly embraced and adopted by the region's most significant players. The United States, Australia, New Zealand and South Korea adopted a foreign policy strategy for the Indo-Pacific. By the early 2020s, the reconfiguration of the Asian region within foreign policy planning had come to involve, through the adoption of a formal policy document, the United Kingdom and Europe as well – understood both as EU institutions[4] and as individual Member States, first and foremost France and Germany.[5]

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[1] Abe, S. (2007) *Confluence of the Two Seas, Speech at the Parliament of the Republic of India*, Tokyo: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 22 August, available online.

[2] For example, see Kratiuk, B., Van Den Bosch, J., Jaskolska, A., Sato, Y. (2023) *Routledge Handbook of Indo-Pacific Studies*, London: Routledge, available online.

[3] For example, see Higgott, R. (2024) *From Globalisation and the 'Asia-Pacific' to Geopolitics and the 'Indo-Pacific'*, London: LSE Ideas, available online.

[4] European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (2021) *Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council. The EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific*, JOIN (2021) 24 Final, 16 September, available online.

[5] Gouvernement Français (2025) *France's Indo-Pacific Strategy*, Paris: Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, 12 December, available online; The Federal Government of Germany (2020) *Policy Guidelines for the Indo-Pacific: Germany–Europe–Asia. Shaping the 21st Century Together*, Berlin: Federal Foreign Office, available online; The Federal Government of Germany (2023) *Progress Report on the Implementation of the Federal Government's Policy Guidelines for the Indo-Pacific in 2023*, Berlin: Federal Foreign Office, available online.

For Italy, East Asia – and, today, the Indo-Pacific – has never been a foreign policy priority; nevertheless, the perception within national institutions has now changed. Even in academic circles, some voices argue for the need to increase political investment in the region.[6] In March 2025, the Indo-Pacific Committee of the Chamber of Deputies' Foreign Affairs Committee, following a lengthy fact-finding inquiry, concluded that "the development of an Italian national strategy for the Indo-Pacific appears appropriate for several reasons. Firstly, it would streamline the efforts undertaken, at times independently, by the various components of the national system. Secondly, it would highlight Italy's multilateral approach to its allies and regional partners, making it more recognisable and better structured. Furthermore, it would take account of recent geopolitical developments, moving beyond a European Union strategy that appears outdated in several respects. Finally, a formalised strategy would provide a framework for government action over the medium term, discouraging ad hoc or contingent initiatives".[7]

With a view to the possible formalisation of an Italian strategy for the Indo-Pacific that is coherent, effective and sustainable (given the scarcity of resources and the need to deploy them in closer theatres), it is necessary to begin by defining the region from our country's perspective. Defining the region in social terms is a prerequisite for taking effective action that is coherently integrated into the broader framework of Italian foreign policy. It is also necessary to compare this vision with that of international partners, since the courses of action taken by individual states are inspired not so much by "a battle for influence within the region" as by "concerns about influence and power driving a battle to define what the regional space should or could be".[8] The *Franco-German Observatory of the Indo-Pacific* – a joint initiative of Sciences Po in Paris and the German Institute for Global and Area Studies (GIGA) in Hamburg, with which some of the researchers involved in this project are affiliated – has published a series of conceptual maps on this subject. In these, for each national perspective, it has highlighted the geographical boundaries of the Indo-Pacific, first-, second- and third-tier partners, destabilising actors, areas of greatest interest and theatres of greatest concern.

What geographical area does Italy have in mind when it refers to the Indo-Pacific? According to the aforementioned fact-finding survey, for example, "the eastern section of the wider Mediterranean is also part of the Indo-Pacific, which is considered the focus of our country's most important national interests" because "it is now difficult to separate the two areas, given the common dynamics that affect them".[9] What role does our country intend to play in the region? Research conducted by Anna Caffarena and Giuseppe Gabusi has revealed that Italian governments over the last twenty years have developed as many as nine conceptions of their role in the world:[10] from a transatlantic ally to a "responsible stakeholder" within multilateral dynamics; from a "bridge" between different worlds to a promoter of economic openness and free trade (*globalisation surfer*); from a cul-

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[6] Abbondanza, G. (2024) "Italy's quiet pivot to the Indo-Pacific: Towards an Italian Indo-Pacific strategy", *International Political Science Review*, 45(5), 669–679.

[7] Chamber of Deputies (2025) *Indagine Conoscitiva sulle Tematiche Relative alla Proiezione dell'Italia e dei Paesi europei nell'Indo-Pacifico*,12 March, Roma: III Commissione Permanente (Affari Esteri e Comunitari), 70, available online.

[8] Breslin, S. (2018) *Conceptualising Asian Regionalism*, T.note no. 73, Torino: T.wai - Torino World Affairs Institute, available online.

[9] Chamber of Deputies (2025) *Indagine Conoscitiva sulle Tematiche Relative alla Proiezione dell'Italia e dei Paesi europei nell'Indo-Pacifico*, 5, available online.

[10] Holsti, K. J. (1970) "National Role Conceptions in the study of foreign policy", *International Studies Quarterly*, 14(3), 233–309.

tural power to a defender of the *rules-based order* and human rights.[11] Given the aforementioned scarcity of economic and human resources, it has been suggested that, to ensure the effectiveness of its engagement in the Indo-Pacific, Italy should select the roles in which to invest and the partners on whom to rely.[12]

This research aims to address these questions and to formulate a number of policy recommendations, with a view to Italy's possible adoption of a formal strategy, through a comparative analysis of the Indo-Pacific strategies of at least two of Italy's key partners in the European Union: France and Germany. Taking the Indo-Pacific strategy drawn up by the EU institutions as a reference point, and starting from an analysis of the founding documents of the respective national strategies – and, therefore, the social construction of the Indo-Pacific – we examine their evolution and implementation, following three main strands: security, economy and development.

On the security front, it is necessary to investigate which initiatives and partnerships have been developed in the region, at what level of engagement, and in response to which potential threats. As regards trade and investment, it is necessary to analyse whether dependence on the PRC is actually being reduced through a meaningful risk diversification strategy. Finally, this part of the world, which is particularly vulnerable to the consequences of the climate crisis, is still characterised by a significant, albeit patchy, development gap compared with Europe: along what lines are European countries moving to engage Indo-Pacific governments and societies in a virtuous cycle of growth and adaptation to the ecological transition?

The research draws on the experience and insights of researchers at the *Franco-German Observatory of the Indo-Pacific*, as well as other colleagues who attended a workshop hosted by INALCO in Paris in January 2026. It also prompts reflection on the potential coordination and possible synergies between the actions of individual European states, with a view to enhancing their effectiveness. Against a backdrop of a changing international order, characterised by economic and security tensions on a global scale, there is an even more urgent need for the European Union and its Member States to assume a renewed role beyond their immediate neighbourhood, in order to contribute to the reshaping of the future international order, rather than remaining at the mercy of change.

This book is divided into four sections and thirteen chapters. Section one examines the historical evolution of the concept of the Indo-Pacific and its current relevance to the European Union and its Member States. In the first chapter, Raimondo Neironi outlines the concept's five dimensions: geographical, International Relations theory, security, discourse, and ideology. By combining these perspectives in various ways, the author identifies five core features common to all Indo-Pacific strategies and visions. However, the concept of the Indo-Pacific still remains rather fluid, which has both positive and negative consequences. On the one hand, this helps to explain its widespread endorsement in national foreign policy design; on the other hand, it risks a lack of coherence and coordination, which ultimately undermines its effectiveness. A similar challenge can be seen in the Europe-

[11] Caffarena, A., Gabusi, G. (2017) "Making sense of a changing world: Foreign policy ideas and Italy's National Role Conceptions after 9/11", *Rivista Italiana di Scienza Politica/Italian Political Science Review*, 47(2), 125-147; Gabusi, G., Caffarena, A. (2024) "Changing and yet the same? Italy's foreign policy ideas and National Role Conceptions in a populist age", *Contemporary Italian Politics*, 17(3), 314-335.

[12] Chamber of Deputies (2024) *Audizione di Giuseppe Gabusi del Comitato Permanente sulla Politica Estera per l'Indo-Pacifico*, 19 September, available online.

an context, where the EU has adopted an Indo-Pacific strategy, but its concrete definition and implementation depend on the actions of its Member States. By comparing the French and German visions of the Indo-Pacific, Giuseppe Gabusi and Enrico Fassi's chapter reflects on whether national strategies strengthen or weaken the EU's approach in the region. They argue that a dispersion of roles can generate confusion and a lack of credibility, rendering foreign policy ineffective. In contrast, a more coordinated effort could have a significant impact, particularly at a time when Indo-Pacific partners are diversifying their relations.

Section two focuses on France and the myths and realities surrounding its engagement with the Indo-Pacific. Paris exercises sovereignty over its overseas territories in the Indian and Pacific Oceans, making France a "resident power", which, as Paco Milhiet argues in chapter three, is the first pillar of French ambitions in the region. The second pillar involves robust engagement with "like-minded" countries. Milhiet looks particularly at relations with Southeast Asian nations, arguing that a more significant Italian presence in the area could contribute to the addition of an Indo-Pacific dimension to the Quirinal Treaty, which marks institutionalised and structured cooperation between the two countries. Despite being a resident power in the Pacific, Oceania has never been at the centre of the French Indo-Pacific strategy. In fact, territories such as French Polynesia and New Caledonia have traditionally been treated as domestic issues. However, Céline Pajon highlights in chapter four how, as seen in the 2025 update of its strategy, Oceania is now an influential factor in the design and implementation of French policies in the Indo-Pacific. However, at the crossroads between "grand strategy and domestic politics", and with a "gap between ambitions and limited means", the myth of a "resident power" collides with the reality of limited resources and political capital with which to deal with the many internal (e.g. in New Caledonia) and external, multifaceted challenges. The section ends with a chapter by Elsa Lafaye de Micheaux examining development aid. She argues that the withdrawal of USAID from Southeast Asia — a sub-region where Chinese aid and investment has constantly increased over the past few decades — has created an opportunity for Europe to become more engaged. Both the EU and its Member States should seize this historical opportunity to demonstrate the practical benefits of their approach.

Section three analyses the evolution of Germany's Indo-Pacific strategy and policies, and includes a chapter on the Dutch Indo-Pacific posture. Traditionally, foreign economic policy, particularly with regard to China, has formed the core of Berlin's vision of its role in the Indo-Pacific. However, due to a changing strategic environment, Germany's security engagement with the Indo-Pacific has increased significantly in recent years. Clara Hörning analyses the expansion of defence diplomacy in the area in detail and argues that German successes and shortcomings could provide Italy with valuable insights as it moves beyond the traditional economic dimension of its relationship with East Asia. As China has become more assertive in its foreign endeavours and continues to export overcapacity to Europe, endangering the future of German manufacturing, Linda Liang illustrates how Chancellor Friedrich Merz has adopted a tougher stance on China while diversifying partnerships under a de-risking strategy and multiplying issues of cooperation at the bilateral and multilateral levels. According to the author, this shift does not represent a "fundamental strategic change", but rather a "gradual adaptation". In conclusion, Liang suggests that German interests would be best served by taking joint European action. However, it seems that the current government is not interested in assuming a leadership role in this necessary coordination effort. Gudrun Wacker's contribution highlights the "China factor". She emphasises that Ger-

many has never viewed the Indo-Pacific as a social construct intended to contain China. Instead, Berlin has always adopted an inclusive approach, and the 2020 Guidelines were conceived as a "building block" for the EU's Indo-Pacific strategy. However, growing tensions between the West and Beijing, as well as industrial crises (especially in the automotive sector), have led Berlin to become more critical and sceptical of China, while simultaneously "upgrading" the partnership with Taiwan. Wacker argues that it remains to be seen whether Germany can reduce its companies' overdependence on China and implement an unequivocal de-risking strategy. Chapter nine by Patrick Köllner and Oliver Schramm considers all the elements outlined in the previous chapter and assesses Germany's Indo-Pacific strategy so far. They stress that the 2020 Guidelines broadened Berlin's Asia policy beyond an excessive focus on China and helped the federal government coordinate different ministries and agencies more effectively. The guidelines also generated proactive policies at the bilateral and multilateral levels. While the authors argue that Germany's experience offers some "strategically relevant lessons" for Italy and other EU Member States, they believe that European interests would be best served by "prioritisation" of activities, political and budgetary commitment, and — above all — a renewed EU Indo-Pacific framework that is convincingly supported by key states. In the final chapter of this section, we examine the Netherlands, a middle power whose economic prosperity hinges on global free trade. Gul-i-Hina van der Zwan presents the Dutch Indo-Pacific strategy as an example of the reorganisation of existing policies and organisational practices rather than the launch of new initiatives. Drawing on the example of the Netherlands, the author offers a lesson in humility to other middle powers, such as Italy: while the development of formal guidelines for an Italian Indo-Pacific strategy is a positive step, it should be viewed primarily as a means of enhancing Italy's contribution to the EU Indo-Pacific policy across the Mediterranean–Red Sea–Indian Corridor, which is of vital importance to Italy.

Finally, the perceptions of the renewed European presence in the Indo-Pacific are examined from the perspective of three key regional partners: Japan, Indonesia and South Korea. Gianluca Bonanno highlights how Tokyo now considers European involvement in the region to be a "structural component" of its FOIP vision. While Brussels' normative stance aligns with Japan's defence of a rules-based international order, renewed partnerships with individual Member States — notably Italy — are fostering economic and industrial diversification. However, the author points out that ongoing uncertainties in the international order, particularly within the framework of the alliance between Tokyo and Washington, could still pose a challenge to the honeymoon period between Europe and Japan. In the twelfth chapter, Marie Kwon analyses Southeast Asian perspectives from the perspective of Jakarta. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) plays a crucial role here. The principle of ASEAN centrality, widely accepted in diplomatic circles of the sub-region, means that European actions are most effective when they involve ASEAN-related institutions in a non-discriminatory regional effort. This would prevent Europe from being seen as just another player in the long game of great-power competition, which would be a necessary achievement considering the burden of its colonial past. In the final chapter, In Young Min evaluates how Germany's Indo-Pacific strategy is perceived in South Korea. While, similar to Tokyo, Seoul should in theory welcome Berlin's defence of an open liberal order, the twin realities of South Korea's unclear Indo-Pacific strategy and Germany's lack of visibility in Northeast Asia prevent the partnership from reaching its full potential.

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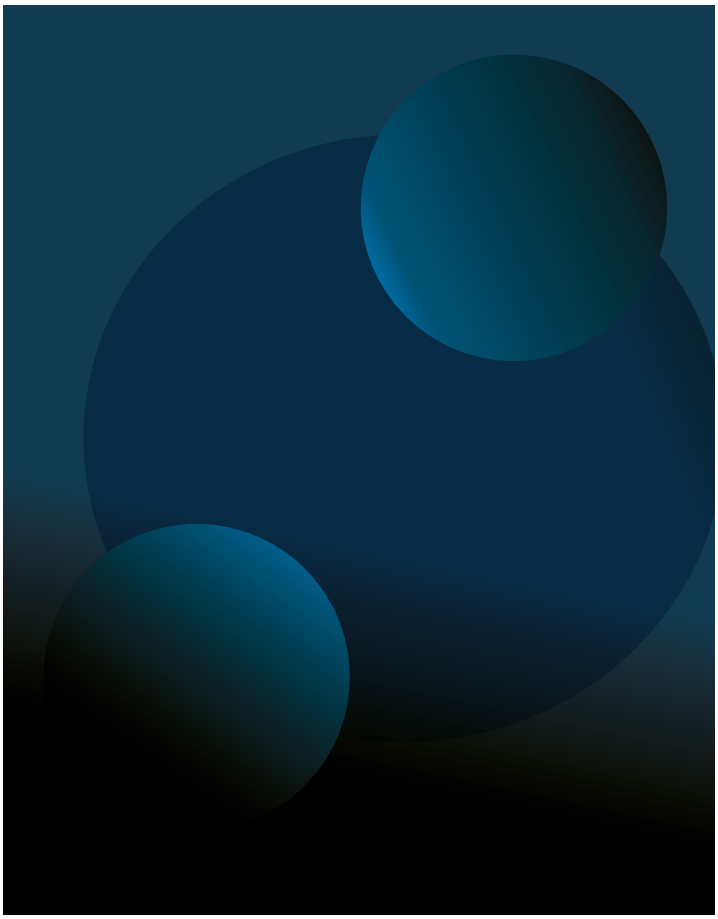
The Federal Government of Germany (2023) *Progress Report on the Implementation of the Federal Government's Policy Guidelines for the Indo-Pacific in 2023*, Berlin: Federal Foreign Office, available at: https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/resource/blob/2617992/61051683e7e1521583b3067fb3200ad8/230922-leitlinien-indo-pazifik-3-fortschrittsbericht-data.pdf, accessed 7 August 2026.

SECTION ONE

THE INDO-PACIFIC AND HOW IT MATTERS FOR EUROPE



From Asia-Pacific to Indo-Pacific: Geographical Delimitation and the Political Construction of a Mega World Region

Raimondo Neironi
T.wai and University of Rome, Tor Vergata

The concept of the Indo-Pacific has gained widespread currency in official documents in recent years and refers to the artificially constructed nature of a macro-region extending from the Western Pacific to the Eastern coast of Africa. Although the term is now widely used in academic research, policy analysis, and journalistic jargons, its precise boundaries remain problematic. This article examines the conceptual origins of the Indo-Pacific and its historical evolution from the "Asia-Pacific" to the "Indo-Pacific". In addition to this historical analysis, it identifies five analytical dimensions through which the emergence of this concept can be understood: geographical, IR theory, security, discursive, and ideational. Ultimately, this paper identifies five recurrent features across diverse visions and strategies of the Indo-Pacific, which together allow for the identification of a shared conceptual thread.

Introduction

The geographical delimitation of the vast region now commonly referred to as "Indo-Pacific" remains uncertain and problematic. First, there is still no scholarly consensus regarding the boundaries that define it. Second, even before the term Indo-Pacific came into use, the concept now associated with it – and previously articulated through the concept of "Asia-Pacific" – was inherently "ambiguous", as it challenged the conventional regional frameworks of Asia and Oceania.[1] Since the early twentieth century, long before the term Indo-Pacific entered the vocabulary of official documents, academic scholarship and the media, the region had already been recognised within the natural sciences as a vast and well-defined continuous "marine biogeographic region" or "province"[2] linking the Indian and Pacific Oceans through the Coral Triangle, which spans Indonesia, Malaysia, Timor-Leste, Papua

[1] Kolmaš, M., Qiao-Franco, G., Karmazin, A. (2024) "Understanding Region Formation through Proximity, Interests, and Identity: Debunking the Indo-Pacific As a Viable Regional DemarcZno spazio regionale emergente", In Gavinelli, D., Dal Borgo, A.G. (eds) *Asia-Pacifico: regione emergente. Luoghi, culture, relazioni*, Sesto San Giovanni: Mimesis Edizioni, 7; Beeson, M., Lee-Brown, T. (2017) "The Future of Asian Regionalism: Not What it Used to Be?", *Asia & the Pacific Policy Studies*, 4, 199.

[2] Erpenbeck, D. et al. (2026) "Barcoding-Inferred Biodiversity of Shallow-Water Indo-Pacific Demosponges", *Journal of Biogeography*, 53(3), 2; Fernandez-Silva, I. et al. (2015) "Yellow Tails in the Red Sea: Phylogeography of the Indo-Pacific Goatfish Mulloidichthys Flavolineatus Reveals Isolation in Peripheral Provinces and Cryptic Evolutionary Lineages", *Journal of Biogeography*, 42(12), 2402-2413. With regard to the usage of the term in the biological sciences, see also Pelaggi, S. (2024) "L'evoluzione storica del concetto di Indo-Pacifico e gli equilibri geostrategici della regione", In Carteny, A. (ed.) *Competizione globale, conflitti regionali e crisi politiche. Europa orientale, Medioriente e Indo-Pacifico*, Pesaro: Intra Edizioni, 271-278; Bisley, N. (2023) "The Indo-Pacific and Security: A New Fault Line", In Warren, A. (ed.) *Global Security in an Age of Crisis*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 357.

New Guinea, the Philippines, and the Solomon Islands. Its distinctive geological and biogeographical characteristics have made it a point of interest for coral reef research. The concept emerged later in lexical and anthropological studies, which has shown that early Austronesian peoples sketched out an "Indo-Pacific descriptions" shaped by the maritime environment of Asia and the Pacific.[3]

However, while this ambiguity pertains primarily to the geographical understanding of the term, the concept also requires an in-depth examination from a political and strategic perspective. In recent years, a growing and unprecedented Italian academic debate has emerged on the Indo-Pacific concept and on the role that Rome should assume in this strategically significant region, both in terms of national interests and businesses.[4] Italy's growing attention to this region is underpinned by its economic engagement: Italian exports to the region – including Central Asia – reached €53.1 billion in 2024, with machinery, textiles, and clothing accounting for the largest share.[5] The current and the previous governments have substantially strengthened its presence in the Indo-Pacific through increased military deployments and the promotion of defence procurement partnerships. In addition, reflecting Italy's broader commitment to sustainable development and socio-economic cooperation in the area, in May 2025 Italy further expanded its engagement with the area by signing two memoranda of understanding with the Asian Development Bank and Indonesia's state-owned electric utility company's PT PLN (Persero),[6] aimed at fostering dialogue and projects in climate change mitigation, food security, natural resource management, biodiversity conservation, and energy transition.

Italian institutions have devoted a great deal of attention to the Indo-Pacific since the hearings preceding the *Indagine conoscitiva sulle tematiche relative alla proiezione dell'Italia e dei Paesi europei nell'Indo-Pacifico*, released on 12 March 2025.[7] One of the key issues raised before the Foreign Affairs Committee on the Indo-Pacific of the Italian Chamber of Deputies was whether Italy ought to articulate a clear definition of the region's geographical boundaries within the framework of the European Union (EU)'s "Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific", adopted in 2021. Italy had formally endorsed the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" narrative as early as April 2019, following a bilateral summit in Rome between

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[3] See Matsuda, M.K. (2012) *Pacific Worlds: A History of Seas, Peoples, and Cultures*, Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 9-22.

[4] Academic scholarship and think tanks have produced a plethora of literature defining and assessing Italy's role in the Indo-Pacific. By way of example, see Caffarena, A., Gabusi, G. (2025) "Two Regions, One Order: Framing Strategic Collaboration for a Rules-Based International System", In Gabusi, G. (ed.) *Indo-Pacific Outlooks: Implications for the EU-ASEAN Relationship and Italy's Role in Southeast Asia*, Torino: T.wai - Torino World Affairs Institute,, 3 October, 11-21, available online; Termine, L., Natalizia, G. (2025) "Italy's Indo-Pacific Tilt (2021-2024): Diving into the Determinants of a Security Policy Change", *Contemporary Italian Politics*, 17(4), 465-483; Vesprini, A., Piasentini, M. (2025) "Drivers and Prospects for the Italian Economic Pivot in the Indo-Pacific", *Italian Political Science*, 20(1), 35-62; Abbondanza, G. (2024) "Italy's Quiet Pivot to the Indo-Pacific: Towards an Italian Indo-Pacific Strategy", *International Political Science Review*, 45(5), 669-679; Mazziotti di Celso, M., Natalizia, G., Termine, L. (2024) "Italy and the Indo-Pacific: The Strategic Dilemma of a Mediterranean Middle Power", *Strategic Leadership Journal,* 3, 69-82; Dell'Era, A., Pugliese, G. (2024) "Il ribilanciamento asiatico dell'Italia: driver e prospettive della cooperazione securitaria nell'Indo-Pacifico", In Termine, L., Ercolani, A. (eds) *Driver e ostacoli di un ribilanciamento asiatico dell'Italia*, Roma: UNINT University Press, 28-45, available online; Termine, L., Dell'Era, A. (2023) "Strategie di collegamento dell'Indo-Pacifico al Mediterraneo allargato. La prospettiva dell'Italia oltre il corridoio IMEC", Osservatorio di Politica internazionale, Approfondimento n. 210, December, available online.

[5] Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, Government of Italy (2025) *Action Plan for Italian Exports to High-Potential Extra-EU Markets*, 2 July, available online.

[6] Cassa Depositi e Prestiti (2025) *Cambiamento climatico, alimentazione e transizione energetica: al via nuovi progetti in Asia-Pacifico*, 5 May, available online.

[7] Chamber of Deputies, Italian Parliament (2025) *Indagine conoscitiva sulla proiezione dell'Italia e dei Paesi europei nell'Indo-Pacifico*, Rome, 12 March, available online.

President of the Council of Ministers Giuseppe Conte and Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo. On that occasion, the joint declaration underscored Italy's strategic location in the Mediterranean, positioning the country as a pivotal "focal point"[8] within the broader Indo-Pacific space. It was only thereafter that the region's geographical boundaries were systematically codified in official documents – such as the *Contributo italiano alla strategia europea per l'Indo-Pacifico* of 22 January 2022[9] – as well as parliamentary hearings.

To clarify the object of analysis, this article examines the historical origins of efforts to conceptualise a broad social-constructed region encompassing four continents – Asia, the Americas, Africa, and Europe. Rather than being a theoretical artifact, the Indo-Pacific has long been the subject of intellectual debate, reflecting attempts by regional and extra-regional powers to define and assign strategic meaning to a vast geographical space that has, for centuries, served as the theatre of explorations, trade, warfare, colonisation, and exploitation. Accordingly, the Indo-Pacific has been examined from a variety of perspectives, including historical, geographical, political, strategic, discursive, and ideational approaches. Through the combined contributions of academic scholarship and governmental strategies, it has become possible to shape and embed a regional space that today simultaneously connects and divides the actors operating within it. In conclusion, this contribution identifies five core features that entwine the Indo-Pacific strategies adopted by different states.

The Conceptual Origins of a Macro-Region

The Indo-Pacific region stretches from the coasts of North America to those of East Africa, while also extending into Europe insofar as states such as France and the United Kingdom maintain overseas territories in the Pacific. The involvement of these European powers extends the strategic scope of the Indo-Pacific beyond its conventional geographical boundaries, linking it not only to the Pacific and Indian Oceans but also, indirectly, to the Eastern Atlantic and, more significantly, the Mediterranean Sea through their overseas departments and dependencies and enduring strategic interests. This broader spatial understanding resounds with Italy's approach to the region. Although the current and the previous governments have not adopted a proper Indo-Pacific strategy, they increasingly have viewed developments in the Indo-Pacific as "complementary"[10] to, and "deeply interconnected"[11] with, its strategic objectives in the dubbed Wider Mediterranean. As Defence Minister Guido Crosetto has emphasised, this evolving strategic vision meshes with Italy's overarching Euro-Atlantic commitments and priorities.[12]

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[8] Ambasciata del Giappone in Italia (2019) "Visita del Primo ministro Abe in Italia", 17 May, available online.

[9] Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, Government of Italy (2022) *Contributo italiano alla strategia europea per l'Indo-Pacifico*, Rome, 20 January, available online.

[10] Abbondanza (2024) "Italy's Quiet Pivot…, 676.

[11] Coticchia, F., Mazziotti di Celso, M. (2025) "Still on the Same Path? Italian Foreign and Defence Policy in the Enlarged Mediterranean", *Mediterranean Politics*, 30(3), 652.

[12] Ministry of Defence, Government of Italy (2026) "Il Ministro Crosetto incontra il Comandante del Comando Indo-Pacifico degli Stati Uniti", Press Release, 30 May, available online.

As a "meta-geographical concept",[13] an imagined "super-regional construct",[14] or more simply a "mega-region",[15] the Indo-Pacific has evolved within distinct periods of time and political contexts and may consequently be designed as a social construct, shaped by multifaceted interests, narratives, and priorities of the actors involved. Despite significant differences cropping up over historical trajectories, institutional development, and strategic purpose, the Indo-Pacific framework may be understood as an attempt to delineate a new strategic and economic space, comparable in certain respects to the emergence of the North Atlantic area following the signing of the Washington Treaty in 1949 and the establishment of the Atlantic Alliance. Over time, the latter acquired a distinct strategic, military, and ideological identity as a collective response to the Soviet Union (USSR) and the Eastern Bloc. By contrast, the Indo-Pacific remains a more fluid and contested construct and lacks the foundations that have historically bound the North Atlantic Alliance together.

Since the emergence of the Asia-Pacific concept in the 1990s, the region has been characterised by an incoherent and contending political vision or identity, reflecting the diversity of interests, strategic cultures, and political orientations among the states that comprise it. However, although it cannot be considered a fixed geographical entity, the Indo-Pacific differs from its Euro-Atlantic counterpart in that it enables the study of historical connections that surpass conventional "national, imperial, and linguistic" boundaries, thereby revealing models of interaction and interdependence that are often obscured by traditional regional divisions.[16]

Those who view the Indo-Pacific as a social construct argue that it does not emerge from patterns of ancient trade and geographical discovery, nor from long-standing cultural or civilisational ties. To some degree, they contend that the concept originates within political science and International Relations as a discipline.[17] Within this framework, it has gradually become embedded in the foreign policy lexicon of several states – most notably Australia, India, Japan, and the United States (US) – particularly since 2010.[18] Such assumptions gained prominence in response to the rapid ascendancy of the People's Republic of China (PRC) and its subsequent consolidation as a central actor in Asian and global affairs. According to this line, the Indo-Pacific is understood primarily as a "strategic theatre stretching South and South-East from the Eurasian landmass",[19] which is designed to accommodate shifting regional power dynamics and to frame responses to China's ever-growing influence. Consequently, proponents of this view tend to regard attempts to trace the origins of the Indo-Pacific to earlier historical periods as analytically unconvincing.

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[13] Köllner, P., Jaffrelot, C., Allès, D. (2025) "Introduction: Order(ing) and Agency in the Indo-Pacific: Analytical Issues and the Contributions of this Volume", In Allès, D., Jaffrelot, C., Köllner, P. (eds) *Order and Agency in the Indo-Pacific. The Sciences Po Series in International Relations and Political Economy*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 1-3.

[14] Pan, C. (2014) "The 'Indo-Pacific' and Geopolitical Anxieties about China's Rise in the Asian Regional Order", *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 68(4), 458.

[15] Pugliese, G. (2024) "The European Union and an 'Indo-Pacific' Alignment", *Asia-Pacific Review*, 31(1), 17-44; Sundararaman, S. (2023) "Understanding the Indo-Pacific: Historical Context and Evolving Dynamics", In Kratiuk, B. et al. (eds) *Handbook of Indo-Pacific Studies*, New Delhi: Routledge, 11; Köllner, P. (2021), "Beyond 'Indo-Pacific': Understanding Small Pacific Powers on Their Own Terms", GIGA Focus Asia n. 5, November, available online.

[16] Kroupa, S., Mawson, S.J., Brixius D. (2018) "Science and Islands in Indo-Pacific Worlds", *British Journal for the History of Science*, 51(4), 544.

[17] Latham, A. (2025) "What or where is the Indo-Pacific? How a foreign policy pivot redefined the global map", *The Conversation*, 13 May, available online.

[18] He, K., Li, M. (2020) "Understanding the Dynamics of the Indo-Pacific: US-China Strategic Competition, Regional Actors, and Beyond", *International Affairs*, 96(1), 1.

[19] Cannon, B.J., Rossiter, A. (2025) "Rethinking and Arresting Eurasian Hegemony: The Centrality of Central Asia to Indo-Pacific Strategies", *International Affairs*, 101(4), 1193.

Pondering over historical developments in the Indian and Pacific Oceans during the Age of Discovery, the Turkish-American historian Arif Dirlik subscribed to the view that terms such as "Asia-Pacific" or "Pacific Basin" are not purely geographical descriptions, but "ideational constructs" that primarily defined historically produced interests and visions of power.[20] Both constructs perform two principal functions: first, they delineate a sphere of economic activity and influence through which one or more hegemonic actors seek to contain potential adversaries. Second, a "Pacific ideology" aims to align economic and political forces that do not inherently make up a coherent regional structure.[21] Either way, the fact that the Pacific is an "invented regional structure" does not imply that it exists only as an idea. Rather, its existence is grounded in "human interaction" and in the conceptual frameworks that assign meaning to those interactions.[22] As a matter of fact, people-to-people exchanges, connections among different political systems, and the strategic and economic significance that a given area holds for a hegemon operating within it may constitute sufficient criteria for defining the boundaries of territories that otherwise lack cultural and political homogeneity.

However, these positions overlook a long and substantial historiographical debate concerning the existence of effective geographical ties in the Indo-Pacific that have intimately connected the Indian and Pacific Oceans for centuries,[23] as well as the developments that hit the science of geopolitics in the first half of the Twentieth century. References to what would later be conceptualised as the Indo-Pacific was considered by the geographer Oskar Spate as "a Euro-American artifact". In fact, it was European voyagers who brought together its disparate parts into "larger entities".[24] Initially characterised as a "Spanish lake" during the period of Iberian maritime predominance, the Pacific was later described as a "British lake" in the context of a nineteenth-century transoceanic order shaped by British commercial and naval expansion, particularly following the imposition of the "treaty-port system" on China in the 1840s. Afterwards, the Pacific came to be portrayed as an "American lake", reflecting the growing strategic, political, and economic instrumentality of the US across the central and southern Pacific, the Philippines, and China. With maritime Asia at its core, the Indian and Pacific Oceans were increasingly regarded as a single interconnected space, not only in strategic and commercial terms but also in "cultural" terms, as a composite region shaped by shared historical legacies and broadly comparable social attitudes.[25]

The concept of an integrated geographical space can be traced back to the 1920s writings of Karl Haushofer, a German general, geographer, and professor at Munich's Ludwig Maximilian University, whom many scholars have framed – if somewhat overstatedly[26] – as an ideological and cultural vanguard of Nazi Germany. Li Hansong stresses that Haushofer put forward the "Indo-Pacific Space" (*Indopazifischen Raum*) theory in a bid to identify a strategic foothold for the post-

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[20] Dirlik, A. (2021) "Introducing the Pacific", In Dirlik, A. (ed.) *What Is in a Rim?: Critical Perspectives on the Pacific Region Idea*, Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 3-4.

[21] Dirlik, A. (1992) "The Asia-Pacific Idea: Reality and Representation in the Invention of a Regional Structure", *Journal of World History*, 3(1), 56.

[22] Dirlik (2021) "Introducing the Pacific", 3-4.

[23] Kolmaš, Qiao-Franco, Karmazin (2024) "Understanding Region Formation…", 1068.

[24] Spate, O.H.K. (1978) "The Pacific as an Artefact", In Gunson, N. (ed.) *The Changing Pacific: Essays in Honour of H.E. Maude*, Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 32-45.

[25] Yadav, R.S. (1991) "Regions International Politics: A Study of the Indian Ocean", *India Quarterly*, 47(1/2), 30.

[26] See Rainer, G., Dudek, S. (2023) "Beyond Haushoferism: Geography, Geopolitics and National Socialist Rule at Munich's Ludwig Maximilian University", *Geopolitics*, 28(5), 1967-1989.

WWI Germany within the international maritime space. As he was aware he was formulating an international Indo-Pacific strategy, he not only justified the spatial integration of the Indian and Pacific Oceans on the basis of their "oceanographic" continuity, but also argued that the Indo-Pacific space was conducive to the emergence of political self-consciousness, particularly in the context of then nascent anti-colonial movements. In this view, the political re-emergence of nations along the Indo-Pacific maritime belt would undermine Anglo-American and Western European colonial dominance and thereby contribute to the reconfiguration of the international order.[27]

While Japanese intellectuals had previously produced largely ineffective attempts to canvass a purportedly shared Asian view[28] in political terminology capable of challenging Western colonial influence during the era of Japan's imperial expansion, it was only during the Cold War that proposals began to emerge for a broader political community linking newly independent Asian states with those of the Pacific, with Japan and Australia at the forefront of efforts to develop the concept of a Pacific community during this period. In the early 1960s, Japan's Prime Minister Ikeda Hayato proposed a regional organisation comprising his country, Australia, Indonesia, New Zealand, and the Philippines, with Malaysia and Thailand potentially to be invited at a later stage. The initiative was primarily economic in nature and was supported by representatives of Japanese companies, including firms such as Toshiba. Although Japan proceeded "very cautiously and gradually towards any larger political role" in Asia, owing to "the legacy of hostility and suspicion" that persisted in several Asian countries following the Pacific War, the Pacific community as a "counterpoise to the growth of Chinese power"[29] ultimately failed to materialise, in part because it depended on the ratification of trade agreements between Japan and certain Southeast Asian states.

In contrast, the prospect of engaging the PRC following the normalisation of bilateral diplomatic relations was among the strategic considerations of Australian Prime Minister Gough Whitlam. His initial soundings in January 1973 regarding an "Asia Pacific Community" that might include Beijing and other Communist governments in the region (North Vietnam) were met with scepticism in Southeast Asia.[30] In this vision, Asia's three sub-regions (South, Southeast, and Northeast Asia) and the two oceans (the Indian and Western Pacific) would form a single regional strategic and maritime system. However, as with some subsequent initiatives, the absence of a broad regional consensus and of the political will required to bring together states across the Indian and Pacific Oceans meant that the idea of creating a macro-region brought to a standstill at least until the late 1980s, at a time when then Australian Prime Minister Bob Hawke publicly floated the idea of an intergovernmental economic institution based in the "Asia-Pacific re-

[27] Li, H. (2023) "The 'Indo-Pacific': Intellectual Origins and International Visions in Global Contexts", *Modern Intellectual History*, 19, 810.

[28] Masamichi Royama and other colleagues at Tokyo Imperial University advanced the notion of an "East Asian Community", envisaging a regionally integrated political and economic order in East Asia. Although initially framed in intellectual and academic terms, this concept later provided part of the ideological foundation for the more expansive and politically charged vision embodied in the "Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere".

[29] Memo n. 1270 "Pacific Community" from F.R. Dalrymple (Office of the High Commissioner for Australia, London) to Secretary Sir A.H. Tange (Department of External Affairs, Canberra), 2nd August 1963, National Archives of Australia (NAA) A1838, 3103/7/2/1 PART 1, Japan – External relations – Pacific economic community.

[30] Halvorson, D. (2016) "From Cold War Solidarity to Transactional Engagement: Reinterpreting Australia's Relations with East Asia, 1950-1974", *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 18(2), 153-158.

gion".[31] As a quintessential expression of Australia's "middle-power activism",[32] the establishment of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) marked the first successful effort to define the spatial boundaries of a highly interdependent, tricontinental region. As the Cold War drew to a close, this represented a notable structural milestone.

The Post-Cold War Asia-Pacific

As APEC expanded its membership to include countries such as China (in 1991), the concept of "Asia-Pacific" gradually re-emerged towards the end of the Cold War.[33] The rise of Asia as a major economic force reinforced the conceptual linkage between Asia and the Pacific in academic scholarship, which began to posit that economic integration would eventually enhance closer security cooperation.[34] In the mid-1990s, the US leveraged its economic, political, and strategic assets to shape an emerging Pacific order centred on American leadership.[35] In fact, an Asia-Pacific ideational concept would prove vital to establish and sustain open regionalism, allowing the Bill Clinton administration to champion global, regional, and bilateral economic integration. The collapse of the USSR in 1991 and the resulting American "unipolar moment" stimulated novel discourses on the necessity of a regional security architecture. Institutional features such as the foundations of non-binding arrangements (i.e. ASEAN Regional Forum, ARF), consensus-driven decision-making, and ASEAN centrality – the latter representing an "unusual concession"[36] from major powers – became the defining characteristics of US-sponsored Asia-Pacific order. Despite the Clinton administration's engagement with multilateral tracks like the ARF and the Northeast Asia Cooperation Dialogue intended to institutionalise preventive diplomacy and confidence-building measures, regional security dialogue often remained secondary to economic integration.

Since the early Twenty-first century, the unity of the Indian subcontinent, East Asia, and the Pacific has been "rediscovered" as a concept.[37] As economic, security and ideological rivalry between the US and China has built up, it drives a systematic reconceptualisation of "broader Asia" – a shift that reflects evolving power balances and incompatible visions of regional architecture.[38] Christian Wirth and Nicole Jenne posit that the Indo-Pacific framework essentially extends earlier efforts by East Asian governments to address the political deficit left by a sluggish post-Cold War order. This systemic "void" sprung primarily from Washington's hesitation to buttress multilateral regional architecture, coupled with its ambiguous stance toward ASEAN-led frameworks – extending beyond the ARF to include the East Asia Summit and ASEAN Plus Three. As a result, rival ma-

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[31] Australian Government, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (1989) "Speech by the Prime Minister Welcome Dinner for Delegates to the Ministerial Meeting On Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation", Canberra, 5 November, available online.

[32] Day, B. (2026) "Success and Failure in Foreign Policy: Comparing Bob Hawke and Kevin Rudd's Regional Order-building Initiatives", *Australian Journal of Public Administration*, 85(2), 312.

[33] Pardesi, M.S. (2020) "The Indo-Pacific: A 'New' Region or the Return of History?", *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 74(2), 135.

[34] Sundararaman (2023) "Understanding the Indo-Pacific…", 11.

[35] Manning, R.A., Stern, P. (1994) "The Myth of the Pacific Community", *Foreign Affairs*, 73(6), 92.

[36] Moon, C-I. (2023) "Asia-Pacific vs. Indo-Pacific: Paradigm Shift or False Choice?", *Global Asia*, 18(3), 14-15.

[37] Scott, D. (2023) "The Return of the 'Indo-Pacific'", *Asia Maior*, 24, 434.

[38] Liu, F. (2020) "The Recalibration of Chinese Assertiveness: China's Responses to the Indo-Pacific Challenge", *International Affairs*, 96(1), 11.

jor powers stepped forward to contest and design this thin institutional environment.[39] In contrast to the Asia-Pacific paradigm, the Indo-Pacific concept manifests a clear-cut separation between economic and security considerations.[40]

The Emergent Indo-Pacific: Security, Ideational, and Discursive Foundations

The discussion in the previous paragraphs demonstrates that the origins of the Indo-Pacific concept can be traced through a longer historical trajectory, and that some scholars interpret its contemporary prominence as a re-articulation of an older vision of a macro-region spanning four continents. It has also been argued that the Indo-Pacific constitutes a social and political construct, shaped by academic and policy debates rather than by any self-evident geographical unity. In this sense, the concept brings together the Indian and Pacific Oceans within a single analytical framework, encompassing a highly diverse space characterised by a multiplicity of cultures, peoples, languages, religions, and political systems. At this stage, it is crucial to consider additional dimensions of the Indo-Pacific concept, including both its security implications and its discursive and ideational foundations. Indeed, the concept of the Indo-Pacific – and the debate over whether to retain the older Asia-Pacific framework – gained significant traction during the first decade of this century, particularly within the Australian academic community.

For instance, security forms the primary analytical focus for Rory Medcalf, who argues that the Indo-Pacific framework is fundamentally driven by the dual emergence of China and India as expansive economic and military actors whose strategic interests have spilled into each other's traditional maritime domains. Far from being a mechanism for Chinese exclusion, Medcalf conceives this space as an integrated "super-region" whose geographic boundaries remain "fluid", with Asia "unquestionably" at its core,[41] thus eclipsing the centrality of the Indian subcontinent. That the Indo-Pacific is a construct explicitly anchored in security interests is evident from the extensive reliance of governments and public rhetoric on old strategic concepts such as "containment" and "spheres of influence". These notions, alongside newer formulations like the "pivot" or "rebalance", have been reinterpreted to justify contemporary strategies by exploiting the potential for a systemic clash between the region's primary competitors – the US and China – thereby catalysing a renewed bipolar confrontation reminiscent of the Cold War.[42]

On the other hand, while acknowledging that the Indo-Pacific construct is rooted in strategic considerations, Nick Bisley and other constructivist IR scholars maintain that it transcends a simple territorial expansion of states, representing instead a distinct ideational framework based on shared values for the US and its principal allies. This "integrated geographically expansive zone", which since the mid-1970s has generated unprecedented levels of socioeconomic development and prosperity, has simultaneously become the central theatre of prolonged "volatility". This environment emerged as a direct consequence of strategic recalibrations by the US and many of its allies and partners, who abandoned traditional Asia-centric mod-

[39] Wirth, C., Jenne, N. (2022) "Filling the Void: The Asia-Pacific Problem of Order and Emerging Indo-Pacific Regional Multilateralism", *Contemporary Security Policy*, 43(2), 213-242.

[40] Kwon, M. (2023) "The Emergence of the Indo-Pacific: Geopolitical Turn or Continuity?", *E-International Relations*, 11 April, available online.

[41] Medcalf, R. (2014) "In Defence of the Indo-Pacific: Australia's New Strategic Map", *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 68(4), 471-473.

[42] Doyle, T., Rumley, D. (2019) *The Rise and Return of the Indo-Pacific*, New York: Oxford University Press, 45-67.

els in favour of the broader "Indo-Pacific idea" – thereby signalling a profound regional power transition.[43] Nevertheless, this perspective of a shared ideational framework is congruent with an interpretation that privileges the conceptualisation of the Indo-Pacific advanced by the US, Japan, and Australia.

Ultimately, Pan Chengxin underscores the discursive nature surrounding the Indo-Pacific framework, contending that, rather than existing as an objective geographical reality, it functions as a socially constructed narrative whose implementation impinge upon regional stability. Pan traces this systemic friction to three overlapping dynamics. First, the framework furnished the intellectual scaffolding for the Barack H. Obama administration to execute its "pivot to Asia" (or "rebalance"[44]). Second, the shifting material balance triggered by the rise of China and India amplified a structural reliance on US security guarantees in Tokyo, Seoul, Manila, and Canberra. Such an anxiety has been "encapsulated" in the Indo-Pacific nomenclature.[45] A third factor, while not explicitly identified in Pan's seminal analysis but integrated by Rebecca Strating to complement his reflection, is the role of this rhetorical architecture as a mechanism for sustaining an "open and rules-based order", through which it projects a normative vision where state behaviour, especially in the maritime realm, is tempered by existing international law.[46]

Building upon this discursive lens, Thomas Wilkins and Kim Jiye demonstrate that major and middle powers have leveraged the Indo-Pacific concept to formulate tailored grand strategies. Far from just an abstract concept, this conceptual architecture encompasses both strategic "initiatives and countermeasures", offering a vehicle through which states construct and project distinct political narratives against specific adversaries and threats to protect their own vested interests.[47] With this conviction in mind, the effort to conceptualise a mega-region constitutes a mere pretext for these states to identify and entrap a designated enemy, or to encircle a potential menace perceived as inimical to their own national interests.

The Politics of Naming a Macro-Region

Crafting a grand strategy for a macro-region is not limited to defining its geographic perimeters; it also aims to identify the key challenges emerging within the maritime locus, and articulate foundational principles. However, they do not always propose concrete, operational solutions. While Australia pioneered the formal interpretation of the Indo-Pacific within its state doctrine, the construct quickly evolved into an overarching global paradigm as Japan, US, India, ASEAN, and the EU successively infused the framework with their own distinct objectives. This section explicates how these actors delineate the Indo-Pacific in strict territorial terms. Furthermore, it scrutinises the distinctly structured economic visions pursued by China and Russia within this contested area. This dimension is frequently overlooked in current scholarship, which often erroneously treats Beijing and

[43] Bisley (2023) "The Indo-Pacific and…", 354-357.

[44] Signalled by US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's October 2011 *Foreign Policy* essay and underscored by President Obama during his address in Australia later that year, the "Asia rebalance" represented a comprehensive US strategic shift towards Asia and the Pacific. Encompassing security, economic, and human rights domains, this many-sided effort defined Obama's foreign policy throughout his two terms in office.

[45] Pan (2014) "The 'Indo-Pacific' and…", 458-459.

[46] Strating, R. (2023) "The Rules-based Order As Rhetorical Entrapment: Comparing Maritime Dispute Resolution in the Indo-Pacific", *Contemporary Security Policy*, 44(3), 373.

[47] Wilkins, T., Kim, J. (2022) "Adoption, Accommodation or Opposition? – Regional Powers Respond to American-led Indo-Pacific Strategy", *The Pacific Review*, 35(3), 438.

Moscow as mere passive subjects reacting to the strategies implemented by Western powers, their allies, and other regional players.

In 2012, the Julia Gillard government made Australia the first country to formally incorporate the Indo-Pacific into its strategic lexicon. Aligning with the Australian Labour Party's historic legacy of defining regional borders across Asia and the Pacific, the proposed framework envisaged the Western Pacific and Indian Oceans as a "single strategic arc", shaped by intensifying economic interdependence across Asia and the growing significance of Middle Eastern energy flows. This framing also reflects the emergence of a broader trans-Asian orientation, as highlighted by India's 1992 "Look East" policy and the reciprocal westward engagement of Northeast and Southeast Asian states, both of which underscore deepening economic, historical, and energy-driven linkages across the region.

Although Canberra pioneered the spatial mapping of the macro-region, Japan has consistently sought to "reify"[48] the Indo-Pacific transforming it from a mere geographical descriptor into a cohesive strategic concept aimed at addressing specific political and security challenges within its foreign policy. The Japanese foundational vision drew upon two distinct diplomatic pillars: Aso Taro's 2006 "Arc of Freedom and Prosperity" – which originally extended towards Western Europe across Central Asia, the Middle East, the Caucasus, and then newly democratic states of Eastern Europe[49] – and Shinzo's 2007 "Confluence of the Two Seas" address.[50] By internalising these statements, Tokyo formally integrated India into its "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP) strategy, which then Prime Minister Abe explicitly unveiled at the Sixth Tokyo International Conference on African Development in Nairobi in 2016. From a political perspective, Abe imagined the liberal maritime order defended by this strategy as a critical counterweight to Beijing's unfolding "charm offensive" across the Global South,[51] drawing a tacit parallel to the containment strategy of the 1960s. This enduring belief persisted until at least 2018, when Tokyo deliberately recalibrated the FOIP from a strategy into a vision.[52] At once, in ideological terms, he envisaged an "Expanded Asia" (*kakudai Ajia*) wherein Japan and India – anchored at opposite maritime peripheries – act as the primary custodians tasked with safeguarding freedom of navigation and securing the vital sea lines of communication linking the East China, South China, and Indian Oceans. Extending through vital chokepoints such as the Strait of Hormuz, the Strait of Bab-el-Mandeb, and the Suez Canal, Japan's FOIP vision logically expands the geographic and strategic parameters of the Indo-Pacific theatre encompassing not only the Middle East and East Africa, but stretching well beyond, potentially projecting its reach as far as the Mediterranean Sea.

In the US, the evolution of strategic discourse on Asia between 2002 and 2017 underscores a profound conceptual reorientation in geographical and political cartography. While the George W. Bush administration's 2002 *National Security*

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[48] Tamaki, T. (2024) "Re-reading the Indo-Pacific as *Aidagara*: Watsuji Tetsuro's Relevance to Japan's Foreign Relations", *Critical Asian Studies*, 56(3), 409-410.

[49] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Japan (2006) "Speech by Mr. Aso Taro, Minister for Foreign Affairs On the Occasion of the Japan Institute of International Affairs Seminar 'Arc of Freedom and Prosperity: Japan's Expanding Diplomatic Horizons'", Tokyo, 30 November, available online.

[50] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Japan (2007) "Confluence of the Two Seas: Speech by H.E. Mr. Abe Shinzo, Prime Minister of Japan at the Parliament of the Republic of India", New Delhi, 22 August, available online.

[51] Watanabe, T. (2019) "Japan's Rationale for the Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy [1]", *Sasakawa Peace Foundation*, 30 October, available online.

[52] Heiduk, F., Wacker, G. (2020) "From Asia-Pacific to Indo-Pacific: Significance, Implementation and Challenges", Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik Research, Paper n. 9, 7 July, available online.

Strategy anchored its approach to the Asia-Pacific primarily within institutional frameworks like APEC, the Obama administration's 2010 iteration largely sidelined this terminology,[53] opting instead to delineate engagement across "the Asian and the Pacific" to substantiate its strategic rebalance towards the area.[54] A definitive shift occurred under the first Trump administration: the 2017 National Security Strategy formally institutionalised the Indo-Pacific paradigm, explicitly characterising the region as a contested "economic and geopolitical battleground".[55] This framework deliberately aligned US policy with complementary regional constructs, notably Japan's "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" and India's "Act East" policy. Crucially, this semantic change has injected a novel vocabulary[56] into regional security architecture, driving the proliferation of "minilateral" mechanisms – such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), initiated in 2007 and revitalised in 2017 – and "trilateral" initiatives, exemplified by the AUKUS pact.[57] By prioritising institutional flexibility and smaller-scale configurations, these security arrangements have increasingly emasculated the traditional centrality of ASEAN-led multilateral forums in regional governance.

India has systematically challenged the post-1945 cartographic bifurcation of the Pacific and Indian Oceans, perceiving this "artificial"[58] division as a legacy artifact of US strategic hegemony. In its place, Indian strategic architecture embraces the Indo-Pacific as an indivisible maritime space or, what External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar characterised in 2019, as a "diverse" and far-flung "wide arc".[59] This conceptual framing revived the doctrine of the indivisibility of the sea, a principle rooted in the classic maritime strategy of Alfred T. Mahan and later adapted by the Indian diplomat K.M. Panikkar in the mid-1940s to argue for the strategic unity of India's oceanic approaches.[60] This reorientation found its first operational expression in 2014, when the New Delhi government transitioned from its legacy "Look East" posture to an assertive "Act East" policy, a shift announced by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in Myanmar. Modi himself explicitly articulated an expansive vision of the Indo-Pacific, defining it as a "natural region" stretching from the African coast to the Americas.[61] By explicitly including Latin America, New Delhi's broad geographic conception directly challenged the more restrictive regional parameters preferred by Washington. However, India's inauguration of the "Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative" at the 14th East Asia Summit in 2019 marked the

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[53] White House (2010) *National Security Strategy*, Washington D.C., May, 42, available online.

[54] White House (2015) *National Security Strategy*, Washington D.C., February, available online.

[55] White House (2025) *National Security Strategy*, Washington D.C., November, 19, available online. In June 2026 the US Department of War announced a reversion of the Indo-Pacific Command's name to the "US Pacific Command", thereby reversing the rebranding introduced during President Trump's first administration.

[56] Hanada, R. (2026) "Minilateralism: A New Page for Indo-Pacific IR Lexicon", *Pacific Review*, 39(3), 608.

[57] The QUAD is a diplomatic partnership between Australia, India, Japan, and the US committed to intensifying cooperation in maritime security, health policy, and climate change. The beginning of the QUAD as a grouping can be traced in the so-called "Tsunami Core Group", an ad-hoc grouping that sprang up to respond to the 2004 devastating Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami. Instead, the AUKUS is a trilateral security partnership formed in 2021 by Australia, Great Britain, and the US, involving two "pillars". The first pillar centers on the supply and delivery of nuclear-powered attack submarines; the second one is about the three members collaborating on sharing military expertise in areas such as long-range hypersonic missiles, robotics and Artificial Intelligence.

[58] Muraleedharan, V. (2021) "Remarks 6th Indian Ocean Dialogue", In Mahawar, N.K., Sakhuja, V. (eds), *Indo-Pacific: Re-Imagining the Indian Ocean through an Expanded Geography*, New Delhi: KW Publishers, 19.

[59] Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India (2022) "Address by External Affairs Minister, Dr. S. Jaishankar at the Chulalongkorn University on India's Vision of the Indo-Pacific", Bangkok, 18 August, available online.

[60] See Kanth, M. (2025) "Ordering the Post-Colonial Oceanic Space(s): K.M. Panikkar and the Origins of India's Maritime 'Resurgence'", *Global Studies Quarterly*, 5(3).

[61] Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India (2018) "Prime Minister's Keynote Address at Shangri La Dialogue", Singapore, 1st June, available online.

institutionalisation of a maritime strategy that does not accord higher priority to the Indian Ocean at the expense of the Pacific. Rather, this shift reinforces its Act East policy by maintaining ASEAN centrality, thereby progressively integrating the Western Pacific into India's national security strategy.

Regional and institutional actors have similarly engaged in the spatial demarcation of the Indo-Pacific. In 2019, ASEAN – acting more as a coherent region than a conventional intergovernmental body – issued an outlook that framed the Indo-Pacific as a composite of the "wider Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean regions", with Southeast Asia positioned firmly at the centre. Eschewing a focus on contiguous landmasses, ASEAN defined the region as an interdependent, "interconnected" maritime system,[62] though it remarkably neglected Africa and critical strategic chokepoints. By contrast, the EU pursued a different trajectory. Launched in 2021, the EU's strategy adopts a mercantilist lens that treats the Indian Ocean as a critical transit route connecting Europe to Asian commercial hubs.[63] Furthermore, by expanding institutional ties with the African Union and Western Indian Ocean littoral states, Brussels has explicitly incorporated the African continent into the Indo-Pacific matrix, establishing a wider geographic scope than that envisioned by Japan's FOIP.

China and Russia counter these regional strategies/outlooks with their own scaled geoeconomic visions, such as China's Belt and Road (BRI) and its recent four "Global Initiatives" (development, security, civilisation, and governance), launched between 2021 and 2025. PRC's major critique of the Indo-Pacific is not strictly geographic, but rather ideological; it views the concept as a mechanism for reproducing Cold War polarisation and forcing regional actors to side with the US. Russia, for its part, has similarly constructed alternative spatial rubrics, transitioning from "Greater East Asia"[64] (composed of North-East Asia, South-East Asia, Central, and South Asia) toward a vast "Greater Eurasia"[65] framework that links the Atlantic, Pacific, and Arctic oceans. Moscow's dismissal of the Indo-Pacific stems from its structural aversion to resurgent US primacy, which clashes with Russia's assessment that Western authority in Asia is irreversibly reducing.[66] The institutional rejection of what are believed as a Western-led spatial designations is underscored by BRICS, whose annual summit communiqués and declarations systematically omit both the "Asia-Pacific" and "Indo-Pacific" terminology. This act may be interpreted as a reflection of the significant diplomatic leverage exerted by its principal architects, Beijing and Moscow.

Five Core Features of Indo-Pacific Strategies and Visions

Regardless of divergent national interpretations concerning its spatial boundaries and strategic orientations, the demarcation of the "Indo-Pacific" reveals at least five shared commonalities. These features are not determined by physical geography but instead reflect political, economic, and strategic considerations.

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[62] ASEAN Secretariat (2019) *ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific*, Jakarta, 22 June, available online.

[63] European Commission (2021) *Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council: The EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific*, Brussels, 16 September, available online.

[64] Lunev, S., Shavlay, E. (2018) "Russia and India in the Indo-Pacific", *Asian Politics & Policy*, 10(4), 713-731. The concept of "Greater East Asia" has traditionally found strong backing among scholars at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations, an institution directly affiliated with the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

[65] Denisov, I. et al. (2021) "Russia, China, and the Concept of Indo-Pacific", *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 12(1), 73.

[66] Rozman, G. (2024) "Conceptualisation of the Indo-Pacific in Russia's 'Turn to the East'", In Rozman, G., Christoffersen, G. (eds) *Putin's "Turn to the East" in the Xi Jinping Era*, Vol. 1, Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 172.

First and foremost, the Indian and Pacific Oceans are structurally linked as a "single contiguous area" from both economic and security perspectives.[67] The intensifying connectivity between the two oceans has generated a unified "maritime unit"[68] wherein shifts in one sector trigger immediate systemic repercussions elsewhere.[69] This structural interdependence is vividly illustrated by how localised flashpoints – most notably a potential cross-Strait crisis over Taiwan or the ongoing territorial disputes in the South and East China Seas – instantly reverberate across the wider Indo-Pacific security architecture.

Second, another common factor shaping the geographical concept of the Indo-Pacific is the recognition of India's role as a vital anchor of a rules-based maritime order. This is driven by New Delhi's ever growing economic weight, its strategic proximity to Southeast Asia, and the broadening of its defence cooperation with various regional partners. This alignment dates back to July 2011, when Hillary Clinton explicitly framed India as a "balancing force"[70] within the Obama administration's strategic pivot, essentially coopting it alongside Washington as a co-guardian of vital waterways.[71] Yet, while this framework hinges on India sustaining an increasingly proactive regional posture, a fundamental structural friction persists: indeed, New Delhi remains largely decoupled from the dense "East Asian and trans-Pacific production networks" that originally defined the economic architecture of the traditional Asia-Pacific.[72]

Third, the Indo-Pacific construct is fundamentally driven by a collective imperative to manage, rather than socialise, the many-sided challenge of an assertive[73] China. This perception – manifested across economic, technological, and maritime domains – reflects a growing consensus that Beijing exhibits structural revisionism. This behaviour stems less from a rejection of the current international order's norms than from deep dissatisfaction with China's subordinate status within the regional "hierarchy"[74] that emerged after the end of World War II. Faced with the structural hurdles of a latecomer, Beijing has deployed the BRI and other alternative strategies[75] to bypass status quo biases and modify existing institutional frameworks to suit its national preferences.[76] Thus, the shared anticipation of systemic disruption serves as the primary catalyst for the widespread adoption of the Indo-Pacific framework, compelling the US, its allies, and India to craft coun-

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[67] Heiduk, Wacker (2020) "From Asia-Pacific to…".

[68] Sundararaman (2023) "Understanding the Indo-Pacific…", 11.

[69] Medcalf (2014) "In Defence of the…", 471.

[70] Cheng, H. et al. (2026) "The Indo-Pacific: In What Sense a Region?", *Dialogues in Human Geography*, 16(1), 247.

[71] US Department of State (2011) "Hillary R. Clinton's Remarks on India and the United States: A Vision for the 21st Century", Chennai, 20 July, available online.

[72] Acharya, A. (2024) "Turning the idea of the Indo-Pacific into reality", *East Asia Forum*, 13 June, available online.

[73] Among the principal manifestations of Chinese assertiveness are Beijing's rapid military modernisation and its increasingly assertive rhetoric and conduct in territorial, diplomatic, and economic disputes with neighbouring countries in the East China Sea and the South China Sea, see Liu (2020) "The Recalibration of Chinese…", 9; see also Stevens, F.M.S. (2025) *Chinese Assertiveness, Ideational Mobilization, and The Rise of Xi Jinping: Achieving Something*, Abingdon: Routledge; Strating, 372-409; Turcsányi, R.Q. (2018) *Chinese Assertiveness in South China Sea*, Cham: Springer Nature; Feng, H., He, K. (2014) "Examining China's Assertiveness through the Eyes of Chinese IR Scholars", *RSIS – S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies*, Working Paper n. 281, 17 September, available online.

[74] Zhao, S. (2018) "A Revisionist Stakeholder: China and the Post-World War II World Order", *Journal of Contemporary China*, 27(113), 644.

[75] Liu, L. (2021) "Beyond the Status Quo and Revisionism: An Analysis of the Role of China and the Approaches of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to the Global Order", *Asian Journal of Political Science*, 29(1), 105.

[76] Stephen, M.D. (2025) "Beyond Multilateralism: China's International Order Building through Transnational Policy Forums", *The Pacific Review*, 1-26.

terbalancing grand strategies.

Fourth, Southeast Asia is structurally placed at the centre of the Indo-Pacific construct. Yet, while this narrative of "centrality" is universally endorsed by the indigenous and external powers behind these various Indo-Pacific strategies and visions, translating this rhetorical commitment into actionable policy remains a long-term challenge. In recent years, the IISS Shangri-la Dialogue has evolved into the primary venue for addressing the most acute security issues in the Indo-Pacific, thus increasingly overshadowing ASEAN-led mechanisms. At issue is whether this centrality will be endowed with a functional political mandate or will remain a purely geographical conception.

Fifth, since they span two oceans, the various strategies and visions on the Indo-Pacific focus directly on achieving multilateral coordination to address shared interests, specifically in the maritime domain.[77] The safety of shared pathways is thus treated as a collective priority. Putting this into practice requires moving beyond basic rhetoric surrounding freedom of navigation to handle a wide range of daily security challenges. Upholding international law, tracking maritime activity, and defusing accidents from escalating need closer cooperation and unambiguous, shared codes of conduct.

Conclusion

As the historiographical debate demonstrates, the demarcation of the Pacific and Indian Oceans has long been contested by powers that were either indigenous to the region or – as in the case of imperial states – present in this vast arena to secure territorial control and manage trade routes linking colonies to the metropoles. Whereas the deliberate attempt to inscribe Asia and the Pacific within a joint conceptual field was predominantly imperial in intent during the colonial era, post-WWII frameworks sought to convene as many states as possible around shared imperatives of economic growth and regional cooperation, as evidenced by the initiatives of Ikeda and Whitlam between the 1960s and the 1970s. Today, despite lacking universally recognised boundaries, the Indo-Pacific functions as a political construct, engineered within contemporary strategic frameworks to be as geographically inclusive as possible. Every strategy and vision has developed its own institutional geometry within the Indo-Pacific, featuring fixed or, less frequently, fuzzy parameters that define the contours of a mega-region now vital to the core interests of major global states and actors. Nonetheless, if the dictum "the boundary is the law, and the law is the assertion of boundaries"[78] is applied to a mega-region rather than a unified political community, the conceptual validity of the Indo-Pacific becomes weak. As a matter of fact, the area suffers from a lack of normative cohesion, as evidenced by the deep disagreements among its actors regarding the international rules, norms and principles that should govern the vast maritime sphere, especially the boiling front of the South China Sea.

Given that the geographic scope of the Indo-Pacific macro-region remains contingent upon specific strategic visions of various states and actors, these boundaries have evolved significantly since the early 1990s. At first, the concept of the "Asia-Pacific" was delineated by the membership boundaries of the APEC forum,

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[77] Szalwinski, A. (2023) "What's in an Indo-Pacific Concept? Shared Visions and Varied Approaches", *Asia Policy*, 18(3), 97; Haruko, W. (2020) "The 'Indo-Pacific' Concept: Geographical Adjustments and Their Implications", *RSIS – S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies*, Working Paper n. 326, 16 March, 16, available online.

[78] Longo M. (2018) *The Politics of Borders: Sovereignty, Security, and the Citizen after 9/11*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 23.

the first major regional organisation established during the twilight of the Cold War. Afterwards, Japan contributed significantly to expanding this geographic narrative, underscoring the priority of integrating the Indian and Pacific Oceans into the strategic and diplomatic calculus of both great and middle powers. This spatial paradigm was further consolidated under the Obama administration, which elevated the strategic significance of Southeast Asia and Australia through its "pivot to Asia" announcement. A more profound transformation occurred in 2017, during the first Trump administration, when the increasing prominence of India incorporated a major regional actor with a population exceeding one billion into the emerging Indo-Pacific framework. While this terminological shift may appear cosmetic, it attests to a substantive reformulation of the old-fashioned "Asia-Pacific" concept in the strategic calculus of the US and its like-minded partners until the heydays of Narendra Modi's "Act East" policy. Concurrently, the geographic scope of the macro-region expanded considerably, stretching from the Indian subcontinent to the Pacific coastlines of North America while explicitly omitting Central and South America. By contrast, Far East Russia and Central Asia have been systematically marginalised within this evolving regional construct.

Finally, marking a decisive rupture with past geographical frameworks, the integration of the Indian Ocean has expanded Indo-Pacific's spatial boundaries to encompass the Eastern littoral of Africa, introducing a large spectrum of economic opportunities and maritime security challenges. The more the boundaries of a political construct expand, the greater the costs and pitfalls for actors seeking to gain a foothold in the Indo-Pacific. The inclusion of the African continent and the Middle East into this broadened Indo-Pacific rubric directly prompts Italy to formalise a dedicated regional strategy that has yet to fully materialise, aligning with strategic priorities that our policymakers actively seek to consolidate and defend across these contiguous spaces.

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EU's Indo-Pacific Strategy and Member States: A Comparative View

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In 2021, the EU adopted its Indo-Pacific Strategy, which is designed to promote an open, rules-based regional order in the Indo-Pacific. The strategy outlined the EU's efforts to increase its presence in an area that was perceived as both distant and increasingly important. The definition and implementation of the strategy, however, essentially depend on the EU's Member States. Several of these countries have already adopted their own strategies or guidelines for the region, including Germany, France, the Netherlands, Lithuania and the Czech Republic. The chapter addresses the question of how these strategies strengthen or weaken the EU's approach and its ability to present itself as a unified actor in the Indo-Pacific. We address this question by examining how two EU Member States (France and Germany) perceive their role, and EU's role in the region, in the context of mounting challenges to the rules-based international order.

Introduction

In 2021, the European Union (EU) adopted its strategy for the Indo-Pacific.[1] The document outlines a future of a "principled and long-term" engagement with partners in the Indo-Pacific, with the aim of strengthening a rules-based order while addressing global challenges. The strategy lists seven priority areas in particular: sustainable and inclusive prosperity; the green transition; ocean governance; digital governance and partnerships; connectivity; security and defence; and human security. Three EU Member States had already published their national Indo-Pacific Strategy: France (2018), Germany (2020), and the Netherlands (2020). Other Member States would follow suit: The Czech Republic (2022), Lithuania (2023), and Slovakia (2025). As highlighted in the literature, the duplication of EU's and national strategies for the Indo-Pacific is another example of the inherent tension between EU's and Member States' foreign policies. This chapter investigates the relationship between the EU's Indo-Pacific Strategy and the those of France and Germany to observe the degree of complementarity and competition between them. If the latter is relatively high compared to the former, there is a risk that the EU's Indo-Pacific Strategy will merely become a minimum common denominator among Member States, lacking effectiveness and real impact. In this case, partners

[1] European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (2021) *Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council: The Indo-Pacific strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific*, JOIN (2021) 29 Final, 16 September, available online.

in the region looking beyond the normative power of the EU in defense of a rules-based order, multilateralism and democracy, would instead turn to state-to-state relations. However, a lack of co-ordination among Member States, coupled with their relatively scarce resources compared to other regional actors such the People's Republic of China, could diminish Europe's impact on security and economic dynamics in the Indo-Pacific.

We conduct our analysis by looking at the respective roles that Berlin, Paris and Brussels want to play in the region. In fact, sorting out what to do in the Indo-Pacific and how to do it is one of the three steps any country must take to design a credible, effective and coherent Indo-Pacific strategy – the other two steps being defining the geographical boundaries of action and choosing preferred partners.[2] Drawing on Holsti's framework of National Role Conceptions (NRCs),[3] as updated by Anna Caffarena and Giuseppe Gabusi in their study of Italy's foreign policy,[4] we observe how the EU, France and Germany see their roles in the Indo-Pacific, and outline the similarities, overlaps, complementarities, and contradictions between their strategies. As evidence, we draw on official documents from the EU, French and German governments, secondary literature, and the views expressed by the contributors to this book.

The chapter is structured as follows: Section one reflects on the relationship between the EU's foreign policy and those of its Member States. Section two reviews role theory in the analysis of foreign policy. Section three applies role theory to the EU's foreign policy, while section four analyses the three Indo-Pacific strategies within the NRC framework. Section five draws some conclusions.

The Neverending Story: EU's Foreign Policy and Member States' Foreign Policy

A frequently asked question about the European Union (EU) is whether its foreign policy is more than the sum of its parts. In other words, is the EU a foreign policy actor in its own right, or merely an aggregation of the lowest common denominator of its Member States' foreign policies? What meaning is attributed to the EU as an agent of foreign-policy action?[5]

Since emerging on the international stage, the European Union has been characterised by a certain degree of constitutive ambiguity compared to traditional actors in international politics (and in IR analyses) such as states and, to some extent, international organisations. Although the EU has developed a Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), its Member States have retained their own national foreign policies and continue to act as autonomous foreign policy actors. This ambiguity is embedded in the EU treaties themselves. On the one hand, Member States are required to support and actively contribute to the Union's CFSP in a spirit of loyalty and mutual solidarity (Treaty on the European Union, TEU). On the other hand, the treaties explicitly state that CFSP provisions do not affect the

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[2] Gabusi, G. (2025) "Introduction", in Gabusi, G. (ed.) *Indo-Pacific Outlooks: Implications for the EU-ASEAN Relationship and Italy's Role in Southeast Asia*, Torino: T.wai - Torino World Affairs Institute, 5-11, 7, available online.

[3] Holsti, K. (1970) "National Role Conceptions in the study of foreign policy", *International Studies Quarterly*,14(3), 233-309.

[4] Caffarena, A., Gabusi, G. (2017) "Making sense of a changing world: foreign policy ideas and Italy's National Role Conceptions after 9/11", *Rivista Italiana di Scienza Politica/Italian Political Science Review*, 47(2), 125-147; Gabusi, G., Caffarena, A. (2025) "Changing and yet the same? Italy's foreign policy ideas and National Role Conceptions in a populist age", *Contemporary Italian Politics*, 17(3), 314–335.

[5] Aggestam, L. (2006) "Role theory and European foreign policy a framework of analysis" in Elgström, O., Smith, M. (eds) *The European Union's Roles in International Politics: Concepts and Analysis*, Abingdon: Routledge, 11-29.

powers of Member States regarding the formulation and conduct of their national foreign policies, nor do they prejudice their responsibilities in this area (Lisbon Treaty, Declarations 13 and 14). As a result, the relationship between EU's foreign policy and the foreign policies of its Member States is characterised by a persistent tension between collective action and national autonomy.[6] The inherent tension between the Member States' desire to retain the ability to act independently and the search for a unified European position in international politics is indeed often cited to explain inconsistencies in EU's foreign policy behaviour.[7]

This ambiguity has fuelled a long-standing debate within the fields of International Relations and European Studies concerning the nature of the European Union and, consequently, the most suitable analytical tools and theoretical frameworks for examining its external action and assessing its significance in international politics. "At one end of the spectrum are those who see the EU as a potential state, or at least the performer of essential state functions in the international political arena"; at the other end of the same spectrum are those who see the EU "at best a patchy and fragmented international participant, and as little more than a system of regular diplomatic co-ordination between the Member States".[8]

Between these two extremes, many observers tend to emphasize the "uniqueness" of the EU as an actor in international politics.[9] This perspective is perhaps best illustrated by the extensive literature portraying the European Union as either a "presence", a "civilian power" or a "normative power", emphasising its distinctive mode of influence in international politics.[10] In summary, this body of literature regards the European Union as a unique international actor due to the nature of its goals and values, the specific combination of instruments at its disposal and its distinctive institutional architecture.[11] These studies focus on the relationship between institutionalisation processes and the construction of collective identities and shared understandings, as well as the distinctive features of the EU's external action and its impact across different policy areas. In doing so, they opened the way for incorporating into this debate the parallel developments of Role Theory and its application to the analysis of foreign policy.[12]

Role Theory in the Analysis of Foreign Policy

Role Theory in foreign policy analysis focuses on the *ideas* that inform foreign policy. Ideas, in fact, "shape and influence the early stage of foreign-policy formulation".[13] How does a state look at the world and its evolving dynamics? How does a state see itself within the international system? What are its political, economic

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[6] Keukeleire, S., Delreux, T. (2014) *The Foreign Policy of the European Union* (2nd ed.), London: Bloomsbury Academic, 18-19.

[7] Orenstein, M. A., Kelemen, R. D. (2017) "Trojan Horses in EU Foreign Policy", *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 55(1), 87–102.

[8] Elgström, O., Smith, M. (2006) "Introduction", in Elgström, O., Smith, M. (eds) *The European Union's Roles in International Politics: Concepts and Analysis*, Abingdon: Routledge, 1-10, 1.

[9] *Ibidem,* 2.

[10] *Ibidem*, 2-3; Allen, D., Smith, M. (1990) 'Western Europe's Presence in the Contemporary International Arena', Review of International Affairs, 16, 19–37; Duchêne, F. (1972) "Europe's Role in World Peace", in Mayne, R. (ed.) *Europe Tomorrow*, London: Collins, 32–47; Manners, I. (2002) "Normative Power Europe: A Contradiction in Terms?", *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 40 (2), 235–258.

[11] *Ibidem.*

[12] Aggestam, L. (2006) "Role theory and European foreign policy a framework of analysis" in Elgström, O., Smith, M. (eds) *The European Union's Roles in International Politics: Concepts and Analysis*, Abingdon: Routledge, 11-29.

[13] Gabusi, G., Caffarena, A. (2025) "Changing and yet the same? Italy's foreign policy ideas and National Role Conceptions in a populist age", *Contemporary Italian Politics*, 17(3), 316.

and social resources that could be the foundations of an effective foreign policy? What role could a state perform best? By responding to these questions, countries design their foreign policy. Recalling Goldstein and Keohane's tripartition[14], Gabusi and Caffarena outline that "at the broadest level are worldviews… [that] establish the framework in which normative ideas [as foreign policy goals] are formulated", while "operational ideas encompass policy recommendations regarding the means to achieve the established objectives".[15] What underpins such objectives is a National Role Conception, formulated on the basis of a country's own reading of the world and which actions a country should consequently focus on.

According to Kal Holsti's definition,

> "a national role conception includes the policymakers' own definitions of the general kinds of decisions, commitments, rules and actions suitable to their state, and of the functions, if any, their state should perform on a continuing basis in the international system or in subordinate systems. It is their 'image' of the appropriate orientations or functions of their state toward, or in, the external environment".[16]

In his seminal contribution, Holsti identified 17 NRCs, while Caffarena and Gabusi added four new NRCs to the list that could be applied to any country, even though they were designed in relation to some aspects of Italy's foreign policy (see Table 1). The *effective multilateralist/responsible state* NRC "is played by countries that conceive multilateralism as a powerful tool for responsible states to make governance work", since in fact a functioning multilateralism "requires engagement and responsible commitment – in terms of capacity and resources – from each single country involved".[17] A *globalization surfer/economic networker* NRC is related to the liberal vision of an open global order and has two dimensions: "first, a *globalization surfer* wants to take advantage of all opportunities that economic interdependence offers (…) Second, the *economic networker* wants to pursue economic diplomacy (…) to attract direct foreign investments and support outgoing investments and exports".[18] A *cultural power* "is usually aware and proud of its cultural uniqueness and it perceives culture as a significant tool to be deployed to raise the country's standing in the world, since it represents a respected source of contribution to the legacy of the humankind". Moreover, "the promotion of culture is also a vehicle for advertising products and services offered by the country".[19] Finally, "a *principled actor* (…) is a country that consciously consults its founding principles before acting on the international stage. (…) Countries playing this NCR believe that whatever decision, action, or behaviour becomes an option, an evaluation of their compatibility with one's defining values is due".[20]

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[14] Goldstein, J., Keohane, R.O. (1993) *Ideas and Foreign Policy: Beliefs, Institutions, and Political Change,* New York: Cornell University Press.

[15] Gabusi, G., Caffarena, A. (2025) "Changing and yet the same? Italy's foreign policy ideas and National Role Conceptions in a populist age", *Contemporary Italian Politics*, 17(3), 316.

[16] Holsti, K. (1970) "National Role conceptions in the study of foreign policy", *International Studies Quarterly*, 14(3), 245-246.

[17] Caffarena, A., Gabusi, G. (2017) "Making sense of a changing world: foreign policy ideas and Italy's National Role Conceptions after 9/11", *Rivista Italiana di Scienza Politica/Italian Political Science Review*, 47(2), 136.

[18] *Ibidem*.

[19] *Ibidem*, 137.

[20] *Ibidem*.

Table 1 – National Role Conceptions (NRCs)

National Role Conception (NRC)	Description
Regional Leader	Seeks a leadership position within a particular region and attempts to influence the behaviour of neighbouring states.
Regional Protector	Assumes responsibility for maintaining order and security within a regional subsystem.
Active Independent	Pursues an autonomous yet active foreign policy in international affairs.
Liberation Supporter	Supports national liberation movements and anti-colonial struggles.
Anti-Imperialist Agent	Opposes imperialism and external domination.
Mediator–Integrator	Acts as a mediator in international disputes and promotes cooperation and integration among states.
Faithful Ally	Consistently supports and cooperates with allied states and international partners.
Independent	Emphasizes sovereignty and freedom of action in foreign policy decisions.
Example	Seeks to serve as a political, economic, or social model for other countries.
Internal Development	Prioritizes domestic development and nation-building over international involvement.
Bastion of Revolution	Promotes revolutionary ideals and supports transformative political change beyond its borders.
Regional-Subsystem Collaborator	Supports cooperation and collective action within regional organizations or subsystems.
Developer	Contributes to the economic and social development of other countries through aid and cooperation.
Bridge	Serves as a link between different regions, cultures, political blocs, or groups of states.
Defender of the Faith	Protects and promotes a particular religious, ideological, or normative community.
Independent Foreign Policy Actor	Maintains a distinct and autonomous foreign policy despite external pressures or alliance commitments.
Protective Security Role	Assumes responsibility for defending a region, alliance, or group of states against external threats.
Effective Multilateralist / Responsible State	Views multilateralism as an essential instrument of global governance and actively contributes resources and political commitment to ensure its effectiveness.
Globalization Surfer / Economic Networker	Embraces economic interdependence and pursues economic diplomacy aimed at attracting foreign investment, supporting exports, and promoting international economic integration.
Cultural Power	Uses cultural heritage, identity, and soft power resources to enhance international influence and national prestige, while also promoting economic interests.
Principled Actor	Bases foreign policy decisions on fundamental national values and principles, evaluating international actions according to their consistency with these norms.

Note: *National Role Conceptions introduced by Caffarena and Gabusi are indicated in italics.*

Applying Role Theory to EU Foreign Policy

A key contribution to the application of Role Theory to the study of EU foreign policy is the volume *The European Union's Roles in International Politics: Concepts and Analysis* (2006), edited by Ole Elgström and Michael Smith. As the authors note, previous scholarship has typically considered role formation and role enactment to be separate analytical domains. While organisation theory has focused primarily on how institutional and organisational contexts shape role performance, social constructivist approaches have concentrated on the processes through which role conceptions are formed and internalised. The scholars involved in this collective effort seek to bridge these perspectives, arguing that a comprehensive understanding of the European Union's external action requires an examination of both the construction of role identities and how these identities are translated into practice:

> "Role conceptions encompass both actors' self-images and the effects of others' role expectations, and they prompt investigation of the interplay between these two elements. In terms of the EU, they give rise to discussion of the extent to which the EU can be seen as a distinctive actor in international politics, generating innovative roles and capable of transferring or reproducing those roles in a variety of contexts. Discussion of the ways in which (for example) the EU plays a leadership role in certain areas of international life, or the extent to which EU international policies enshrine principles such as multilateralism, is a logical consequence of a focus on role conceptions."[21]

Role conceptions play an important function in providing a Member State with the conceptual lenses trough which foreign policy issues on the international and EU agendas are framed. A country's role conception indicates whether it identifies with specific values and objectives and whether it sees itself playing a particular role. They also provide a general orientation through which to define a national position, even if the Member State is not interested in the specific matter and has no *interests* to defend.[22]

Since worldviews and NRCs are embedded in national history and national identity, they tend to be very difficult to compromise. Indeed, in the process of negotiating and bargaining over the definition of EU foreign policy goals and strategies, role conceptions could result even more crucial and persistent than differences in "interests", which most literature on EU/Member States (MS) foreign policy focus on. However, it is important to note that, while national roles are persistent, they are not fixed and can change over time, also due to vertical (EU-MS) and horizontal (MS-MS) interactions within the complex EU foreign policy-making governance system. National Roles contribute to determine the EU's role and, vice versa, in an evolving agent-structure dynamic.

This perspective is particularly useful for analysing the relationship between EU and Member-State role conceptions. Rather than replacing national role conceptions, EU-level roles provide an additional layer of collective identity and action, rooted in broadly shared norms and values. The EU can therefore be treated as a distinct actor whose role conceptions coexist with, and are partly shaped by, those of its Member States. This enables the analysis of EU role conceptions at an aggregate level while acknowledging the continued relevance of national role sets and the persistence of independent foreign policy traditions among Member States.[23]

Analyses of the Indo-Pacific Strategies

This study applies Role Theory and, more specifically the concept of NRCs, to analyse the European Union's and selected EU Member States' engagement in the Indo-Pacific. First, the EU's role conceptions are identified through an analysis of the EU Indo-Pacific Strategy and are subsequently compared with perceptions emerging from the literature, including this book. Secondly, the same approach is applied to France and Germany by examining both their official Indo-Pacific strategies and the assessments provided by contributors to this volume.

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[21] Elgström, O., Smith, M. (2006) "Introduction", in Elgström, O., Smith, M. (eds), *The European Union's Roles in International Politics: Concepts and Analysis*, Abingdon: Routledge, 6.

[22] Keukeleire, S., Delreux, T. (2014) *The Foreign Policy of the European Union* (2nd ed.), London: Bloomsbury Academic, 127.

[23] Michalski, A., Nilsson, N. (2019)"Resistant to change? The EU as a normative power and its troubled relations with Russia and China", *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 15(3), 432-439.

The NRC framework makes it possible to capture both the *ego dimension* of role construction, i.e. how the EU and its Member States perceive and define their own international roles, and the *alter dimension*, namely how these roles are perceived, confirmed, contested, or reinterpreted by external actors and observers.[24] Finally, whenever possible, the role conceptions identified through this analysis are compared with those highlighted in the existing literature on EU and Member States foreign policy in order to assess continuities, changes, and emerging patterns in their engagement with the Indo-Pacific region.

To facilitate comparative analysis, the NRCs have been grouped into broader functional categories based on their primary foreign policy orientation. This aggregation helps to identify common patterns across roles and provides a more manageable framework for coding NRCs in foreign policy documents and comparing role conceptions across countries. Furthermore, this process highlights how the four NRCs introduced by Caffarena and Gabusi reflect themes that became increasingly salient in the post-Cold War era, such as multilateralism, globalisation, cultural soft power, and values-based foreign policy, which were less prominent in Holsti's original taxonomy.

Table 2 – Aggregated NRCs

Macro-category	National Role Conceptions
Leadership	Regional Leader
Security	Regional Protector; Protective Security Role
Autonomy	Active Independent; Independent; Independent Foreign Policy Actor
Alliance	Faithful Ally
Mediation and Cooperation	Mediator–Integrator; Bridge; Regional-Subsystem Col-laborator
Development and Economic Relations	Developer; *Globalization Surfer / Economic Networker*
Normative and Ideological Roles	Example; Liberation Supporter; Anti-Imperialist Agent; Bastion of Revolution; Defender of the Faith; *Principled Actor*
Multilateral and Cultural Roles	*Effective Multilateralist / Responsible State; Cultural Pow-er*

Note: *National Role Conceptions introduced by Caffarena and Gabusi (2017) are indicated in italics.*

The European Union

Since the late 2010s, the Indo-Pacific has become an increasingly important theatre for the European Union's external action.[25] Initially driven by concerns over the region's growing economic centrality, the security of maritime trade routes, and the necessity to diversify partnerships beyond China, the EU has gradually developed a more holistic approach that culminated in the adoption of the *EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific* in September 2021. According to some observers, this strategy reflected a broader shift in the EU's international stance, from a predominantly economic and normative presence to a more geopolitical entity capable of integrating trade, connectivity, sustainability, security, and strategic competition

[24] Harnisch, S., Frank, C., Maull, H.W. (eds) (2011) *Role Theory in International Relations*, Abingdon: Routledge.

[25] Neironi, R. (2026) "From Asia-Pacific to Indo-Pacific: geographical delimitation and the political construction of a mega world region" in Gabusi, G. (ed.) European Approaches to the Indo-Pacific and Their Implications for Italy, Torino: T.wai - Torino World Affairs Institute, 13-32.

within a unified framework.[26] At the same time, this strategy certainly represented an attempt to respond to the increasing strategic relevance of a region that is expected to shape the future international order and where almost half of global maritime trade transits through critical sea lanes.[27]

The EU's growing engagement has been supported by both institutional initiatives and Member-States activism. France, Germany, and the Netherlands were among the first European countries to publish dedicated Indo-Pacific strategies, paving the way for a common European approach. Since 2021, the EU has expanded its political dialogue with regional partners, strengthened cooperation with ASEAN, promoted the Global Gateway initiative as an alternative model of sustainable connectivity, and intensified its engagement in areas such as digital governance, climate cooperation, supply-chain resilience, and maritime security.[28] Indo-Pacific Ministerial Forums held in Paris (2022) and Brussels (2024, 2025) together with the development of partnerships with countries such as Japan, India, South Korea, Australia, and ASEAN members, further demonstrate the EU's ambition to establish itself as a relevant actor in the region.[29]

The EU's enduring interest in the Indo-Pacific is also reflected in a series of recent diplomatic and economic achievements. The successful conclusion of the EU–Indonesia Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) in 2025, the upgrading of EU–Viet Nam relations to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in January 2026, and the finalisation of the EU–India Trade Agreement in the same period demonstrate the Union's commitment to deepening its network of strategic and economic partnerships across the region.[30]

Table 3 – Main EU Role Conceptions in the EU Indo-Pacific Strategy (2021)

NRC	Evidence from the Strategy	Salience
Effective Multilateralist / Responsible State	Repeated commitment to a "rules-based international order", "effective multilateralism", and cooperation with the UN, ASEAN, AU, WTO, G20, and other international organizations.	High
Principled Actor	Strong emphasis on democracy, human rights, rule of law, gender equality, labour rights, humanitarian law, and values-based partner-ships.	High
Regional-Subsystem Collaborator	Extensive engagement with ASEAN, Pacific regional organizations, African regional organizations, and Indian Ocean institutions.	High
Developer	Commitment to development cooperation, sustainable development, climate finance, capacity building, education, health, disaster preparedness, and infrastructure development.	High
Globalization Surfer / Economic Networker	Strong focus on trade agreements, resilient value chains, investment promotion, connectivity, digital partnerships, and economic interdependence.	High

[26] Grgić, G., Tercovich, G. (2025) "Shifting narratives? The EU's approach to the Indo-Pacific after the war in Ukraine", Journal of European Integration, 47(1), 63-8; Michalski, A., Parker, C.F. (2024) "The EU's evolving leadership role in an age of geopolitics: beyond normative and market power in the Indo-Pacific", European Journal of International Security, 9(2), 263-280..

[27] Reuter, F., Grare, M. (2021) "Moving closer: European views of the Indo-Pacific", *European Council on Foreign Relations*, September 13, available online.

[28] Fasulo, F. (2023) *The Eu Indo-Pacific Bid. Sailing Through Economic and Security Competition*, Milano: Ledizioni.

[29] European External Action Service (2025a) "EU and Viet Nam Upgrade Relations to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership during President Costa's Visit", 29 January, available online; European External Action Service (2025b) "Fourth EU Indo-Pacific Ministerial Forum", 20-21 November, available online.

[30] European Commission (2026a), *EU and Indonesia Conclude Negotiations on a Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA)*, Brussels, 23 September, available online; European Commission (2026b), *EU–India Free Trade Agreement: Political Agreement Reached*, Brussels, 27 January, available online; European Council/ Council of the European Union and Socialist Republic of Viet Nam (2026), *Joint Declaration on the Upgrade of EU–Viet Nam Relations to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership,* Brussels/Hanoi, 29 January, available online.

Analysing the EU Indo-Pacific Strategy enables us to identify the EU's main role conceptions in relation to the region (see Table 3). The strategy also contains evidence of several "secondary" role conceptions that are present but appear to be less salient. The EU portrays itself as a *Mediator–Integrator* and a *Bridge*, emphasizing dialogue, connectivity, and cooperation across regions and institutions. Elements of the *Example* role emerge through the promotion of EU regulatory standards and governance models, particularly in areas such as digital governance, sustainability, and environmental protection. The document also contains references to a *Protective Security Role*, notably through maritime security initiatives and capacity-building activities. Furthermore, aspects of a *Faithful Ally* role are reflected in the EU's cooperation with "like-minded partners" like Japan, Australia, India, South Korea, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Together, these secondary roles complement the EU's core identity as a multilateral, normative, developmental and economically connected actor.

Table 4 – Aggregate role profile for the EU in the Indo-Pacific

Macro-category	Salience
Multilateral and Cultural Roles	Very High
Development and Economic Relations	Very High
Normative and Ideological Roles	Very High
Mediation and Cooperation	High
Security	Medium
Alliance	Medium
Leadership	Low-Medium
Autonomy	Low

The 2021 Indo-Pacific Strategy portrays the European Union primarily as an *Effective Multilateralist/Responsible State*, committed to defending and strengthening a rules-based international order through cooperation with international and regional organisations. At the same time, the EU clearly projects itself as a *Principled Actor*, grounding its engagement in democracy, human rights, the rule of law, and sustainable development. A third prominent role is that of *Developer*, reflected in the emphasis on development cooperation, capacity building, climate action, health, education, and disaster resilience. Finally, the strategy strongly embodies the role of *Globalization Surfer/Economic Networker*, highlighting trade, connectivity, investment, resilient supply chains, and digital partnerships as key instruments of engagement.

Notably, the most salient role conceptions identified in the document correspond to the NRCs introduced by Caffarena and Gabusi, rather than to the more traditional roles originally identified by Holsti. This finding suggests that the EU's contemporary external identity is shaped less by classical power politics, alliance formation, or regional leadership concerns, and more by commitments to multilateral governance, values-based diplomacy, sustainable development, and economic interdependence. The Indo-Pacific Strategy therefore reflects a distinctly "European" conception of international engagement, consistent with the EU's broader self-understanding as a normative and cooperative global actor, as also emerges from other main strategic documents.[31]

[31] Council of the European Union (2003) A Secure Europe in a Better World: European Security Strategy, Brussels, 8 December, available online; European External Action Service (2016) Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe – A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy, Brussels, available online.

The EU's Roles in the Indo-Pacific

A comparison between the role conceptions identified in the EU's Indo-Pacific Strategy and the perspectives emerging from the various contributions in this volume reveals a nuanced picture. As expected, none of the EU's core role conceptions are explicitly rejected by the authors. Rather, some are strongly confirmed, while the effectiveness, credibility, or practical relevance of others is called into question. The chapters therefore provide an opportunity to assess not only how the EU conceives its role in the Indo-Pacific, but also how that role is perceived by external observers and regional partners.

Effective Multilateralist / Responsible State

This is arguably the role conception that is confirmed most strongly across the text. Several authors identify the EU's principal added value as being its support for multilateral institutions and regional cooperation mechanisms. For example, Elsa Lafaye de Micheaux argues that following the withdrawal of USAID from the region, the EU could help fill part of the resulting vacuum by engaging with ASEAN to deliver concrete benefits to the population.[32] Similarly, Marie Kwon emphasises that any successful European engagement in the region must be rooted in the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) and respect ASEAN centrality.[33] The EU is therefore consistently portrayed as a supporter of multilateral governance, regional institutions, and a rules-based international order.

Principled Actor

The EU is also consistently associated with democracy, human rights, the rule of law, and values-based diplomacy. However, several contributions question the practical relevance and influence of this role. For instance, discussions reported during the kick-off workshop for this research project noted that democracy appears to occupy a relatively limited place in the EU's Indo-Pacific strategy. Moreover, several authors suggest that regional actors generally prioritise tangible cooperation, connectivity, and development outcomes over normative promotion. Kwon further argues that many Southeast Asian countries remain cautious toward approaches that could be interpreted as ideological or as part of a broader strategy of balancing China.[34] Consequently, while the EU's identity as a *Principled Actor* is acknowledged, its capacity to translate normative commitments into political influence is increasingly being called into question, as Gianluca Bonanno highlights in the case of Japan.[35]

Regional-Subsystem Collaborator

This role conception is strongly supported throughout the chapters. The EU is repeatedly portrayed as a partner of ASEAN and other regional organisations, operating primarily through institutional cooperation and network-building. Several authors emphasise that the effectiveness of European engagement hinges on its ability to work through regional frameworks, including ASEAN, the Pacific Islands Forum, and the Indian Ocean Rim Association. Kwon explicitly argues that European strategies should be aligned with ASEAN priorities and regional

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[32] Lafaye de Micheaux, E. (2026) "On the rise of Chinese aid in Southeast Asia: contextualized perspectives for European cooperation in the Indo-Pacific context After the fall of USAID", in Gabusi, G. (ed.) *European Approaches to the Indo-Pacific and Their Implications for Italy*, Torino: T.wai - Torino World Affairs Institute, 81-96.

[33] Kwon, M. (2026) "Indonesian perspectives on European engagement in the Indo-Pacific: the case for multi-alignment", in Gabusi, G. (ed.) *European Approaches to the Indo-Pacific and Their Implications for Italy*, Torino: T.wai - Torino World Affairs Institute, 196-209.

[34] *Ibidem*.

[35] Bonanno, G. (2026) "Japan's perspective on Italian and European engagement in the Indo-Pacific", in Gabusi, G. (ed.) *European Approaches to the Indo-Pacific and Their Implications for Italy*, Torino: T.wai - Torino World Affairs Institute, 182-195.

governance mechanisms. The EU's image as a collaborative regional actor is therefore broadly confirmed.[36]

Developer

The EU's role as a development actor also receives substantial support. Development assistance, capacity-building, climate finance, and support for sustainable development are frequently cited as areas in which the EU enjoys considerable credibility. Lafaye de Micheaux, for example, argues that the EU should expand its development assistance in Southeast Asia following the decline of American aid[37]. Nevertheless, several contributions suggest that development cooperation alone is no longer sufficient to secure political influence. Although Europe and Japan remain major donors, their political significance is often perceived to be weaker than China's. Consequently, the *Developer* role is confirmed, but it is also portrayed as requiring a stronger strategic dimension if it is to remain politically relevant.

Globalization Surfer / Economic Networker

This role conception is likewise confirmed across the reports, albeit in a modified form. The Indo-Pacific is still primarily understood as a space of economic interdependence, trade, connectivity, and global value chains. However, concerns about economic security, resilience, and strategic dependencies are increasingly being expressed alongside the language of globalisation. Discussions of de-risking, supply-chain diversification, critical technologies, and economic coercion are particularly prominent in the contributions dealing with Germany and the Netherlands.[38] The EU is therefore still viewed as an Economic Networker, but one operating in a more securitised and geopolitically contested environment than was envisaged in 2021.

Table 5 – The EU's NRCs in the authors' views

NRC	Assessment
Effective Multilateralist / Responsible State	Strongly confirmed
Principled Actor	Partially contested / problematized
Regional-Subsystem Collaborator	Strongly confirmed
Developer	Confirmed but considered insufficient
Globalization Surfer / Economic Networker	Confirmed but increasingly securitized

Overall, the regional contributions broadly support the role profile projected by the EU in its 2021 Indo-Pacific Strategy. The role conceptions most strongly supported by observers are those associated with multilateralism, regional cooperation, development assistance, and economic connectivity. At the same time, however, the chapters reveal growing doubts about the effectiveness of the EU's normative agenda, as well as its ability to convert its economic and developmental presence into meaningful geopolitical influence.

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[36] Kwon, M. (2026) "Indonesian perspectives on European engagement in the Indo-Pacific: the case for multi-alignment", in Gabusi, G. (ed.) *European Approaches to the Indo-Pacific and Their Implications for Italy*, Torino: T.wai - Torino World Affairs Institute, 196-209.

[37] Lafaye de Micheaux, E. (2026) "On the rise of Chinese aid in Southeast Asia: contextualized perspectives for European cooperation in the Indo-Pacific context After the fall of USAID", in Gabusi, G. (ed.) *European Approaches to the Indo-Pacific and Their Implications for Italy*, Torino: T.wai - Torino World Affairs Institute, 81-96.

[38] Van der Zwan (2026) "The Indo-Pacific engagement: Lessons from the Dutch case for Italy's Indo-Pacific turn", in Gabusi, G. (ed.) *European Approaches to the Indo-Pacific and Their Implications for Italy*, Torino: T.wai - Torino World Affairs Institute, 167-180; Wacker, G. (2026) "China and Taiwan in Germany's approach to the Indo-Pacific: Evolution, but no revolution", in Gabusi, G. (ed.) *European Approaches to the Indo-Pacific and Their Implications for Italy*, Torino: T.wai - Torino World Affairs Institute, 138-151.

Most significantly, perhaps, the findings reinforce the relevance of the four role conceptions introduced by Caffarena and Gabusi (see Table 1). The EU is consistently perceived as an *Effective Multilateralist/Responsible State*, a *Developer*, and a *Globalization Surfer/Economic Networker*, while its role as a *Principled Actor* remains visible but increasingly contested. More traditional role conceptions associated with power projection, alliance politics, or regional leadership play a comparatively limited role in how the EU is perceived externally. Overall, the authors suggest that the EU's contemporary identity in the Indo-Pacific is primarily that of a cooperative, multilateral, and economically connected actor, albeit one whose geopolitical influence remains constrained by questions of strategic credibility and effectiveness.

France – the Resident Power

As a European and Indo-Pacific nation, France perceives itself as uniquely positioned in the region. France's Indo-Pacific strategy, whose initial orientations date back to 2018 under President Macron, was formalised in an interministerial public communication document first published in 2021 and updated in 2022. It was updated again in 2025, in parallel with the French national strategic review, to reflect recent geopolitical upheavals, acknowledge the progress made in its implementation and adjust its priorities.[39]

According to Krot's seminal analysis[40], France's enduring NRC is that of a Residual World Power. Deeply rooted in long-standing historical narratives of national *grandeur*, rank, and international prestige, this role conception portrays France as an autonomous and globally relevant actor with both the right and the responsibility to shape international affairs. Its core components are independence, understood as the capacity to make sovereign decisions without excessive reliance on allies; activism, reflected in a willingness to influence international developments and employ military power when necessary; and global presence, sustained by worldwide diplomatic, military, and territorial engagements.[41] As we will see below, many elements remains present in the latest strategy towards the Indo-Pacific.

[39] Gouvernement Français (2025) *France's Indo-Pacific Strategy*, Paris: Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, 12 December, available online.

[40] Krotz, U. (2002) *National Role Conceptions and Foreign Policies: France and Germany Compared*, Program for the Study of Germany and Europe Working Paper 02.1 Minda de Gunzburg Center for European Studies Harvard University, available online.

[41] Krotz, U., Sperling, J. (2011) "The European security order between American hegemony and French independence", *European Security*, 20(3), 305-335.

Table 6 – French Role Conceptions in the Indo-Pacific Strategy (2025)

NRC	Evidence from the Strategy	Salience
Regional Protector	France presents itself as a security provider committed to protecting maritime routes, regional stability, freedom of navigation, and security in both the Indian and Pacific Oceans.	High
Regional Leader	France explicitly seeks to shape regional governance, support regional organizations, lead European engagement, and act as a driving force behind EU Indo-Pacific initiatives.	High
Effective Multilateralist / Responsible State	Strong support for ASEAN centrality, regional organisations, international law, UNCLOS, and multilateral governance mechanisms.	High
Regional-Subsystem Collaborator	Active participation in ASEAN, Pacific Islands Forum, Indian Ocean Commission, IORA, and numerous regional cooperation frameworks.	High
Principled Actor	Repeated emphasis on sovereignty, international law, freedom of navigation multilateralism, climate commitments, and rules-based order.	High
Bridge	France portrays itself as a connector between Europe and the Indo-Pacific and promotes "sovereignty partnerships" linking both regions.	Medium High
Developer	Extensive references to AFD financing, climate adaptation, health, infrastructure, education, scientific cooperation, and sustainable development projects.	Medium High
Globalization Surfer / Economic Networker	Strong focus on connectivity, infrastructure corridors, supply-chain diversification, energy security, trade agreements, and strategic economic partnerships.	Medium High
Faithful Ally	Cooperation with the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, India, Japan and other like-minded partners.	Medium
Cultural Power	Promotion of academic exchanges, scientific cooperation, mobility programmes, French research institutes, and people-to-people contacts.	Medium

France's Roles in the Indo-Pacific

The analysis of the authors' views suggests that France's role profile in the Indo-Pacific is characterised above all by its self-perception and external recognition as a "Regional Protector" and "Regional Leader". Unlike most European actors, France is consistently portrayed as a resident power with sovereign territories, a permanent military presence, and direct security interests in the region. Paco Milhiet, for example, identifies exercising sovereignty over France's overseas territories and developing strategic partnerships as the two pillars of France's Indo-Pacific strategy.[42] Similarly, Céline Pajon emphasises that France's territorial presence and extensive Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) provide the principal source of legitimacy for its role in the region.[43]

France also emerges as a "Regional-Subsystem Collaborator". Several authors highlight Paris's active engagement with regional institutions and cooperation frameworks, including ASEAN, the Indian Ocean Commission, the Pacific Community, and the Pacific Islands Forum. Milhiet describes the growing importance of Southeast Asia in French diplomacy, referring to a broader "French ASEAN pivot", while Céline Pajon underlines the increasing integration of France's overseas territories into regional governance mechanisms.[44]

A further prominent role is that of "Bridge". France is frequently depicted as a connector between Europe and the Indo-Pacific, leveraging its dual identity as both a European power and a resident Indo-Pacific actor. Milhiet argues that France is increasingly seeking to translate its bilateral partnerships into a broader

[42] Milhiet, P. (2026) "From bilateral to European: France's like-minded partnerships in Southeast Asia and the case for a coherent EU Indo-Pacific Strategy", in Gabusi, G. (ed.) *European Approaches to the Indo-Pacific and Their Implications for Italy*, Torino: T.wai - Torino World Affairs Institute, 55-66.

[43] Pajon, C. (2026) "The Oceania factor in France's evolving Indo-Pacific strategy", in Gabusi, G. (ed.) *European Approaches to the Indo-Pacific and Their Implications for Italy*, Torino: T.wai - Torino World Affairs Institute, 67-80.

[44] *Ibidem*; Milhiet, P. (2026) "From bilateral to European: France's like-minded partnerships in Southeast Asia and the case for a coherent EU Indo-Pacific Strategy", in Gabusi, G. (ed.) *European Approaches to the Indo-Pacific and Their Implications for Italy*, Torino: T.wai - Torino World Affairs Institute, 55-66.

European presence in the region, acting as a catalyst for stronger EU engagement in Southeast Asia.[45]

Elements of the *Effective Multilateralist/Responsible State* role conception are also clearly visible. Both Milhiet and Köllner and Schramm emphasise France's commitment to multilateral cooperation, its backing of regional institutions, and its defence of a rules-based international order. However, these multilateral commitments are generally presented as complementary to, rather than an alternative to, France's broader strategic ambitions.[46]

Other role conceptions appear with lower salience. France's network of partnerships with India, Japan, Australia, the United States and a growing number of Southeast Asian countries reflects aspects of the "Faithful Ally" role, although Milhiet notes that these relationships are often pragmatic and transactional rather than purely ideological.[47] Likewise, elements of the *Globalization Surfer/Economic Networker* role emerge through references to trade, connectivity, economic diversification, and defence-industrial cooperation.[48] Finally, traces of the *Principled Actor* role can be found in recurring references to sovereignty, international law, and the rules-based order. However, several authors suggest that French diplomacy adopts a flexible and pragmatic interpretation of these principles when pursuing its regional objectives.

Overall, the chapters portray France as a considerably more geopolitical and security-oriented actor than the European Union as a whole. As Köllner and Schramm observe, security and defence issues occupy a much more central place in French Indo-Pacific thinking than in German or broader European approaches.[49] France therefore combines EU-style role conceptions associated with multilateralism and partnership-building with more traditional roles centred on sovereignty, leadership, and security provision. The resulting profile is that of a resident power that seeks not only to participate in regional governance, but also to shape it.

Table 7 – Aggregate Role Profile of France in the Indo-Pacific

Macro-category	NRCs	Salience
Security	Regional Protector; Faithful Ally	Very High
Leadership	Regional Leader	Very High
Mediation and Cooperation	Regional-Subsystem Collaborator; Bridge	High
Multilateral and Cultural Roles	*Effective Multilateralist / Responsible State*	High
Normative and Ideological Roles	*Principled Actor*	Medium-High
Development and Economic Relations	Developer; *Globalization Surfer / Economic Networker*	Medium-High
Autonomy	Active Independent (implicit)	Medium-High

[45] *Ibidem*.

[46] *Ibidem*; Köllner, P., Schramm, O. (2026) "Assessing Germany's Indo-Pacific engagement: What lessons for Italy?", in Gabusi, G. (ed.) *European Approaches to the Indo-Pacific and Their Implications for Italy*, Torino: T.wai - Torino World Affairs Institute, 152-166.

[47] Milhiet, P. (2026) "From bilateral to European: France's like-minded partnerships in Southeast Asia and the case for a coherent EU Indo-Pacific Strategy", in Gabusi, G. (ed.) *European Approaches to the Indo-Pacific and Their Implications for Italy*, Torino: T.wai - Torino World Affairs Institute, 55-66.

[48] *Ibidem*; Pajon, C. (2026) "The Oceania factor in France's evolving Indo-Pacific strategy", in Gabusi, G. (ed.) *European Approaches to the Indo-Pacific and Their Implications for Italy*, Torino: T.wai - Torino World Affairs Institute, 67-80.

[49] Köllner, P., Schramm, O. (2026) "Assessing Germany's Indo-Pacific engagement".

Germany – the Pragmatic Liberal

First and foremost, Germany presents itself as a commercial and multilateral power committed to preserving an open international order and avoiding bloc politics or containment strategies. Although security considerations are clearly present in the strategy, they remain subordinate to broader objectives, such as safeguarding the rules-based international order, protecting maritime trade routes and supply chains, and promoting regional stability. Rather than seeking to project power or exert geopolitical influence for its own sake, Germany primarily frames its engagement in the Indo-Pacific in terms of cooperation, economic interdependence, multilateral governance and maintaining an open and stable regional environment.[50] These ideas align with the long-term NRC identified in the literature.[51] Rooted in the historical legacies of World War II and the *Shoah*, these role conceptions – particularly that of "Civilian Power" – emphasise multilateralism, international law, predictability and responsibility, while maintaining a highly restrictive attitude toward the unilateral use of military force. Consequently, German foreign policy has long been characterised by a preference for institutional cooperation, alliance frameworks, and strengthening a rules-based international order.[52]

Table 8 – Germany Role Conceptions in the Indo-Pacific Guidelines (2020)

NRC	Evidence from the Strategy	Salience
Effective Multilateral-ist / Responsible State	Multilateralism constitutes the organizing principle of the entire strategy. Germany emphasizes ASEAN centrality, the UN system, the WTO, WHO, G20, the Alliance for Multilateralism, and regional institutions.	Very High
Globalization Surfer / Economic Networker	Strong focus on open markets, free trade, connectivity, global value chains, diversification of economic relations, digital transformation, and trade agreements.	High
Principled Actor	Repeated references to human rights, democracy, rule of law, international law, UNCLOS, sustainability, and the rules-based international order.	High
Regional-Subsystem Collaborator	Extensive engagement with ASEAN, ASEAN-centred institutions, IORA, BIMSTEC, PIF, ASEM and other regional frameworks.	High
Developer	Strong emphasis on development cooperation, climate finance, capacity-building, sustainable development, environmental protection and governance assistance.	High
Bridge	Germany explicitly presents itself as a connector between Europe and Asia and repeatedly frames its engagement through the EU and EU-ASEAN relations.	Medium High
Active Independent	Germany rejects both hegemonic and bipolar structures and empha-sizes diversification, strategic autonomy, and freedom of choice for regional partners.	Medium High
Protective Security Role	Security engagement exists through maritime security, anti-piracy op-erations, sanctions monitoring, defence cooperation, and capacity-building. However, security remains subordinate to broader multilat-eral objectives.	Medium
Faithful Ally	Cooperation with like-minded democracies such as Japan, Australia, South Korea and India is repeatedly emphasized.	Medium
Example	Germany promotes its own governance standards in areas such as sus-tainable development, human rights, climate policy, vocational train-ing, and rule of law assistance.	Medium

[50] The Federal Government, Germany (2020) *Policy Guidelines for the Indo-Pacific: Germany–Europe–Asia. Shaping the 21st Century Together*, Berlin: Federal Foreign Office, available online.

[51] Krotz, U. (2002) *National Role Conceptions and Foreign Policies: France and Germany Compared*, Program for the Study of Germany and Europe Working Paper 02.1 Minda de Gunzburg Center for European Studies Harvard University.

[52] *Ibidem*.

Germany's Roles in the Indo-Pacific

Germany's role profile in the Indo-Pacific, as it emerges from the chapters, is primarily that of an *Effective Multilateralist/Responsible State*. Wacker stresses that Germany's Indo-Pacific Guidelines were conceived as an inclusive framework and as a contribution to a broader EU strategy rather than as a strategy to contain China.[53] This confirms Germany's preference for multilateralism, institutional cooperation, and EU coordination.

A second central NRC is that of *Globalization Surfer/Economic Networker*. Several authors underline that Germany's engagement remains strongly shaped by trade, supply chains, economic security, and the need to diversify relations beyond China. Wacker demonstrates how Germany's China-centred approach has gradually evolved toward de-risking and diversification, whereas Linda Liang argues that the Merz administration has maintained this trajectory, while adding a stronger security framing.[54]

The contributors also confirm Germany's role as a Principled Actor, albeit in a cautious and pragmatic manner. Germany consistently refers to international law, human rights, the rules-based order, freedom of navigation, and the peaceful management of disputes. However, Wacker also reveals that Berlin has often tried to avoid openly confronting China, highlighting the tension between normative commitments and economic pragmatism.[55]

Germany also emerges as a "Regional-Subsystem Collaborator". Köllner and Schramm emphasise that Germany's approach is closely aligned with the EU framework, relying on cooperation with regional institutions and partners rather than unilateral power projection.[56] This distinguishes Germany from France, as France acts as a resident power while Germany operates mainly through partnerships, multilateral formats, and institutional engagement.

A more recent development concerns the emergence of a limited "Protective Security Role". Liang and Hörning both show that, since 2020, Germany's Indo-Pacific engagement has become more security-oriented, especially through naval deployments, military exercises, defence cooperation, liaison officers, and partnerships with Japan, Australia, India, Singapore and South Korea.[57] Yet this remains a constrained and carefully calibrated role, far from the French model of a regional security provider.

Finally, Germany exhibits elements of both "Active Independent" and "Faithful Ally". On the one hand, Berlin seeks to reduce overdependence on China

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[53] Wacker, G. (2026) "China and Taiwan in Germany's approach to the Indo-Pacific: evolution, but no revolution", in Gabusi, G. (ed.) *European Approaches to the Indo-Pacific and Their Implications for Italy*, Torino: T.wai - Torino World Affairs Institute, 138-151.

[54] *Ibidem*; Liang, L. (2026) "Tougher talk, careful steps in the Indo-Pacific: Germany's foreign policy under Friedrich Merz", in Gabusi, G. (ed.) *European Approaches to the Indo-Pacific and Their Implications for Italy*, Torino: T.wai - Torino World Affairs Institute, 122-137.

[55] Wacker, G. (2026) "China and Taiwan in Germany's approach to the Indo-Pacific: evolution, but no revolution", in Gabusi, G. (ed.) *European Approaches to the Indo-Pacific and Their Implications for Italy*, Torino: T.wai - Torino World Affairs Institute, 138-151.

[56] Köllner, P., Schramm, O. (2026) "Assessing Germany's Indo-Pacific engagement: what lessons for Italy?", in Gabusi, G. (ed.) *European Approaches to the Indo-Pacific and Their Implications for Italy*, Torino: T.wai - Torino World Affairs Institute, 152-166.

[57] Liang, L. (2026) "Tougher talk, careful steps in the Indo-Pacific: Germany's foreign policy under Friedrich Merz", in Gabusi, G. (ed.) *European Approaches to the Indo-Pacific and Their Implications for Italy*, Torino: T.wai - Torino World Affairs Institute, 122-137; Hörning, C. (2026) "Germany's security engagement with the Indo-Pacific: implementation of the 2020 Policy Guidelines in a changing strategic environment", in Gabusi, G. (ed.) *European Approaches to the Indo-Pacific and Their Implications for Italy*, Torino: T.wai - Torino World Affairs Institute, forthcoming, 98-121.

and preserve room for manoeuvre; on the other, it increasingly cooperates with "like-minded" partners such as Japan, Australia, South Korea and India. In Young Min's analysis through Korean eyes confirms that Germany is perceived as part of a broader European engagement with Asia, but not as a hard security actor comparable to the United States.[58]

Overall, the chapters portray Germany as a multilateral, economic, normative, and increasingly security-aware actor. Unlike France, Germany does not present itself as a resident power or regional leader. Instead, its Indo-Pacific role is built around multilateral governance, economic diversification, rules-based cooperation and selective security engagement.

Table 9 – Aggregate role profile of Germany in the Indo-Pacific

Macro-category	NRCs	Salience
Multilateral and Cultural Roles	*Effective Multilateralist / Responsible State*	Very High
Development and Economic Relations	*Globalization Surfer / Economic Networker*; Developer	Very High
Normative and Ideological Roles	*Principled Actor*; Example	High
Mediation and Cooperation	Regional-Subsystem Collaborator; Bridge	High
Autonomy	Active Independent	Medium High
Security	Protective Security Role	Medium
Alliance	Faithful Ally	Medium
Leadership	—	Low

Conclusions

As shown in Table 10, a comparison of the Indo-Pacific Strategies of the European Union, France and Germany reveals a closer alignment between Berlin and Brussels. In both cases, normative and multilateral roles, together with the salience of economic relations, feature prominently. Conversely, while France acknowledges that a commitment to multilateralism is essential for any meaningful European approach to the region, it sees itself – as a resident power – to be playing a role of leader in shaping the security environment in the Indo-Pacific.

Unsurprisingly, all three actors highly value a role of mediation and cooperation, as none of them would benefit from serious crises in the region, possibly involving clashes between the United States and China. Given the increased security risk posed by great power competition, it is no surprise that, following the adoption of its strategy, Germany has turned increasingly to military projection in the Indo-Pacific, mainly as a signalling exercise. However, in doing so, Berlin has diluted its normative role, which had already been tarnished by its very significant trade relationship with China, a country not known for its respect of human rights or its true commitment to a level-playing, rules-based international order. However, the Indo-Pacific is not a priority for Germany, and hence the resources devoted to military and security-providing missions and operations can only be scarce, with the consequences highlighted by Emanuele Ballestracci as Europe's "deteriorating security environment, structural constraints on defence integration, and strained transatlantic relations raise questions about the long-term viability of its emerging role as a security provider in the Indo-Pacific".[59]

[58] Min, I.Y. (2026) "Germany's Indo-Pacific strategy through Korean eyes: perceptions and prospects for cooperation", in Gabusi, G. (ed.) *European Approaches to the Indo-Pacific and Their Implications for Italy*, Torino: T.wai - Torino World Affairs Institute, 210-220.

[59] Ballestracci, E. (2026) *Is the European Engagement in the Indo-Pacific Already Coming to an End?*, RSIS commentary no. 113, 25 May, available online.

Furthermore, the resurgence of industrial policies in Europe – including at the EU level, with the European Commission's proposal of the Industrial Accelerator Act – is also undermining the continent's perceived commitment to defending an open, liberal trade and investment order. These dynamics generate confusion among regional partners: while they – being mostly middle powers – appreciate the EU's commitment to a rules-based order, they wonder how effectively an inward-looking EU can fulfil this role in a rapidly deteriorating security environment. Looking at the two most significant Member States, they will find a liberal power whose economic relations with a neo-authoritarian and assertive China have limited its normative stance (Germany), and a possible security provider constrained by economic and political malaise (France). For historical reasons, France and Germany have significantly different approaches to the Indo-Pacific, preventing a common approach to the region. The question we posed at the beginning of the chapter about the need to clarify roles to play still remains unanswered. Rather than multiplying formal national strategies – now including even those of small states like Lithuania – European Member States should agree at the EU level on what roles the Europeans should focus on in the Indo-Pacific in order to be perceived as credible. In fact, a dispersion of roles, accompanied by a relative lack of resources inevitably leads to scarce credibility, which, in turn, would make foreign policy ineffective.[60]

Table 10 - Comparative Aggregate Role Profile of the EU, France and Germany in the Indo-Pacific

Macro-category	European Union	France	Germany
Leadership	Low-Medium	*Very High*	Low
Security	Medium	*Very High*	Medium
Autonomy	Low	Medium-High	Medium-High
Alliance	Medium	Medium	Medium
Mediation and Cooperation	High	High	High
Development and Economic Rela-tions	*Very High*	Medium-High	*Very High*
Normative and Ideological Roles	*Very High*	Medium-High	High
Multilateral and Cultural Roles	*Very High*	High	*Very High*

[60] Caffarena, A., Gabusi, G. (2017) "Making sense of a changing world: foreign policy ideas and Italy's National Role Conceptions after 9/11", *Rivista Italiana di Scienza Politica/Italian Political Science Review*, 47(2), 125-147.

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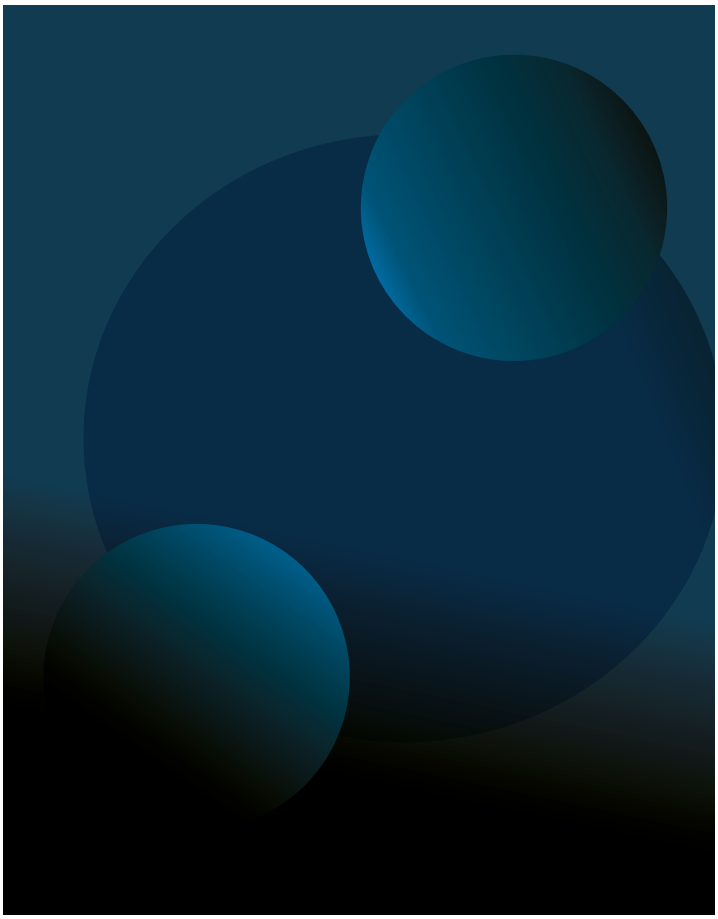
SECTION TWO

FRANCE AS A RESIDENT POWER: MYTH AND REALITY



From Bilateral to European: France's Like-Minded Partnerships in Southeast Asia and the Case for a Coherent EU Indo-Pacific Strategy

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Since the implementation of a national Indo-Pacific strategy in 2018, France has relied primarily on two pillars to support its ambitions in the region. First, as a resident power, the exercise of sovereignty over its overseas territories in the Indian and Pacific Oceans remains the cornerstone of the French strategy. Second, Paris has developed key bilateral partnerships with "like-minded" countries – historically India, the United States (US), and Japan – and more recently complemented by growing engagement with Southeast Asian nations. While the concept of "like-mindedness" in international relations is currently subject to critiques, often exacerbated by unilateral actions of the US, it has historically been used as a framework for building flexible international partnerships rooted in shared values, objectives, or institutional mechanisms. French diplomacy has repeatedly relied on this paradigm to advance its diplomatic engagement in the Southeast Asian region, promoting dense, specific, and complementary bilateral partnerships. For Paris, effectively harnessing "like minded" bilateral partnerships is central to advancing regional ambitions, particularly in asserting European leadership on Indo-Pacific dynamics. In this context, Italy's growing interest and engagement in the region could provide a significant asset, supporting broader European Union engagement in Southeast Asia.

Introduction

On 2 May 2018 in Australia, the President of the French Republic, Emmanuel Macron, formally articulated a new geopolitical framework: France's Indo-Pacific strategy.[1] Since then, the President and the relevant French authorities have consistently referred to this concept when addressing geopolitical developments in Asia, the Indian Ocean, and the Pacific Ocean. What does this concept entail and why has it gained such prominence in contemporary international relations?

Geographically, the Indo-Pacific refers to a vast maritime and continental space spanning the Indian and Pacific Oceans and their littoral states, accounting for nearly 235 million square kilometres, or 64 percent of the world's oceans. But beyond this spatial definition, the Indo-Pacific is above all a strategic construct that reflects and reshapes the balance of power among regional and extra-regional actors.[2] While the term itself is not new – having been theorised as early as the

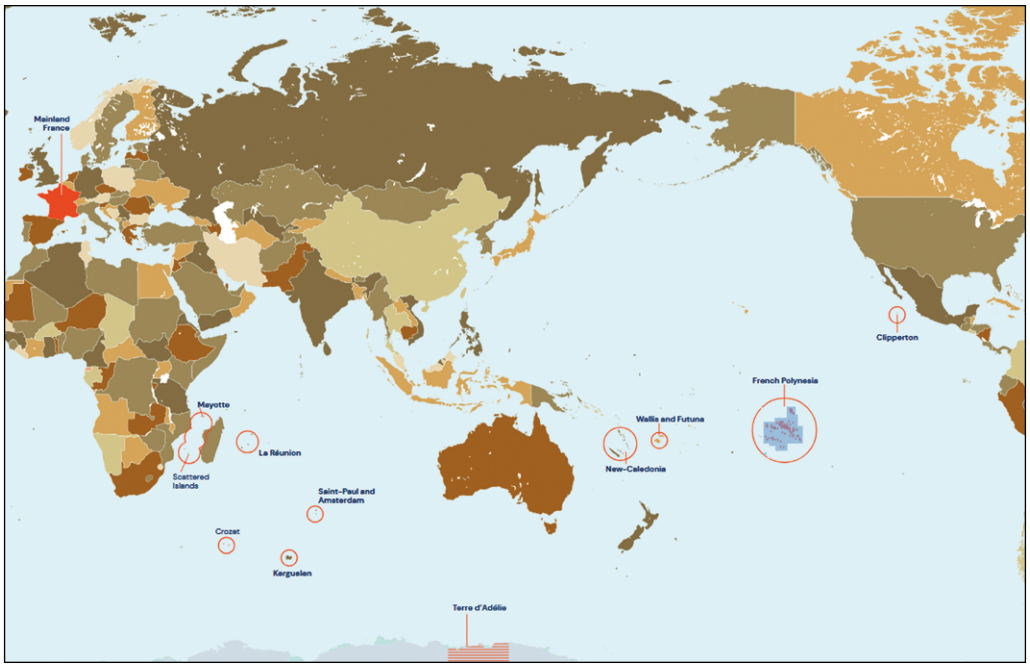
[1] Elysée, French Presidency (2018) *Discours à Garden Island, base navale de Sydney*, 3 May, available online.

[2] Saint-Mézard, I. (2022) *Géopolitique de l'Indo-Pacifique*, Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 216.

early twentieth century by Karl Haushofer and later used in various institutional contexts[3] – it experienced a revival in 2007 under the impetus of Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo.[4] Subsequently, it has been widely adopted and adapted by key actors including India, the United States (US), and Australia, each projecting its own strategic priorities onto the concept.[5]

Under the leadership of President Macron, France rapidly embraced the concept and developed a distinctive vision, grounded in its "resident power" status. Indeed, Paris possesses unique sovereign assets across the Indo-Pacific, with overseas territories located at both ends of the region: in the Pacific, New Caledonia, Wallis and Futuna, French Polynesia, and Clipperton Island; and in the Indian Ocean, Réunion, Mayotte, and the French Southern and Antarctic Lands (see Figure 1). The exercise of sovereignty over these territories grants France the world's second-largest maritime domain after the US, with an exclusive economic zone (EEZ) of nearly 11 million square kilometres. Approximately 93 percent of this EEZ lies within the Indo-Pacific and holds considerable energy, mineral, and biological potential. This territorial presence is complemented by a permanent military footprint of approximately 8,000 personnel, supported by a network of forward-deployed bases enabling sustained power projection. In the post-Brexit context, France remains the only European Union (EU) member state with sovereign territories in the Indo-Pacific, strengthening its claim to act as both a national and European stakeholder in regional security dynamics.

Figure 1 – The French overseas territories in the Indo-Pacific



(source: the author).

Leveraging these assets, Paris has pursued an increasingly proactive diplomatic

[3] Medcalf, R. (2018) "La Chine et l'Indo-Pacifique: multipolarité, solidarité et patience stratégique", *Revue de Défense Nationale*, 811, 17 February, available online.

[4] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Japan (2007) "Confluence of the Two Seas: Speech by H.E. Mr. Abe Shinzo, Prime Minister of Japan at the Parliament of the Republic of India", New Delhi, 22 August, available online.

[5] Gyngell, A. (2018) "To each their own 'Indo-Pacific'", *East Asia Forum,* 23 May, available online.

strategy across the Indo-Pacific. At the multilateral level, France is a member of key regional organisations – such as the Indian Ocean Rim Association, the Indian Ocean Commission, and the Pacific Community – and has increased its visibility through partnerships and high-level visits, as illustrated by President Macron's keynote address at the 2025 Shangri-la Dialogue.[6] At the bilateral level, France has traditionally prioritised strategic partnerships with major Indo-Pacific powers, including India, the US and Japan. However, ongoing geopolitical reconfigurations have prompted Paris to elevate Southeast Asia's strategic importance and deepen its engagement on concrete issues – a new subregional policy some observers describe as the French Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) pivot.[7]

Underpinning this new strategic posture is the notion of "like-mindedness" which has emerged as a framework for building flexible international partnerships.[8] Originally discussed in the 1980s by Scandinavian countries,[9] the notion refers in international relations to *ad hoc* collaborations based on shared values, objectives, or institutional affinities.[10] Its purpose is to establish collective mechanisms to address contemporary challenges while managing complex relationships with a wide range of actors. In this sense, "like-minded" partnerships are best understood as instruments of a milieu grand strategy[11] – aimed not at countering a specific rival, but at shaping a cooperative international environment through shared norms and institutionalised ties. In practice, these partnerships tend to be more transactional than ideological, fostering diversified engagements across different blocs and sectors.[12]

French diplomacy has repeatedly relied on the "like-minded" framework to advance its engagement in Southeast Asia.[13] However, this bilateral activism confronts a deeper structural challenge: as geopolitical competition intensifies in the Indo-Pacific, how can France leverage its partnerships in Southeast Asia to assert its role as a European leader and contribute to a coherent EU strategy in the region?

To address this question, the article first examines and assesses Paris's growing bilateral relations in Southeast Asia, establishing a typology of France's partnerships structured around three categories (I). It then considers the challenges of translating these bilateral relations into a more coherent and visible European strategy. From this perspective, the combined engagements of France and Italy in Southeast Asia could serve as a catalyst for broader EU-ASEAN cooperation (II).

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[6] Macron, E. (2025) *Keynote Address – Emmanuel Macron, President of the French Republic*, 22nd Asia Security Summit of the Shangri-la Dialogue, International Institute for Strategic Studies, 30 May, available online.

[7] Milhiet, P. (2025) "Emmanuel Macron in Singapore for the Shangri-La Dialogue: A French Pivot to Southeast Asia?", *RSIS – S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies*, IDSS Paper, n. 25063, 5 June, available online.

[8] Ishmael, L., Klingebiel, S., Sumner, A. (2025) "In Search of a Plan B: Like-Minded Internationalism and the Future of Global Development", *Global Policy*, 20 August, available online.

[9] Hveem, H. (1980) "Scandinavia, the Like-Minded Countries, and the NIEO", *Western Europe and the New International Economic Order*, available online.

[10] Conley Tyler, M., Vu, M. (2024) "The Translator: 'Like- minded countries'", *The Interpreter*, 11 April, available online.

[11] Ikenberry, G.J. (2008) "Liberal order building", In Leffler, M.P., Legro, J.W., *To Lead the World: American Strategy after the Bush Doctrine,* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 85-10.

[12] Shehadeh, O. (2025) "The Myth of 'Like-Minded Countries': Reality vs. Public Perception?", 14 March, available online.

[13] Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, Government of France (2025) *France's Indo-Pacific Strategy*, available online.

I. A French Pivot to Southeast Asia?

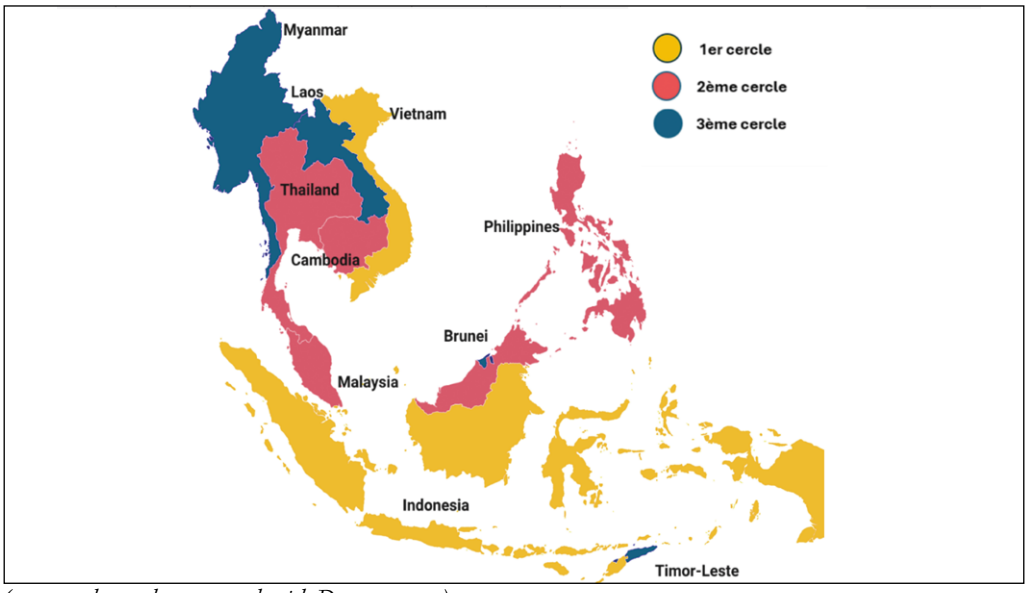
France's influence in Southeast Asia first developed in the early nineteenth century, driven by a triple ambition:[14] religious, through the agency of Catholic missionaries; commercial, in pursuit of new markets and diversified supply chains; and strategic, in a context of colonial rivalry in which the United Kingdom was consolidating its own regional foothold. Seeking commercial access to Southern China, France's exploration policy along the Mekong and then the Red River led to the progressive colonisation of the entire Indochinese peninsula: Cochinchina became a colony in 1862, the Kingdom of Cambodia a protectorate in 1863, followed by Annam and Tonkin in 1884, the Chinese enclave of Guangzhouwan in 1898, and finally Laos in 1899. Marginalised in the aftermath of the First Indochina War (1946-1954) and the debacle of Dien Bien Phu, France would wait nearly half a century before reformulating regional ambitions.

In the wake of the American "pivot to Asia" elaborated by the Barack H. Obama administration in 2011, French diplomacy outlined its own "French pivot to Asia" as early as 2013. From 2018 onwards, President Macron formalised a French Indo-Pacific strategy in which Southeast Asia was identified as a priority region. Situated at the crossroads of the Indian Ocean and the Pacific, it constitutes the geographic and economic core of the Indo-Pacific, where France's most significant strategic and commercial interests converge. ASEAN also represents a key economic and diplomatic partner and a lever through which Paris seeks to promote a multipolar international order. However, given ASEAN's limited effectiveness in high politics, France has primarily sought to exercise its influence at the bilateral level.

A Typology of France's Bilateral Relation in Southeast Asia

France's bilateral relations within Southeast Asian countries are characterised by varying degrees of density, diversification, and specificity. For the purposes of this analysis, three categories can be identified, ranging from the "first circle" (most developed) to the "third circle" (most modest) (see Figure 2).

Figure 2 – France in Southeast Asia: "Three circles" of bilateral relations



(source: the author, created with Datawrapper)

[14] Joyaux, F. (2022) *Nouvelle histoire de l'Indochine française*, Paris: Edition Perrin, 411.

Table 1 – France's Economic Relations with ASEAN Countries (2024)[15]

	Countries	Total Trade (in millions of euros)	Balance	
	Singapore	10230	4912	
	Vietnam	8507	-5467	
	Thailand	4986	-1978	
	Malaysia	4263	-1422	
	Indonesia	3282	-1628	
	Philippines	1896	92	
	Cambodia	1483	-1233	
	Myanmar	387	-313	
	Brunei	166	1160	
	Laos	56	-33	
	Timor Leste	3	NC	
	Total	35335	-5910	

(source: the author[16]*)*

The **first circle** comprises France's most important partners in the region – Singapore, Vietnam, and Indonesia – as illustrated by President Macron's diplomatic tour of ASEAN in May 2025.

Singapore stands as France's principal economic partner in Southeast Asia. The relationship is characterised by strong global connectivity – particularly in maritime affairs, technology, and the digital economy – as well as shared emphasis on technological excellence. Nearly 1,000 French company subsidiaries operate in the city-state, spanning virtually all sectors, with particularly strong positions in aerospace, shipping, electronics, finance, insurance, and business services. Singapore accounts for more than two-thirds of all French investments in Southeast Asia and is France's largest investment destination in the region after the US. In 2024, as France and Singapore celebrated 60 years of diplomatic relations, both countries upgraded their ties to a comprehensive strategic partnership, the first of its kind between Singapore and a European power. The CSP covers key areas such as cybersecurity, artificial intelligence, green finance, and digital transition.

Vietnam occupies a distinctive place in this first circle, combining a shared historical legacy with a deepening process of reconciliation and robust economic cooperation. In 2024, for the first time, a French Defence Minister – Sébastien Lecornu – was invited to Dien Bien Phu to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the battle, marking a symbolic milestone in bilateral reconciliation.[17] Economically, the relationship remains substantial, with Vietnam being France's second-largest economic partner in the region. France aims to expand its involvement in Vietnam's modernisation trajectory, at a time when Hanoi faces the combined challenges of American trade pressures and China's predominant economic influence.

[15] The trade data largely corroborates our proposed typology, with the notable exception of Indonesia, which remains in the first circle despite its more modest trade figures, owing to the growing Franco-Indonesian strategic and political engagement.

[16] The data is sourced from the French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs website, available online.

[17] Milhiet, P. (2024) "Dien Bien Phu, 70 Years after the Battle", *RSIS – S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies,* IDSS Paper, n. 24052, 24 May, available online.

Indonesia represents a partnership of growing strategic depth, driven by defence cooperation and major recent arms contracts (notably Rafale fighter jets and *Scorpène*-class submarines), but increasingly extending into a broader political dialogue. A strategic partnership was formalised in 2011 between the two countries, and the momentum has continued in recent years. In 2025 alone, the port call of the aircraft carrier *Charles de Gaulle* in Lombok, the official visit of Emmanuel Macron to Jakarta, and the invitation of Prabowo Subianto as guest of honour at the Bastille Day celebrations stand as testament to the ever-growing ties between France and Indonesia. Beyond symbolism, this reflects a dynamic convergence across military, economic, and diplomatic domains. For Indonesia, France – as a European partner and a permanent member of the UN Security Council – offers a credible lever for strategic diversification, consistent with Jakarta's traditional non-aligned posture. In this respect, President Macron's emphasis on strategic autonomy resonates strongly with Indonesia's *bebas aktif* doctrine.[18]

The **second circle** brings together partners whose relationships with France are significant but less developed, and whose trajectories vary considerably.

Malaysia was once a key partner for France in the region – particularly in the field of defence, marked by the completion of major contracts for *Scorpène*-class submarines and A400M aircraft – but the bilateral partnership has gradually declined. This downturn has been driven by frictions over palm oil taxation, controversial statements by former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad after a terrorist attack in Nice, and a defence relationship that failed to live up to its initial ambitions. This erosion was reflected in Malaysia's notable omission from President Macron's 2025 ASEAN tour.[19]

By contrast, the Philippines has emerged as a rising partner in both defence and strategic terms. This evolution is reflected institutionally through the appointment of a French defence attaché in Manila in 2025 and an armament attaché (relocated from Kuala Lumpur to Manila), and increased defence cooperation, particularly in the maritime security domain. France's growing role as a supplier of defence equipment – most notably the sale of 40 patrol vessels to the Philippine Coast Guard – illustrates this upward trajectory.

Thailand remains an important partner for France, albeit of a different nature. The country is France's oldest partner in the region, as the first diplomatic missions between the kingdoms of Siam and France were initiated 340 years ago.[20] More recently, President Macron was the first European leader to attend the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in Thailand in 2022. The bilateral relationship is underpinned less by defence cooperation than by strong people-to-people and economic ties, particularly in tourism, with nearly 800,000 French tourists visiting Thailand each year.

Thailand's regional environment inevitably brings Cambodia into focus. Indeed, the territorial dispute between Thailand and Cambodia, which has escalated into a war in 2025, traces its origins in the colonial policy of French Indochina, as well as in the Franco-Siamese treaties of 1904 and 1907. While Cambodia does not offer the same economic opportunities as its Thai or Vietnamese neighbours, it remains a

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[18] Frécon, E., Milhiet, P. (2025) "Prabowo in Paris: Beyond the parade, geopolitical synergies", *The Diplomat,* 15 August, available online.

[19] Milhiet, P., Singh Rayar, N. (2025) "Malaysia-France relations: A renewed momentum for deeper engagement?", *RSIS – S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies*, IDSS Paper, n. 25071, 22 July, available online.

[20] Van der Cruysse, D. (1991) *Louis XIV et le Siam*, Paris: Fayard, 588.

francophone state where a significant portion of the political and administrative elite – including the monarch – retains strong ties to the French language and culture. This is reflected in Cambodia hosting the Francophonie Summit in November 2026, an event President Macron will attend.

A **third circle** can be identified, comprising more limited bilateral relationships which nonetheless should not be overlooked.

Laos, a former French colony and member of the *Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie* (*OIF*), remains a country where France maintains privileged ties. French influence persists primarily in the fields of culture, heritage preservation, and tourism, notably through Francophonie-related initiatives. However, France's role in Laos is now largely cultural and diplomatic rather than economic, as regional Asian actors have gained increasing influence.

Myanmar also falls within this third circle. France and Myanmar have maintained diplomatic relations since 1948, with economic ties intensifying during the 2010s alongside the country's gradual political opening, particularly through the presence of French multinational TotalEnergies. Following the February 2021 coup d'état, France strongly condemned the ruling military junta. In January 2022, TotalEnergies withdrew from Myanmar, citing worsening human rights abuses. While political relations appear severed for the time being, France has, like other states and international organisations, appointed a Special Envoy for Myanmar, reflecting efforts to maintain a channel of communication amid persistent political and humanitarian crises.

Brunei represents another limited case of engagement for France in the region. French influence in the country was long linked to the presence of TotalEnergies since 1987, but the French multinational sold its Brunei subsidiary in 2024 as the offshore field had become no longer profitable enough to keep in its portfolio. Since then, bilateral interaction has been modest, although naval port calls by French vessels continue to provide a minimal yet symbolic form of engagement.[21]

Finally, we have to consider Timor-Leste, the latest country to have joined ASEAN in October 2025. While current French engagement remains limited, as a small insular nation located at the junction of the Indian and Pacific Oceans, it holds strategic relevance as a potential bridge between France-s overseas territories. France previously held significant economic interests in the country, notably through Bolloré Group's involvement in the construction of the main deep-water port, later subcontracted to a Chinese operator and subsequently sold to Italo-Swiss MSC.

Ultimately, it will be instructive to assess whether the forthcoming regional engagements of France confirm our broader typological hypothesis regarding the evolving hierarchy and differentiation of France's partnerships within ASEAN.

Assessing French Strategy in Southeast Asia

Beyond bilateral diplomatic activism, the French government – aware of the inherently malleable nature of the Indo-Pacific concept – regularly complements its national strategy and bilateral engagement with normative attributes to reinforce its strategic narrative and enhance its credibility. President Macron thus pairs France's Indo-Pacific ambitions with a distinct strategic grammar:[22] upholding an

[21] Milhiet, P., Hashim, H. (2025) "Brunei-France Relations: A Bilateral Reset Grounded in Defence Cooperation", *RSIS*, IDSS Paper, n. 25118, 10 December, available online.

[22] For example, Elysée, French Presidency (2023) *Conférence des Ambassadrices et des Ambassadeurs: le discours du Président Emmanuel Macron*, 28 August, available online.

international order governed by the rule of law, rejecting bloc-based rivalries, promoting strategic autonomy for both Europe and Asian nations, and respecting all national sovereignties without double standards. Through this framework, Macron consistently presents France and Europe as a "force for peace and equilibrium", repeatedly advocating for a distinctive and inclusive French "third way" in the region through the formation of "coalitions of independents" founded on sovereignty, transparency and open exchange.

Behind these signature concepts lies a fundamentally clear message: remaining free from Chinese coercion, while avoiding systematic alignment with the US. This positioning, widely interpreted as a Gaullist legacy, is frequently criticised in the West, yet well understood across Southeast Asia, where most countries maintain economic ties with China being a too significant partner to risk openly siding with Washington. In this regard, Macron's vision of a "third way" and "strategic autonomy" resonates with the non-alignment, or even multi-alignment, approaches adopted by some ASEAN states.[23]

In short, France in Southeast Asia is welcomed and listened to, but not necessarily awaited. Sustaining this presence therefore requires permanent diplomatic activism. More fundamentally, France faces the challenge of translating its dense and differentiated network of bilateral relationships into a more coherent and visible regional strategy – an objective that lies at the heart of its renewed Indo-Pacific strategy, particularly in the context of deepening EU-ASEAN institutional engagement.

II. Building on Bilateral Relations to Foster EU-ASEAN Cooperation

Since launching its national Indo-Pacific strategy in 2018, France has consistently sought to play a leading role within the EU on Indo-Pacific affairs, with its diplomats actively lobbying in Brussels for a collective European regional approach. This effort paid off when the EU published its own Indo-Pacific strategy in September 2021[24] – an outcome widely interpreted in Paris as a significant diplomatic victory. Building on this momentum, French diplomacy leveraged its Presidency of the EU Council in 2022 to organise the first ministerial forum for Indo-Pacific cooperation,[25] bringing together European institutions, foreign ministers – or their representatives – from all 27 EU member states, and delegates from around thirty Indo-Pacific nations.

This European vocation remains central in the French narrative, confirmed by the latest update of the French Indo-Pacific strategy, published in July 2025, in which supporting the EU's strategy in the region figures among France's four core objectives.

This alignment between French and European priorities finds its most tangible expression in a shared commitment to regional multilateralism – one that necessarily implies stronger ties with ASEAN and support for its centrality in the Indo-Pacific architecture. This ambition has already taken concrete institutional form: the EU and ASEAN elevated their relationship to a "strategic partnership

[23] Nicolas, F. (2025) "L'Asie du Sud-Est: du non-alignement au multi-alignement", *Le Monde selon l'IFRI*, Podcast, 12 August, available online.

[24] European Commission (2021) *Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council: The EU Strategy for Co-operation in the Indo-Pacific*, Brussels, 16 September, available online.

[25] Grare, F. (2022) "Will and intent: The Paris ministerial forum on the Indo-Pacific", *European Council on Foreign Relations,* 28 February, available online.

in 2020", and their complementary strengths offer significant opportunities to deepen economic ties and address shared challenges such as climate change and digital transformation. Enhanced cooperation between the two blocs would also reduce vulnerability to unilateral pressure from China and the US, providing a more balanced multilateral framework. In this sense, the "coalition of independents" envisioned by President Macron at the Shangri-la Dialogue could evolve into a durable "Euro-ASEAN way".

Persistent Challenges to Wider European Cohesion

However, the EU's Indo-Pacific ambitions confront several structural obstacles that limit their translation into collective European action.[26] EU member states frequently pursue competing national agendas in Southeast Asia, generating confusion among regional partners about Europe's strategic priorities and capacity to act as a unified actor.[27] Without stronger internal alignment, Europe risks undermining the very principle of strategic autonomy it seeks to promote. Furthermore, recent geopolitical developments such as the war in Ukraine and instability across the Middle East have further diverted European political attention and defence resources away from the Indo-Pacific. Finally, Europe's persistent reliance on the US as its primary security guarantor exposes it to external policy shifts that may not align with European interests, and its considerable economic and normative weight will prove insufficient so long as it lacks the strategic agency to act independently in the region.

While adopting a fully unified European position remains a complex undertaking, bilateral cooperation within the EU offers promising avenues for broader intra-regional engagement and greater strategic clarity. In this regard, the Franco-Italian partnership in the Indo-Pacific presents considerable assets that should not be overlooked.

A Case for Wider Franco-Italian Cooperation in the Region

Franco-Italian partnership in the Indo-Pacific represents a natural and underexplored avenue for European strategic consolidation in the region. While Italy is not a resident power, it has actively engaged with the Indo-Pacific through trade, defence procurement, and naval deployments, positioning itself as a meaningful – if still emerging – contributor to European regional presence.[28] Rome's interest in the Indo-Pacific is further shaped by its broader Mediterranean enlargement strategy,[29] reflecting a distinctly Italian geopolitical sensibility that seeks to connect its near abroad with more distant theatres. Significantly, although Italy has yet to publish a formal Indo-Pacific strategy – having thus far only released a document outlining its contribution to the EU's regional approach[30] – the Italian Chamber of Deputies has concluded a series of auditions intended to guide Parliament, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, and the Government toward a more comprehensive strategic framework, signalling growing institutional momentum.[31]

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[26] Abbondanza, G., Grgic, G. (2025) *Europe's Indo-Pacific Pivot Navigating New Horizons*, Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, available online.

[27] Tan, E., Lin, J. (2024) "Engaging Southeast Asia: The EU's Role as a Resilient and Reliable Middle Power?", *ISEAS Perspective*, n. 41, 5 June, available online.

[28] Abbondanza, G. (2023) "Italy and the Indo-Pacific: towards an Italian Indo-Pacific strategy", *9 Dashline*, 9 November, available online.

[29] Patalano, A. (2024) "Italy: The Globally Connected Mediterranean Power?", *Royal United Service Institute*, 1 August, available online.

[30] Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, Government of Italy (2022) *Contributo Italiano alla Strategia Europea per l'Indo-Pacifico*, Rome, 20 January, available online.

[31] Chamber of Deputies, Italian Parliament (2025) *Indagine conoscitiva sulla proiezione dell'Italia e dei Paesi europei nell'Indo-Pacifico*, Rome, 12 March, available online.

Regarding the Indo-Pacific, and particularly Southeast Asia, France and Italy are more complementary than competitive. At the security level, both countries possess the most capable naval forces within the EU, with a proven record of collaboration in regional security operations (*Atalanta* and *Aspides*), and a recently expanded reach in the Indo-Pacific – notably through successive deployments: the *ITS Cavour* in 2024, and the *Charles de Gaulle* carrier strike group in 2025. Politically, drawing on a previous analytical framework,[32] any Italian Indo-Pacific strategy would logically rest on pillars that closely mirror French priorities: (1) upholding the primacy of international law and regional stability; (2) advancing a broad conception of the Indo-Pacific that links Italy's enlarged Mediterranean vision with France's sovereign presence in the Indian and Pacific Oceans; (3) strengthening bilateral relationships with ASEAN and regional states committed to a rules-based international order. A structured Franco-Italian dialogue on Indo-Pacific affairs would therefore not only reinforce European cohesion in the region but demonstrate that the EU can act as a credible and autonomous player in the Indo-Pacific, beyond the traditional transatlantic framework.

Conclusion: An Indo-Pacific Dimension for the Quirinal Treaty?

France's engagement in Southeast Asia, as this article has sought to demonstrate, is neither uniform nor improvised. Structured around a three-tiered typology, France's bilateral network in the region reflects a deliberate and differentiated diplomatic architecture. Underpinning this engagement is a coherent normative grammar, rooted in a Gaullist tradition of strategic autonomy, that resonates distinctly across a region wary of both Chinese coercion and unconditional alignment with Washington. Yet as this analysis has also highlighted, France faces a structural tension: its bilateral relationships, however dense and well-calibrated, have yet to be effectively translated into a coherent and visible European regional strategy.

A structured Franco-Italian dialogue therefore appears as a meaningful step toward a more coherent and credible EU posture in the Indo-Pacific – one that ASEAN partners have long awaited. The suitable mechanism for such coordination may already exist. Though conceived in a European context, the Quirinal Treaty – signed in November 2021 – institutionalises bilateral consultation across diplomacy, defence and economic affairs. Its regular summits, ministerial meetings and joint working groups provide a natural forum for extending Franco-Italian coordination to the Indo-Pacific agenda. Rather than building new mechanisms from scratch, both countries could leverage this ready-made framework to turn their parallel ASEAN commitments into genuinely joint action – coordinating positions, aligning development priorities, and speaking with greater weight in a region where European fragmentation has too often diluted European ambition.

Symbolically, France and Italy were granted "ASEAN Development Partner" status on the same day – 9 September 2020 – a convergence that has yet to translate into coordinated action but may well point to a shared destiny. The time has come to move beyond parallel engagement and advance jointly toward the next stage of their relationship with Southeast Asia.

[32]Gabusi, G. (ed.) (2025), *Indo-Pacific Outlooks: Implications for the EU-ASEAN Relationship and Italy's Role in Southeast Asia*, T.wai – Torino World Affairs Institute, 3 October, available online.

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The Oceania Factor in France's Evolving Indo-Pacific Strategy

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This paper examines the two-way relationship between France's Indo-Pacific strategy and developments in Oceania. Oceania was not a priority in the initial years of France's Indo-Pacific strategy, as the region was largely treated as secondary to major strategic hotspots and key partnerships, while overseas territories were primarily handled as domestic issues and recipients of a top-down strategy. However, political, strategic, and geopolitical shifts in the region–ranging from the AUKUS deal and the growing Chinese presence in the area to renewed independence movements in French overseas territories–have progressively shaped and reoriented France's approach. As a result, Paris had to devote greater resources to Oceania, adopting a more balanced and comprehensive approach toward Pacific Island countries, while making stronger efforts to empower its overseas territories as co-constructors of, and beneficiaries from, the Indo-Pacific strategy. This evolution is reflected in the 2025 update of France's Indo-Pacific strategy. By doing so, the paper highlights how Oceania has evolved from a peripheral consideration into an increasingly influential factor in Paris's Indo-Pacific thinking, and illustrates some of the tensions within France's Indo-Pacific strategy: the interconnection between grand strategy and domestic politics and the gap between ambitions and limited means.

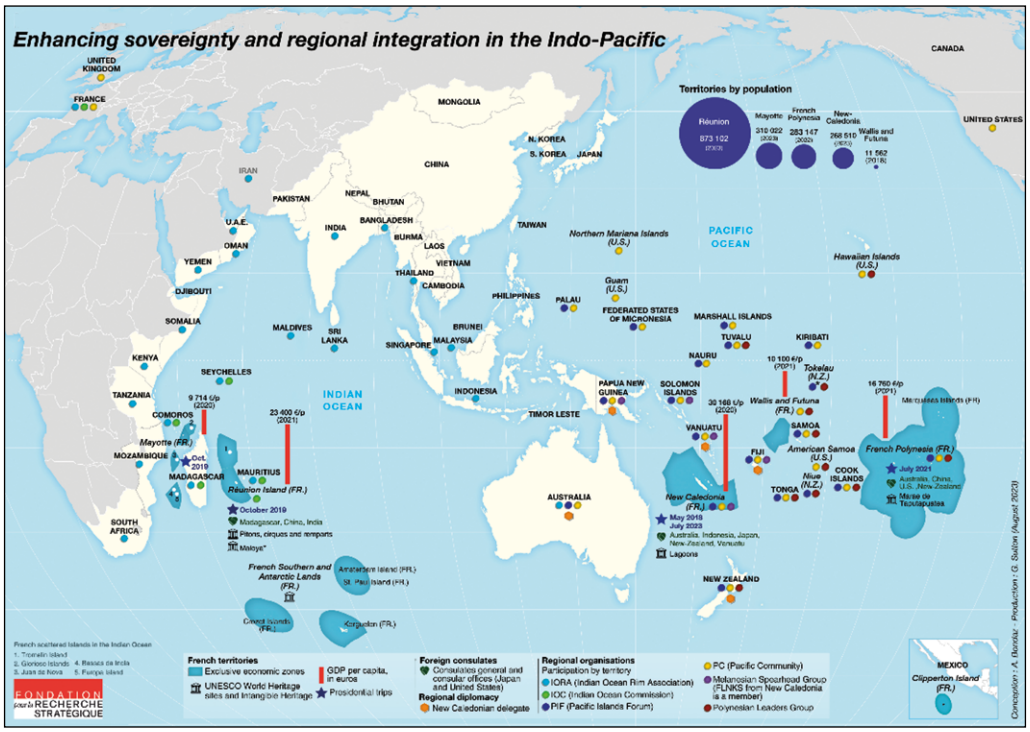
Introduction

France's distinctive feature in the Indo-Pacific is that it is the only European state with a substantial territorial presence across the region. It possesses several overseas territories and around 90% of its vast Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) is located in the Indo-Pacific, alongside approximately 1.6 million French citizens and more than 7,000 prepositioned military personnel stationed in La Réunion, New Caledonia, and French Polynesia. This sustained presence makes France a genuine "resident powe" of the Indo-Pacific and constitutes a central source of legitimacy for its position as the first European country to adopt a dedicated Indo-Pacific strategy in 2019.[1]

A significant proportion of France's overseas territories in the region is located in the South Pacific, which alone accounts for roughly 60% of its total EEZ. Despite this structural reality, Oceania (meaning the Pacific Islands nations, including Australia and New Zealand) initially remained relatively marginal in French strategic thinking, which tended to prioritize broader power projection narratives rather than the specific political and geopolitical dynamics of the South Pacific.

[1] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, France (2025) *The Indo-Pacific: a Priority for France*, available online.

Figure 1: French Overseas Territories in the Indo-Pacific



Source: Fondation pour la recherche stratégique, 2023 (https://www.frstrategie.org/en/publications/fiches-indo-pacifique/n1-overseas-territories)

However, this imbalance has shifted. The 2025 French updated Indo-Pacific strategy places a much stronger emphasis on overseas territories as central pillars of France's regional identity and influence. At the same time, strategy-oriented policy publications on Oceania have increased significantly, reflecting a growing recognition of the region's strategic importance[2]. This evolution indicates a gradual rebalancing of French strategic thinking, moving from a primarily declaratory Indo-Pacific vision toward a more territorially grounded approach that integrates the South Pacific more fully into France's overall regional posture.

This article thus examines the two-way relationship between France's Indo-Pacific strategy and developments in Oceania and highlights how Oceania has evolved from peripheral consideration into an increasingly influential factor in Paris's Indo-Pacific policy thinking.

Oceania was not a priority in the initial years of France's Indo-Pacific strategy, as the region was largely treated as secondary to major strategic hotspots and key partnerships, while overseas territories were primarily handled as domestic issues and recipients of a top-down strategy.

However, political, strategic, and geopolitical shifts in the region, ranging from the AUKUS deal and the growing Chinese presence in the area to renewed independence movements in French overseas territories, have progressively shaped and reoriented France's approach.

[2] Pina, C. (2026) "Stratégies chinoises et équilibres de puissance en Océanie insulaire", Etude 133, IRSEM, available online ; Comité d'études de Défense Nationale (2024) *Revue Défense Nationale*, *L'Océanie, un théâtre sécuritaire en Indo-Pacifique ?*, n.872, available online ; Pajon, C. (2022) "Two Shades of Blue: Europe and the Pacific Islands, Strategic Partners in the Indo-Pacific", Briefing de l'Ifri, available online.

As a result, Paris had to devote greater resources to Oceania, adopting a more balanced and comprehensive approach toward Pacific Island countries, while making stronger efforts to empower its overseas territories as co-constructors of, and beneficiaries from, the Indo-Pacific strategy. This evolution is reflected in the 2025 update of France's Indo-Pacific strategy.

Oceania as an Initial Afterthought in the French Indo-Pacific Strategy – 2019 - 2021

Oceania did not constitute a central priority within France's Indo-Pacific strategy as articulated in 2018–2019.[3] Rather, French strategic attention was predominantly directed toward major geopolitical hotspots and key regional partners, reflecting a hierarchy of interests shaped by hard security considerations, great-power competition and regional stability. In this context, Oceania appeared comparatively peripheral, despite the presence of French overseas territories.

Three main drivers of the Indo-Pacific strategy keep Oceania as a secondary theatre

This relative marginalization can be explained by the three main motivations underpinning France's Indo-Pacific strategy.

First, France sought to maintain and reinforce its relevance in an emerging and increasingly contested global order. The Indo-Pacific concept itself had already been embraced by major powers such as the United States, Japan, India, and Australia, each promoting their own strategic visions for the region. For Paris, adopting an Indo-Pacific framework was therefore not only a matter of regional engagement but also a way to assert its status as a global power and a credible strategic actor. This ambition was closely tied to President Emmanuel Macron's broader objective of restoring France's international influence and shaping the norms of a future multipolar order, leading French policymakers to focus on interactions with other major and middle powers, rather than on smaller island states in Oceania.[4]

Second, the need to respond to the growing challenges posed by China played a decisive role in shaping French priorities. As highlighted in successive National Strategic Reviews (2017 and 2022), China's assertiveness in the East and South China Seas, the expansion of its military capabilities, and the establishment of a large military base in Djibouti in 2017 were perceived as a destabilizing factor and a challenge to the rules-based international order.[5] France's Indo-Pacific strategy thus emerged partly as a hedging and balancing response to China's rise, even though the French officials insisted on its inclusive and non-discriminatory nature. Consequently, French attention gravitated toward zones where Chinese power projection was most visible and potentially destabilizing, reinforcing the focus on maritime Asia rather than the Pacific Islands.

Third, the Indo-Pacific strategy also provided an opportunity for France to advance its economic and industrial interests, particularly in the defense sector. Strengthening partnerships with key regional actors such as India and Australia

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[3] Ministry of European and Foreign Affairs, France (2018) *2030 French Strategy in Asia-Oceania. Towards an inclusive Asian Indo-Pacific Region*, France Diplomatie, August, available online.

[4] Macron, E. (2017) *Discours du Président de la République à l'ouverture de la conférence des Ambassadeurs*, August 29, Élysée, available online.

[5] Ministry for the Armed Forces, France (2017) *Strategic review of defence and national security 2017*, October, available online; Secrétariat général de la défense et de la sécurité nationale (2022) *Revue nationale stratégique 2022*, Gouvernement français, November, available online.

opened avenues for major defense contracts (in 2016, two major deals were signed to sell 12 submarines to Australia and 36 Rafale fighter jets to India)[6] and deeper security cooperation. This dimension further contributed to prioritizing relationships with larger states possessing significant procurement capacities, to the relative detriment of smaller countries.

A Top-down Approach, Imposed on French Overseas Territories

Another important limitation of France's early Indo-Pacific approach lies in the relatively marginal role attributed to its overseas territories. The formulation of the strategy largely followed a top-down logic, initiated and driven by the executive, particularly under the push of President Emmanuel Macron, with limited consultation of local actors in the Pacific.[7] As a result, the perspectives, needs, and political sensitivities of these territories were insufficiently integrated into the broader strategic reflection.

This centralized approach reflects an enduring institutional divide within the French state apparatus. Overseas territories have traditionally been treated primarily as matters of domestic governance, falling under the authority of the Ministry for Overseas Territories, rather than as fully-fledged components of foreign and strategic policy. In the context of the Indo-Pacific strategy, this translated into a disconnect between France's external ambitions and the internal management of its own territories.

The initial sidelining of overseas territories in the strategic design process has generated a number of tensions. It has contributed to frustrations among local stakeholders, who perceived Paris's Indo-Pacific strategy as externally imposed and insufficiently attentive to local realities[8].

This perception is further compounded by France's complex historical legacy in the region. The creation of the Pacific Islands Forum was itself partly a response to French nuclear testing in the Pacific, and issues of decolonization and self-determination, particularly in New Caledonia, continue to shape regional attitudes toward France.[9] As a result, any strategy that insufficiently integrates local perspectives or fails to acknowledge this historical context risks generating mistrust and limiting France's ability to position itself as a legitimate and constructive stakeholder in Oceania.

A Defense and Security-based Approach, far from Oceania's Main Priorities

Finally, the initial French Indo-Pacific strategy was predominantly driven by military and diplomatic considerations, and suffered from a limited interministerial, or genuinely whole-of-government, approach.

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[6] Reuters (2017) "Australia, India deals boost French arms sales to record 20 billion euros in 2016", *The Express Tribute*, 20 January, available online.

[7] Bachelier, J., Pajon, C. (2023) "France in the Indo-Pacific: The Need for a Pragmatic Strategic Posture", *Focus Stratégique*, Ifri, available online.

[8] Leyral, M. (2021) "En Polynésie, Emmanuel Macron se pose en rempart contre l'influence chinoise dans le Pacifique", *Le Monde*, 29 July, available online.

[9] Mohamed-Gaillard, S. (2022) "La Calédonie dépasse la Calédonie : ancrage régional et perspectives internationales d'un Outre-mer français", *Asie Visions*, Ifri, 22 December, available online.

Key instruments of influence beyond defense and high diplomacy remained underutilized, most notably development policy. The mandate of the French Development Agency (AFD) in the Pacific was, at the time, relatively constrained, which limited France's capacity to engage with Oceania outside of the perimeter of climate adaptation and mitigation.[10]

As a result, Oceania was largely approached through two main lenses. On the one hand, it was integrated into France's strategic partnership with Australia, which occupied a central place in Paris's Indo-Pacific vision prior to the AUKUS rupture. On the other hand, Oceania appeared as a theater of operation for French sovereignty forces stationed in New Caledonia (1,650 personnel) and French Polynesia (1,180 personnel). French armed forces play a visible and often positively perceived role, particularly in providing regional public goods such as humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR), also in coordination with partners such as Australia and New Zealand in the FRANZ mechanism[11], and maritime surveillance, and the fight against illegal activities including Illegal Unregulated and Unreported (IUU) fishing, also with Australia, New Zealand, as well as US forces through the "Pacific Quad" scheme and narcotrafficking.[12] These missions contribute to France's image as a security provider and a reliable partner. However, this security-centric approach also encounters structural limitations when applied to Oceania, as only three Pacific Island Countries (Tonga, Papua New Guinea, Fiji) possess military capabilities.

2021-2023 – Oceania comes to Fore: Turning Points and Tensions Question France's Legitimacy and Credibility

The period 2021–2022 marked a clear turning point in France's position in the Indo-Pacific, as both external strategic shocks and internal territorial dynamics increasingly challenged its influence and legitimacy.

Independence Moves in Overseas Territories Shake France's Legitimacy

Political developments in France's overseas territories intensified debates about the legitimacy of French sovereignty in the Pacific. In New Caledonia, a pro-independence government led by Louis Mapou was elected in July 2021, operating within a complex landscape marked by widening fragmentation between pro-independence and loyalist camps and compounded by internal divisions.[13] In this polarised context, the third referendum on independence held in December 2021 was highly contested. Although France considered the referendum process in line with the Nouméa Accord on the decolonization, pro-independence leaders argued that the conditions for free and fair self-determination were not met.[14] The vote was largely boycotted as it was held during customary mourning period among the Kanak population due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This divergence in

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[10] Senat (2023) "La stratégie française pour l'Indo-Pacifique : des ambitions à la réalité", *Rapport d'information n° 285*, 25 January, available online.

[11] Through the FRANZ mechanism (named after the acronyms of the participating countries), established in 1992, France, Australia and New Zealand agreed to coordinate their responses to natural disasters by pooling logistical resources, information and response capabilities, when requested by affected countries. FRANZ is a civilian-led arrangement supported by defence forces and is regularly activated.

[12] Pajon, C. (2025) "France's Contributions to Pacific Maritime Governance", *Asia Pacific Bulletin*, Number 729, East-West Center, available online.

[13] Comminsoli, Q. (2024) "Fractures in New Caledonia's Independence Movement Widen, Uncertainty Reigns", *The Diplomat*, available online.

[14] Fisher, D. (2022) "After three referendums, France still faces major challenges in New Caledonia", *The Strategist*, ASPI, 23 November, available online.

interpretation has contributed to a prolonged institutional and political deadlock over the territory's future.

This situation escalated further in 2024 when New Caledonia experienced a major outbreak of violence following proposed electoral reforms from Paris. The unrest that followed resulted in deaths, widespread arrests, the declaration of a state of emergency, and significant economic disruption.[15] This crisis revealed the depth of political polarisation in the territory and further weakened trust between local actors and the French state.

A similar, although less confrontational, dynamic has emerged in French Polynesia. In May 2023, elections resulted in the victory of Moetai Brotherson and the pro-independence Tavini Huiraatira party. While his government does not advocate immediate independence, it explicitly supports a gradual transition toward sovereignty over the medium to long term.[16]

These developments have created increasing complexity in France's regional diplomacy, as external relations is a shared competency between Paris and the Pacific territories. Both New Caledonia and French Polynesia are full members of the Pacific Islands Forum since 2016, while France itself holds only observer status. This asymmetry creates a situation in which French territories can directly participate in regional discussions on issues such as climate change, development, and maritime governance, sometimes expressing positions that differ from those of Paris. When territorial governments pursue political agendas that are not aligned with Paris, the coordination on external relations and regional strategy can become extremely difficult and conflictual.[17] These difficulties in turn are hurting France's reputation in the region.

AUKUS and France's Credibility as an Indo-Pacific Security Player

France's credibility as an Indo-Pacific power was significantly shaken by the announcement of the AUKUS agreement between Canberra, Washington and London in September 2021. This development constituted a major strategic shock for Paris, first because it led to Australia's abrupt cancellation of its diesel-powered submarine contract with France's Naval Group, in favour of nuclear-powered submarines co-developed with its partners. Second, this development was perceived in France as both a diplomatic betrayal and a serious failure of trust in defence-industrial cooperation.[18] It exposed the fragility of France's strategic partnerships in the Indo-Pacific, particularly with Australia, and raised broader doubts about the reliability of France's alignment with its traditional allies, including the United States and the United Kingdom in this specific context. This episode contributed to a broader perception that France's role in the region was more limited than its official Indo-Pacific strategy suggested.

Beyond the immediate diplomatic fallout, AUKUS had structural consequences for France's defence and industrial strategy. In response, Paris has sought to diversify its Indo-Pacific footprint, particularly by strengthening ties with Southeast

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[15] Les Décodeurs (2024) "New Caledonia: Six questions to understand the current crisis", *Le Monde*, 17 May, available online.

[16] Leyral, M. (2023) "French Polynesia: Independentists' victory is first step toward a self-determination referendum", *Le Monde*, 1st May, available online.

[17] Senat (2025) *Audition de Mme Véronique Roger-Lacan, ambassadrice pour le Pacifique,* Délégation Sénatoriale aux Outre-Mer, 18 December, available online.

[18] Pajon, C. (2021) "AUKUS, the Indo-Pacific, and France's Role: Fluctuat nec Mergitur", *RIAC*, available online.

Asian partners, which are seen as emerging markets for naval and security cooperation. Indonesia signed a deal in 2022 to purchase 42 French-made Rafale jets.

More broadly, AUKUS raised fundamental questions about France's capacity to realistically exert meaningful influence in a region increasingly shaped by US–China competition.

The 2022 China-Solomon Security Deal and the Strategic Wake-Up Call for Oceania

In 2022, the security agreement between China and the Solomon Islands marked a major strategic turning point for Oceania and was widely interpreted as a wake-up call.[19] The leak of this secret deal in march, followed by Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi's unprecedented diplomatic tour across several Pacific Island states in May highlighted the rapid intensification of China's presence in the region, through infrastructure investments and development financing under the Belt and Road Initiative, as well as its efforts to expand political influence.

This growing Chinese footprint has also been reflected in Beijing's sustained pressure on Pacific states to switch diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to the People's Republic of China.[20] Several Pacific countries have already done so in recent years, including the Solomon Islands and Kiribati in 2019, and more recently Nauru in 2024.

Concerns about Chinese influence have also extended to French territories in the Pacific, where debates over external influence and sovereignty have become more salient in political discourse. In this context, President Macron has repeatedly referred to what he describes as China's "predatory" strategies in the Pacific, including in French Polynesia.[21]

The new realization of the Chinese push in the region prompted a series of reaction from maritime democracies in the Indo-Pacific that intensified their Pacific engagement, starting with the US with a new strategy and a first-ever US-Pacific Island Countries Summit in September 2022[22].

At the minilateral level, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) gathering the US, India, Japan and Australia, also began to develop more structured approaches to Pacific engagement, including initiatives such as the Indo-Pacific Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA) program launched in 2022, with a special focus on the region.[23] These efforts reflect a broader shift toward more coordinated strategies among like-minded partners in response to China's expanding role in the Pacific and provide impetus for France to also step up its engagement in the region.

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[19] Lyons, K., Wickham, D. (2022) "The deal that shocked the world: inside the China-Solomons security pact", *The Guardian*, 20 April, available online.

[20] Julienne, M. (2026) "China's Strategy Toward Pacific Island countries: Countering Taiwan and Western Influence", *Reconnect Policy Brief*, available online.

[21] Milhiet, P. (2022) "French Polynesia Has Its Own China Dream", *The Diplomat*, 23 June, available online.

[22] U.S. Embassy in Canberra (2022) "FACT SHEET: Roadmap for a 21st-Century U.S.-Pacific Island Partnership", 20 September, U.S. Embassy and Consulates in Australia, available online.

[23] Prime Minister of Australia (2023) *Quad Leaders' Joint Statement,* Office of the Prime Minister of Australia, 20 May, available online.

2023-2025 – Adaptation of France's strategy: an Enhanced and Comprehensive Approach to the Region

France has responded to the intensification of geopolitical competition in the Indo-Pacific by undertaking a multilayered reinvestment in Oceania, combining diplomatic, development, and security instruments in a more integrated approach. This strategy reflects a recognition that France's influence in the Pacific can no longer rely solely on its sovereign territorial presence, but must instead be actively maintained through sustained engagement with regional states and institutions.

France's Multilayered Reinvestment in Oceania

At the diplomatic level, France has significantly strengthened its institutional footprint in the Pacific. A key development has been the decision in 2023 to base the French Permanent Secretary for the Pacific, Véronique Roger-Lacan, in Nouméa (rather than in Paris before that), which reflects a shift toward embedding high-level diplomatic coordination directly within the region. France has also expanded its regional diplomatic presence, including the establishment of new embassies such as in Samoa in 2025 and the deployment of engaging diplomatic figures such as Jean-Baptiste Jeangène Vilmer in Vanuatu, to embody France's everyday commitment.[24]

These efforts were reinforced by President Emmanuel Macron's regional visit in July 2023, which included stops in New Caledonia, Vanuatu, and Papua New Guinea, signaling a renewed political attention to Oceania.[25] At this occasion, he announced the set-up of the Pacific Academy, an interministerial project designed to provide diversified training programmes in security, policing, and defence, extending cooperation beyond strictly military frameworks. Finally, in December that year, New Caledonia hosted the South Pacific Defence Ministers' Meeting (SPDMM), further demonstrating its role as a platform for regional security.[26]

Finally, France has also pursued the modernisation of its military equipment in the Pacific with ancient maritime patrol vessels being replaced by Oceanic Multimission Patrol Vessels (POMs), which will enhance the effectiveness of surveillance in the EEZ and Falcon-50 maritime patrol aircrafts by 2030.[27] France also expanded flexible cooperation tools such as ship-riding agreements. These mechanisms allow personnel from partner countries to embark on French naval vessels, thereby enhancing interoperability, maritime surveillance, and operational cooperation across the region.

In parallel, France has also increased its development and economic engagement in the region, particularly through a strengthened role for the French Development Agency. The AFD has expanded its activities across the Pacific, including the establishment of two new offices in Papua New Guinea and Fiji in 2024.[28] It promotes climate-related activities, and environmental security agenda, in close

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[24] He is very active on social media. Check his Twitter/X account, available online.

[25] Pajon, C. (2023) "President Macron's Historic Pacific Visit: A Signal of France's Regional Step-Up", *The Diplomat*, 21 July, available online.

[26] Pajon, C. (2023) "Reflecting on a Decade of the South Pacific Defence Ministers Meeting (SPDMM)", *Briefings de l'Ifri* ,23 November, available online.

[27] Ministry for the Armed Forces, France (2023) *Objectifs LPM 2024-2030 : renforcer notre souveraineté dans les Outre-mer*, 24 May, available online.

[28] Agence française de développement (2023) *Océan Pacifique : la France et le groupe AFD aux avant-postes pour le climat et la biodiversité*, AFD, 8 September, available online.

collaboration with regional actors, including multilateral Pacific Community and Pacific Island Forum.

Paris frames environmental challenges not only as ecological issues but as strategic and security concerns. This "securitization" of climate issues strongly resonates with vulnerable states, especially in the Pacific, where climate change is seen as an existential threat. This includes disaster risk reduction, sustainable resource management, and support for adaptation to climate change. By linking environmental security, development, and multilateral cooperation, France strengthens its legitimacy and appeal in the region.

France has also progressively shifted its strategy toward greater engagement with smaller and non-aligned regional partners. Rather than focusing only on major powers, France seeks to build a dense network of relationships with ASEAN countries, Pacific Island states, and Indian Ocean partners. In this context, France adopts a tailored approach, aligning its discourse with the priorities of regional actors, such as development, sovereignty, and stability, while avoiding confrontational rhetoric, particularly toward China. This flexibility allows France to engage partners that value strategic autonomy and are reluctant to choose sides.[29]

Efforts to Empower Overseas Territories

During this period, a growing effort to empower overseas Pacific territories has been noticed. These are no longer seen merely as strategic footholds, but as actors in their own right, increasingly appropriating and shaping the Indo-Pacific concept. This is illustrated by the joint report issued in March 2023 by the Assembly of French Polynesia, in cooperation with New Caledonia, which assesses the impact of France's Indo-Pacific strategy on Oceanian territories and provide recommendations.[30]

Accordingly, efforts have been made to consult with the territories in preparation of the updated Indo-Pacific strategy published in July 2025.[31] These consultations signal a shift toward a more realistic approach that integrates local stakeholders into strategic planning. Overseas territories are thus placed front and center in the new Strategy, not only as beneficiaries but as contributors to policy design.

French Pacific territories' agency has also been reinforced through concrete measures, such as the presence of representatives from New Caledonia in French embassies across the region, and some high-level political engagement. For instance, when he visited the area in Summer 2023, President Emmanuel Macron invited, in an unprecedented move, Caledonian President Louis Mapou and Polynesian President Moetai Brotherson to join his visit to Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu.[32] This reflects a broader effort to strengthen their regional integration and neighborhood diplomacy, giving substance to a more decentralized and inclusive French presence in the Indo-Pacific.

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[29] Pajon, C. (2024) "Macron is not giving up France's role as a Pacific player", *Nikkei Asian Review*, 4 August, available online.

[30] Assemblée de la Polynésie Française (2023) *Rapport de la mission d'information portant sur l'impact des stratégies de la France dans l'espace indopacifique, sur les collectivités françaises du Pacifique*, March.

[31] Ministry of European and Foreign Affairs, France (2025) *France's Indo-Pacific Strategy – The Indo-Pacific: a priority for France*, France Diplomatie, available online.

[32] Prévost, B. (2023) "Moetai Brotherson : 'Jeter les bases d'une autre relation' ", *Tahiti Infos*, July 31, available online.

Still, serious challenges remain

However, significant challenges remain that continue to undermine France's position in Oceania. New Caledonia remains the most sensitive and unresolved issue, as the broader decolonisation process continues to generate deep political and historical tensions. Attempts to reach a new political compromise, including through the Bougival agreement[33]of July 2025, have been rejected by the FLNKS, the key pro-independence party. Ongoing discussions and negotiations illustrate that the political situation remains highly fluid and that no durable consensus has yet been achieved regarding the future institutional status of the territory.[34] In French Polynesia, the legacy of colonial rule, especially those of France's nuclear testing, continues to fuel distrust and shape local political discourse.[35]

More broadly, France continues to face structural political challenges in redefining the nature of its relationship with its Pacific territories. A central question remains how to develop genuine convergence between Paris and local governments in order to ensure effective coordination on shared competencies, particularly in areas such as foreign relations, security, and regional engagement. This difficulty is reflected in France's participation in regional and international organisations, including the Pacific Islands Forum and the United Nations, where the coexistence of multiple political voices complicates the articulation of a coherent diplomatic position.[36] As a result, France is increasingly confronted with the need to reinvent its partnership model and clarify the institutional status of its overseas collectivities within the broader Indo-Pacific strategy.

At the same time, new hybrid security threats have been reinforced in these territories, particularly around issues of foreign interference and disinformation. Recent reports by think tanks and strategic analysis institutions have highlighted growing attention to information manipulation and external influence operations in the Pacific, including narratives targeting France's presence in its overseas territories.[37] This adds an additional layer of complexity to France's regional posture, as it must now address not only traditional geopolitical competition, but also informational and cognitive dimensions of influence in an increasingly contested Indo-Pacific environment.

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[33] The accord negotiated in the town of Bougival by the French overseas territories minister and representatives from the territory's six pro and anti-independence delegations involves the creation within the French Republic of a "State of New Caledonia," enshrined in the Constitution, as well as a "Caledonian nationality," which would be inseparable from French nationality. This would be a transitional step, preceding the full sovereignty sought by the pro-independence movement.

[34] Wyeth, G. (2026) "New Agreement Expands on the France-New Caledonia Bougival Accord", *The Diplomat*, 26 January, available online.

[35] Werkhäuser, N. (2025) "Living with the legacy of France's nuclear weapons testing", DW, 26 September, available online.

[36] Senat (2025) *Audition de Mme Véronique Roger-Lacan, ambassadrice pour le Pacifique,* Délégation Sénatoriale aux Outre-Mer, 18 December.

[37] Brady, A.M. (2024) "When China knocks at the door of New Caledonia", *ASPI Special report*, 23 August, available online; Pantz, P.C. (2024) "Azerbaïdjan : une puissance (du) « Pacifique » ? Anachronisme géopolitique et répercussion d'une escalade diplomatique avec la France", *RDN*, n. 872.

Conclusion

This chapter highlights how Oceania has evolved from a peripheral consideration into an increasingly influential factor in Paris's Indo-Pacific thinking, and illustrates several key tensions within France's Indo-Pacific approach. It reveals the interconnection between grand strategy and domestic political realities, particularly the fact that France's Indo-Pacific presence is directly shaped by its overseas territories, whose political status remains somewhat contested. It also highlights the gap between France's global strategic ambitions and the constraints of limited means, both in terms of military resources and diplomatic presence. Finally, it underscores the contrast between a comprehensive strategic vision of France as an Indo-Pacific power and the complex, often unstable local realities on the ground, where questions of sovereignty, legitimacy, and identity remain central.

To place this in a broader perspective, despite renewed diplomatic, economic, and security engagement in Oceania, France's primary strategic focus remains more firmly anchored in the western Indian Ocean. This relative prioritisation reflects a combination of structural, geopolitical, and institutional factors that make the region both more accessible to French and European forces and more immediately consequential for French interests.

First, the western Indian Ocean offers a more established framework for cooperation with European partners, notably through EU maritime security initiatives and coordinated counter-piracy operations, facilitating burden-sharing and legitimising French engagement. Second, its proximity to the European continent, combined with the strategic importance of key chokepoints such as the Strait of Hormuz and the Red Sea, highlighted by the conflict with Iran in early 2026, reinforces its centrality for France and broader European security. Third, India is a core partner for France in the Indo-Pacific, given their converging views on strategic autonomy and multipolarity, the breadth of bilateral cooperation, from critical minerals and technologies to maritime security, and the very significant defense industrial cooperation that structures the strategic trajectory of the partnership.[38] This helps explain why strategic attention continues to prioritize this area over Oceania.

[38] Ahlawat, D., Lim, Y.H. (2026) "India–France Convergence: Redrawing the Strategic Map of the Indo-Pacific", Analysis, *AIIA*, 26 February, available online.

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Werkhäuser, N. (2025) "Living with the legacy of France's nuclear weapons testing", *Deutsche Welle*, 26 September, available online at: https://www.dw.com/en/living-with-the-legacy-of-frances-nuclear-weapons-testing/a-74131800, accessed 5 May 2026.

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On the Rise of Chinese Aid in Southeast Asia: Contextualised Perspectives for European Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific Context After the Fall of USAID

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Over the past two decades, Chinese foreign aid has been deployed in Southeast Asia through several hundred projects. To shed light on this phenomenon, this paper examines its scale within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and among its member states. After long years of focusing on the African continent, the dynamics of China's global expansion of foreign assistance have placed Asia at the forefront of Beijing's priorities with the Belt and Road Initiative. Nevertheless, in Southeast Asia, traditional donors (Europe, the United States and Japan) have remained more generous, albeit increasingly less politically significant, until the demise of the United States Agency for International Development in 2025. How should Indo-Pacific partners operate strategically in this sudden vacuum? The European Union (EU) can appear on the horizon if it demonstrates the success/reality of the cooperation it is capable of. Aid can be a good area in which to illustrate cooperation in the Indo-Pacific. Also, the EU can help to lend credibility to and support ASEAN for the benefit of its citizens.

Introduction

According to recent annual surveys conducted in Singapore by the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, China is viewed by Southeast Asian leaders, specialised journalists, and businesspeople as the most influential political and economic power in the region.[1] No country is left out and areas previously considered peripheral to Southeast Asia's states have been heavily invested in by China since 2000.[2] The perception of its importance far exceeds that of the United States (US), Japan and the European Union (EU), and is widening year on year. It seems firmly established even though, on the one hand, the United States as well as Europe as a whole remains economically more financially involved than China.[3]

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[1] Seah, S. (several years) *The State of Southeast Asia: Survey Report*, *ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute*, Singapore, available online.

[2] This chapter draws extensively on the international research network *ASEAN-China Norms* which the author coordinates since 2019. In particular, tables and maps were produced and discussed by the working group of geographers (including Nathalie Fau, Manuelle Franck, Gabriel Fauveaud, and Christian Taillard), economists (Clément Séhier, Muriel Périsse, and Chiang Minhua), PhD students (Robin Laillé, Cher Hui Yun, Aymeric Mariette) and Master student (Xavier Delannay) in order to assess the extent of this trend at the regional level. See Fau, N., Lafaye de Micheaux, E. (eds) (2026) *Mapping Chinese Investment in Southeast Asia*, Singapore: Springer Nature; Fau, N., Lafaye de Micheaux, E. (2023) The Scale of the Dragon's Shadow: Chinese Aid and Investment in Southeast Asia (2000-2022)", *Moussons*, 41.

[3] ASEAN Secretariat (2025) *ASEAN Investment Report 2025*, Jakarta, available online.

Table 1 – Foreign Direct Investment in ASEAN, 2023-2024

2023			2024		
Source	**Value**	**Share of total FDI**	**Source**	**Value**	**Share of total FDI**
United States	84	40.5	United States	42	18.6
Intra-ASEAN	22	10.4	Intra-ASEAN	31	13.9
China	17	8.3	China	19	8.6
Hong Kong, China	14	6.6	United Kingdom	19	8.3
Japan	13	6.1	Japan	18	7.7
Ireland	8	3.6	Hong Kong, China	14	6.3
Luxembourg	6	2.9	Republic of Korea	8	3.4
India	5	2.4	Taiwan Province of China	7	3.2
United Kingdom	5	2.2	Ireland	6	2.5
Germany	4	1.8	France	5	2.2
Total	**177**	**85.0**	**Total**	**169**	**74.7**
Others	31	15.0	Others	57	25.3
Total FDI in ASEAN	**208**	**100.0**	**Total FDI in ASEAN**	**226**	**100.0**

(source: ASEAN Secretariat, 2025)

On the other hand, Japan and the EU have been seen as the two most reliable powers and are, in a sense, "powers of recourse", perceived as more disinterested[4] but also because they appear capable of remaining outside the US-China rivalry, from which all states in the region pursuing a *hedging* strategy are trying to stay out of.[5] In a nutshell, China's position in Southeast Asia is thus not secure, neither straightforward. Nevertheless, at least two elements come into the picture: firstly, the fact that the US has long been preferred over China[6] has changed with Donald J. Trump's return to power in January 2025. Secondly, the diversity of Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) member states makes it difficult to view the region as a whole, as the details of their respective (and mobile) positions in the international relations system show.[7]

The discrepancy between perceptions, symbolic power and objective conditions indicates scope for manoeuvre for European cooperation. This chapter therefore focuses on development aid to assess Chinese influence and highlight the objective importance that European cooperation may still hold in ASEAN today. And the brutal fall of the *United States Agency for International Development* (*USAID*) in 2025 should prompt the EU to increase its official development aid to support populations, particularly in the least developed parts of ASEAN, such as Cambodia, Myanmar or newly integrated Timor-Leste. Provided it takes account of the diversity of its partners and promotes tailored national approaches, as China does, Europe (and Italy)[8] can continue to have the ambition to play a role in bridging regional development gaps across Southeast Asia.

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[4] However, in 2024, the ASEAN confidence in the European balancing power has suddenly withdrawn (see Seah, *The State of Southeast…*).

[5] Tan, S.S. (2020) "Consigned to Hedge: South-East Asia and America's 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' Strategy", *International Affairs*, 96(1), 131-148; Kuik, C-C. (2024), "Explaining Hedging: The Case of Malaysian Equidistance", *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 46(1), 43-76.

[6] In 2023, the prevailing stance of regional elites suggested that if ASEAN were forced to choose, 61 percent would favour the US. Coming in second, the alternative choice of China would lose 5 percentage points from 43.0 percent in 2022 to 38.9 percent in 2023 (see Seah, *The State of Southeast…*).

[7] In 2024, when respondents are evaluated by nationality, the majority of respondents from Brunei, Malaysia, and Indonesia prefer China over the US.

[8] Boario, M. (2025) "Italian Development Cooperation in ASEAN: A Strategic Partnership for Sustainable Growth", in Gabusi G. (ed.) *Indo-Pacific Outlooks, Implications for the EU-ASEAN Relationship and Italy's Role in Southeast Asia,* Torino: T.wai - Torino World Affairs Institute, 89-104, available online.

Quantifying and Mapping Chinese Aid at the ASEAN Level

The ASEAN Regional Context from Beijing's Perspective

Widely regarded as the most influential country in the region – both economically and in political and strategic terms – China projects its financial power on Southeast Asia, that can be approached from various angles depending on:

- the diverse actors involved: Chinese officials; large public and private companies; small businesses; chambers of commerce; Chinese voluntary associations; brokers; local authorities;
- the targeted industry: transport infrastructure, mining, real estate and industrial zone development, the manufacturing sector);
- the recipient countries according to their economic size and GDP per capita level, their trajectory of development, their political systems, their location and diplomatic proximity to China;
- the objectives pursued:[9] predominantly political and diplomatic strategies, whether offensive or aimed at winning over; economic strategies: industrial, commercial, financial;
- the type of flow: aid and investment (contract loans, foreign direct investment). In that matter, various available databases quantify the dynamics of their respective growth and country as well as sectoral distribution.[10]

As a result, a shift in the economic and human (population) centre of gravity from the Southeast Asian region towards China has been observed: according to original measurements by Chinese researchers based on the nightlight intensity, this phenomenon is said to have occurred at a rate of 145 meters per day over the past decade.[11]

The timeline of Chinese aid and investment into Southeast Asia shows an initial predominance of investments in the least developed countries (Cambodia, Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar), followed by a surge in financial engagement toward the southern part of the region: the major state (Indonesia) and the most developed states (Singapore, Malaysia) in the insular portion of the region then becoming the focus of Chinese policy. The dynamics of financial flows depend heavily on current Chinese strategies, like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), nonetheless they must also be viewed within the context of evolving bilateral relations between China and these countries. Finally, the relations are not linear and undergo shifts, ranging from broad openings (e.g., Rodrigo R. Duterte administration in the Philippines) to the fallout from internal political upheavals. For example, in Myanmar, investment peaked in 2009-2011 before the democratic transition; in Malaysia, the golden age of 2015-2017 was abruptly cut short by the political downfall of Prime Minister Najib Razak in 2018.

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[9] Pornet, A. (2020) "Every Step Makes a Footprint: China's Aid and Development as Incremental Policies", in Rolland, N. (ed) *An Emerging China-Centric Order: China's Vision for a New World Order in Practice*, The National Bureau of Asian Research, Special Report, n. 87, August, 101-118, available online.

[10] Lafaye de Micheaux, E. (2026) "Types, amounts and dynamics of Chinese investment flows to Southeast Asia: A Critical Assessment", in Fau, Lafaye de Micheaux, *Mapping Chinese Investment…*

[11] Chen, C. (2023) "Night skies illuminate Southeast Asian economic shift towards China" *South China Morning Post*, 29 June, available online.

The Rise of Chinese Foreign Aid in Comparison: Sharpest Increase in Absolute Terms but Lesser Amount and Minimal Effort

The history of China's foreign aid began with the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in October 1949. A pendulum swing can be observed: the first period (1950-1978) was marked by ideological objectives, where values were the primary goal and the priority was to consolidate political and diplomatic relations; from the 1980s onward, foreign aid was directed toward the economy and trade (1978-1999, and 2000-2013). This was followed by a period that was once again more political and diplomatic in nature (2014-2018), though it did not neglect its commercial aspects. Finally, in the recent period since 2019, aid has been directly integrated into the foreign policy and diplomatic strategy serving China's ambitions.[12] The nebulous structure of the foreign-aid system has developed over time[13]. In terms of amounts disbursed, the comparison is difficult as the measure of China's foreign aid differs from the Official Development Assistance (ODA) defined by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)'s conventional Development Assistance Committee framework.[14] However, it can be assessed that 2000 has marked the start of two decades of substantial growth of Chinese foreign aid in volume.

Between 2013 and 2018, foreign aid involved 20 regional and international multilateral agencies and benefited 122 countries[15]. In cumulative value over these six years, it amounts to ¥270 billion disbursed in the form of grants, zero-interest loans, and concessional loans (equivalent to approximately US$42 billion, compared to US$14.41 billion from 2010 to 2012, of which one-third were grants – 36 percent – at the time). According to the latest White paper,[16] the 2013-2018 period prioritised the least developed countries in Asia and Africa and the BRI. Least developed countries (LDCs) thus accounted for 45.7 percent of Chinese foreign aid. The first recipient was Africa (44.8 percent), followed by Asia (36.8 percent), Latin America and the Caribbean (7.2 percent), multinational organisations (4.2 percent), Oceania (3.7 percent), and Europe (3.3 percent). Asia appears to be catching up with Africa, which accounted for 52 percent in the previous period (30 percent for Asia).

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[12] Lafaye de Micheaux, E. (2023) "L'aide chinoise au développement en Asie du Sud-Est", *Moussons*, 41(1), 27-61.

[13] Zhang, D., Smith, G. (2017) "China's Foreign Aid System: Structure, Agencies, and Identities", *Third World Quarterly*, 38(10), 2330-2346; Zhang, H. (2017) "The Development and Transformation of China's Foreign Aid", in *Parallel Perspectives on the Global Economic Order,* Remler D.,Ye Y. (eds), CSIS Simon Chair in Political Economy and the Shanghai Institutes for International Studies Report, 79-83.

[14] Waisbish, L.T. (2022) "'It Takes Two to Tango': South-South Cooperation Measurement Politics in a Multiplex World", *Global Policy*, 13(3), 334-345; Zhang, S.H. (2021) "China's 'Administrative Measures of Foreign Aid'", 对外援助管理办法; Sears, C. (2019) "What Counts as Foreign Aid: Dilemmas and Ways Forward in Measuring China's Overseas Development Flows", *The Professional Geographer*, 71(1), 135-144; United Nations Development Programme (2019) Governance System of China's Foreign Assistance, *UNDP Issue Brief*, n. 5, 22 October, available online.

[15] Carty, A., Gu, J. (2021) "Theory and Practices in China's Approaches to Multilateralism and Critical Reflections on the Western 'Ruled-Based International Order'", *Institute of Development Studies*, IDS Research Report no. 85, available online.

[16] State Council Information Office, People's Republic of China (2021) *China's International Development Cooperation in the New Era*, Beijing, 10 January, available online.

Defined in a way that allows for comparison with the aid measured by the OECD's Development Assistance Committee (DAC),[17] Chinese development aid increased sixfold between 2001, when it stood at less than US$1 billion, and 2019, reaching US$6.8 billion.[18] By way of comparison, in that same year, 2019, the net ODA of France and Japan stood between US$11 and US$12 billion, while that of EU institutions amounted to US$15 billion. The United Kingdom (UK) disbursed US$19 billion, Germany US$24 billion, and the US US$33 billion in official development assistance in 2019. China would rank 7th or 9th among donor countries depending on the specific definition of aid used. Its effort devoted to aid (ODA/Gross National Income, GNI) shows a much more pronounced gap: China's aid effort is estimated to be four times smaller than that of the US, and between eight and sixteen times smaller than that of the other countries mentioned (Table 2).

Table 2 – Comparative development aid efforts (ODA or ODA-like/GNI) for DAC countries and China in 2019 (in percentage/%)

Germany	France	DAC average	Japan	US	China
0.71	0.53	0.32	0.31	0.17	0.044

(source: OECD, ODA Trends and Statistics, available online; Kitano N., Miyabayashi Y. (2020) "Estimating China's Foreign Aid: 2019-2020 Preliminary Figures", Japan International Cooperation Agency – Ogata Sadako Research Institute for Peace and Development, 14 December, available online).

Nevertheless, Chinese aid recorded a strong growth in both bilateral and multilateral aid between 2000 and 2022. The Chinese bureaucracy implements aid primarily through MOFCOM (which manages 90 percent of the public budget at the central level; 3 percent reportedly comes from other ministries and 2 percent is related to scholarships for foreign students.[19] In 2019, nearly one-third of Chinese aid went to multilateral aid (US$1.8 billion), which has exceeded US$1 billion since 2015, the year the AIIB was established.[20] The respective shares of bilateral grants and interest-free loans (48 percent), concessional loans from the Chinese government (21 percent), and contributions to international organisations (30 percent) underscore the preeminent role of bilateral aid in the form of grants and zero-interest loans in Chinese aid

Following the initial strong focus on African states, which served as a testing ground for Chinese aid in the 1990s and 2000s,[21] Chinese foreign aid has expanded into Southeast Asia and materialised through several hundred projects over

[17] Total bilateral aid (grants and interest-free loans), i.e., (1) grants and interest-free loans from the Ministry of Commerce (MOFCOM); (2) grants administered by other ministries responsible for foreign aid; (3) CIDCA administrative costs after 2018; (4) scholarships provided by the Ministry of Education (MOE) to students from developing countries; (5) interest subsidies on Chinese government concessional loans (GCL); (6) a special fund of ¥2 billion established by the Chinese government in 2020 to provide anti-epidemic supplies, and interest subsidies on Chinese government concessional loans managed by the Export-Import Bank of China (China Eximbank), as well as multilateral aid (contributions to international organizations eligible for ODA).

[18] Kitano, Miyabayashi, "Estimating China's Foreign…".

[19] In 2009, almost two thirds of students from Global South countries studying in China received these scholarships.

[20] The creation of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) – the multilateral development bank initiated by China, which will be the largest contributor to its capital – marked a significant shift in the scale of China's participation in multilateral aid in 2015. China reportedly contributed US$6 billion to the AIIB's capital in five annual installments of approximately US$1.2 billion, 85 percent of which is counted as ODA under DAC rules, which, since 2017, have classified capital contributions to the AIIB as development aid.

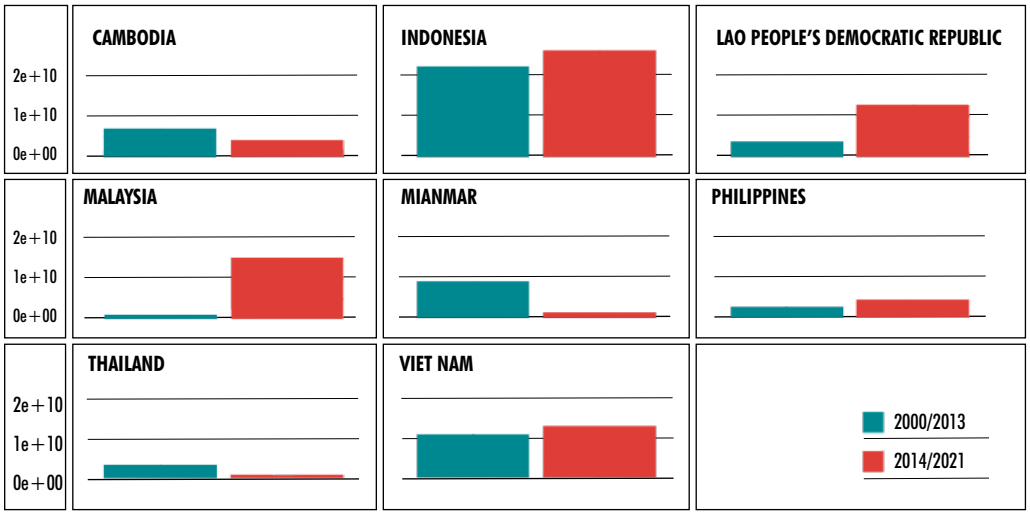
[21] Braütigam, D. (2009) *The Dragon's Gift: The Real Story of China in Africa*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

the past two decades.[22] Its interest in Asia, and Southeast Asia in particular, is also evident at the level of the China International Development Cooperation Agency (CIDCA):[23] established in 2018, the Chinese aid agency has placed at the forefront of its leadership (president, directors) individuals with backgrounds not only in economics (MOFCOM) but also in diplomacy, where key figures possess extensive experience in Asia, including Southeast Asia (Singapore).

Forms and Geographic Distribution of China's Foreign Aid to ASEAN

Available Chinese sources (State Council Information Office, CIDCA, and so on) remain very imprecise in terms of geographic distribution. Despite not fully exhaustive, given its collaborative methodology, the US database *AidData*,[24] currently the most widely used in that matter, allows us to shed light on the amounts per country.

Figure 1 – Cumulated China's foreign aid to Southeast Asia, 2000-2021



(source: AidData, v3, display by Aymeric Mariette)

In the early 2000s, aid was most often directed not only toward the poorest countries geographically close to China but also those with close political ties (Cambodia, Myanmar) where the need for development cooperation is considerable, but mainly to Indonesia and, to a lesser extent, Vietnam. Also, it cannot be simply stated that China was less involved when significant maritime disputes are involved: Vietnam and the Philippines present respectively two opposed patterns. In the next period of time, opened by the launch of BRI in 2013, Malaysia and Laos have become important recipients while Indonesia (by far) as well as Vietnam remained first.

[22] Sun, T., Zhou, T. (2014) "China's Approach to International Development Cooperation: A Case Study of Its Aid in Cambodia", in *The Rise of Asian Emerging Providers*, Agence française de développement, AFD Conferences and Seminars, 26-41.

[23] Rudyak, M. (2020) "Who Is Who in the Chinese Lending Institutional Landscape", *Urgewald*, October, available online; Rudyak, M. (2019) "The Ins and Outs of China's International Development Agency", *Carnegie-Tsinghua Centre for Global Policy*, available online.

[24] AidData Research Lab, available online.

Between 2000 and 2017, 200 projects carried out by China have been of humanitarian type (13 percent) in response to emergency situations (95 percent), e.g., donations to aid flood victims in Vietnam and Cambodia in the early 2000s. The highest frequency of this type of Chinese aid was observed between 2005 and 2008 (38 percent).[25] This significant humanitarian component takes the form of medical aid and emergency assistance (such as the shipment of 200 sets of equipment for cataract surgery to Myanmar in 2013 or the dispatch of six medical teams to the Guido National Hospital in Timor-Leste in 2016) long before the "diplomacy of masks and vaccines" of the COVID era[26] or the dispatch of rescue teams to flood-stricken areas (along the Mekong River in Laos in 2008; in Myanmar in 2015, alongside the People's Liberation Army, PLA; and in Malaysia in January 2015). Humanitarian aid also took the form of regular deployments of Chinese Youth Volunteers to Laos: about a dozen between 2002 and 2016, following the 2005 tsunami in Thailand, on numerous occasions to Myanmar, and to Cambodia, always under the banner of free technical assistance. It also appears as a complement to a robust and coherent health diplomacy that involved the construction of hospitals in recent years, primarily in Laos and Cambodia, but also in Indonesia for post-earthquake reconstruction in Sumatra, as well as in Timor and Myanmar (reconstruction beginning in 2012 of the hospital in Kyaukpyu and along the China-Myanmar oil and gas pipeline, by the Chinese state-owned China National Petroleum Corporation) and in the Philippines. In Laos, the construction of the Luang Prabang Hospital in the north of the country can be traced back to 2002 and China is responsible for the renovation of Mahosot General Hospital (US$59 million) and the Vientiane Military Hospital (also in 2017). Representing 26 regional projects, the construction or renovation of hospitals accounts for the largest share of aid (a quarter of the total amount) and involves MOFCOM, the Ministry of Defence, the PLA and state-owned enterprises. These factors make the contribution to healthcare a truly prominent feature of China's aid practice over time.

Chinese foreign aid to Southeast Asia also takes the form of the provision of trucks and various equipment, Chinese language teachers, and the gift of rare books, for example in Singapore (which was removed from the *AidData* database in the 2021 edition).

More conventional forms of official development assistance such as debt forgiveness or rescheduling have also been documented by *AidData*, primarily between 2002 and 2006 for Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam (for a total amount equivalent to US$330 million today), as well as in Indonesia. Cambodia, in turn, received aid in 2010 and 2016 (US$100 million). Beijing's aid also takes the form of zero-interest loans or concessional loans (loans at preferential rates) to local governments and their agencies, such as the loan granted by the China Eximbank in 2011 for Vietnam's construction of the Cat Linh–Ha Dong railway line (US$248 million) or to Laos in 2018 for electricity transmission (Banha-Sekong, US$300 million), or a loan for the reconstruction of the glass bottle factory in Thanlyin (Myanmar) in 2013, granted by China's second-largest institutional bank, the China Development Bank.

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[25] AidData (2021) *Global Chinese Development Finance Dataset*, Version 2.0, available online.

[26] Maude, R., Fraser, D. (2022) "Chinese Diplomacy in Southeast Asia during the COVID-19 Pandemic", *Asia Society*, 20 July, available online.

The Scale of Chinese Aid in ASEAN

Over the past two decades, China's rise in financial power has not been linear and ASEAN occupies an intermediate position between the developing regions of the Asia-Pacific (South Asia: India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh on one side; the Pacific on the other), characterised by much more pressing needs and resource constraints on one hand, and significant strategic challenges coupled with high economic and ecological vulnerability on the other. Following its deployment on the Africa continent,[27] China's approach to international development cooperation towards ASEAN has experienced periods of acceleration and shifts in focus within the region, that received an average of US$600 million per year between 2000 and 2012; this figure rose to nearly US$1 billion (920 million) per year from 2013 through the end of 2017, representing a 50% increase and reaching a level close to that of the European Union (EU).

In this immediate region – a pivotal hub in globalisation and key to securing maritime trade routes and hydrocarbon transit (Myanmar) – China's priorities have shifted significantly over the past 20 years: in the most recent period, Indonesia and Cambodia alone account for more than 70 percent of aid flows; and like Cambodia,[28] Laos has seen its share double in the distribution of Chinese aid within ASEAN. There are numerous Chinese aid projects across the region: 725 have been recorded by *AidData* between 2001 and 2017, with an acceleration in the second part (300 in the last five years 2013-2017). Although widely scattered, it is possible to discern spatial patterns and logics: notably, a significant focus on peripheral areas emerges, particularly in countries receiving substantial aid or those that are highly developed (north of the Red River in Vietnam, the east coast of Malaysia, Borneo, etc.) and a marked differentiation in these Chinese public financial flows between mainland Southeast Asian countries in direct territorial continuity with China and insular Southeast Asian countries, which are further from China both due to maritime separation and the historically more conflictual relations they maintain with China.

Taken as a whole, in 2020 alone, Southeast Asian countries received US$9 billion in net development aid from developed countries and multilateral agencies. In 2019, three ASEAN countries (Indonesia, Myanmar, and the Philippines) ranked among the top ten recipient countries worldwide, underscoring that this region of the world thus continues to receive significant attention from traditional development aid donors. In Cambodia, China is by far the leading partner and donor.[29]

Chinese aid figures can be compared with those of other countries so as to assess how aid serves as a channel of influence for various major powers at the regional level: in 2017, from the DAC (all member donors), ASEAN received US$8.6 billion, which is

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[27] Chen, Y., Calabrese, L., Willitts-King, B. (2021) "How China's New White Paper Defines a Decade of Development Cooperation", *ODI Global*, 20 January, available online; Cheng, C. (2019) "The Logic Behind China's Foreign Aid Agency", *Carnegie-Tsinghua Centre for Global Policy*, 21 May, available online; Cheng, C. (2015) "Official Development Finance with Chinese Characteristics: Development Cooperation between China and Africa", in Freeman, C.P. (ed.) *Handbook on China and Developing Countries,* Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 193-224; Chaponnière, J-R. (2009) "Chinese Aid to Africa, Origins, Forms and Issues", in van Dijk, M.P. (ed.) *The New Presence of China in Africa*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 55-82.

[28] According to *AidData*, between 2000 and 2012, Cambodia reportedly received US$1.02 billion in cumulative aid from China (US$78 million per year, on average), compared to US$1.2 billion in cumulative aid between 2013 and 2017 – three times as much (US$240 million per year, on average). See also, Cambodian Rehabilitation and Development Board of the Council for the Development of Cambodia, Royal Government of Cambodia (2010) *Cambodia Aid Effectiveness Report 2010*, May, available online.

[29] O'Neill, D. (2014) "Playing Risk: Chinese Foreign Direct Investment in Cambodia", *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 36(2), 173-205.

nine times more than what has been received from China. The Chinese aid to ASEAN was then lower than the net aid from the EU (institution) and its member states (US$1.351 billion) and was equivalent to the "grant" portion alone of the official development assistance provided by the US to ASEAN that same year (US$975 million). However, it exceeded the grant portion of Japanese aid (US$651 million). Noticeably, the EU also provided US$524 million net to China that same year. By way of comparison of the respective regional focuses: over the past decade, Europe allocated an average of only 13 percent of its development aid to Asia to ASEAN, compared to approximately 30 percent for Japan.

In 2021, the distribution of the foreign aid from China (ODA-like) and from the DAC to Southeast Asia was as reproduced in Table 3.

Table 3 – China's Aid to Southeast Asia in comparison with traditional donors, Year 2021, in million US$

2021	China	US	USAID	Other leading donors
Cambodia	128.1	116	102.5	Japan: 485
Indonesia	75.9	200	145.7	Germany: 644 Australia: 206
Laos	125.7	98	35.7	South Korea: 74 Japan: 60
Malaysia	63.2	15	5.6	Germany: 12 EU: 9 UK: 5.2
Myanmar	171.8	179	190.0	Japan: 320
Philippines	205.1	370	159.0	Japan: 1.100
Thailand	56.1	110	30.0	Japan: 339 France 34
Timor-Leste	3.1	27	21.3	Australia: 72.3 Japan: 19.5
Vietnam	112.4	190	134.5	Germany: 101 South Korea 78 Australia: 65 France: 59
Total	941.4	1.305	824.3	Australia (343.3) EU (9) France (93) Germany (757) Japan (1.224,6) South Korea (152) UK (5.2)

(source: AidData (2023); US State Department (2026); DAC (2025).

It is worth noting that, in contrast, the share of EU aid to ASEAN allocated to Vietnam was extremely high at the start of the 2010s (over 50 percent), before settling between 20 percent and 30 percent after 2015. Aid from Japan, although in smaller proportions, remains relatively high (between 16 percent and 20 percent between 2012 and 2017), which is not the case for the US (approximately 12 percent of the grant portion of US ODA).

Although still lower in amount than that of the major DAC donor countries, and very limited in terms of the effort expended (less than 0.05 percent of GNI), Chinese aid has nonetheless established itself in the development aid landscape of Southeast Asia over the decade preceding the COVID-19 crisis. It has been relatively wide-ranging – from humanitarian aid to sending teachers to debt relief – and highly uneven in volume across countries.

Finally, the chronology of the linkages between aid/loans and Foreign Direct Investment (FDI is difficult to establish, as it does not follow a single or simple pattern. Econometric results, based on African countries, have shown a correlation between high levels of Chinese public investment, poor governance quality, and high levels of Chinese aid.[30] In our view, there are in fact several typical patterns of the Aid/I relationship in ASEAN, which depend less on the quality of local governance than on the recipient country's level of development and the nature of its political ties to China. The various field studies (case studies on Malaysia, Indonesia, Cambodia, Laos, Singapore, and the Philippines, among others) can be drawn upon to support these connections. They highlight the diversity of actors and the variation in their strategies depending not only on the central governments but also on the local authorities involved. The "tailor-made" nature of certain Chinese investments and aid projects studied in the region is reflected in a remarkable ability to adapt to local conditions and national interests, which, in some cases but not always, remained overseen from the global capital. Finally, the scope and depth of the negotiations and their outcomes are also impressive: China's high-handed moves are often highlighted, particularly when describing the intimidation tactics it employs, especially in the maritime domain or at sea, but less often are the subtle, finely tuned adjustments it makes to its industrial economic projects to align with the needs and interests of local officials and governments. This is clearly evident, for example, in the finely differentiated and perfectly tailored strategies for accessing mines in Malaysia (CNMC Sokor Mine, Kelantan)[31] or the Philippines (e.g. nickel and gold)[32].

Not only indicative of the imposition of China's interests through aid, the functioning of the regional cooperation system also incorporates ASEAN's own inequality pattern, internal tensions, and domestic political dynamics. Far from being independent from the Chinese multinationals strategies and focus, the foreign aid's system thus subtly articulates the promises of shared prosperity with local governments' quest for legitimacy and the needs of Southeast Asian economies, while responding to the imperatives and, increasingly, the constraints of the Chinese economy and diplomacy. But this finely adjusted combination should not obscure the fact that in Southeast Asia, traditional donors (Europe, the US, Japan) remain more generous than China. But are they therefore always more politically significant than Beijing? The answer depends on the countries concerned and will depend on the policies of these traditional donors.

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[30] Fon, R., Alon, I. (2022) "Governance, Foreign Aid, and Chinese Foreign Direct Investment", *Thunderbird International Business Review*, 64(2), 179-201.

[31] Lafaye de Micheaux, E. (2019) "Political Economy of China's Investment in Malaysia, 2009-2018", *Bandung Journal of Global South*, 6(1), 5-49.

[32] Bonnet F.X. (2023) "Chinese Mining Strategies in the Philippines", *Moussons*, 41.

Europe's Scope for Development Cooperation in Southeast Asia

An Ancient, Large and Deep Presence

Over time, the EU (including the UK until recently) has positioned itself within a vast and highly heterogeneous regional space. This is a region where the EU's diplomacy, soft power, firms and non-governmental organisations are still well-established, even compared to China. While China is generally considered the most economically influential power in the region, its economic reach – including investment stocks and flows, as well as development aid – is less significant than that of the region's older partners. Thus, since 2010, it has appeared only twice among the top four FDI investors. Time and again, the EU, ASEAN, the US, and Japan have held the top spots.

Table 4 – Ranking of the top three to four highest foreign investors in ASEAN, 2010-2021

2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
EU28	US	ASEAN	Japan	EU28	US	EU28	US	EU 28	US	US	US
ASEAN	ASEAN	US	ASEAN	ASEAN	EU28	ASEAN	ASEAN	Japan	Japan	ASEAN	EU27
US	EU28	Japan	US/ EU28	US	ASEAN	Japan	China	ASEAN	ASEAN	EU27	ASEAN
				Japan	EU	US	Japan	China	EU 28	Japan	China

(source: ASEAN Secretariat, 2023).

For the EU, the question of the relative position objectively held by its companies, businesspeople, technologies and capital is therefore not so much one of decline or retreat; and, as far as the economic front is concerned, alongside new room for manoeuvre we must also consider the objectives and strategies to be pursued. Without defining them here, one idea might be to combine this strong and solid objective presence with a clearer awareness on the part of private and public economic actors engaged on the ground that their actions carry content and implications that are far from insignificant in the current context (a message that would be relayed by the several Chambers of Commerce, trained intermediaries, etc..). But this awareness should be linked more to a common and shared objective of supporting the autonomy of the countries in the region by allowing them to keep open a safe middle ground within the US-China rivalry (which these countries are asking for), rather than to a defence of Europe's established position – or that of certain European countries – in this region of the world (an idea that expatriates do not necessarily share themselves, nor could they usually justify, and which does not meet local expectations).

Cultivating the Image of a Power of Recourse in a Time of Uncertainty

Politically, ASEAN countries maintain ambivalent and complex relations with China, a situation the EU can use to position itself as a power of recourse. China's growing influence is not always viewed favourably in the region: according to the latest ISEAS report,[33] 64.5 percent of those who consider China to be the most influential economic power, and 68.5 percent of those who consider China to be the most influential in the political and strategic spheres, express concern about

[33] Lin, J. et al. (2026) *The State of Southeast Asia: 2026 Survey Report*, Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, available online.

the expansion of its influence. This concern does not extend to the EU, whose presence on the ground is neither weaker nor more discreet than China's, without being associated with a threat of imperialism – except, in a very rhetorical and entirely sporadic manner, when it comes to protecting an economic model that is still often highly extractive in the name of resistance to neo-colonialism. Similarly, the EU cannot be accused of contributing to or even fuelling any dependence of the region's states on it (through the debt trap, in particular). Finally, it avoids criticism in the press and among the general public regarding dubious contracts, the enrichment of corrupt elites, or depriving local workers of jobs on construction sites where, conversely, Chinese companies have relied – often to a lesser extent than has been claimed by political opponents in the host countries – on labour imported from China.

The Constant Gardener

In comparison with many Chinese companies' local business practices and labour norms, the major industrialised European countries multinationals often appear exemplary in financial and social terms given the older social responsibility agenda as it has been included in the several EU-ASEAN countries agreements that have entered into force with Singapore (2019) and Vietnam (2020), while negotiations with Indonesia have been finalised (2025) and resumed in Thailand (2023), Philippines (2024) and Malaysia (2025). Since July 2024, the EU Directive on corporate sustainability due diligence aims to foster sustainable and responsible corporate behaviour in companies' operations across their global value chains: this regulation allows for progress and improvement. More generally, France, Germany, the UK, the Netherlands and Italy enjoy the trust of major regional political actors and are well placed to build on this legal foundation within the context of contemporary ASEAN.

This is contingent upon taking into account local perceptions of current challenges, accurately assessing the objective reality of these concerns, and providing appropriate responses in terms of the practical interactions (economic, political, diplomatic) that have been established. Five years after COVID-19, Southeast Asia has slowly moved beyond health concerns related to the pandemic to focus on the income and socioeconomic impacts it faces, the effects of climate change, and evolving geopolitical tensions.

Indeed, unemployment and economic recession have come to the forefront in 2023 (59.5 percent, +10 points compared to 2022), followed by the effects of climate change, which saw the biggest jump compared to the previous year's public opinion (57.1 percent, +20 points) Finally, widening socioeconomic gaps and increasing income disparities, as well as military tensions, rank third among the region's most pressing challenges (42 percent), while terrorism comes in last place (11.3 percent).

For the EU, this return to the forefront of material and tangible concerns should pave the way for greater confidence in the relevance of its strategic positioning and the importance of its contribution to international cooperation and relations. With its recognised leadership in climate governance, a strong regional industrial and economic presence, an enviable position in terms of managing inequalities (of income and capital), and with direct investments in the region still on the rise in 2022 and 2023, the EU ticks all the boxes to present itself as a reliable power, a benchmark, and a source of support in the face of the current uncertainties and concerns shaping public opinion in Southeast Asia.

The regional integration card

Fearing that the region will become an arena for competition among major powers, with member states acting as their proxies, sentiment toward ASEAN appears to be dominated by disrepute and a decline in its standing. ASEAN's slowness and inefficiency are singled out as incapable of addressing political and economic developments. Concerns about disunity within ASEAN are far surpassing the fear that it will not be able to recover from the pandemic. Moreover, as Thuong Le Thu has shown it very clearly, China works against ASEAN unity through a dual strategy, combining power dynamics and coercion with a charm offensive consisting of multiple incentives, primarily of an economic nature.[34] However, the slowdown of the Chinese economy since 2014 has started to be felt, as well as the emergence and subsequent intensification of US-China rivalry.

By first contributing to the recognition of ASEAN and then, to its improved functioning, the EU can, conversely, help lend credibility to and support the regional association for the benefit of its citizens. The EU might intend to re-play the international integration card that was central in the 2000-2010s, although in a non-ideological manner and for better reasons than in the past, as the EU can no longer seek to be taken as a model by ASEAN. In fact, Europe's relative position as a normative power and as a model (or an ideal) of regional integration has been significantly altered and undermined over the course of a long decade marked by China's phenomenal rise in the region. In 2012, the EU received the Nobel Peace Prize: this achievement paradoxically marked the beginning of a form of decline. Meanwhile, ASEAN made rapid progress during the 2010-2020 period, both in terms of institutional development and prosperity of its members – including founding members (Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, Singapore, and to a lesser extent, the Philippines) as well as newcomers, which experienced the highest growth rates. So, the balance of power, both economic and political, between the two regions has evolved and this must be fully acknowledged in any forthcoming cooperation process.

If the EU model's appeal as a model of integration to be emulated has very clearly eroded, the regional integration card is still significant. The ASEM forum remains a pillar of the ASEAN-EU relationship, giving it tangible substance in a few key areas at the EU level where citizens of ASEAN countries would be given preferential treatment as members of ASEAN such as school exchanges; status of migrant workers; student mobility; press cards and journalist mobility; scientific cooperation; submission of scientific projects, all areas where the EU can offer its experience, while presenting itself as open to Southeast Asian models (often less bureaucratic and more fluid). Making this EU-ASEAN cooperation more tangible and more understandable, at least for a certain segment of the population, could constitute a short-term political objective to strengthen, in a context marked by uncertainty and fear of a "clash of titans", its role as a power of last resort.

[34] Huong, L.T. (2018) "China's Dual Strategy of Coercion and Inducement toward ASEAN: A Rapidly Evolving Relationship – From Coercion to Inducement", *The Pacific Review*, 32(1), 20-36.

Conclusion

As a diverse and rapidly growing region, ASEAN has been integrated into globalisation for a long time, especially into several global value chains. The region has long offered foreign investors large prospects and opportunities in sectors such as semiconductors, the automotive industry and textiles and apparel for several decades. Aid has been part of the trade, investment and power strategies of the Indo-Pacific powers as well as China.

Since 2025, ASEAN is navigating an extremely tense geopolitical landscape, where the major US-China rivalry is playing out almost daily and where, in the event of open conflict, all countries in the region feel they would emerge as losers. However, recent trade tensions (the US-China trade war in 2018; the announcement of exorbitant tariffs in April 2025) have in turn created opportunities for the relocation and reorientation of commercial activities towards ASEAN, as direct investment from Europe, China, Japan and the US in the region continued to rise in 2024 and 2025. This is all the truer given that the COVID-19 crisis has disrupted supply chains, weakened social fabric, undermined the credibility of certain governments deemed poor managers of the health crisis, and reduced ASEAN to an ineffective and contested entity. In the meantime, a coup d'état followed by civil war in Myanmar on 1 February 2021 and Thailand's aggression at the Cambodian frontier from July 2025 have broken the peace in the region.

From the perspective of European diplomacy, the present configuration in which China is viewed as highly influential but not necessarily welcome, would suggest focusing less on the automatic expansion of EU involvement, particularly in industrial, commercial, or financial spheres, which is already substantial in quantitative terms, and more on reflecting on Europe's own positioning. Increasing the already well-acknowledged resource constraints in the aid sector, as in France in 2025 and 2026, in the name of sovereignty and the necessary increase in national military expenditure, should not be an option. The trust the EU enjoys in Southeast Asia gives it a certain degree of leeway, provided it understands precisely the limits – undoubtedly narrower than they were fifteen or twenty years ago – and the contours, which vary depending on the country within the zone.

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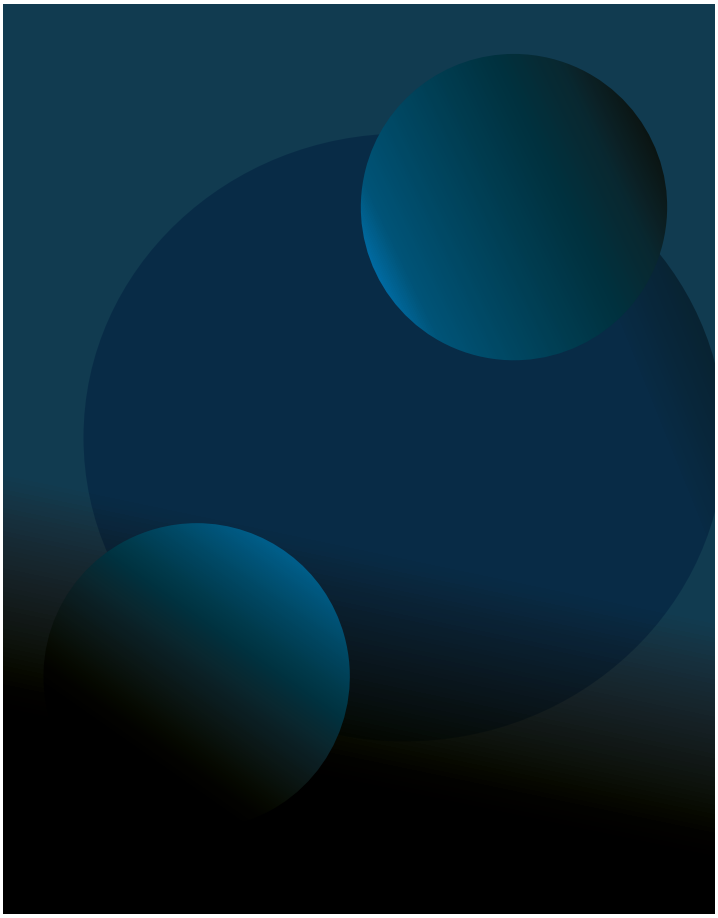
SECTION THREE

EVOLVING INDO-PACIFIC STRATEGIES IN GERMANY AND IN THE NETHERLANDS



Germany´s Security Engagement with the Indo-Pacific: Implementation of the 2020 Policy Guidelines in a Changing Strategic Environment

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This paper assesses Germany's security engagement with the Indo-Pacific in the five years since the publication of the 2020 Policy Guidelines for the Indo-Pacific, asking how this engagement has evolved and to what extent Germany's stated strategic objectives are matched by its observable behaviour and material commitment. The paper begins by situating Germany's Indo-Pacific security engagement in context. As a non-resident power with no territorial presence in the region, Germany's approach to the Indo-Pacific was historically defined by trade and economic relations, predominantly with China, while security played a marginal role. The publication of the 2020 Guidelines marked a paradigm shift, acknowledging the region's centrality to Germany's prosperity and security and outlining aspirations to diversify and deepen bilateral relations, expand security and defence cooperation, broaden its maritime presence, and protect the rules-based order. The analysis examines Germany's security engagement along three empirical dimensions. First, at the level of strategic thinking, it traces three successive shifts - the 2020 Guidelines, the 2022 German Zeitenwende, and the changed geopolitical landscape of 2025 under the Trump 2.0 presidency and the Merz government - that have progressively sharpened Germany's threat perceptions and advanced the understanding of European and Indo-Pacific security as being interconnected. Second, at the level of partnerships and cooperation, it documents a substantial diversification of security ties, including the establishment of 2+2 consultations with Japan and Australia, a deepened defence-industrial partnership with India, and newly formalised defence cooperation with the Philippines, Vietnam, and Malaysia. Third, at the operational level, it examines how Germany employs defence diplomacy and military deployments to deepen its security engagement with the region: two major naval deployments, regular participation in multilateral exercises, the stationing of liaison officers and military attachés, and capacity-building initiatives under the Enable and Enhance framework. Finally, a brief excurses surveys German arms transfers to the Indo-Pacific. The paper concludes that Germany has achieved a notable expansion of its security engagement across all three dimensions, yet remains operationally a symbolic actor in the Indo-Pacific, constrained by resource limitations and competing security demands in Europe. Its engagement is best understood as defence diplomacy, political signalling, partnership-building, and gaining operational experience, rather than as a bid for hard-security influence. Drawing on these findings, the paper offers lessons for Italy as it considers whether to develop its own Indo-Pacific strategy.

Introduction

Germany´s 2020 *Policy Guidelines for the Indo-Pacific* marked a watershed in Berlin´s engagement with the region. Until then, German policy in the wider Indo-Pacific had been primarily trade-focused and overwhelmingly China-centric, with security policy playing a marginal role even in long-standing bilateral relationships such as those with Japan, India, and Indonesia. The Guidelines reframed the region as central to Germany´s prosperity and security, set out a strategic framework spanning seven policy fields, and committed the Federal Government to expanding its security policy engagement, deepening defense cooperation with regional partners, and increasing its maritime presence. This shift reflected a growing recognition that Germany´s deep economic exposure to the region, combined with the risks of overdependence on China, required a broader and more diversified pattern of engagement.

The strategic environment into which the Guidelines were launched has since been transformed. The Indo-Pacific´s post-Cold War security architecture, organized around the United States hub-and-spokes alliance system, is increasingly under pressure from intensifying great-power competition between Washington and Beijing, Chinas growing assertiveness in the South China Sea, persistent tensions on the Korean peninsula, and the ever-present risk of escalation around Taiwan. Each of these flashpoints carries direct implications for Germany, whose maritime trade routes, supply chains, and broader economic security are tied to regional stability. Alongside these regional dynamics, a series of structural shocks has progressively transformed the global context of German engagement: the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine and the German Zeitenwende it triggered, the changed global security environment since 2025 marked by the second Trump administration and fundamental challenges to the rules-based international order have placed new demands on German and European defense resources.

This combination of expanding ambition and tightening constraints raises the central question of this article: how has Germany´s security engagement in the Indo-Pacific evolved since the publication of the Guidelines, and to what extent have the security aspirations set out in 2020 been met under conditions that have changed fundamentally since? The article examines this question through three analytical dimensions: strategic thinking, partnerships and security cooperation, and operational engagement.[1] The first part traces the evolution of German strategic thinking through three successive inflection points: the 2020 Guidelines, the *Zeitenwende*, and the post-2025 security environment. The following section maps the expansion of Germany´s bilateral and multilateral partnerships, with particular attention to Japan, Australia, India, and Singapore. The third subchapter assesses operational engagement, including the two Indo-Pacific naval deployments, German participation in bi- and multilateral exercises, liaison officer placements, and capacity-building under the Enable and Enhance Initiative. The analysis draws on a selected sample of primary sources, including key strategy documents, landmark speeches, parliamentary debates, and government press releases. The focus throughout is on hard security; soft security initiatives such as crisis prevention, climate cooperation, and arms control, although also part of the Guidelines, fall outside the scope of this article.

The conclusion brings the three dimensions together to assess the overall coher-

[1] This chapter extends and complements the analysis developed in Heiduk, F., Hörning, C. (2026) *Zeitenwende in the Indo-Pacific? Assessing Germany's Regional Security Engagement. German Politics,* 1–25, available online, which examines the impact of the *Zeitenwende* on German regional security engagement in depth.

ence of Germany´s engagement and the value of the Guidelines as an instrument of foreign and security policy. On that basis, the final section turns to the lessons of Germany´s experience for Italy, which currently faces the question of whether to develop its own Indo-Pacific guidelines.

Strategic Thinking and Political Discourse

This section examines Germany´s security objectives and threat perceptions in the Indo-Pacific: why and how the region features in German strategic thinking, what rationale underpins Germany´s security engagement there, and how that thinking has evolved over the past six years in response to changing domestic and international security conditions. The analysis draws on a selected sample of primary sources; key strategy documents, landmark speeches, press releases, and parliamentary debates, to trace the evolution of political discourse on Germany´s security role in the Indo-Pacific since 2020.

Three major inflection points structure the analysis: the publication of the German *Policy Guidelines for the Indo-Pacific* in 2020, Russia´s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, in response to which then-Chancellor Olaf Scholz declared the German *Zeitenwende*, and the changed global political and security environment from 2025 onwards, characterized by challenges to the rules-based international order, great power competition, claims of an emerging multipolar order, and increasingly challenging transatlantic relations.

Regional engagement before 2020

Prior to 2020, German foreign policy toward the Indo-Pacific was heavily China-focused. Germany saw China´s rise primarily as an economic opportunity and, as with Russia, pursued a *change through trade*[2] strategy. Bilateral relations across the region, including with Japan, India, and Indonesia, were predominantly trade-driven. Security policy played a marginal role throughout this period.

First Inflection Point: the 2020 Policy Guidelines for the Indo-Pacific

The publication of the *Policy Guidelines for the Indo-Pacific* in 2020 marked a paradigm shift in Germany´s strategic thinking, explicitly acknowledging the region´s centrality to Germany´s prosperity and security. The document provided a strategic framework for Germany's broad engagement with the Indo-Pacific across a broad range of policy fields, from multilateralism and climate policy to economics, trade, human rights, and security.[3]

A central driver of this reorientation was the recognition that Germany´s narrow focus on China had led to a neglect of the wider region. The Guidelines emphasized the growing political and economic importance of the Indo-Pacific to Germany as a

[2] *Wandel durch Handel* or "change through trade" describes a longstanding strategic doctrine underlying German foreign policy vis-à-vis non-democratic or non-Western states like China and Russia, that was based on the assumption that close trade relations and economic integration would eventually lead to democratization in these countries.

[3] The official policy fields set out in the Guidelines are: (1) strengthening multilateralism, (2) tackling climate change and protecting the environment, (3) strengthening peace, security and stability, (4) promoting human rights and the rule of law, (5) strengthening rules-based, fair and sustainable free trade, (6) rules-based networking and the digital transformation of regions and markets and (7) bringing people together through culture, education and science. So, while the Guidelines have a security chapter, security policy is just one of several priorities. See: Federal Government, Germany (2020) *Policy Guidelines for the Indo-Pacific. Germany – Europe – Asia: Shaping the 21st Century Together*, Berlin, 21, available online.

trading nation[4] and articulated the country´s interest in closing "ranks with democracies and partners with shared values in the region"and in diversifying its relations "to avoid unilateral dependencies." [5] This was a clear, if diplomatically understated, acknowledgement of the risks of overdependence on China. Notably, however, Germany did not frame the Guidelines as a tool to balance China. Instead, it adopted an inclusive regional definition, describing "the Indo-Pacific to be the entire region characterised by the Indian Ocean and the Pacific" [6] and thereby including China. This distinguished Germany´s approach from that of other actors such as the United States, which framed the concept of the Indo-Pacific concept in more explicitly competitive terms.[7]

The rationale underpinning German security engagement in the Indo-Pacific set out by the Guidelines was closely linked to Germany´s economic security interests. The document established a direct nexus between European and Asian prosperity and security, pointing to Germany´s significant trade exposure to the region and the vital importance of open maritime trade routes and maritime security. On this basis, the Federal Government committed to expanding its security policy engagement in the Indo-Pacific through a broad range of initiatives.[8] Among others, Berlin intended to deepen "its security policy engagement", "expand its security and defence cooperation", and increase its maritime presence in the Indo-Pacific region.[9] Soft security measures such as civil crisis prevention, conflict management and peacebuilding and arms control measures also featured in the Guidelines[10] but fall outside the scope of this chapter, which focuses on hard security initiatives.

It is also worth noting that the Guidelines did not set out overly ambitious security objectives; Germany did not aspire to become a major security actor in the Indo-Pacific or to alter the regional security architecture. The stated goals were to deepen cooperation, diversify partnerships, and contribute to the stability of a rules-based regional order. Whether and how these goals have been met is examined in the following subchapters.

Second Inflection Point: Russia´s Invasion of Ukraine and the German *Zeitenwende*

The second major inflection point fundamentally reshaped German strategic thinking and security policy. Following Russia´s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Chancellor Scholz declared the German *Zeitenwende,* a historic strategic turning point that called for Germany to shift from its role as a civilian power to a guarantor of European security, to reverse decades of low defense spending and rearm, and to adapt to a new era of confrontation and geopolitical rivalry.[11]

This reorientation necessarily led to a renewed focus on national and European

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[4] *Ibidem.*

[5] *Ibidem.*

[6] *Ibidem.*

[7] Heiduk, F., Wacker, G. (2020) *From Asia-Pacific to Indo-Pacific*, SWP Research Paper, Berlin, available online.

[8] Federal Government, Germany (2020) *Policy Guidelines for the Indo-Pacific. Germany – Europe – Asia: Shaping the 21st Century Together*, Berlin, 35, available online.

[9] *Ibidem, 35-36.*

[10] *Ibidem, 16.*

[11] Federal Government, Germany (2022) "Policy statement by Olaf Scholz, Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany and Member of the German Bundestag, 27 February 2022 in Berlin", Berlin, available online; Scholz, O. (2022) "The Global Zeitenwende: How to Avoid a New Cold War in a Multipolar Era", *Foreign Affairs*, 101(2), available online.

defense. The 2023 *National Security Strategy* made clear that "national and collective defense is the core task of the Bundeswehr, with all other tasks subordinate";[12] the Indo-Pacific featured only in passing.[13]

Yet the war did not lead to retreat from Germany´s Indo-Pacific commitments, but impacted Germany´s assessment of its bilateral relations and security interests. Notably, it accelerated an already-underway shift in Germany´s perception of China. The failure of the *change through trade* doctrine, now demonstrated not only by Russia´s invasion but increasingly applicable to China, the vulnerabilities in Germany´s supply chains and trade routes, and China´s role in sustaining Russia´s war economy all contributed to a recalibration. While China remains one of Germany´s most important trading partners, official German strategic thinking has shifted from an emphasis on partnership toward one that gives greater weight to rivalry and competition, a change reflected in the 2023 *Strategy on China*.[14] This gave further urgency to diversify partnerships with other countries in the Indo-Pacific so as to reduce the dependency on the Peoples Republic.

The war also deepened the argument, already latent in the 2020 Guidelines, that European and Indo-Pacific security are interconnected. The economic framing of 2020 centered on trade routes and supply chains was now accompanied by an explicit security framing in the political discourse. The Guidelines had noted the *EU Global Strategy´*s observation that "there is a direct nexus between prosperity in Europe and security in Asia,"[15] but this was primarily an economic argument. From 2022 onwards, the security dimension became more central in the official discourse; Beijing´s direct and indirect support of Russia through its continuation of political and economic relations enabled Moscow to continue the conflict and propped up the Russian war economy and the military cooperation between Russia and North Korea were regularly cited as evidence that the two theatres could not be treated in isolation. As Defense Minister Boris Pistorius stated in 2024: "I have come in the firm conviction that the challenges and crises of the world are interconnected. Today more than ever before. We cannot separate the security challenges of the Indo-Pacific from those in Europe. And if we want to address the strategic issues of our time successfully, we need strong partnerships."[16]

One could of course also champion the somewhat cynically hypothesises, that the framing of both security theatres being inextricably linked may be at least in part a strategy to keep the political focus on the Indo-Pacific and justify resources being spend on missions abroad despite competing domestic demands. Germany´s continued security engagement with the Indo-Pacific has not been without domestic contestation. While the governing coalition parties so far have supported the security components of the Guidelines, the far-right opposition party AfD called for an end to military deployments to the region, advocated for a new Indo-Pacific

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[12] Federal Government, Germany (2023) *National Security Strategy. Robust. Resilient. Sustainable. Integrated Security for Germany*, Berlin, 32, available online

[13] *Ibidem, 23.*

[14] China's conduct and decisions have caused the elements of rivalry and competition in our relations to increase in recent years." Federal Government of Germany (2023) *Strategy on China of the Government of the Federal Republic of Germany*, Berlin, 11, available online; and "Increasing competition and systemic rivalry with China require new efforts in Germany and the EU to strengthen our economy, competitiveness and technological sovereignty, as well as to protect our open societies and assert our interests vis-à-vis China." *Ibidem, 34.*

[15] Federal Government, Germany (2020) *Policy Guidelines for the Indo-Pacific. Germany – Europe – Asia: Shaping the 21st Century Together*, Berlin, 35, available online.

[16] Federal Ministry of Defence, Germany (2024) "Partner für den Frieden: Pistorius am Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies", available online.

strategy based on economic interests, and questioned the added value of measures such as the naval deployments.[17]

Despite these domestic pressures, the *Zeitenwende* did not lead to an abandonment of the *Indo-Pacific Guidelines* at the level of strategic thinking: Germany´s security interest in the region was if anything further elaborated during this period. [18]

Third inflection point: the changed security environment since 2025

Germany´s current strategic outlook reflects a third, ongoing shift. Foreign Minister Wadephul characterized the emerging global environment in stark terms: "The law of the strongest seems to be increasingly replacing the strength of the law. Rules that we considered the backbone of our international order are being called into question. The international order itself – as we have known it since after the Second World War – is under pressure."[19] Chancellor Merz was even more frank: "... the international order, which was based on rights and rules, is in the process of being destroyed. I fear we must put this even more bluntly: this order, as imperfect as it was even at the best of times, no longer exists."[20]

While this paradigm shift is multi-causal and more diffuse than the other two inflections points, the author of this piece has decided on the re-election of US president Donald Trump as the temporal marker. The third inflection is defined by challenges to the rules-based international order, heightened great power competition, unstable transatlantic relations and a fundamental questioning of American reliability as a security partner in Europe and the Indo-Pacific alike. In response, Germany has amended the constitution to allow for a substantial increase in defense spending: Germany´s NATO contribution is set to rise to 2.8 percent of GDP in 2026 and to 3.5 percent by 2029. [21] This signifies a fundamental paradigm shift in German security policy.

Against this backdrop, the argument for diversifying and deepening partnerships with "like-minded" middle powers, already present since 2020, has become ever more prominent and more explicitly tied to strategic self-interest. German officials have continued to emphasize the interconnected security theaters and framed deeper engagement with partners in the Indo-Pacific as a response to an environment of diminished reliability.[22] Defense Minister Pistorius, speaking in Australia in early 2026, argued that in a world of greater unpredictability, it had

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[17] German Bundestag (2025) *Umsetzung der Indo-Pazifik-Leitlinien der Bundesregierung*, Bundestagsdrucksache 21/2138, 21st electoral term, Berlin, available online; German Bundestag (2023) *Kleine Anfrage,* Bundestagsdrucksache 21/2138, 20th electoral term, Berlin, available online; German Bundestag (2024) *Plenary debate on "Vertiefte Zusammenarbeit mit den Partnern des Indo-Pazifiks zur Lösung globaler Herausforderungen"*, Plenarprotokoll 20/181, Berlin, 23530, available online.

[18] See also Heiduk, F., Hörning, C. (2026) "Zeitenwende in the Indo-Pacific? Assessing Germany's Regional Security Engagement", German Politics, 1–25, available online.

[19] Federal Foreign Office, Germany (2026) "Speech by Foreign Minister Johann Wadephul at IISS Raffles Lecture in Singapore – "Security, freedom, prosperity: foreign policy in the era of uncertainty", Singapore, available online.

[20] Federal Government, Germany (2025) "Speech by Federal Chancellor Merz at the Munich Security Conference "We are asserting our freedom with our neighbours ", Munich, available online.

[21] Federal Ministry of Finance, Germany (2025) "German government intensifies its investment drive: 2026 federal budget and fiscal plan to 2029 adopted", Berlin, available online.

[22] "We can choose to together adapt to the new realities. We can choose to preserve our values – together as partners. We can choose to recognise the sense of urgency. And to work together as an international community and to strengthen multilateralism. That is precisely why I am here. Because I am convinced that the Indo-Pacific is of decisive importance for Germany, for Europe. And vice versa. And because we – as Germans and as Europeans – want to build and strengthen partnerships that are solid, reliable, and capable of shaping a shared and prosperous future." Federal Foreign Office, Germany (2026) "Speech by Foreign Minister Johann Wadephul at IISS Raffles Lecture in Singapore – "Security, freedom, prosperity: foreign policy in the era of uncertainty"", Singapore, available online.

become more important for like-minded partners such as Australia, Germany, Japan, and Singapore to remain committed to the rules-based order and to one another.[23] Addressing the issue of American reliability, the Defense Minister noted that the Trump administration´s demands had accelerated European rearmament and underscored the need to broaden and deepen alliances with partners who share a stake in the rules-based order. Germany´s primary geographic responsibility, as articulated in official statements, remains Europe, but, as Pistorius stated, "in an interconnected strategic environment, geographic distance must not be mistaken for strategic irrelevance. A truly comprehensive European security approach must comprise Indo-Pacific security as well. To Germany, partnerships beyond Europe are a strategic necessity".[24]

At the same time, German officials have been careful to avoid the impression that Berlin was distancing itself from Washington and repeatedly reiterate the importance of the transatlantic partnership,[25] the need to keep the US engaged in NATO[26] and US centrality to security in the Indo-Pacific: "Without a strong US presence, the Indo-Pacific would be less safe. For us and for our allies." [27]

Interim conclusion

Germany´s strategic thinking toward the Indo-Pacific has evolved substantially since 2020. Three successive inflection points have impacted threat perceptions, deepened the rationale for security engagement, and expanded the range of interests that Germany links to the region.

What began in 2020 as a primarily economics-driven case for diversification has developed into a broader security argument in which European and Indo-Pacific security are understood as being linked. This shift has been reinforced rather than reversed by the intensifying demands on European defense and the shifts in the international order and security environment. Despite growing resource constraints and domestic political contestation, Germany has in rhetorical terms expanded its commitment to the region. The following two subchapters examine whether and to what extent this evolution in strategic thinking has been matched by observable behavior on the diplomatic level through the development and deepening of partnerships and security cooperation´s and through operational engagement and defense diplomacy measures by the *Bundeswehr*.

While the invasion of Ukraine and the growing security demands at home could have led to a complete refocusing on Europe and abandoning the goals set out in the relatively new Indo-Pacific guidelines, this was not the case. In fact, the logic of why the Indo-Pacific mattered to German security was further developed in the official political discourse over the last years.

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[23] Australian Government, Department of Defence (2026) "Joint press conference, Parliament House, Transcript", Canberra, 26 March, available online.

[24] *Ibidem.*

[25] Pistorius, B.: "[...] we don't want to imagine a world without the United States as a reliable partner". *Ibidem.*

[26] Pistorius, B.: "Our American allies want to see a European-led NATO. And we have acted and are acting to build a more European NATO. A NATO in which Europeans bear the brunt of conventional deterrence and defence. In other words: NATO has to become more European to stay transatlantic." Federal Ministry of Defence, Germany (2026) "Speech by Federal Minister of Defence Boris Pistorius at the National Press Club of Australia – "Germany and Australia: Partners in an Era of Strategic Competition"", Canberra, available online.

[27] *Ibidem.*

Partnerships and Security Cooperation

The 2020 *Policy Guidelines for the Indo-Pacific* set out several concrete objectives in the realm of security partnerships: to expand security and defense cooperation with partners in the region, to pursue bilateral defense cooperation in line with export control commitments, to expand cybersecurity dialogue and cooperation with like-minded partners, and to support ASEAN´s security cooperation formats.[28] This subchapter examines whether, and to what extent, these goals have been met. It traces the expansion of Germany´s network of bilateral security agreements, consultation mechanisms, and defense industry cooperation since 2020, and assesses the overall trajectory of Germany´s partnership-building in the region up to early 2026.

As the previous section showed, the strategic rationale for engaging with the Indo-Pacific deepened considerably across the three inflection points. What follows examines whether that shift in strategic thinking was accompanied by a corresponding expansion of Germany´s partnership infrastructure. It does so by taking a closer look at four bilateral relationships -Singapore, Japan, Australia, and India - which reflect the diversity of Germany´s partnership-building in the region: Japan and Australia are established US treaty allies with whom Germany has developed 2+2 consultation formats and defense-industrial ties; Singapore represents Germany´s most institutionalized bilateral defense partnership in Southeast Asia, underpinned by longstanding submarine cooperation and a recently elevated strategic partnership; and India, a major power that has traditionally pursued strategic autonomy rather than formal alliance commitments, represents a newer but deepening relationship driven in part by growing Indian demand for German defense equipment. These four cases are followed by a broader overview of Germany´s expanding engagement across the wider region.

Singapore

Germany´s security relationship with Singapore predates the Guidelines and is one of the most sophisticated bilateral defense partnerships in the region. Since 2009, Singaporean Armed Forces personnel have conducted regular joint military training exercises with the *Bundeswehr* in Germany, and in 2018 both countries signed an *Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement* covering high-level visits, military-to-military exchanges, professional training, and defense technology collaboration.[29] Singapore has procured German submarines since 2019, with their crews undergoing training with the German Navy in Kiel.[30]

In 2024, the relationship was elevated to the status of a *Strategic Partnership*.[31] In March 2026, Defense Minister Pistorius´s visit to Singapore produced two further

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[28] Federal Government, Germany (2020) *Policy Guidelines for the Indo-Pacific. Germany – Europe – Asia: Shaping the 21st Century Together*, Berlin, 15-16, available online.

[29] Ministry of Defence, Singapore (2026) *Singapore and Germany to Step Up Defence Cooperation*, Singapore, available online.

[30] Federal Ministry of Defence, Germany (2026) "Pistorius in Singapur: Bessere Wartung von U-Booten am strategischen Knotenpunkt", available online.

[31] In the joint work plan 2025/2026 the two countries set out to "Deepen military-to-military cooperation in the areas of digitalisation and cybersecurity, Research & Development/Innovation, Armament – based on our already successful cooperation in the fields of main battle tanks and submarines –exercises, training, education, and exchanges. Explore further collaboration opportunities between our navies, armies, air and cyber forces, building upon the existing cooperation on armour-related training exercises and in submarine-related areas." Federal Government of Germany and Government of the Republic of Singapore (2024) *Joint Declaration on the Strategic Partnership between the Federal Republic of Germany and the Republic of Singapore*, available online.

agreements. ThyssenKrupp Marine Systems (TKMS) and ST Engineering Marine signed a MoU to establish a *Joint Service and Maintenance Centre* in Singapore. The agreement for this regional submarine maintenance hub covers platform delivery, technology transfer, crew training, maintenance, repair, logistical support, and armed forces exchanges in the areas of maritime security and strategic capabilities. The hub will be accessible to the Singaporean, German and all other navies operating TKMS submarines, and is therefore of clear operational relevance for future German naval deployments to the region. [32] In addition, a *Supply Chain Resiliency Arrangement* was signed to strengthen both countries´ defense supply chains against unforeseen disruptions. [33] Cooperation in cybersecurity is also set to expand, with a new agreement between the two countries´ cyber intelligence authorities scheduled for June 2026. [34]

Singapore imposed sanctions against Russia after the invasion of Ukraine.[35]

Japan

Bilateral security cooperation with Japan has expanded steadily since the publication of the Guidelines. In 2021, both countries established *2+2 consultation* format which brings together their foreign and defense ministers[36] and signed the *German-Japanese Agreement on the Security of Information*, enabling the exchange of classified material and more intensive cooperation on security issues.[37] The first *German-Japanese government consultations* took place in 2023.[38] In 2024, both countries signed an *Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement* (ACSA), facilitating the provision of supplies, ammunition, and logistical support between the Bundeswehr and Japan´s Self-Defense Forces. [39]

Defense Minister Pistorius´s visit to Japan in March 2026 aimed to further deepen interoperability and defense industry cooperation. Both sides agreed to strengthen defense-related communication through regular security consultations in peacetime and crisis situations, and committed to consulting on "appropriate responses" to threats to their security and regional stability. Both governments have also expressed interest in concluding a *Reciprocal Access Agreement* (RAA). On the defense industrial side, longstanding cooperation, including Airbus and Kawasaki Heavy Industries´ 50-year collaboration and Japan´s observer status in the Eurodrone program, is set to expand.[40]

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[32] Thyssenkrupp Marine Systems (2026) "TKMS and ST Engineering sign MoU in Singapore", available online; Federal Ministry of Defence, Germany (2026) "Pistorius in Singapur: Bessere Wartung von U-Booten am strategischen Knotenpunkt", available online; Ministry of Defence, Singapore (2026) "Singapore and Germany to Step Up Defence Cooperation", Singapore, available online.

[33] *Ibidem.*

[34] Federal Ministry of Defence, Germany (2026) "Pistorius in Singapur: Bessere Wartung von U-Booten am strategischen Knotenpunkt", available online.

[35] Monetary Authority of Singapore (2026) "Financial Measures in Relation to Russia", Singapore, available online.

[36] Federal Foreign Office, Germany (2021) "*Foreign and security policy consultations between Japan and* Germany", Berlin, available online.

[37] Federal Foreign Office, Gemany (2021) "Sign of mutual trust: Japan and Germany sign Agreement on the Security of Information", Tokyo, available online.

[38] Federal Foreign Office, Germany (2023) "Germany and Japan: Bilateral relations", Berlin, available online.

[39] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan (2024) *Entry into Force of the Agreement between the Government of Japan And the Government of the Federal Republic of Germany*, Tokyo, available online.

[40] Federal Ministry of Defence, Germany (2026) "Tokyo: Pistorius engagiert sich für engere Zusammenarbeit mit Japan", available online; Ministry of Defense, Japan (2023) *Japan-Germany Defense Ministerial Meeting*, Tokyo, available online.

Australia

Australia is Germany´s most important security partner in the southern Indo-Pacific. The two countries established a *Strategic Partnership* in 2013. After the publication of the guidelines, the relations were elevated to an *Enhanced Strategic Partnership* with *2+2 consultations* in 2021.[41] A MoU on defense science and technology was signed in November 2023 to expand research cooperation.[42] The following year, a *Strategic Raw Material Partnership* was agreed between Australia and the EU, and Foreign Minister Wadephul indicated during his 2026 visit that further cooperation in this area is being explored.[43]

Defense Minister Pistorius´s visit to Australia in March 2026 yielded further concrete outcomes. Both sides announced plans to seek a *Status of Forces Agreement* (SOFA) to facilitate military cooperation and remove barriers to operational collaboration, and signed a joint letter of intent on space cooperation.[44] Defense industry cooperation is one of the most important areas of bilateral security engagement. The German defense manufacturer Rheinmetall´s facility in Brisbane now manufactures Boxer combat reconnaissance vehicles for the Australian Army, with an additional 100 units to be exported to Germany from 2026, which represents Australia´s largest defense export to date. A further letter of cooperation with TDW, a German defense company specializing in missile systems, was also signed during the visit.[45]

Australia´s status as the largest military supporter of Ukraine outside NATO[46] reinforces the argument, made repeatedly in German political discourse, that the two security theatres are connected.

India

While 2025 marked 25 years of the India-Germany *Strategic Partnership* and biannual *intergovernmental consultations* have been held since 2011,[47] Indian-German defense and security relations have only in recent years substantially deepened, driven by an increased Indian interest in German defense equipment.

A significant signal of the growing importance Germany attaches to this relationship was the publication of the *Focus on India* strategy paper in 2024.[48] A subchapter on security and defense policy sets out concrete initiatives, including placing cooperation between the *Bundeswehr* and the Indian armed forces on a more permanent footing through regular deployments and joint exercises, concluding a *Reciprocal Logistics Support Agreement*, seconding a liaison officer to the *Information*

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[41] Federal Government of Germany and Government of Australia (2021) *Erweiterte strategische Partnerschaft zwischen Australien und der Bundesrepublik Deutschland*, Canberra/Berlin, available online.

[42] Federal Foreign Office, Germany (2024) *Progress report on the implementation of the Federal Government's policy guidelines for the Indo-Pacific for the year 2024*, Berlin, available online.

[43] Minister for Foreign Affairs, Senator the Hon Penny Wong, Australia (2026) *Press conference, Canberra*,Canberra, available online.

[44] Department of Defence, Australia (2026) *Joint Statement, Australia–Germany Defence Ministers' Meeting*, Canberra, available online; Australian Government, Department of Defence (2026) *Joint press conference, Parliament House, Transcript*, Canberra, 26 March, available online.

[45] Department of Defence, Australia (2026) *Australia and Germany to closely cooperate on guided weapons components*, Canberra, available online.

[46] Australian Government (2025) *Australia stands with NATO partners in support of Ukraine*, available online.

[47] Federal Foreign Office, Germany (2025) "Germany and India: Bilateral relations", Berlin, available online.

[48] The only other comparable single-country document is the *Strategy on China* dedicated to relations with China.

Fusion Centre – Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) in New Delhi, and expanding arms cooperation with Indian defense companies.[49]

Tangible progress toward these goals has been made. In 2025 a *High Defense Committee Meeting* took place, focusing on military-to-military cooperation, defense industrial partnerships, and co-development and co-production of equipment.[50] Signaling the growing importance placed on the bilateral relations, Chancellor Merz chose India as the destination for his first official visit to Asia in January 2026. During the visit, the Chancellor and Prime Minister Modi signed 19 joint declarations of intent, most notably a joint declaration of intent to develop a *Defense Industrial Cooperation Roadmap* to promote long-term industry-level collaboration, including technology partnerships, co-development, and co-production. Progress was also recorded toward an MoU on peacekeeping training, the *Reciprocal Logistics Support Agreement*, and knowledge exchange in advanced defense technologies between India´s Defense Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) and Germany´s Federal Office of Bundeswehr Equipment (BAAINBw). On the industrial side, cooperation continues in the fields of submarines, counter-UAV systems, and helicopter obstacle avoidance, and India´s participation in the Eurodrone MALE UAV program has been confirmed.[51]

Other developments

Beyond these four partnerships, Germany has expanded its security engagement across the wider region. Ministerial-level defense talks were held for the first time with Vietnam and Malaysia in 2022, while defense policy talks were resumed with Indonesia (2022), Thailand (2023)[52], and the Philippines (2024)[53]. In 2025, Germany and the Philippines signed an agreement concerning defense.[54] Germany also participated as an observer at the *2025 ASEAN Defense Ministers´ Meeting Plus*, the first time it attended this forum at ministerial level.[55] In August 2021, Germany acceded to the *Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia* (ReCAAP).[56]

Germany´s engagement with the Pacific Island states has also developed since 2020. A *Special Envoy* for the Pacific Island States was appointed in 2022 and the first embassy in a small Pacific Island state was opened in Fiji in 2023[57], accompanied by the launch of military-political cooperation with Fiji in September of that

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[49] Federal Foreign Office, Germany (2024) *Focus on India*, Berlin, 8-9, available online.

[50] Outcomes: further augment bilateral defense cooperation including institutionalized services Staff Talks and visits of Service Chiefs, commitments to deepen military-to-military cooperation through joint exercises, training and exchanges of senior officials.

[51] Government of India, Press Information Bureau (2025) *India – Germany Joint Statement,* New Delhi, available online; Ministry of External Affairs, India (2026) *India–Germany Joint Statement*, New Delhi, January 12, available online.

[52] Federal Foreign Office, Germany (2023) *Progress report on the implementation of the Federal Government's policy guidelines for the Indo-Pacific for the year 2023*, Berlin, 5, available online.

[53] Federal Foreign Office, Germany (2024) *Progress report on the implementation of the Federal Government's policy guidelines for the Indo-Pacific for the year 2024*, Berlin, 9, available online.

[54] Federal Ministry of Defence, Germany (2025) "Deutschland und die Philippinen vereinbaren engere Zusammenarbeit", Berlin, available online.

[55] Philippine News Agency (2023) "ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting accepts Türkiye, Germany as observers", Manila, available online.

[56] Federal Foreign Office, Germany (2021) *Progress report on the implementation of the German Government policy guidelines on the Indo-Pacific region*, Berlin, 5, available online.

[57] Federal Foreign Office, Germany (2023) "Germany and Fiji: Bilateral relations", Berlin, available online.

year[58]. Furthermore, Berlin recognized Niue as a state in 2025[59], and has indicated its intent to upgrade the existing dialogue partnership with the Pacific Islands Forum to a strategic partnership.[60]

Expanded cooperation with the region can also be observed at an increase of high-level visits from German government members to the region.[61] This trend was continued in 2026, with the leading government figures, chancellor, foreign minister and defence minister all visiting the Indo-Pacific aiming to deepen security cooperation and defence industry collaboration, promote trade, and diversify supply chains. [62]

Interim conclusion

On the level of partnerships and security cooperation, Germany has met the broad aspirations set out in the 2020 Guidelines. Bilateral security agreements, consultation mechanisms, and defense industry partnerships have expanded substantially, not only with established US allies Japan and Australia, but also with India and, at a lower level of institutionalization, with the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, and the Pacific Island states. Cybersecurity cooperation has been extended with Singapore, Japan, South Korea, and India. Germany has joined *ReCAAP*, engaged with ASEAN security formats, and developed dedicated relationships with Pacific Island states. Defense industry cooperation has become a structurally significant element of several partnerships.

The wave of high-level visits in early 2026 underscores that this momentum has been maintained under the Merz government. At this level, the rhetorical commitments made in the Guidelines and reinforced through successive inflection points have been translated into concrete political and diplomatic infrastructure. How the *Bundeswehr* has operationalized this partnership framework through deployments, exercises, liaison officer placements, and capacity-building will be examined in the following section.

Operational Engagement and Military Deployments

This subchapter examines what operational resources Germany has allocated to implement the 2020 Guidelines, and how German defense diplomacy in the Indo-Pacific has been conducted in practice. It assesses the scope and character of the *Bundeswehr*´s regional engagement, including its deployments, participation in bi- and multilateral exercises, liaison officer placements, and capacity-building initiatives, and asks how the successive inflection points impacting the strategic thinking have shaped the observable German behavior in the region.

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[58] Federal Foreign Office, Germany (2024) *Progress report on the implementation of the Federal Government's policy guidelines for the Indo-Pacific for the year 2024*, Berlin, 25 September, available online.

[59] Federal Foreign Office, Germany (2026) "Deutschland und Niue: Bilaterale Beziehungen", Berlin, 19 March, available online.

[60] Federal Foreign Office, Germany (2025) "Germany's cooperation with the Pacific Island States", Berlin, available online.

[61] Heiduk, F., Hörning, C. (2026) *Zeitenwende* in the Indo-Pacific? Assessing Germany's Regional Security Engagement. *German Politics*, 13, available online.

[62] Chancellor Merz first visit to Asia was to India in January 2026, Foreign Minister Wadephul visited Singapore, New Zealand, Tonga, Australia and Brunei in February 2026 and Defense Minister Pistorius made a military policy trip to the Indo-Pacific visiting Japan, Singapore and Australia in March 2026.

German Defense Diplomacy

According to the 2023 *Defense Policy Guidelines*, the Ministry of Defense defines defense diplomacy (*Verteidigungsdiplomatie*) as an instrument of international cooperation and partnership that includes strengthening partners´ security structures, building and maintaining bilateral security and military relations, and supporting arms control and capacity-building measures. In practice, defense diplomacy takes the form of exchanges between *Bundeswehr* personnel and foreign counterparts. Its main instruments include the secondment of exchange officers and military attachés, official port visits by naval vessels, and participation in NATO, EU, OSCE, and UN formats[63]. The most relevant examples of German defense diplomacy in the Indo-Pacific are outlined below.

Indo-Pacific deployments and participation in exercises

For several decades prior to 2021 the German Navy had been absent from the Indo-Pacific. The two naval deployments undertaken since the publication of the Guidelines therefore carried considerable symbolic weight and were read in the region as evidence that Germany intended to follow through on its stated ambitions. The pattern that has emerged between 2021 and 2026 is one of alternating years of high and low activity. 2021, 2022, and 2024 saw major naval deployments and multiple exercise firsts, while 2023 and 2025 were markedly quieter. 2026 saw a return to the regional deployments, though through a maritime patrol aircraft rather than a naval vessel, a considerably smaller operation than the two previous missions.

The first naval mission to the region, Indo-Pacific Deployment 2021 (*IPD21*), consisted of the frigate *Bayern*, which traversed the Indo-Pacific from August 2021 to February 2022. The frigate took part in approximately 30 individual exercises with naval forces from 17 nations, most of them short passing exercises,[64] with participation in *ANNUALEX 2021*, a Japan-led multilateral maritime exercise, [65] representing the operational highlight. Port calls during the deployment included Pakistan, Australia, Japan, South Korea, Singapore, Vietnam, Sri Lanka, and India, and gave the *Bundeswehr* the opportunity to build and deepen bilateral relationships.[66] While the deployment was intended to demonstrate Germany´s commitment to upholding a rules-based regional order, its actual contribution to this goal has been questioned. The *Bayern* avoided geopolitical hotspots, most notably the Taiwan Strait, and its contribution to monitoring UN sanctions against North Korea was of limited operational significance.[67] The deployment nevertheless effectively signaled the new German security interest to regional partners and succeeded in its defense diplomacy objectives.

Beyond the naval voyage, 2022 also marked the first major air force deployment to the region through the multi-stop exercise *Rapid Pacific*. German air force units participated for the first time in both *Kakadu 2022* and *Pitch Black 2022*, hosted by Australia. Further stops included joint exercises in Singapore, a visit to South Korea, and a landing in Japan, the first of its kind by a German military aircraft in Japanese

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[63] Federal Ministry of Defence, Germany (2023) *Defence Policy Guidelines 2023*, Berlin, available online; Bundeswehr, Germany (2024) "Indo-Pacific Deployment 2024", available online.

[64] Bundeswehr, Germany (2022) "Indo-Pacific Deployment: "Bayern" back home", available online.

[65] Bundeswehr, Germany (2021) "Naval exercises: the "Bayern" at ANNUALEX 2021", available online.

[66] Bundeswehr, Germany (2024) "Indo-Pacific Deployment 2024 der Marine beendet", available online.

[67] Sakaki, A., Swistek, G. (2022) "*Return from the choppy waters of the Indo-Pacific: implications of the deployment of the Frigate "Bayern"* ", SWP Comment 2022/22, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, Berlin, available online.

territory.[68] Germany also took part in *RIMPAC 2022*, though only with personnel.[69] By contrast, 2023 was a quieter year operationally, with the main operational implementation of the Guidelines being Germany´s first-ever participation in the Australian-led multinational exercise *Talisman Sabre 2023*, to which it contributed over 200 personnel from the army and navy.[70]

The following year was the most active of German operational engagement in the region. The second major naval mission, *Indo-Pacific Deployment 2024 (IPD24*), ran from May to December 2024 and comprised the frigate *Baden-Württemberg* and the replenishment vessel *Frankfurt am Main*. Germany participated for the first time with navy ships and air force assets in *RIMPAC 2024*, a significant deepening of its contribution compared to its prior participation with troops. *IPD24* also included participation in the *Pacific Security Maritime Exchange (PSMX),* a multilateral partnership monitoring UN sanctions against North Korea,[71] bilateral exercises with the navies of Japan, South Korea, Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, and India, and port calls to Goa, Port Klang, Singapore, Jakarta, Manila, Incheon, Tokyo, and Hawaii.[72] In contrast to the *Bayern*, the *Baden-Württemberg* transited the Taiwan Strait, deliberately signaling that Germany, in accordance with international law, considers the Strait as international waters.[73] The government framed the deployment´s goals as maintaining a regional presence in defense of the rules-based international order and the freedom of the seas, advancing defense diplomacy and security cooperation, and improving the operational readiness of the crew and interoperability with partner forces. The 2024 deployment therefore addressed several of the limitations that had been identified in the *Bayern* voyage.

Alongside *IPD24*, the air force conducted *Pacific Skies 24*, a coordinated set of exercises with the air force of France and Spain. Within this framework, German fighter aircraft trained for the first time in Japanese airspace during *Nippon Skies 2024*, took part in *Pitch Black 2024*, joined *RIMPAC 2024,* and contributed with French and Spanish counterparts to *Tarang Shakti 1*, the first occasion on which German and Indian forces exercised in Indian airspace together. These firsts underscored the growing operational ambition of the air force in the region and the deepening military cooperation with Indo-Pacific partners.[74]

Germany´s most visible security cooperation with the Indo-Pacific in the following year was the participation in the multilateral exercise *Talisman Sabre 2025*, alongside the reciprocal landing of two Japanese Air Force fighter jets in Germany during Operation *Atlantic Eagle*, which reflected the increasing depth of the German-Japanese defense relationship.[75] In early 2026, Germany returned to the region with the deployment of a Navy P-8A Poseidon maritime patrol aircraft as part of *IPD26*. The aircraft participated in Exercise *Milan* on 16 February 2026

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[68] Bundeswehr, Germany (2022) "Pitch Black 2022", available online; Bundeswehr (2022) "Rapid Pacific Teil 4 – Die Besuche", available online.

[69] U.S. Navy (2022) "RIMPAC 2022 concludes", Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam, 4 August, available online.

[70] Bundeswehr, Germany (2023) "Talisman Sabre 2023: Großübung in Australien feierlich eröffnet", available online.

[71] Bundeswehr, Germany (2024) "The German Navy and the United Nations´North Korea sanctions" available online.

[72] Bundeswehr, Germany (2024) "Indo-Pacific Deployment 2024 der Marine beendet", available online; Bundeswehr (2024) "Partnering auf Hoher See: Indische und Deutsche Marine üben gemeinsam", available online.

[73] Bundeswehr, Germany (2024) "Indo-Pacific Deployment 2024 der Marine beendet", available online.

[74] Bundeswehr, Germany (2024) "Pacific Skies 24 – one deployment, five exercises", available online.

[75] Bundeswehr, Germany (2025) "Talisman Sabre 2025: Bundeswehr trainiert in Australien", available online; Bundeswehr (2025) "Vom Fuji nach Laage: Deutsch-japanische Freundschaft stärkt Sicherheit im Luftraum", available online.

following its deployment from India and undertook further bi- and multilateral exercises and training across the wider region. The Federal Government has framed *IPD* as having three core missions: deepening cooperation with regional partners, contributing to the security of maritime and trade routes through maritime presence, and demonstrating that Germany remains a reliable partner in the Indo-Pacific even in light of the war in Ukraine.[76] However compared to prior Indo-Pacific Deployments, IPD26 was fairly limited in scope and fell short of the expected biannual major naval deployments.

Outlook: sustained exercise participation, uncertain naval deployments

The Federal Government has confirmed continued participation in bi- and multilateral exercises across 2026 and 2027. Planned contributions include *Pitch Black 2026*, to which Germany will send nine Eurofighters and refueling aircraft,[77] *Tarang Shakti* and *Keen Sword* in 2026, *Talisman Sabre* in 2027[78] and participation in *RIMPAC* is foreseen for 2028[79]. However, no major naval mission is planned for 2026, and a 2027 deployment has not yet been confirmed either.[80] The initial expectation of a biannual German naval presence in the region therefore appears unlikely to be sustained.

In 2025, the *Bundeswehr*´s operational focus was primarily on the Baltic region, reflected in Exercise *Quadriga 2025*, Germany´s leadership of the multinational NATO battlegroup in Lithuania, the permanent deployment of a brigade there, and the NATO mission *Baltic Sentry*. While the government has stated that Indo-Pacific participation does not formally compete with other commitments, the finite capacity of the *Bundeswehr* and the limited size of the German naval fleet impose material constraints on current and future Indo-Pacific deployments. These constraints are linked to the from the structural shifts traced in the strategic thinking section.

Liaison officers, UN Command, and capacity-building

Beyond deployments and exercises, Germany has extended a limited permanent presence in the region. A German liaison officer has been stationed at the Information Fusion Centre in Singapore since 2020[81] and the liaison officer post at the Enforcement Coordination Cell in Yokosuka, Japan, which monitors UN sanctions against North Korea, was made permanent in 2024, extending an earlier temporary secondment.[82] In 2025, Berlin announced that a further liaison officer would be stationed at the Information Fusion Centre – Indian Ocean Region in

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[76] Bundeswehr, Germany (2026) "Schneller und weiter: P-8A Poseidon Richtung Indo-Pazifik gestartet", available online; Bundesministerium der Verteidigung (2024) "Für einen freien und offenen Indo-Pazifik: Pistorius besucht Partnerstaaten", Berlin, 28 July, available online.

[77] Australian Government, Department of Defence (2026) "Joint press conference, Parliament House, Transcript", Canberra, 26 March, available online.

[78] Federal Ministry of Defence, Germany (2024) "Für einen freien und offenen Indo-Pazifik: Pistorius besucht Partnerstaaten", Berlin, 28 July, available online.

[79] Federal Ministry of Defence, Germany (2026) *Speech by Boris Pistorius at the National Press Club of Australia: "Germany and Australia: Partners in an Era of Strategic Competition"*, Canberra, 25 March, available online.

[80] German Bundestag (2025) *Antwort der Bundesregierung auf die Kleine Anfrage der Abgeordneten Dr. Alexander Wolf, Stefan Keuter, Jan Wenzel Schmidt, weiterer Abgeordneter und der Fraktion der AfD – Umsetzung der Indo-Pazifik-Leitlinien der Bundesregierung*, BTDrucksache 21/2485, 30, Oktober, available online.

[81] Federal Foreign Office, Germany (2024) *Progress report on the implementation of the Federal Government's policy guidelines for the Indo-Pacific for the year 2024*, Berlin, 25 September, available online.

[82] *Ibidem.*

New Delhi. Germany also joined the United Nations Command in Korea, a multinational force that monitors the Korean Armistice Agreement. [83]

Germany also conducts security capacity-building activities in the region under the Enable and Enhance Initiative, which designated the Indo-Pacific a partner region in 2023. Under this framework, Germany supports the coast guards of the Philippines and Malaysia in maritime surveillance and capacity-building, and has launched military capacity-building pilot projects with Malaysia, Indonesia, and Vietnam in areas including medical care, military engineering, and UN peacekeeping training.[84] As part of its support to the Philippine Coast Guard, Germany delivered two Trinity F90+ reconnaissance drones in 2022 and four additional drones in 2024, bringing the total to six, together with operator training and support in developing operational guidelines.[85]

Interim conclusion

At the operational level, Germany´s engagement has expanded substantially since 2020. Regular deployments, participation in a growing number of bi- and multilateral military exercises, the stationing of liaison officers, accession to the United Nations Command, and the inclusion of the Indo-Pacific in the Enable and Enhance Initiative together represent a clear operationalization of the aspirations set out in the Guidelines. The two naval deployments illustrate a qualitative evolution. The 2021 *Bayern* voyage avoided geopolitical hotspots and was largely symbolic, while the 2024 *Baden-Württemberg* deployment transited the Taiwan Strait, participated in sanctions monitoring, and engaged a wider range of partners through exercises and port calls.

The operationalization also reflects the partnership architecture traced in the last subchapter. Cooperation with Japan, Australia, India, and Singapore, each the subject of a formal consultation or cooperation framework, has been materially underpinned by joint exercises, training in partner airspace, and port calls. In this sense the rhetorical commitments set out in the first subchapter and the diplomatic infrastructure mapped in the second find their concrete expression here.

Important constraints are nevertheless evident. Germany´s presence remains operationally modest. Naval deployments have not become routinised, the expected biannual rhythm appears unlikely to be sustained, and the war in Ukraine combined with the Bundeswehr´s deepening commitments to NATO´s eastern flank impose structural limits on further expansion. Germany remains a valued political and defense-industry partner in the region, but its operational role is primarily symbolic and does not meaningfully affect the regional balance of power. A rhetoric-action gap becomes most visible at this level. Strategic thinking has continued to deepen and partnerships have expanded, but operational realities are increasingly shaped by finite resources and competing domestic and regional commitments.

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[83] Federal Foreign Office, Germany (2020) "Foreign Minister Baerbock welcomes Germany joining the United Nations Command on the Korean Peninsula", Berlin, 8 July, available online.

[84] Federal Government, Germany (2023) *Progress report on the implementation of the Federal Government's policy guidelines for the Indo-Pacific in 2023*, Berlin, 5, available online; Federal Government, Germany (2024) *Progress report on the implementation of the Federal Government's policy guidelines for the Indo-Pacific in 2024*, Berlin, 9, available online.

[85] Federal Government, Germany (2022) *Progress report on the implementation of the Federal Government's policy guidelines for the Indo-Pacific in 2022*, Berlin, 7, available online; Maitem, J. (2024) "Germany to provide additional drones to the Philippine Coast Guard," *Naval News* available online.

Conclusion

This chapter asked how Germany´s security engagement in the Indo-Pacific has evolved since the publication of the 2020 *Policy Guidelines for the Indo-Pacific*, whether the goals set out in that document have been broadly met, and, by implication, whether the act of publishing the Guidelines has been an effective instrument of German foreign and security policy. The analysis across three dimensions yields a differentiated answer.

At the level of strategic thinking, the three inflection points traced above have progressively deepened rather than diluted Germany´s commitment to the region. What began in 2020 as a primarily economics-driven case for diversification has developed into a broader security argument that treats European and Indo-Pacific security as connected theatres. The German *Zeitenwende* could plausibly have redirected political attention fully to Europe, but instead reinforced the logic for continued engagement in the Indo-Pacific by sharpening the perception of China and making the interconnectedness of the two theatres a recurring theme of official discourse. The changed security environment since 2025, shaped by the return of the Trump administration and challenges to the rules-based international order, has further elevated the importance Germany attaches to middle-power partnerships in the region.

At the level of partnerships and security cooperation, this evolution in strategic thinking has been matched by observable behavior. Germany has institutionalized and deepened ties with Japan, Australia, India, and Singapore, expanded bilateral defense consultations with Southeast Asian partners, broadened cybersecurity cooperation, joined ReCAAP, engaged with ASEAN security formats, and developed its dedicated relationships with Pacific Island states. Defense industrial cooperation continues to become a significant element of several bilateral partnerships. The sequence of high-level visits in early 2026 under the Merz government underscores that the political momentum has been maintained across changes of administration. At this level, rhetorical commitment and observable action broadly cohere, though a strict causal attribution to the Guidelines themselves is difficult to establish.

At the operational level, the coherence between aspirations and action becomes more strained. Germany has achieved a substantive expansion of its operational presence compared to the pre-2020 baseline: two naval deployments, an increasing range of bi- and multilateral military exercises, newly permanent liaison officer posts, accession to the United Nations Command, and capacity-building under the Enable and Enhance Initiative. The qualitative shift between the 2021 *Bayern* voyage and the 2024 *Baden-Württemberg* deployment, including the transit of the Taiwan Strait and participation in sanctions monitoring, demonstrates growing ambition. At the same time, the expected biannual rhythm of naval deployments is unlikely to be sustained, no major deployment is planned for 2026, and the *Bundeswehr*´s deepening commitments to NATO´s eastern flank imposes structural limits on further expansion. Germany´s operational role in the region remains primarily symbolic. It is best understood as a form of defense diplomacy, political signaling, partnership-building, and operational learning rather than as a contribution to hard deterrence or to the regional balance of power.

Taken together, the *Guidelines* have served as an effective instrument for anchoring Germany´s Indo-Pacific engagement. They have provided continuity across successive administrations and changing security environments, kept the region on the German political agenda despite growing domestic and European security

demands, and signaled to regional partners that Germany is committed to sustained engagement. Most of the hard security aspirations set out in 2020 have been at least partially met by early 2026. This does not mean that Germany has become a consequential hard-security actor in the region; the geographic and resource constraints on such a role are unlikely to be overcome. The Guidelines´ achievement lies in institutionalizing a pattern of engagement that would likely not have developed in their absence. Their future, however, remains unclear: no updated implementation report was issued for 2025, breaking a four-year sequence of annual reporting. The strategic environment has changed substantially since 2020, and a reformed framework would better reflect current threat perceptions, clarify priorities, and set a more realistic operational horizon. For the present, however, such an update does not appear imminent, leaving a document conceived for a different strategic moment to govern an engagement whose underlying rationale has since evolved.

On this basis, the final section of this article turns to the lessons of Germany´s experience for Italy.

Recommendations for Italy

Italy is currently weighing whether to develop its own Indo-Pacific guidelines. On the basis of the preceding analysis, this chapter argues that a dedicated Indo-Pacific strategy can be a valuable foreign and security policy instrument, helping to anchor the region on the political agenda and to provide a measure of continuity in the face of geopolitical shifts and changes in government. At the same time, the German experience also illustrates the importance of tailoring such a document to a country´s own strategic priorities and capacities. Rather than emulating any existing model, including the German or French approaches, Italy should design an Indo-Pacific strategy that reflects its specific interests, alliance profile, and resource constraints. With this in mind, and focusing on the security dimension of the Guidelines, Germany´s experience offers five concrete lessons for Rome.

First, clarify the intended security role**.** The German Guidelines succeeded in providing continuity and political anchoring because they were overall realistic in their security ambitions: defense diplomacy, partnership-building, and a limited maritime presence, rather than going so far as to claim to alter the regional balance of power or act as a hard-security guarantor. Italy should avoid setting out aspirations it cannot sustain. The central question for Rome should be what kind of security role is realistic given the concurrent demands of the Mediterranean, the Sahel, NATO´s southern flank, and continued deterrence in Europe.

Second, align ambition with geographic and capability constraints. Germany´s experience illustrates the limits of what a non-resident European power can sustain in a theatre located roughly 10,000 kilometers from home. Germany has managed two major voyages in six years, and the expected biannual rhythm has not materialized. For Italy, whose navy is significantly larger than Germany´s but which also carries substantial Mediterranean, Red Sea, and North African responsibilities, the constraint is not fleet size in absolute terms but the logistical, political, and opportunity costs of sustaining a persistent presence at distance. Any Italian framework should address this trade-off explicitly rather than leave it for future governments to resolve politically.

Third, prioritize partnership architecture and defense-industrial cooperation over operational presence**.** The most durable element of German engagement since 2020 has not been its naval deployments but the expansion of bilateral agreements, con-

sultation formats, and defense-industry links with Japan, Australia, India, and Singapore. An Italian framework should place these at its center.

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Fifth, build in regular implementation reporting from the start. Germany´s four annual progress reports (2021-2024) served as a key mechanism of accountability, coordination, and external signaling. An Italian framework should include a defined reporting cycle and a scheduled review point at which the strategy could be updated rather than quietly abandoned.

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Ministry of Defence, Germany (2026) *Pistorius in Singapur: Bessere Wartung von U-Booten am Strategischen Knotenpunkt*, available online at: https://www.bmvg.de/de/pistorius-besucht-indo-pazifik-partner/minister-boris-pistorius-singapur-6080040, accessed 10 May 2026.

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The Federal Government, Germany (2025) *Speech by Federal Chancellor Merz at the Munich Security Conference: We Are Asserting Our Freedom with Our Neighbours*, Munich, available online at: https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-en/federal-government/speech-chancellor-msc-2407256 , accessed 10 May 2026.

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Thyssenkrupp Marine Systems (2026) *TKMS and ST Engineering sign MoU in Singapor*e, Singapore, available online at: https://www.tkmsgroup.com/news/article/tkms-and-stengineering-sign-mou-in-singapore, accessed 10 May 2026.

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Tougher Talk, Careful Steps in the Indo-Pacific: Germany's Foreign Policy under Friedrich Merz

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The German government under Friedrich Merz has announced a tougher stance on China and more European alignment on foreign policy. This article examines whether these rhetorical shifts have translated into a more strategic and coherent German approach toward the Indo-Pacific during the coalition's first nine months in office. It takes stock of Germany's engagement with the Indo-Pacific across three policy areas: security and defence cooperation, research and technology cooperation, and economic relations. Rather than assuming a policy shift, it assesses continuity and change relative to the previous traffic light coalition government and evaluates whether current initiatives amount to any strategic reorientation or remain incremental adjustments. In the area of security and defence, the article argues that Germany's engagement has remained stable. With the Social Democratic defence Minister remaining in office, Germany's Indo-Pacific security engagement largely follows existing trajectories. The newly concluded defence cooperation agreement with the Philippines is examined in scope and substance and situated within Germany's broader pattern of defence cooperation in the region, including capacity-building, military-to-military exchanges, and arms exports. It asks whether these initiatives meaningfully enhance Germany's strategic presence or primarily serve industrial and signalling purposes.

The section on research and technology cooperation focuses on the visibly intensified German-Japanese engagement. High-level political initiatives have highlighted research security, scientific freedom, and integrity – concepts increasingly central to Germany's China policy. At the same time, both governments have pushed for expanded cooperation in strategic technologies such as aerospace and related high-technology sectors. The article assesses how these initiatives align with the Merz government's newly articulated "Space Security Strategy" and broader ambitions for more autonomous European space capabilities.

Finally, the article examines economic relations, concentrating on Germany's engagement with India during the final phase of EU-India Free Trade Agreement negotiations. Besides drawing on trade and investment data for 2025 more broadly, this section evaluates whether Germany has primarily acted as a champion of EU-level interests of cohesion and de-risking or has pursued a more nationally driven economic diplomacy serving its export interests. Taken together, these discussions provide a more fine-grained assessment of the Merz government's Indo-Pacific policy and clarify the extent to which it departs from its predecessors. The article concludes by identifying areas where closer coordination with other EU member states could strengthen Europe's long-term strategic autonomy.

Introduction

The German government under Friedrich Merz has announced a stronger focus on the Indo-Pacific alongside its tougher stance on China and a stronger commitment to European alignment in foreign policy. This article examines how these rhetorical shifts have translated into Germany's regional approach during the coalition's first year in office, across three policy areas. German foreign policy under Merz has become more coherent and security-oriented though it has largely retained the direction of the preceding "traffic-light" coalition. Its policy on security and defence have followed existing trajectories of capacity-building, military-to-military exchanges, and arms exports. A notable development is Germany's growing tendency to source military capabilities from regional partners, reflecting both budgetary constraints and a widening circle of like-minded defence relationships. On research and technology cooperation, the Merz government has more deliberately aligned its scientific initiatives with its strategic objectives. The intensification of German-Japanese engagement in space technologies, for example, reflects the security concerns of the new German "Space Security Strategy". Taking India as an example for its regional economic engagement, Germany has been broadly supportive of the conclusion of an EU free trade agreement while simultaneously pursuing its nationally driven defence export interests. Novel multilateral European formats involving India offer tentative signs of broader European diplomatic coordination. A recurring limitation, nevertheless, is Germany's continued bilateral pursuit of its objectives and missing leadership for fostering a more coherent European presence in the Indo-Pacific.

Germany in the Indo-Pacific: More Engaged under Merz?

In his first address to Parliament, Friedrich Merz, Germany's Chancellor since May 2025, declared the Indo-Pacific a strategic priority, vowing to deepen regional ties and to reduce China's significance to just one relationship among many.[1] Fittingly, in the first two months of 2026, Merz and his foreign and defence ministers visited the region in quick succession. Just in March 2026, Boris Pistorius, the German Defence Minister, travelled to Japan, Singapore and Australia during ongoing military escalations in the Middle East.[2] As it seems, the German government is reinforcing its growing track record in the region. It has sought closer coalitions among the states of the Indo-Pacific accompanying the more critical approach it has taken towards China.

The following analysis is an assessment of what making the Indo-Pacific a foreign policy priority has meant in the first year of Merz's coalition government and what changes and continuities exist with the previous governments. It also asks how much of a European approach to the region can be observed and what Germany is contributing to member state coordination. These observations signal what Germany's foreign policy could look like in the upcoming years. Initiatives are examined across three policy areas: in security and defence cooperation, research and technology cooperation, and economic relations. Taken together, they show that the degree of change from the former German government is moderate. The overall direction has stayed the same, but what can be observed is a more intense security framing and closer linkage between research and security. Germany has continued to expand its engagements in line with its military commitments and

[1] Federal Government of Germany (2025) *Address by Chancellor Bundeskanzler Friedrich Merz*, Bulletin 34-3, available online.

[2] Friederichs, H. (2026) "Boris Pistorius in Asien: Unterwegs bei Freunden", *Die Zeit*, 24 March, available online.

arms cooperation. The areas of its deepening research cooperation with Japan now target the gaps of European strategic capabilities the German government has deemed necessary to fill according to its Space Security Strategy. And in its engagement with India during the final phase of EU-India Free Trade Agreement (FTA) negotiations, Germany is pursuing the interests of its defence industry but participating in engaging India diplomatically.

A more coherent Indo-Pacific policy has come to be expected since the centre-right Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU) are not only leading the current government coalition with the Social Democrats (SPD), but also most ministers key to foreign policy come from their ranks.[3] The inter-party rift which beset the preceding traffic-light coalition between Social Democrats, Greens and Liberals, no longer applies. We have seen the current CDU/CSU coalition giving up on the more pragmatic approach that has come to be associated with German China policy and instead taking a stronger stance against China. During his trip to Japan August 2025, Johann Wadephul, Germany's Foreign Minister from the CDU, openly criticised China for its aggressive behaviour around Taiwan and in the region at large.[4] German Chancellor Merz also reiterated at the Munich Security Conference in February 2026 how China was "systematically exploiting the dependencies of others, reinterpreting the international order on its own terms".[5] This departure has come with some consequences. The German Foreign Minister has had to postpone an imminent diplomatic visit to China in December 2025 and the German Chancellor's first visit to China recently took on a more subdued tone.[6] Nevertheless, these steeper costs have not significantly recalibrated Germany's Indo-Pacific guidelines but instead been complemented with a stronger engagement with the region.

Striving for More Defence Cooperation

On security and defence, Germany's engagement has remained stable and even slightly expanded on arms cooperation. Pistorius, who is a Social Democrat and has retained his post as German Defence Minister from the previous coalition, largely follows existing trajectories despite Germany's more limited maritime capabilities. The newly proposed or concluded defence cooperation agreements with Japan and the Philippines have broadened the scope of cooperation with so-called "like-minded partners". They are situated within Germany's broader pattern of defence commitments in the region which include capacity-building, military-to-military exchanges, and arms exports. Germany has also been keen to enhance its strategic presence with a submarine maintenance hub in Singapore in planning. This may be motivated by defence industrial policy but could further signal Germany's willingness to participate in regional security. More notably, the arms collaborations that have been coming along indicate that Germany is turning towards contenders from the region for its own military acquisitions, a divergence from its military equipment traditionally being sourced from the United States (US) or other European states.

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[3] These include Germany's Chancellery, Foreign Ministry, Economy Ministry and Research Ministry. The Defence Ministry and Development Ministry are both led by the Social Democrats.

[4] Graham, D. (2025) "German foreign minister criticises 'aggressive' China ahead of trip to Japan", *Reuters*, 17 August, available online.

[5] Federal Government of Germany (2026) *Speech by Federal Chancellor at the Munich Security Conference*, available online.

[6] Knapp, F., Burchard, H. von der, Verhelst, K. (2025) "Diplomatic bombshell as German foreign minister postpones China trip", *Politico*, 24 October, available online, Roßbach, H. (2026) "Friedrich Merz in China: Der Kanzler kritisiert nur leise – heikle Themen bleiben vage", *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 26 February, available online.

Germany is neither a resident power in the Indo-Pacific region, nor does it possess the more wide-ranging maritime capabilities of European powers such as France or the United Kingdom (UK). Yet, it has progressively intensified its security and defence commitments to the region since 2020, participating regularly in regional multilateral military exercises. Under Merz, the German *Bundeswehr* (the Armed Forces) has kept the pace of its previous military engagements. It was part of the multilateral "Talisman Sabre" joint exercise in Australia in June 2025 and sent a P-8A Poseidon maritime patrol aircraft to India for the navy's Indo-Pacific Deployment 2026.[7] According to planning for the upcoming months, the German air force will join the "Pitch Black" exercise in Darwin, Australia in July 2026.[8] Around a hundred German medical personnel will take part in the Japanese military exercise Keen Sword, while Germany's navy intends to join the "Tarang Shakti" air combat exercise in India in September 2026.[9]

In fact, German military presence in the Indo-Pacific has been embedded in multilateral settings. Its military exercises regularly involve partner countries from the region such as Australia, Japan, India, South Korea and Singapore as well as European counterparts including France, the UK, the Netherlands and Spain. This pattern can be observed in relation to its participation in other security-related initiatives in the region, which the current German government has continued backing with its resources. Its voluntary contribution to the Multilateral Sanctions Monitoring Team (MSMT), for example, which provides sanctions monitoring for the UN sanctions against North Korea, is a case in point, as was its joining of the United Nations Command which monitors the ceasefire agreement on the Korean peninsula in 2024.[10] Showing its commitment towards regional initiatives, Germany has likewise stationed a growing number of permanent liaison officers at the MSMT and other regional bodies such as the Information Fusion Centre in Singapore, and the Information Fusion Centre-Indian Ocean Region in India.[11]

The Merz government has further deepened its defence cooperation relations in the Indo-Pacific. In his most recent visit to Asia in 2026, Defence Minister Pistorius put forward a new defence agreement and arms cooperation with Japan. A reciprocal access agreement was proposed with the aim to facilitate the deployment of visiting forces between the two countries.[12] Less than a year earlier, another defence cooperation agreement was concluded in May 2025 by Germany and the Philippines,[13] which seeks to advance cooperation between the militaries and on defence armaments. The German government's willingness to expand its defence partnerships has been taken up by partners in the Indo-Pacific who are keen to diversify their own partnerships, not least because of the growing wariness

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[7] German Armed Forces (2026) *Swifter and farther: P-8A Poseidon takes off for the Indo-Pacific.* available online; German Armed Forces (2025) *Talisman Sabre 2025: Bundeswehr trains in Australia,* available online.

[8] Ministry of Defence, Federal Government of Germany (2026) *Japan, Singapore, Australia: Pistorius holds talks on security policy*, available online.

[9] Nedden, C. zur (2026) "Singapore: How Berlin is reviving its Indo-Pacific strategy", *Table.Briefings*, 24 March, available online; Ministry of Defence, Federal Government of Germany, *Japan, Singapore, Australia..*

[10] Before the MSMT, Germany has participated in the similar network: Pacific Security Maritime Exchange (PSMX) in 2024 and with an additional liaison officer post for the Enforcement Coordination Cell (ECC) in Yokosuka, Japan, see Federal Government of Germany (2024) *Progress Report on the Implementation of the Federal Government's Policy Guidelines for the Indo-Pacific for the Year 2024*, 25 September, available online.

[11] The German Bundestag (2024) *Strategic Policy Document on Bilateral Relations Between the Federal Republic of Germany and the Republic of India*, Drucksache 20/13333, available online.

[12] Lunday, C. (2026) "Germany pushes new military cooperation deal with Japan", *Politico*, 22 March, available online.

[13] Flores, M. (2025) "Germany, Philippines sign defence agreement", *Reuters*, 15 May, available online.

towards the US in the region. Around the time of upgrading the pact with Germany, the Philippines also deepened their defence ties with several other countries, including New Zealand, Canada and France.[14] Japan has been strengthening its ties through various agreements to increase joint exercises and defence industry cooperation with Canada and the Philippines as well.[15]

While continuing to increase its defence industry cooperation, a shift has been taking place which shows Germany turning towards sourcing capabilities outside of the US and the European Union (EU) and taking advantage of more competitive contractors from the Indo-Pacific. At the same time, for the German defence industry, which was heavily represented in Pistorius' March delegation, the Asia trip concluded with new arms cooperation as well. In the past five years, Germany has become the world's fourth largest arms supplier (2021-2025).[16] According to government reports, it has sold around 25 percent of its arms exports to the Indo-Pacific in the first half of 2025.[17] Now, German defence contractor TDW has reportedly signed a letter of intent to expand Australia's domestic manufacturing capability for guided weapons.[18] Latest discussions also include plans for Germany's warship builder TKMS and Singapore-based ST Engineering to build permanent infrastructure with military utility with a joint submarine maintenance centre in Singapore. This maintenance hub would service TKMS warships and submarines Singapore has already acquired and could also tend to other allied nations, which has been observed to be a potential boost for regional acquisitions of TKMS submarines.[19]

These defence industry policies are geared more towards expanding the customer base of German arms manufacturers. However, we can also see the German government taking seriously the idea that like-minded countries in Europe and Asia would benefit from pooling resources, especially given budgetary constraints for expanding military capabilities. Besides discussing cooperations with Australian producers of rare earths, the German and the Australian government have expressed the joint objective of developing strategic space technology in the form of a joint early warning system which would serve as independent global monitoring capabilities in space.[20] Even more notably, Germany has agreed to procure Australian-developed combat drones, which are unmanned aircrafts designed to fly alongside fighter jets to carry sensors, jammers or weapons.[21] This sourcing of military equipment from regional partners might also include high-precision laser weapons used for drone defence on warships in the future. After German parliamentarians stopped a contract with German defence firms because of ballooning development costs, Electro Optic Systems (EOS) – an Australian defence company which has also considered permanently relocating its production to Europe – has currently be-

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[14] *Ibidem*.

[15] Yamaguchi, M. (2026) "Japan and Canada sign agreement to step up defence and energy cooperation", *Associated Press*, 6 March, available online; Strangio, S. (2026), "Japan, Philippines sign new defence pact to facilitate flow of military supplies", *The Diplomat*, 16 January, available online.

[16] Friederichs, "Boris Pistorius in…"; George, M. et al. (2026) "Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2025", *SIPRI – Stockholm International Peace Research Institute*, available online.

[17] Ministry for Economic Affairs and Energy, Federal Government of Germany (2026) *Report on Export Policy for Conventional Arms in the First Half of 2025*, 10 December, available online.

[18] Kuper, S. (2026) "Australia, Germany to partner on expanded guided weapons industry", *Defence Connect*, 26 March, available online.

[19] Sprenger, S. (2026) "TKMS and ST Engineering to create submarine service 'hub' in Singapore", *Defense News*, 24 March, available online.

[20] Nienaber, M. (2026) "Germany, Australia team up on space security, laser weapons", *Bloomberg*, 26 March, available online.

[21] Rheinmetall (2026) *Rheinmetall and Boeing partner on German MQ-28 Ghost Bat*, available online.

come a likely contender.[22] Japan's Kawasaki Heavy Industries have continued talks to co-develop new engines for German Taurus long-range cruise missiles as well.[23]

Germany's military engagements and arms cooperation have remained on a steady upward trajectory. Its presence at military exercises has been unaffected by the change in its coalition government and the announcements of deepened defence ties have been a signal of intent. The intensifying arms cooperation and seeking out of secure supply chains are aligned with its strategic objectives of increasing its military capabilities. This does not look markedly different to the defence policy in the Indo-Pacific of the traffic-light coalition before, perhaps because Pistorius, who has held on to the Defence Ministry for the Social Democrats, has resumed bolstering Germany's strategic capacities by seeking more arms sales and collaboration.

Regardless of Germany's individual efforts in the Indo-Pacific, there are few signs of Germany under Merz leading efforts to coordinate European approaches in e.g. maritime or supply chain security in the region. Instead, member states have each been conducting their own defence and security policies. The EU and its member states have remained on the sidelines of more substantive regional defence dialogues such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus.[24] The little reported 4th Indo-Pacific Ministerial Forum in November 2025 can only attest to some very tentative attempts at collective European engagement, where European and Indo-Pacific foreign ministers as well as EU institutions came together in Brussels to discuss maritime security.[25] Disappointingly, joint defence cooperation initiatives such as the "Eurodrone" programme, which has been in discussions for a Japanese participation, have been afflicted by withdrawals e.g. from France.[26] With the US becoming a less trusted ally, it remains to be seen if Europeans can deepen ties outside of North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). As in other areas of foreign and security policy, German behaviour is contributing to the fact that EU policy in the Indo-Pacific remains the composite of what initiatives each member state takes on.

Strategic Space Research Cooperation with Japan

In the area of research and technology cooperation, German-Japanese engagement has visibly intensified. Several high-level political initiatives emphasising research security, scientific freedom, and integrity have emerged as a counterpoint to Germany's reservations regarding its research cooperation with China. The areas of cooperation under consideration with Japan are broad, encompassing strategic technologies in artificial intelligence, quantum computing, and nuclear fusion. Most notably, joint research initiatives have been announced in aerospace and related high-technology sectors – areas that coincide with the strategic objectives articulated in the Merz government's Space Security Strategy, which harbours broader ambitions for more autonomous European space capabilities.

Since 2022, Germany has been steadily expanding its research and technology cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region. Having previously concentrated predom-

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[22] Rugamer, M., Lhomedet, H. (2026) "Exclusive: Australian laser maker EOS heads for Europe as defence demand soars", *Reuters*, 30 January, available online.

[23] Geddie, J., Kubo, N. (2025) "Exclusive: Kawasaki in talks to develop Taurus missile engines, sources say", *Reuters*, 17 October, available online.

[24] ASEAN (2026) *About the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus,* available online.

[25] The Foreign Office, Federal Government of Germany (2025) *Two Meetings in Brussels: EU and Indo-Pacific Foreign Ministers to Discuss Security in Europe, Africa and the Indo-Pacific*, available online.

[26] Hauke, Unterwegs bei Freunden…

inantly on green technologies, including green hydrocarbon supply chains, sustainable mobility projects, and environmental research, renewed attention is now being directed towards areas encompassing more strategically sensitive technologies. Since assuming the chancellorship, Merz has sought to explore bilateral partnerships with India not only in green transformation technologies, but also in artificial intelligence and biotechnology, building upon existing cooperative frameworks. In February 2026, the German and Singaporean government also approved a "Year on Innovation" initiative to advance cooperation on artificial intelligence, quantum computing, microelectronics and biotechnology.[27]

Japan has recently received the most sustained high-level attention from Germany in the area of research and technology cooperation. Defence industry cooperation between the two countries has progressed slowly, notwithstanding Japan's NATO-equivalent status on export controls since 2011, which is sometimes attributed in part to Japan's comparatively less internationalised defence industry.[28] Existing research relationships, nevertheless, are considerably more robust. As of Spring 2026, some 886 cooperative arrangements existed between Japanese and German higher education institutions, many concentrated in STEM disciplines (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics), providing a solid foundation for the deepening of bilateral research collaboration.[29] Ongoing cooperations in emerging technologies include joint projects in artificial intelligence, such as those linking Osaka Metropolitan University and the National Institute for Informatics in Tokyo with the Munich Centre for Machine Learning and the Berlin Institute for the Foundations of Learning and Data.[30]

Since 2025, high-level exchanges between the two governments have markedly increased in frequency. In June 2025, German Research and Space Minister Dorothee Bär visited Japan alongside Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier, a visit reciprocated within the same month by Japan's Research and Space Minister Minoru Kiuchi, whose trip to Germany included a visit to the German Aerospace Centre (*Deutsches Zentrum für Luft- und Raumfahrt*, *DLR*).[31] In October, Minister Bär made a further visit to Japan to present the German pavilion at Expo 2025 in Osaka.[32] During these exchanges, two letters of intent were concluded and signed in Berlin in late June 2025, with the aim of expanding bilateral research cooperation.[33] The areas designated for priority collaboration include space robotics, satellite technologies, and earth observation, alongside future cooperation in artificial intelligence, quantum computing, and nuclear fusion research.

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[27] Subhani, O. (2026) "Singapore seeks deeper ties with Germany to boost trade between ASEAN and EU: Gan Kim Yong", *The Straits Times*, 25 March, available online.

[28] Lill, F. (2023) "'Wir stehen sehr schlecht da': Warum Japans Waffenproduzenten nicht mithalten können", *Der Tagesspiegel*, 31 January, available online.

[29] International Cooperation of Higher Education (2026) *Hochschulkompass: Kooperationen nach Staaten*, available online.

[30] Kuhrt, N. (2025) "Germany and Japan embark on a new mission", *Deutschland.De*, 24 October, available online.

[31] Kuhrt, "Germany and Japan embark…"; Jung, B. (2025) *Japan and DLR strengthen research ties,* The German Aerospace Centre, 30 June, available online.

[32] Kuhrt, "Germany and Japan embark…".

[33] Ministry of Research Technology and Space, Federal Government of Germany (2025) *Letter of Intent on strengthening Cooperation in Science, Technology and Innovation between the Cabinet Office of the Government of Japan and the Federal Ministry of Research, Technology and Space of the Federal Republic of Germany*, available online; Ministry of Research Technology and Space, Federal Government of Germany (2025) *Joint Declaration of Intent Between the Cabinet Office of Japan and the Federal Ministry of Research Technology and Space of the Federal Republic of Germany on Space Cooperation for Peaceful Purpose*, available online.

Of particular significance is the language employed in these agreements concerning research security and integrity, identified as fundamental prerequisites for sustainable scientific cooperation between the two countries. The agreements additionally affirm the principle of scientific freedom. Though not stated explicitly, these provisions mirror the concerns articulated by the preceding German traffic-light coalition government regarding China. In its 2023 China Strategy, Germany implicitly criticised China for unilateral knowledge and technology transfers in the context of research cooperation, and announced measures to curtail its collaborative projects, citing the risks that China's military-civil fusion poses to shared civilian research.[34] The strategy further references instances of illegitimate interference in the freedom of research and teaching within Germany. The inclusion of research security and integrity provisions in new bilateral agreements with a like-minded partner signals a heightened awareness among German policymakers of the necessity for guardrails in scientific cooperation, particularly in domains involving strategically sensitive technologies.

Space has emerged as the most prominent area of German-Japanese research cooperation under the current initiatives. The second letter of intent is dedicated exclusively to space cooperation, encompassing space exploration, launch technologies, and their commercialisation. The German side has specifically proposed collaboration in space robotics, satellite technologies, and earth observation. A well-established track record of cooperation already exists between the Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency (JAXA) and the DLR, including the Callisto project – a joint initiative with the French space agency *Centre National d'Études Spatiales* (*CNES*) developing reusable rocket launch systems – and the "JAXA Martian Moons eXploration" mission, to which DLR and CNES are contributing the Idefix moon rover for in situ investigations.[35] Beyond inter-agency cooperation, current policy is also oriented towards deepening academic partnerships, including plans for joint doctoral programmes and interdisciplinary research networks between RWTH Aachen University and the Institute of Science Tokyo.[36]

The current prioritisation of space within the Merz government's research cooperation policy with Japan is consistent with the strategic objectives it has established for Germany's defence capabilities. The German Space Security Strategy, published by the Defence Ministry in November 2025, directly addresses gaps in German and European space capabilities and the imperative for the EU to reduce its dependence on non-European providers for core strategic and military functions, including space reconnaissance.[37] The strategy concludes that to secure an independent European space architecture, Germany and the EU must develop their own industrial competences and launch capabilities. Joint research initiatives and information-sharing arrangements with Japan are well-aligned with these objectives, as are the specific areas of reusable launch technologies and space surveillance capabilities prioritised for collaboration.

Space capabilities are inherently dual-use, and the strategic objectives stated in the Space Security Strategy therefore exist in some tension with Germany and Japan's

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[34] Federal Government of Germany (2023) *Strategy on China of the Government of the Federal Republic of Germany*, available online.

[35] German Aerospace Center (2026) *CALLISTO. Mission & Projects*, available online. The second project is also realised with the participation of the European Space Agency (ESA). Its expected launch date is in November 2026, see Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency (2026) *MMX – Martian Moons eXploration official homepage*, available online.

[36] RWTH Aachen University (2025) *RWTH and Institute of Science Tokyo forge strategic partnership*, available online.

[37] Federal Government of Germany (2025) *Space Safety and Security Strategy*, available online.

mutual commitment to the peaceful use of their space cooperation. Scientists have reiterated calls for the bilateral research cooperation to be conducted exclusively for peaceful purposes, as both states have formally committed to under their cooperation agreement and in relevant international frameworks, including the Outer Space Treaty.[38] Technologies such as rocket launch systems and satellites, though developed for ostensibly civilian purposes, carry evident military applications and cannot be neatly disaggregated from their potential strategic utility. In Japan's case, space capabilities have long constituted a cornerstone of its latent nuclear power – a status that has grown increasingly salient given the country's evolving strategic environment.[39] Germany, by contrast, no longer retains such latent nuclear capability, having exited its civilian nuclear energy industry in the 2010s.[40] More enhanced space capabilities oriented towards defensive capabilities such as reconnaissance, surveillance, and launch resilience could contribute to collective European deterrence – specifically, by reducing European dependence on US satellite and reconnaissance infrastructure. It would also further strengthen the credibility of autonomous European security provision. The longer-term risk that defensive space capabilities could be repurposed for offensive applications nonetheless warrants continued scrutiny from policymakers and the scientific community alike.

In sum, the Merz government has moved to more closely align its research cooperation initiatives with its broader strategic objectives, a tendency most pronounced in its efforts to deepen engagement with Japan's aerospace research community. Notwithstanding this initial convergence of security and research policy at the level of high-level political coordination, it remains premature to draw firm conclusions regarding their efficacy. The success of expanded space cooperation will ultimately depend on the long-term outcomes. Furthermore, as in the previous policy area, Germany has not actively sought to coordinate its research cooperation policy at the European level. That said, existing cooperation networks at the implementation level frequently feature European partners. During Expo 2025 in Osaka, for instance, DLR, the French Aerospace Lab (ONERA), and JAXA convened a trilateral meeting to advance aerospace research cooperation.[41] Germany's broader conviction that Europe requires more resilient and autonomous space capabilities is, moreover, consonant with a wider European consensus on the matter. Its efforts in this domain could yet serve as a catalyst for more substantive European pooling of resources in partnership with Indo-Pacific actors.

From Arms Exports to India to New Diplomatic Formats

This section examines Germany's economic relations with the Indo-Pacific, concentrating on its engagement with India during the final phase of EU-India FTA negotiations. Drawing on trade and investment data for 2025 more broadly, it evaluates whether Germany has acted as a champion of EU-level interests in cohesion and economic de-risking, or whether its diplomacy has been primarily driven by national commercial objectives. The rapid succession of high-level visits to India by

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[38] University of Münster (2025) *Physics societies sign "Declaration for the Future" in Münster*, 14 November, available online.

[39] Albessard, T. (2022) "Japan's Nuclear Latency. A Dual-Use Diplomatic Lever?", *IRSEM – Institut de Recherche Stratégique de l'École Militaire*, n. 93, available online.

[40] Kühn, U. (2024) "Germany and the Puzzling End of Nuclear Latency", In Kühn, U. (ed.) *Germany and Nuclear Weapons in the 21st Century: Atomic Zeitenwende?*, Abingdon: Routledge, 260-280.

[41] Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency (2025) *DLR-ONERA-JAXA Trilateral Meeting held in Osaka, Japan*. available online.

Chancellor Merz and Foreign Minister Johann Wadephul during the concluding stages of the FTA suggests that Germany's economic diplomacy has been considerably shaped by its national arms export interests. Nevertheless, the conditions India attaches to arms sales and their implications for long-term European security interests warrant careful consideration. A further development of note has been the emergence of novel multilateral formats, in which Germany has engaged with Indian counterparts e.g. within the framework of the "Weimar Triangle"[42]. Such constellations, bringing together a European minilateral format and a strategic partner from the Indo-Pacific, may offer a template for future European coordination in the region.

The EU-India FTA, now anticipated to be signed in November 2026, forms part of a broader number of EU trade agreements with Indo-Pacific partners.[43] The EU Commission finalised the trade agreement with Indonesia in September 2025[44] and concluded negotiations with Australia in March 2026.[45] In contrast to the previously covered policy areas, the competence to negotiate trade agreements here resides exclusively with the EU Commission. The now pending agreement with India has been characterised as less comprehensive than comparable EU trade deals, with contentious areas such as agricultural goods largely excluded from its scope.[46] Its principal political objective appears to be to advance European economic security after its conclusion, with cooperation in critical sectors, including green technologies, pharmaceuticals, advanced manufacturing, and biotechnology, intended to diversify and strengthen the resilience of European supply chains, as well as to enable deeper security and defence ties.[47]

Germany has been a consistent advocate of the FTA with India, motivated by its industries' interest in improved market access, particularly in the automotive, automotive supply, machinery, and speciality chemicals sectors.[48] During the final stages of the negotiations, Foreign Minister Wadephul visited India in September 2025, followed by Chancellor Merz in January 2026 – the latter visit being Merz's first to an Asian and non-NATO partner country. The precedent of visiting another Asian partner before China has become an established pattern in German foreign policy since the end of Angela Merkel's chancellorship: Merz's predecessor Olaf Scholz similarly visited Japan prior to travelling to Beijing. While India's overall ranking as a trading partner for Germany has remained broadly stable across both the current and preceding governments, arms exports have increased markedly under Scholz, and the Merz government has pursued a notably more assertive agenda in support of German defence suppliers. The delegation accompanying Foreign Minister Wadephul to India in 2025 included several prominent German arms manufacturers, among them sensors and electronic warfare spe-

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[42] In August 1991, the Foreign Ministers of Germany, France, and Poland met in Weimar to launch a forum aimed at deepening cross-border ties and shaping a shared European future.

[43] Mohan, G., Varma, T. (2026) "The Europe-India Briefing – Inaugural Edition", *German Marshall Fund*, available online.

[44] European Commission (2026) *EU-Indonesia Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement and Investment Protection Agreement*, available online.

[45] European Commission (2026) *The EU-Australia trade agreement*, available online.

[46] The Economist (2026) "Europe's long-awaited free-trade deal with India", 25 January, available online.

[47] Mohan, G. (2026) "A Long Time Coming: Europe and India Have Discovered a Strategic Partnership", *German Marshall Fund*, available online.

[48] Wagner, C. (2026) "Die deutsch-indischen Beziehungen: Wertegeleiteter oder interessensgeleiteter Partner?", *IFRI – Institut français des relations internationales*, Notes du Studienkomitees für deutschfranzösische Beziehungen (Cerfa), n. 191, available online.

cialist Hensoldt and warship builder TKMS, a subsidiary of Thyssenkrupp.[49] By 2026, the timeline for the anticipated sale of six German submarines to India had been accelerated, with the contract now projected to be concluded within the coming three months.[50]

This particular submarine contract would be substantial and could further advance India's strategic diversification away from its traditional supplier Russia towards Western alternatives, which have thus far predominantly comprised France, the US, and Israel.[51] While these efforts by Germany may be interpreted as the pursuit of domestic commercial interests, the broader objective of cultivating influence through strategic defence partnerships has equally featured prominently on the EU's agenda. Nevertheless, a potential Indian acquisition of German submarines remains contentious, not least due to the requisite technological transfer obligations, given that the prevailing "Make in India" policy mandates that such vessels be constructed by Indian domestic shipbuilders.[52] It remains an unanswered question whether this form of defence cooperation will really reshape India's broader geopolitical orientation.

What has been particularly noteworthy, however, is the emergence of new diplomatic formats between European actors and India on the sidelines of trade negotiations, in which Germany, while not assuming a leading role, has nonetheless been an active participant. First, German Chancellor Merz's visit to India as a European head of state was succeeded by a series of further high-level engagements, including visits by European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, French President Emmanuel Macron, and Finnish President Alexander Stubb in early 2026.[53] More consequential, however, was the participation of Indian Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar in the Weimar Triangle meeting of his German, French, and Polish counterparts in January 2026. On this occasion, the Polish Foreign Minister commended India for reducing its procurement of Russian oil, and India was affirmed as a strategic partner for the EU's economic resilience, alongside broader discussions on European security.[54] Beyond this minilateral format, Foreign Minister Jaishankar also attended the meeting of the Council of EU Foreign Ministers in March 2026, where deliberations were dominated by Iran and energy security.[55] These emerging formats may tentatively indicate how Germany could coordinate European initiatives on economic security policy and structure them to include partners from the Indo-Pacific region.

Conclusion: Taking Steps, but not Yet Jointly European Ones

The first year of the Merz government's engagement in the Indo-Pacific reveals a foreign policy that is marked by continuity in its orientation and tentative steps towards deepening its track record in the region. Across the three policy areas exam-

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[49] The German Bundestag (2025) *Written questions and received replies from the German Government during the week of 29 September 2025*, Drucksache 1948, 24, available online.

[50] Linnemann, N. (2026) "Deutsch-indische U-Boot-Kooperation rückt näher", *CPM Defence Network*, 22 April, available online.

[51] George, M. et al. (2026) "Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2025", *SIPRI – Stockholm International Peace Research Institute,* available online.

[52] Gemeinsame Konferenz Kirche und Entwicklung (2025), *Rüstungsexportbericht 2025 der GKKE*, n. 74, 6-7, available online.

[53] European Council president Antonio Costa and Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez also visited, see Mohan, Varma, "The Europe-India Briefing…".

[54] *Ibidem*.

[55] *Ibidem*.

ined – security and defence, research and technology, and economic – the overall trajectory established under the preceding 'traffic-light' coalition has largely been maintained, with incremental rather than transformative shifts characterising the new government's approach.

In the domain of defence and security, Germany has sustained its growing military engagement and arms cooperation in the region. The deepening of defence partnerships with Japan and the Philippines and the planned submarine maintenance hub in Singapore reflect a steady intensification of commitments which predates the Merz government. The shift towards new arms acquisitions from regional partners such as Australia, however, shows that German budget restraints are pushing lawmakers towards the pooling of resources among like-minded countries across the regions.

What is more distinct for the current government is an increasingly explicit security framing of its Indo-Pacific policy, which is reflected in its research and technology cooperation. Here, the Merz government has more deliberately aligned its scientific initiatives with its strategic objectives. The high-level attention directed towards space technologies, AI, and quantum research represents a notable reorientation away from the green technology focus that was previously predominant. The initiatives aimed at deepening German-Japanese space cooperation exemplify how German research cooperation policy has been increasingly aligned with the capability gaps articulated in the German Space Security Strategy of late 2025. The emphasis on research security and scientific integrity in new bilateral agreements further signals a heightened awareness of the risks associated with open research cooperation.

Germany's economic engagement with India, conducted against the backdrop of the final EU-India FTA negotiations as one EU FTA among many with countries of the Indo-Pacific, have been in support of a successful conclusion but also driven by national commercial interests, particularly in the defence sector. The prominent role of German arms manufacturers in high-level diplomatic delegations, and the acceleration of the anticipated submarine sale to India, suggest that bilateral defence export interests have taken precedence, with questions remaining on how these align with long-term European security interests in safeguarding strategic technologies. Nevertheless, the emergence of novel multilateral formats, most notably India's participation in the Weimar Triangle meeting and the EU Foreign Affairs Council, offers tentative evidence that Germany's bilateral engagement may be contributing, even if inadvertently, to broader European diplomatic coordination with India.

Yet, a recurring limitation across all three policy areas is the absence of genuine European coordination. Germany has largely pursued its security, research, and economic objectives bilaterally. European-level initiatives have remained fragmented and subordinate to its member state priorities. As the US becomes a less reliable security guarantor in the region, the imperative for a more coherent and coordinated European presence in the Indo-Pacific is becoming more pressing. Germany, under Merz, has not shown the strategic ambition to assume a leadership role in fostering this coordination function but has remained one contributor among many.

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China and Taiwan in Germany's Approach to the Indo-Pacific: Evolution, but no Revolution

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This chapter will look at the evolution of Germany's position on and policy vis-à-vis the Indo-Pacific. The focus will be on the People's Republic of China and Taiwan and how Germany's perception and policy has changed in the five plus years since the Policy Guidelines for the Indo-Pacific were first published in September 2020. In contrast to some other countries, most notably the United States, the German government has declared to pursue an inclusive approach to the region. Moreover, the Guidelines were explicitly meant to be a building block for and contribution to an Indo-Pacific strategy of the European Union (similar to the Dutch approach).

While China has in no way become less important from the German perspective (economically, strategically and in terms of global order), the assessment of Beijing's behavior and aspirations has become more critical over this period of time. At the same time, Taiwan has cautiously been "upgraded" as a partner.

The chapter will address the main factors that led to this evolution, namely changes in German domestic politics and in the geo-strategic and geo-economic environment. It will describe how this evolution (and its limits) manifested themselves in official documents and speeches.

Introduction

For the last three decades Germany's policy in Asia was almost exclusively focused on the People's Republic of China (PRC or China). This was mostly due to China's growing international role and economic weight as well as the strong engagement of German companies in this country. In comparison, other countries in the region received much less attention, be it politically, economically or in terms of diplomatic resources.

During these three decades China underwent significant changes, especially after Xi Jinping took over the highest positions in the Communist Party and the state (2012/13): Under his leadership the PRC formulated technological, geo-economic and geo-political aspirations much clearer and more openly than previous leadership generations. This also manifested itself in grand visions like the Belt and Road Initiative[1] or the more recent "global initiatives"[2] and in an overall more assertive and often coercive or even aggressive behavior in foreign and economic policy.

[1] For a more recent article on the Belt and Road Initiative see McBride, J., Berman, N., Chatzky, A. (2023) "China's Massive Belt and Road Initiative", *Council of Foreign Relations Backgrounder*, 2 February, available online.

[2] There are now four global initiatives are: Global Development Initiative (2021), Global Security Initiative (2022), Global Civilization Initiative (2023) and Global Governance Initiative (2025). See e.g. Awan, Z.A. (2025) "China's visionary global initiatives: Building a shared future for humanity", *People's Daily Online*, 24 December, available online.

The goals of the *Policy Guidelines for the Indo-Pacific*[3](in short: *Guidelines*) published in early September 2020 were to diversify economic, political and other relations with the region, to strengthen partnerships with regional countries other than China and subsequently also to reduce (over-)dependencies on China. The German government had originally hesitated to embrace the concept of the Indo-Pacific promoted first by Japan, the United States, Australia, India, and also France, because this concept had been associated with the growing strategic rivalry between the United States and China and the perceived efforts of the USA and some regional countries to contain the PRC and slow down or hinder its economic and political rise and technological progress.

Germany and the Netherlands published the documents on their respective approaches to the Indo-Pacific roughly at the same time, while France, namely the French Ministry of Defense, had published its own first strategy paper as early as 2018.[4] Both, the German and the Dutch paper, were intended as building blocks for an Indo-Pacific strategy of the European Union (EU), which followed in the year 2021.

Three German Governments

Counting the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and its Bavarian sister party Christian-Social Union (CSU) as one, Germany has usually been ruled by a coalition of either two or even three different political parties. Until spring 2025, when the present coalition government took office, this always meant that the positions of chancellor and foreign minister are filled by representatives of the two biggest parties in the coalition. Not surprisingly, this constellation does not always lead to an optimal synchronization and coordination in German foreign policy. Traditionally, Germany's China policy has ultimately been decided by the chancellor.

Angela Merkel's China Policy (2005 to 2021) – Steady, as She Goes

When the *Guidelines* were formulated and then published in early September 2020, Germany was governed by a grand coalition of the CDU/CSU and the Social Democratic Party (SPD). Angela Merkel was already in the 15th year of her chancellorship. During her four terms in office, she had pursued a steady China policy, visiting the country on an annual basis, usually with a big delegation of business representatives. She had initiated cabinet-to-cabinet consultations (*Regierungskonsultationen*) between Germany and the PRC which took place from 2011 onwards.[5]

While gradual changes took place in the German perception of China after the *Made in China 2025* document came out in 2015[6], these did not immediately lead to any drastic shifts in Germany's overall China policy. Within German political and eco-

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[3] Federal Foreign Office, Germany (2020) *Policy Guidelines for the Indo-Pacific. Germany – Europe – Asia. Shaping the 21st Century Together*, The Federal Government, Berlin, available online.

[4] Ministère des Armées (2018) *France and Security in the Indo-Pacific*, 2018 edition – updated in May 2019, available online.

[5] A joint declaration was published as a result of these first cabinet-to-cabinet consultations. (in German only): Generalkonsulat der Volksrepublik China in Frankfurt a. Main (2011) "Gemeinsame Erklärung anlässlich der 1. Deutsch-Chinesischen Regierungskonsultationen in Berlin", 29 June, available online.

[6] This document formulated ambitious goals for ten industry sectors like robotics and AI in which China aimed at achieving global market leadership by the year 2025. See for example Wübbeke, J. et al. (2016) *Made in China 2025. The making of a high-tech superpower and consequences for industrial countries*, (=Merics Papers on China 2), December, available online.

nomic circles, however, more China-critical positions began to take hold even within Merkel's own then ruling party CDU, for example on the question of allowing Chinese telecommunication companies like Huawei to be part of building the 5G network in the country (2019ff.).[7] Moreover, in early 2019 the Federation of German Industries (BDI) published a position paper on China which called the PRC a "systemic competitor" for the first time.[8] And at the EU-level, the March 2019 *Strategic Outlook on China*[9] formulated a new triad for the EU's relations with China, namely as a cooperation partner, a competitor and a systemic rival. However, this characterization was not incorporated in the German *Guidelines for the Indo-Pacific*.

After the publication of the *Guidelines* the German government made every effort to signal to the PRC that embracing the Indo-Pacific concept was not directed against any country and was inclusive of China. For example, for the first naval deployment - after an absence of 20 years - to the Indo-Pacific from August 2021 to early 2022, the German government had originally planned to include a port call in Shanghai – somewhat contradicting the stated purpose of this mission to support international law and in particular the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and the freedom of navigation. After some stalling, the Chinese side ultimately denied the request.[10]

During the 16 years Angela Merkel held office Germany's overall China policy remained dominated by strong economic (trade and investment) relations. China was mainly seen as a cooperation partner, and from 2014 onwards the relationship was officially called a "comprehensive strategic partnership"[11]. The more critical German debate on China which unfolded after 2015 was certainly also fueled by the first Trump administration (2017-2021) in the United States: While the US-China strategic rivalry heated up, US pressure on "allies and friends" to fall in line with US restrictions on China increased during this period. This factor is also reflected in the *Guidelines*, which in several parts expressed "concern" about the growing tensions, but avoided taking sides.

The "Traffic Light Coalition": SPD, Green Party and Liberal Party (2021-2024) – Strange Brew

After Germany held its regular general elections in October 2021, the new government consisted of three parties SPD, Greens and Liberals. The coalition treaty of these three parties announced that Germany would, for the first time ever, publish a China strategy paper. For describing Germany's relations with China, the coalition document adopted the EU's triad cooperation partner, competitor and systemic rival and stated that cooperation would be sought wherever possible on the basis of human rights and international law. It is also mentioned that Germany will seek transatlantic coordination on China and cooperate with other "like-minded" partners.[12] The explicit mentioning of better transatlantic coordination was an

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[7] See for example Barkin, N. (2019) "The Huawei Conundrum", *Berlin Policy Journal*, March/April, available online.

[8] BDI (2019) *Partner and Systemic Competitor –How Do We Deal with China's State-Controlled Economy?* , January, available online.

[9] European Commission and HR/VP contribution to the European Council (2019) *EU-China – A strategic outlook*, 12 March, available online.

[10] Deutsche Welle (2021) "China denies port visit by German warship", *Deutsche Welle*, 15 September, available online.

[11] Consulate General of the People's Republic of China in New York (2014) "China, Germany establish comprehensive strategic partnership", 29 March, available online.

[12] SPD (2021) *Mehr Fortschritt wagen. Bündnis für Freiheit, Gerechtigkeit und Nachhaltigkeit. Koalitionsvertrag 2021-2025 zwischen der SPD, BÜNDNIS 90/Die Grünen und FDP*, 23 November, available online, 124.

expression of hopes that with the Biden administration a less coercive US policy vis-à-vis European countries and the EU including on China would return.

For the first time ever in such a coalition treaty, Taiwan is explicitly mentioned: The parties declare that the status quo in the Taiwan Strait was only to be altered in a peaceful way and if both sides agree. It also states that "within the framework of the EU's one-China policy" Germany supports Taiwan's issue-related participation in international organizations.[13] The novelty here is that Taiwan was mentioned at all, while the statements as such did not constitute anything new.

The coalition treaty also devotes a relatively long paragraph to the Indo-Pacific region, building on the *Guidelines* and the Indo-Pacific strategy of the EU. It underlines strengthening cooperation with ASEAN and "value partners" like Australia, New Zealand, Japan and South Korea, as well as deepening the strategic partnership with India.[14]

The coalition treaty was a manifestation of several factors that had led to a new risk awareness: the impact of the global COVID pandemic, the vulnerability of supply chains, the problem of economic over-dependencies and the "weaponization" of economic relations, not only by China, but also by the United States during the first Trump administration (2017-21).

During their term in government the three parties in the coalition displayed different positions on China. Broadly speaking, the SPD was divided with Chancellor Olaf Scholz's pragmatic course in continuity with his predecessor Angela Merkel, on the one hand, and parts of his own party (especially in the German parliament) leaning towards a more critical stance, on the other. The Green Party, although in general China-critical, underlined the necessity of cooperating with China on global issues like climate change or biodiversity. And the Liberal Party which had arguably been the most China-skeptic, nevertheless opposed every action that could potentially limit the freedom of operation for German companies, including in the PRC. These differences resulted in a strange and inconsistent mix which ultimately was reflected in the China strategy paper, published in July 2023.[15]

The Coalition-Government under Friedrich Merz (2025) – New Uncertainties, Harder Balancing Act

After the break-up of the traffic-light coalition at the end of 2024 and the ensuing general elections, a new coalition government was formed consisting of CDU/CSU and SPD. In this new coalition, which took office in May 2025, the chancellor and the foreign minister are from the same political party.

On the Indo-Pacific, the new coalition treaty echoes the goals of the previous government, mentioning again the "value partners" Australia, Japan, New Zealand and South Korea, but putting more emphasis on deepening the strategic partnership with India "on all levels" and including the support for a free trade agreement between EU and India.[16]

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[13] *Ibidem.*

[14] *Ibidem*, 125.

[15] English version Federal Foreign Office, Germany (2023) *Strategy on China of the Government of the Federal Republic of Germany*, 13 July, available online.

[16] Koalitionsvertrag 2025 (2025) *Verantwortung für Deutschland. Koalitionsvertrag zwischen CDU, CSU und SPD*, 6 May, available online, 128.

For their China policy, the parties declare the willingness to cooperate with China "where it is in the German and European interest" and they plan to act self-confident and hold a clear and strong position where necessary. They acknowledge that due to China's behavior "elements of systemic rivalry" had become more prominent. Therefore, Germany would strive to reduce one-sided dependencies and further pursue a policy of "de-risking".[17]

Again, Taiwan is at least mentioned in the coalition treaty, announcing that Germany would "continue to develop relations with Taiwan" on the basis of the one-China policy,[18] but not mentioning Taiwan's participation in international organizations.

Conclusion

Despite China undergoing dramatic changes in the years after 2012/13, these did not lead immediately to a visibly different China policy of the German government (or German business). However, a serious debate about how to deal with a more competitive and assertive PRC started after 2015. The *Guidelines* of 2020 still describe China mainly as a partner, albeit one that poses a challenge to some established international rules. With the incoming -traffic light coalition-, the tone vis-à-vis China becomes overall sharper and more straightforward, but due to differing positions within and between the parties and the persistent strong engagement of German companies in the PRC, China policy can only be described as an effort to have the cake and eat it too. Finally, the new German government under Friedrich Merz, while also quite critical of China's internal developments and external behavior to start with, soon faced new uncertainties with a second Trump administration which proved to be even more destructive to the beleaguered international order and disruptive to global trade than his first presidency.

In the following two parts, we will analyze the evolution in Germany's policy vis-à-vis China and Taiwan after the publication of the Indo-Pacific *Guidelines*. This is largely based on the annual progress reports issued by the German Foreign Office between 2021 and 2024. No such report was published in 2025 by the new coalition government with Chancellor Merz and Foreign Minister Johann Wadephul. We will also consider diplomatic activities and military deployments by the consecutive German governments.

The PRC within the Framework of Germany's Indo-Pacific Policy: Same, Same, only Different

As outlined above, while the PRC was still mainly described as a cooperation partner in the 2020 *Guidelines*, the perception of China's domestic development and foreign policy behavior in German political and economic circles had already taken a more critical turn in the five previous years.

The first *Progress report on the implementation of the German Government guidelines on the Indo-Pacific region*[19] (in short: *Progress Report*) was published in September 2021, when the grand coalition under Chancellor Merkel was still in power. In this report, China is mentioned in several parts indirectly. The only direct mentioning refers to the conclusion of the Comprehensive Investment Agreement

[17] *Ibidem.*

[18] *Ibidem.*

[19] The Federal Government (2021) *Progress report on the implementation of the German Government policy guidelines on the Indo-Pacific region*, 6 September, available online.

(CAI) between the EU and the PRC in December 2020.[20] While the agreement is described in positive terms, it is pointed out that the ratification process in the European Parliament had been suspended because of China's sanctions against European entities in March 2021. The indirect references all concern the situation in the South China Sea (SCS) and Germany's efforts to support international law: A Note Verbale stating the legal position on the SCS was presented by France, the UK and Germany to the UN; the German frigate "Bayern" was deployed in the Indo-Pacific passaging through the SCS; and Germany flanked the establishment of a Group of Friends of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea in New York.[21]. The *Progress Report* 2022[22] only mentions strengthening agricultural cooperation with China (and Vietnam) and promoting agriculture-related exports.[23]Security cooperation with other countries in the region was continued. For example, two reconnaissance drones were handed over to the Philippine coast guard in June 2022.[24]

Germany's first ever *National Security Strategy*[25] devoted one paragraph to China, which provides a concise summary of the official position at the time:

> China is a partner, competitor and systemic rival. We have observed that rivalry and competition have increased in the past years. China is trying in various ways to remould the existing rules-based international order, is asserting a regionally dominant position with ever more vigour, acting time and again counter to our interests and values. Regional stability and international security are being put under increasing pressure and human rights are being disregarded. China makes deliberate use of its economic clout to achieve political goals. At the same time, China remains a partner without whom many global challenges and crises cannot be resolved. That is why we must grasp the options and opportunities for cooperation in these fields in particular.[26]

A month later, the first ever China strategy[27] of the German government followed (as had been stipulated in the coalition treaty). The 64-pages document covers all aspects of German-China relations. While adopting the triad of cooperation, competition and systemic rivalry as formulated by the EU in 2019 and acknowledging that the latter dimension has become more prominent, the paper strives to maintain an overall constructive tone. The Indo-Pacific is mentioned in this China strategy several times – partly describing the significance of the region for China, but also for the future global order, and partly stating goals and interests of Germany's policy there, for example to protect public goods in the Indo-Pacific. It states that Germany will expand its security and military cooperation with close partners in the region and will continue temporary military deployments for safeguarding the rules-based international order.[28] It also expresses support for the strategic discussion on EU Free Trade Agreements with countries in the

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[20] *Ibidem.*

[21] *Ibidem.*

[22] The Federal Government (2022) *Progress report on the implementation of the German Government policy guidelines on the Indo-Pacific region in 2022 (Progress Report Indo-Pacific 2022)*, September, available online.

[23] *Ibidem, 10.*

[24] *Ibidem, 7.*

[25] The Federal Government (2023) *Robust. Resilient. Sustainable. Integrated Security for Germany, National Security Strategy*, June, available online.

[26] *Ibidem, 23.*

[27] Federal Foreign Office, Germany (2023) *Strategy on China of the Government of the Federal Republic of Germany*, 13 July, available online.

[28] *Ibidem, 50.*

region and with ASEAN. Germany also announced to flank engagement of German companies in the region by increasing high-level diplomatic visits.[29] In terms of security policy, the German government expressed support for the ASEAN-led initiatives such as confidence building measures (CBMs) and military transparency, and also for the ASEAN-centered dialogue architecture. It offered cooperation on disarmament, arms controls and CBMs, including to China.[30]

The *Progress Report* on the Indo-Pacific for 2023[31] referred to the existing climate and energy partnership/dialogue with China.[32] But the major event in 2023 was the resumed cabinet-to-cabinet consultation between Germany and the PRC (7th meeting of its kind), which resulted in an agreement on a new climate and transformation dialogue to accelerate green transformation. In the *Progress Report* 2024[33] China is mentioned several times in the preamble – specifically its expansive maritime claims in the SCS, the fact that the share of China in Germany's trade with the region had been shrinking and that China exported dual use goods to Russia, thus supporting the war against Ukraine. Chancellor Scholz and Vice-Chancellor Habeck both visited China. A bilateral dialogue on sustainability took place for the first time. However, Germany also continued its assistance to the Philippines and Malaysia in maritime surveillance.

Overall, high-level visits to countries in the Indo-Pacific region were considerably increased during the years 2022 to 2025. Even after Russia invaded Ukraine, which directed most of the government's attention (and resources) back to the European theatre, the engagement with the Indo-Pacific including military deployments was maintained. The war in Ukraine added to the already strained relations with China, since Beijing did not only not distance itself from Moscow, but directly and indirectly supported Russia's warfare.

The strengthening of political relations and security cooperation with Indo-Pacific partners other than China was not matched by the same level of diversification in economic terms, however. German companies, especially the multinational ones, have not reduced their engagement with China. On the contrary, German direct investment in China reached a four-year high in 2025[34] and the PRC was Germany's biggest trading partner again, but with a growing trade deficit on Germany's side.[35] The trade and investment figures for 2025 can largely be attributed to the "Trump factor". For the whole period following 2020, German business's logic of diversification or "de-risking" has differed from the ideas of the government: Increasingly, big German companies produce "in China for China".

The new government with Chancellor Merz, which had more or less adopted the critical position on China of the previous government, was confronted with a weak economy domestically and an even more unpredictable international environment

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[29] *Ibidem, 51.*

[30] *Ibidem, 57.*

[31] The Federal Government (2023) *Progress report on the implementation of the Federal Government's policy guidelines for the Indo-Pacific in 2023*, 22 September, available online.

[32] *Ibidem, 3.*

[33] The Federal Government (2024) *Progress report on the implementation of the Federal Government's policy guidelines for the Indo-Pacific for the year 2024*, 25 September, available online.

[34] The Business Times (2025) "German firms' investments in China boomed in 2025 on US trade war worries", *The Business Times*, 27 January, available online.

[35] Statistisches Bundesamt (2026) "China im Jahr 2025 wieder wichtigster Handelspartner Deutschlands", 20 February, available online. According to this source, this was also the case between 2016 and 2023. In 2024, Germany's biggest trading partner was the US.

with the second Trump administration. It is therefore not surprising that when Friedrich Merz travelled to China for the first time as German chancellor in February 2026, economic issues were at the top of his agenda. While Merz did raise critical issues like Chinese overcapacities, export controls and unfair competition, he also sought to strengthen bilateral cooperation. He called the relationship with China a "comprehensive strategic partnership" again[36] – a description that had not been used since Merkel – and announced the next round of cabinet-to-cabinet meetings.[37] In contrast, Foreign Minister Wadephul had made quite critical remarks on China's ambitions in the SCS and on the situation in the Taiwan Strait in several public speeches during his visits to countries in the Indo-Pacific, and even during his (postponed) trip to China in December 2025.[38] Both, Germany's foreign minister and Minister of Defense Boris Pistorius visited several countries in the Indo-Pacific in early 2026, the latter travelling to Singapore, Japan and Australia with representatives of the German arms industry.[39]

Taiwan in Germany's Indo-Pacific Policy: Cautious Upgrade

German political circles (or media) did not devote a lot of attention to Taiwan (officially "Republic of China on Taiwan") during the years 2008 and 2018. Between 2008 and 2015 cross-Strait relations were relatively stable after the Kuomintang (KMT) came back to power: Both sides established direct connections and negotiated more than 20 agreements. However, after the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) won the presidential and parliamentary elections in 2016, the PRC, which perceives the DPP as the party promoting the island's independence, not only stopped direct talks, discontinued tourism to and boycotted certain imports from Taiwan. Beijing also gradually intensified efforts to intimidate the island by demonstrating its military power around Taiwan and directing cyber-attacks as well as disinformation campaigns at the island, ultimately aiming at coercing Taiwan into submission.[40]

On the German and European side there was no immediate response to these coercive measures. However, several developments brought Taiwan back on the German (and European) political radar after 2018. Reports on labor camps in Xinjiang, China's response to the demonstrations in Hong Kong in 2019 and the outbreak of the global COVID pandemic in early 2020 all played a role. The events in Hong Kong and China's forceful reaction demonstrated that the "one country, two systems" formula was not a reliable concept (which it never had been from the Taiwanese perspective anyway). During COVID Taiwan became a model for how to respond to such a pandemic. This crisis also showed (again) that Taiwan should be granted some kind of participation in the World Health Organization (WHO). Most importantly, the vulnerability of globalized supply chains became a big topic in economic and political circles as well as the broader public due to temporary lock-downs, e.g. of Chinese ports. The supply chain debate also included the realization of Taiwan's significance as the world's (almost) only supplier of the most

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[36] The Federal Government (2026) "We want a partnership with China", 26 February, available online.

[37] Interesse, G. (2026) "Germany-China Relations Under Merz: What the First Official Visit to Beijing Means for Business", *China Briefing*, 13 March, available online.

[38] See e.g. Federal Foreign Office, Germany (2025) "Speech by Foreign Minister Johann Wadephul at the Foreign Policy Community of Indonesia in Jakarta", 20 August, available online. On his visit to China see Buckenmaier, C., Kirchner, R. (2025) "Wadephul in China. Der deutsche Balanceakt in der Volksrepublik", *tagesschau*, 10 December, available online.

[39] Reuters (2026) "German defence minister to visit Indo-Pacific with arms firms", *Reuters*, 18 March, available online.

[40] For an in-depth analysis of China's gray zone activities see e.g. Grossman, D. (2025) *The Chinese Communist Party's Gray Zone Tactics Against Taiwan*, Global Taiwan Institute, March, available online.

advanced semiconductors. Thus, any direct military conflict between the PRC and Taiwan would have a massive impact on the global (including the German) economy. The other big factor drawing attention back to cross-Strait relations and Taiwan was Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. This event played out in two dimensions: On the one hand, it added urgency to the issue of supply chain security and how to reduce over-dependencies. On the other hand, parallels were drawn between Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the situation between the PRC and Taiwan in light of Beijing's repeated threats to unite Taiwan with the mainland by military force if necessary.

While the first *Progress Report* of 2021 does not mention Taiwan at all, exchanges and cooperation between Germany and the island were listed in the reports published in 2022, 2023 and 2024. For example, the *Progress Report* 2022 underlines that against the background of the COVID pandemic German Health Minister Lauterbach for the first time publicly advocated the inclusion of Taiwan in the WHO at the World Health Assembly in May 2022.[41] Indirectly, the report criticizes the PRC for challenging the rules of the international order by raising the risk of an escalation in the Taiwan Strait. It repeats the statement that the status quo in the Strait can only be changed by peaceful means.[42]

While Taiwan did not appear in Germany's first *National Security Strategy* of June 2023, the China strategy paper published about a month later (July 2023) mentions Taiwan several times and devotes a paragraph to the island under the heading "one-China policy". It repeats once again the positions as they had been formulated before: The one-China policy remains the basis for Germany. Diplomatic relations only exist with the PRC. With Taiwan, Germany maintains close and good relations in many areas and wants to expand these. Within the framework of the EU's one-China policy Germany supports Taiwan's issue-related participation in international organizations. A change of the status quo in the Taiwan Strait can only happen peacefully and if both sides agree. And finally, a military escalation would also affect German and European interests.[43] The document also mentions that it will pursue better working conditions for German political foundations and that their cooperation with Taiwan conforms with the one-China policy.[44] In the context of "de-risking" the situation in the Taiwan Strait is raised as an example of the vulnerability of supply chains, especially semiconductors.[45] Chinese disinformation campaigns are described as increasing globally, with Taiwan and Hong Kong cited as examples.[46] German economic and technological interests in Taiwan are brought up in the context of trade and diversification. Taiwan is mentioned not only as an important trading partner, but also as a relevant site for German companies.[47]

The *Progress Report Indo-Pacific* for 2023 mentions statements in support of Taiwan's participation in international organizations, this time specifically in the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) in September 2023.[48] According

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[41] The Federal Government (2022) *Progress report on the implementation of the German Government policy guidelines on the Indo-Pacific region in 2022 (Progress Report Indo-Pacific 2022)*, 9.

[42] *Ibidem, 1.*

[43] Federal Foreign Office, Germany (2023) *Strategy on China of the Government of the Federal Republic of Germany*, 13.

[44] *Ibidem, 23.*

[45] *Ibidem, 25.*

[46] *Ibidem, 43.*

[47] *Ibidem, 51.*

[48] The Federal Government (2023) *Progress report on the implementation of the Federal Government's policy guidelines for the Indo-Pacific in 2023*, 3.

to the report, statements in favor of the status quo in the Taiwan Strait were made by the German government on several occasions in consultations and in public, underlining that a military escalation would affect German and European interests.[49] The report also notes that legal cooperation between Germany and "value partners" in the Indo-Pacific has increased after the Russian invasion of Ukraine.[50] In this context, an "Arrangement on the Cooperation in the Area of Judicial Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters" is mentioned that was agreed on between Germany and Taiwan in March 2023. Intensification of cooperation also took place in science and research, with both sides agreeing to pursue exchanges on technological applications.[51] This agreement was signed during a high-level visit which had not taken place since 1997: The German Minister for Education and Science Bettina Stark-Watzinger was the first German cabinet-level minister to travel to Taiwan in 26 years. While this is only mentioned briefly in the *Progress Report* without naming the minister,[52] in the media this visit was called a "landmark"[53] and "historic"[54]. However, there was actually never any reason for cabinet members not to travel to Taiwan other than the anticipation of official protests (and maybe punitive measures) from the Chinese side. Therefore, this trip demonstrated to what degree exchanges with Taiwan have been intensified and have become more important in the last years.

The biggest project between Germany and Taiwan is an investment of the Taiwanese semiconductor giant TSMC in a chip factory in Dresden (Saxony), which was announced in August 2023.[55] The plant is supposed to open in 2027. Intensive collaboration between Germany and Taiwan continues also in other technological sectors, including joint high-tech research projects.

The *Progress Report* in 2024[56] mentions the first meeting of the German-Taiwanese Dialogue Platform which had been established in December 2023, and joint research projects on batteries. The support for Taiwan's inclusion in WHO was repeated by the German Health Minister at the WHA. Again, one of the more significant events is not mentioned explicitly in the report: The German frigate "Baden-Württemberg" and a supply ship sailed through the Taiwan Strait during their deployment in the Indo-Pacific in 2024.[57] As was to be expected, China called this action a provocation and filed official complaints.[58]

As mentioned above, no progress report was published in 2025. However, under the new coalition government and Chancellor Merz, exchanges with Taiwan continued. While no German cabinet member visited Taiwan, Vice-President Hsiao

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[49] *Ibidem, 5.*

[50] *Ibidem, 7.*

[51] *Ibidem, 10*.

[52] *Ibidem, 1.*

[53] Deutsche Welle (2023) "German minister makes landmark visit to Taiwan", *Deutsche Welle*, 21 March, available online.

[54] Wu, P., Madjar, K. (2023) "German minister leads historic visit to Taiwan", *Taipei Times*, 22 March, available online.

[55] Silicon Saxony (2023) "Germany shows Europe the way – 20 billion Euro funding commitment moves the semiconductor industry", *Silicon Saxony*, 10 August, available online.

[56] The Federal Government (2024) *Progress report on the implementation of the Federal Government's policy guidelines for the Indo-Pacific for the year 2024.*

[57] See Legarda, H. (2024) "The German navy wades into the waters of the Taiwan Strait", 25 September, available online.

[58] Liang, X. (2024) "PLA slams Germany for sailing ships through Taiwan Strait, citing 'security risks' ", *South China Morning Post*, 14 September, available online.

Bi-khim gave an interview to Germany's state television ARD after delivering a speech in the European Parliament and transited through Germany in October 2025, and in the following month, former President Tsai Ing-wen spoke at the Berlin Freedom Conference.[59]

Conclusions

The German approach to the Indo-Pacific as formulated in the *Guidelines* was explicitly meant as a building block for the EU to go forward with an Indo-Pacific strategy. The goal of diversifying and strengthening relations with countries in the Indo-Pacific other than China has been somewhat successful in terms of diplomatic exchanges, high-ranking visits and security cooperation. However, so far, the results on the goal of economic de-risking leave much to be desired.

China has remained one of the most important economic partners for the German economy in terms of trade and investment, and it is still seen as an indispensable partner for tackling global issues like climate change, biodiversity and disarmament. Despite German efforts to keep communication between both sides open and to promote cooperation, the visits of Chancellors Scholz and Merz made clear that China's leadership, despite all their rhetoric on protecting free trade etc., is not really willing to compromise on substance.

Taiwan, which has always been a significant economic partner for Germany, has been upgraded in terms of cooperation and exchanges since 2021 and the island has attracted more attention in the German media and public than in the years before. German politicians have become more outspoken on the situation in the Taiwan Strait and in support of Taiwan's functional participation in international organizations, especially the WHO. However, this development has not changed the underlying framework of the one-China policy, which still is the basis for the relations between Germany and Taiwan. Therefore, Germany still acts well within limits that should ultimately be acceptable to Beijing.

Meanwhile, the EU has recently finalized Free Trade Agreements in the Indo-Pacific with India, Australia – maybe both with a little help of the current unpredictable US trade policy – and Indonesia and it continues to negotiate with Malaysia, Thailand and the Philippines.[60] The EU has also started a dialogue about closer cooperation with CPTPP, the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership.[61] To support economic de-risking, the German government (during the "traffic light coalition") has expanded its investment guarantees to several countries in the Indo-Pacific (India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam), while limiting these guarantees for China.[62] Whether these instruments and measures will really lead to a substantive diversification and reduction of over-dependencies of German companies in the future remains to be seen.

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[59] Taiwan Today (2025) "Berlin Freedom Conference welcomes former president Tsai's speech", *Taiwan Today*, 18 November, available online.

[60] European Commission (n.d.) "Negotiations and agreements", available online. In previous years, the EU concluded FTAs with South Korea, Japan, Singapore, Vietnam, New Zealand, Samoa and Papua New Guinea. See ibidem.

[61] European Commission (2025) "Joint Ministerial Statement from the EU and the CPTPP at the 14th WTO Ministerial Conference", 27 March, available online.

[62] AHK (2023) "German Federal Government Investment Guarantees for Diversification Targets", 3 December, available online.

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Assessing Germany's Indo-Pacific Engagement: What Lessons for Italy?

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This paper assesses Germany's Indo-Pacific Guidelines five years after their adoption, asking whether they can be considered a strategic success—and why they now require fundamental revision. The paper starts by putting Germany's Indo-Pacific (IP) engagement in context, comparing it to France's engagement in that strategic space. While Germany and France IP strategies are aligned in many ways, their engagement is not alike. France's own engagement in that space draws on its territorial presence in both the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Germany has no such territories and also no comparable colonial baggage. A strong economic thrust characterizes Germany's IP engagement while military aspects have only taken on more importance in recent years. France's approach to the IP has been more shaped by military strategic considerations. Arms sales to the IP also matter much more to France than to Germany (though this is slowly changing, indicating a possible future convergence). We conclude this section by arguing that Italy's IP engagement so far bears more similarities with Germany's approach to the IP. The second section of the paper zooms in on Germany's 2020 Guidelines and the implementation thereof. It argues that the 2020 Guidelines functioned less as a classical strategy document than as a strategic framing device: They helped decentre Germany's Asia policy from an overly China-centric focus, mobilised a whole-of-government approach, and anchored German engagement in the regional order shaped by ASEAN, international law and open markets. In doing so, they enhanced Germany's visibility and legitimacy as a cooperative security actor and promoted economic diversification as an early form of "de-risking without decoupling." In sinc with the Guidelines, Germany's high-level diplomacy to the region (official visits of chancellors, foreign and defence ministers) have both intensified and diversified, becoming far less China-focussed. In terms of the actions area mentioned in the Guidelines, Germany has been particularly active btw 2020 and 2025 in terms of first, economic diplomacy, second, security engagement/defence diplomacy, and third, multilateral diplomacy. The third section of the paper contends that the geopolitical environment of 2026 differs structurally from that of 2020. Intensified US–China rivalry, the weaponisation of supply chains, and the growing centrality of security alignment and technological competition have exposed the limits of a framework designed for a comparatively stable order. Against this backdrop, Germany is moving toward a more explicitly strategic Indo-Pacific posture under Chancellor Friedrich Merz and Foreign Minister Johann Wadephul, marked by a stronger focus on India, upgraded engagement with ASEAN, and the integration of trade, raw materials and security policy. Recent high-level diplomatic travel and expanded security presence underscore this recalibration.

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The paper concludes by situating Germany's evolving approach within a broader European context, highlighting the need for Franco-German-Italian coordination and for an updated EU Indo-Pacific strategy that prioritises resilience, security and strategic alignment alongside economic connectivity. It argues that Italy would be well served by developing an IP strategy with distinct Italian characteristics.

Introduction

In this chapter we bring together the perspectives of a scholar and a practitioner who have been concerned with Asian and broader international affairs in the past few decades. We join forces to assess Germany's Indo-Pacific engagement to find out what lessons it may offer for Italy's engagement in that strategic space. We do so by first reflecting on the concept cum strategic vision/narrative of the Indo-Pacific to understand where the thinking in Indo-Pacific terms comes from. In a second step we juxtapose the Indo-Pacific engagement of France and Germany as these two countries were not only the first middle powers in the European Union to develop a foreign affairs focus on the Indo-Pacific but were also both instrumental in driving the EU's own development of a strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific. But then, as we will note, France and Germany's Indo-Pacific engagements differ in important ways. In a third step, we examine the contours of Germany's Indo-Pacific engagement to better understand the general thrust of this engagement in the first five years since 2020. In a fourth step, we discuss how the geopolitical and broader international environment in 2026 differs from that of 2020 when Germany's Indo-Pacific guidelines were first issued. We also discuss how the changed environment gets reflected in Germany's current approach to the Indo-Pacific. In the final section, we situate Germany's evolving approach within a broader European context, highlighting the value of Franco-German-Italian coordination and the need for an updated EU Indo-Pacific strategy that prioritises resilience, security and strategic alignment alongside economic connectivity. We argue that Italy would be well served by developing an Indo-Pacific strategy with distinct Italian characteristics.

Notably, we understand the Indo-Pacific not as a natural region in any sense – it is far too vast and diverse for that – but as a socially constructed space connecting the strategic theatres of the Indian and the Pacific Ocean. Social constructions do not take place in a vacuum but reflect the interests of those who come up with relevant ideas. The Indo-Pacific has aroused the interest of strategic thinkers for different reasons for at least a century[2] but the most recent Indo-Pacific turn has been propelled by the rise of China. Strategic thinkers and practitioners in Australia, India, Japan, and the United States became increasingly concerned after the turn of the millennium about the military dimensions of China's inexorable rise and how an increasingly affluent and powerful China might come to dominate Asia, starting with what the country regards as some of it 'core interests' in the South China Sea and across the Taiwan straits. As a result, China would increasingly challenge the primacy of the United States which had built up in the wake of World War II a network of bilateral alliances, the 'hub-and-spokes-system', in the region, with the main spokes extending to Japan, the Republic of Korea and Australia. Steeped in neorealist thought, the answer of strategists to the perceived challenge was to extend the strategic space in question, bringing in India with its resources (military and otherwise) to help balance China. The basic idea was the

[2] Scott, D. (2023) "The Return of the 'Indo-Pacific' ", *Asia Maior 34*, available online.

following: If China might at some point be able to dominate East and Southeast Asia, it would be much more difficult to dominate the entire Indo-Pacific region in which the United States joined forces not only with its traditional allies and partners but also India – which has its own sets of concerns about China's rise and its growing engagement in the Indian Ocean region.[3]

US and, by extension, European Indo-Pacific policies and their respective China policies are thus inextricably linked. The Indo-Pacific should thus be understood as a strategic space in which strategic competition unfolds between, on the one hand, the United States and its allies and partners, and China, on the other hand. While it makes sense to conceive of the Indo-Pacific in such geostrategic terms,[4] governments which have used the notion of the Indo-Pacific, have often done so in a pragmatic manner, not necessarily embracing the strategic-military rationale of the concept. They have, for example, connected their existing Asia(-Pacific)-related policies and activities with a broader Indo-Pacific frame. Anxious not to antagonize China, several governments have emphasized the economic rationale of closer cooperation with the Indo-Pacific. (Although they could have easily stuck to existing Asia/Asia-Pacific monikers for that purpose.) Some Indo-Pacific strategies put out by governments have also put far less emphasis on balancing China than on cooperating with all partners in the region (including China and Taiwan), emphasizing the inclusiveness of the respective strategies. And notably, several states in the Indo-Pacific have not really embraced the idea of the Indo-Pacific idea at all, either because they understand it as directed against them – as in case of China (and Russia) – or because they prefer their own strategic visions of peaceful and prosperous development, as in the case of the Pacific Island countries.[5]

France and Germany's Indo-Pacific Engagement: Aligned, not Alike

One might be forgiven for thinking that France and Germany sing in unison from the same hymn sheet when it comes to the Indo-Pacific. After all, governments in Paris and Berlin were the first in the European Union member states to develop Indo-Pacific strategies. Both countries have also often acted in tandem to propel EU projects. And both were instrumental in driving, together with the Netherlands, the European Union's Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific published in September 2021. In that sense France and Germany's Indo-Pacific strategies are very much aligned. There is also a fair amount of similarity when it comes to the areas of cooperation that are envisioned in the respective Indo-Pacific strategies. Governments in Paris and Berlin have frequently emphasised the need to work together with Indo-Pacific partners to increase economic exchanges and cooperation in science and innovation; to uphold the rules-based international order and multilateralism; and to work together in tackling climate-change is-

[3] Köllner, P., Patman, R. G., Kiglics, B. (2022) "From Asia–Pacific to Indo-Pacific: Diplomacy in an Emerging Strategic Space" in: Patman, R.G., Köllner, P., Kiglics, B. (eds.) *From Asia–Pacific to Indo-Pacific Diplomacy in a Contested Region*, Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 1-27. For a related understanding of the Indo-Pacific as a 'macro-securitized constellation' see Smith, N. R., Bacon, P. (2025) "The Indo-Pacific as a macrosecuritized constellation: revising Regional Security Complex Theory for the age of the Indo-Pacific", *The Pacific Review*, 1–29, available online.

[4] For discussions of how the age of the Indo-Pacific with all its geostrategic connotations and implications came to replace the age of the Asia-Pacific with its emphasis on economic cooperation and globalisation see Köllner et al. (op. cit.) and Higgott, R. (2026) "What is in a Name? From the Geo-Economics of the Asia–Pacific to the Geo-Politics of the Indo-Pacific", in: A. Acharya et al. (eds.) *Essays on Global Regionalism I*, United Nations University Series on Regionalism 30, available online.

[5] Köllner, P. (2021) "Beyond 'Indo-Pacific': Understanding Small Pacific Powers on Their Own Terms", *GIGA Focus Asia*, 5, available online.

sues. Contributions to maritime security also feature in both French and German policy documents on the Indo-Pacific.

It is telling, however, that security and defence-related issues usually come first in French strategic documents on the country's engagement in the Indo-Pacific[6] whereas they feature more inconspicuously in Germany's Indo-Pacific Policy Guidelines of August 2020. There, 'peace, security and stability' got listed third among the seven policy areas for cooperation, coming after combating climate change and protecting the environment in second place and multilateralism in first place. The prominence of the latter reflected not only Germany's post-World War II European identity and its interests as a civilian and trading power but also the particular interests of Heiko Maass who first served as minister of justice (2013-2018) and then as foreign minister (2018-2021) in the last two grand-coalition cabinets led by Chancellor Angela Merkel.[7]

Several reasons account for the much more pronounced military-strategic dimension in French policy documents on the Indo-Pacific than in Germany's strategic directions for the Indo-Pacific – an emphasis that is also reflected in the fact that there is a separate policy document from the French Ministry of Defence concerning the country's Indo-Pacific engagement.[8] For one, security and defence-related issues have been of lower importance overall for Germany's conduct of foreign affairs in the past eighty-odd years given the country's resounding defeat in World War II and the ensuing identity of the Federal Republic of Germany as a 'civilian power'.[9] For France on the other hand, with its more 'unbroken history' and its claim to being a global power, endowed with a permanent seat in the United Nations' security and equipped with nuclear weapons (the 'force de frappe'), security and defence-related issues have continued to play a larger role since World War II. Concerns about China's military build-up and corresponding threat perceptions also grew earlier in French military and strategic circles than in Germany where the main international security concern regarding China in the latter half of the 2010s seemed to be what the country's rejection of the 2016 South China Sea ruling of the Permanent Court of Arbitration (established under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea) meant for the rules-based international order.[10]

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[6] Starting with Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires étrangères (2018) *Stratégie française en Asie-Océanie à l'horizon 2030*. See also the most recent edition of the strategy: Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires étrangères (2025) *La stratégie indopacifique de la France*, France Diplomatie, available online.

[7] Federal Government, Germany (2020) *Policy guidelines for the Indo-Pacific*, Berlin, Federal Foreign Office, Germany, available online.

[8] Ministère des Armées (2019) *Stratégie française en Indopacifique*, available online.

[9] A term popularised by Maull, H. W. (1990) "Germany and Japan: The New Civilian Powers", *Foreign Affairs* 69(5), 91-106. This is not to deny that arms deals played an important role in Germany's bilateral relations with several countries in the Middle East and beyond since the 1970s. For example, (West) Germany agreed to supply two submarines to Indonesia in the late 1970s. After German unification, no less than 39 of the ships of East Germany's naval forces, including 16 corvettes, were sold to Indonesia. For a recent history of (West) Germany's 'deals with dictators', see Bösch, F. (2024) *Deals mit Diktaturen: Eine andere Geschichte der Bundesrepublik*, Munich: C.H. Beck.

[10] Economically, there were also concerns about China's growing industrial-technological prowess, what this meant for German industry, and about the lack of a level playing field in terms of market access. See Meijer, H. (2022) *Awakening to China's Rise. Europe's Foreign and Security Policies toward the People's Republic of China*, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, chapters 1 and 2.

A related second reason for France's stronger emphasis on security and defence related cooperation in the Indo-Pacific is that the country defines itself as a 'sovereign nation of the Indo-Pacific' or as a 'resident power' because of the territories it occupies there and their strategic implications.[11] In contrast, Germany has no such overseas territories, having gotten stripped of all existing colonies in the wake of World War I. Germany does thus not share the kind of overseas obligations and also not the same kind of colonial baggage that France does. Notably, two of France's overseas territories in the Indo-Pacific, French Polynesia and New Caledonia – with the latter having been rocked in recent years by pro-independence protests and unrest – are listed by the United Nations as non-self-governing territories to be fully decolonised.[12]

France's strategic-military interests also manifest themselves in terms of a vibrant arms industry with global interests. In recent years, France has emerged as the world's second-largest arms exporter (10% of global arms exports in the 2021-2025 period), trailing the United States (42%) by far but having overtaken Russia (9%) in the wake of the latter's war on Ukraine. The largest recipient of French arms, including the multirole fighter aircraft Rafale (produced by Dassault) and the Scorpène-class submarine (produced by Naval Group), these days is India, a central actor in the Indo-Pacific.[13] France had also won a tender to supply new submarines to Australia, another major actor in that strategic space.[14] Indonesia has become a further major French arms-exports destination in the Indo-Pacific, with contracts for the delivery of 42 Rafale jets and two Scorpène-class submarines getting signed in 2022 and 2024, respectively. Additional orders may ensue.[15]

Whereas Germany has also emerged as a major arms exporter in recent years with a market share of over six percent, having recently overtaken China as fourth-largest global arms exporter,[16] the importance of arms exports pales in comparisons with other industrial products such automobiles, chemicals or machinery. Tellingly, business and political circles in Germany woke up to the threat posed by China's rise in industrial and technological terms only when the big German robotics producer KUKA was taken over by a Chinese competitor in 2016.[17] While a convergence of French and German efforts to act as major suppliers of arms to the Indo-Pacific cannot be ruled out in the longer term, military engagement in, including arms export to, the Indo-Pacific played a far larger role for France than for Germany until 2025. Germany deployed for the first time in decades naval forces (two frigates and a supply ship) to the Indo-Pacific and stepped-up Indo-Pacific deployments of the Luftwaffe (airforce) as well as

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[11] Jaffrelot, C., Plagemann, J. (2025) "Europeans and the Indo-Pacific: Is there a 'Third Way' Between China and the United States?", 223, in: Allès, D., Jaffrelot, C., Köllner, P. (eds.) *Order and Agency in the Indo-Pacific*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

[12] United Nations (n.d.) "Non-Self-Governing Territories", available online.

[13] George, M., Djokic, K., Hussain, Z., Wezeman, P.D., Wezeman, S.T. (2026) "Trends in International Arms Transfers 2025", *SIPRI*, Stockholm, 8 March, available online.

[14] In 2021, the Australia government decided to abort the deal and to go, under the AUKUS agreement, for nuclear-powered submarines supplied by the US and the United Kingdom. The new agreement has been beset by numerous problems.

[15] Strangio, S. (2026) "Indonesia Takes Delivery of First French-made Rafale Fighter Jets", *The Diplomat*, 27 January, available online.

[16] George, M., Djokic, K., Hussain, Z., Wezeman, P.D., Wezeman, S.T. (2026) "Trends in International Arms Transfers 2025", *SIPRI*, Stockholm, 8 March, available online.

[17] Haupt, A. (2023) "Franka, Emika, Hamburger Hafen und Kuka: So viele Übernahmen von deutschen Unternehmen durch chinesische Investoren gab es wirklich", *Business Insider*, 23 November, available online. See also Meijer, H. (2022) *Awakening to China's Rise. Europe's Foreign and Security Policies toward the People's Republic of China*, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, chapter 5.

some army units in the 2021-2025 period. As will be argued below, however, and despite the visibility of such undertakings, the main thrust of Germany's Indo-Pacific engagement has been of an economic nature.[18] The Indo-Pacific engagements of France and Germany up until the mid-2020s have thus been aligned but not alike. The Italian government might draw its own lessons what kind of orientation and priorities best fit Italian interests and preferences in the Indo-Pacific.

Germany's Asia Policy Before and After the Publication of the Indo-Pacific Guidelines

Asia assumed ever more importance for Germany's foreign policy after the end of the Cold War. In the heydays of globalisation, in the 1990s and early 2000s, trade and investment ties between Germany and Asia boomed, and especially economic ties with China, where five thousand German companies have set up shop, multiplied. In 2016, the People's Republic became Germany's top trading partner – a position it has held since (except for 2024, when the US briefly overtook China). Klaus Kinkel, Germany's foreign minister between 1992 and 1998, was instrumental in driving the development of the first Asia concept of the federal government published in 1994. Subsequent foreign ministers followed up on this, culminating in the establishment of a separate Asia-Pacific directorate-general (DG), composed of several desks – incl. one desk for Chinese affairs only – in the Federal Foreign Office (FFO) in 2017. The new *Abteilung* has since been headed by a director-general, supported – until an organisational restructuring in mid-2026 – by two deputy director-generals at the ambassadorial level.[19]

Under the long-lived Merkel governments (2005-2021), the number of high-level diplomatic visits between the two countries also grew by leaps and bounds. Merkel herself visited China in her capacity as chancellor twelve times between 2006 and 2019. (Compared to five such visits to Japan, four to India, and three to South Korea.) Merkel thus become the head of government in the West with most visits to the People's Republic. Regular government consultations between the two countries were introduced in 2011 and bilateral ties were upgraded to 'comprehensive strategic partnership' level in 2014. Growing concerns about China's increasingly aggressive activities in the South China Sea and towards Taiwan, as well the growing challenge posed by Chinese business competitors (supported by government funding and the like) led to a more nuanced view of China in Germany in the latter half of the 2010s. Notably, German business and political circles played a major role in the European Union's 2019 designation of China as a 'partner, competitor and systemic rival'. Still, the German government pushed the proposed Agreement on Investment (CAI) with China, which eventually got put on hold by the European Parliament in May 2021 after China had reacted strongly to European sanctions placed on China in view of the country's systematic repression of Uighurs.[20]

The publication of Germany's policy guidelines on the Indo-Pacific in August 2020 reflected not only Germany's more nuanced views of China but also the

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[18] For an in-depth comparison of France and Germany's Indo-Pacific engagement see Jaffrelot, C., Plagemann, J. (2025) "Europeans and the Indo-Pacific: Is there a 'Third Way' Between China and the United States?", 223, in: Allès, D., Jaffrelot, C., Köllner, P. (eds.) Order and Agency in the Indo-Pacific, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

[19] Before, Asian affairs had been dealt with by another DG which also covered African, Latin American and Middle East affairs.

[20] Meijer, H. (2022) *Awakening to China's Rise. Europe's Foreign and Security Policies toward the People's Republic of China*, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, chapters 1 and 2. See also the chapter by Gudrun Wacker in this report.

government's interest in actively diversifying business and other ties in the region beyond the existing strong focus on China. Yet, the guidelines were marked by an inclusive orientation. Despite the apparent interest in the diversification of all kinds of links with the Indo-Pacific, the guidelines made sure not to exclude necessary or potentially useful cooperation with China.

The Indo-Pacific guidelines, a framing device for a whole-of-government effort to increase exchanges with that strategic space, brought the German nomenclature more in sync with those of its main transatlantic partner and ally, the US, as well as with that of Australia, Japan, and India, i.e. other proponents of the Indo-Pacific concept. Interestingly, it was however only after the Association for Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) had published its own (inclusive) Outlook on the Indo-Pacific in 2019[21] that Germany followed suit with its own guidelines – which played tribute to the much-heralded 'centrality' of ASEAN in regional affairs. That reference also reflected Germany's support of multilateral structures in general and regional organisations in particular.

The reality though has been that Germany's Indo-Pacific engagement in the first five years after the publication guidelines saw concerted efforts to intensify mostly *bilateral* ties. This is perhaps no surprise as, fundamentally, nation-states have remained central actors in international affairs. Moreover, ASEAN's effectiveness as an international actor has always been circumscribed by the Southeast Asian bloc's tremendous respect for national autonomy. Whereas relations between Germany and ASEAN were elevated to strategic-partnership level early on, particular attention has been paid to both deepen and widen bilateral ties with regional heavyweights. For example, the first 2+2 exchanges (foreign and defence ministers) with Japan were set up with Japan in 2022.

As other chapters in this report do so, there is no need to detail here Germany's Indo-Pacific engagement over time or in specific domains. What can be noted though is the following.

First, whereas the Indo-Pacific guidelines list seven relevant policy fields ranging from multilateralism, and security via human rights and the rule of law, free trade, and digital affairs to culture, education and science, in all of which numerous activities have taken place (as documented in four progress reports put together by the FFO[22]), the German government put a particular focus on economic (including digital) cooperation, and on defence diplomacy.

The economic thrust of implementing the policy guidelines becomes even clearer when one considers the strong efforts exerted by the German federal government – whether under Merkel, Scholz or Merz – to expedite free-trade agreements of the European Union with countries such as Australia (negotiations finalised in 2026), New Zealand (signed in 2024), Indonesia (negotiations finalised in 2025) and India (negotiations also finalised in 2026).

Second, there has been a substantial diversification of ties with Indo-Pacific nations as evidenced by intensification of high-level diplomacy (visits by the chancellor, the foreign and defence ministers, as well as the federal president). Whereas China clearly topped the list in the Merkel years, Japan topped the list in the first five years after the publication of the Indo-Pacific guidelines, followed by India

[21] ASEAN (2019) *ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific*, Jakarta: ASEAN Secretariat, 23 June, available online.

[22] Federal Foreign Office (2024) *Progress report on the implementation of the Federal Government's policy guidelines for the Indo-Pacific for the year 2024*, German, available online.

and China. Moreover, since 2022 several German ministers have participated in the annual Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, the region's premier security-related dialogue and networking platform.

Third, the Pacific Island Countries began to figure more visibly on the German foreign policy radar, also reflecting the confluence of the new Indo-Pacific thrust and the active climate foreign policy (*Klimaaußenpolitik*) championed by former Foreign Minister Annalena Bearbock (2021-2025).[23] Germany joined the US-led Partners in the Pacific initiative in 2022, set up an embassy in Suva (Fiji) in 2023, Baerbock and her successor Johannes Wadephul visited Palau in 2022 and Tonga in 2026, respectively. In sum, Germany's diplomatic ties with various parts of the Indo-Pacific have visibly deepened and become much more diversified since the publication of the Indo-Pacific policy guidelines in August 2020.

Germany's Indo-Pacific Engagement in a Changing Geopolitical Environment

The geopolitical environment in which Germany's Indo-Pacific guidelines were conceived in 2020 differs in important structural respects from that of 2026. What was originally framed as a broad, largely cooperative and economically driven policy approach now unfolds in a context marked by intensifying geopolitical rivalry, the securitization of interdependence, and increasing pressure for political alignment.

This transformation has become more explicitly acknowledged under the current German government led by Friedrich Merz. Senior members of the current German government increasingly frame the Indo-Pacific less as a space of opportunity than as a central arena of geopolitical competition, technological rivalry, and strategic positioning.[24] This shift in language reflects a broader recalibration of German foreign-policy thinking.

Three interrelated developments are particularly relevant: First, the global systemic context has changed in ways that go beyond US-China rivalry alone. While strategic competition between Washington and Beijing remains a defining structural feature of the Indo-Pacific, it is no longer the sole organising axis. The consequences of the war against Ukraine have significantly deepened European distrust of revisionist great-power behaviour more broadly, including vis-à-vis China. At the same time, the second Trump administration has contributed to a more transactional and less predictably alliance-driven US foreign policy, including renewed debates on burden-sharing, spheres of influence, and selective disengagement. Together these developments have accelerated Europe's – and Germany's – search for a greater strategic autonomy and diversification beyond traditional transatlantic frameworks. India, often perceived as strategically autonomous and comparatively China-sceptical while maintaining selective ties with Russia, has thereby gained additional salience as a partner of first resort.

Second, the weaponization of economic interdependence has further advanced. The concept of *de-risking* has replaced earlier, more technocratic notions of "risk minimisation" and now constitutes a central pillar of German and the EU foreign

[23] Hasenkamp, O., Köllner, P. (2023) "Die Neuentdeckung des Pazifiks: Möglichkeiten deutscher Zusammenarbeit", *GIGA Focus Asia*, n. 4, available online.

[24] Federal Government, Germany (2025) *Verantwortung für Deutschland. Koalitionsvertrag von CDU, CSU und SPD*, 128, 4070-4071, Berlin; Federal Foreign Office (2026) *The Indo-Pacific Region,* 30 January, Berlin; Author interviews with senior officials of the Federal Foreign Office, Berlin, February-April 2026.

economic policy. Germany's China Strategy of 2023 explicitly warns that dependencies can be politically instrumentalized.[25] This shift has concrete implications: it has led not only to tighter investment screening and supply-chain diversification, but also to a more explicit linkage between China policy and Indo-Pacific engagement, especially in semiconductors, green technologies, and critical raw materials.

Third, technological and industrial competition has become structurally embedded in Indo-Pacific geopolitics. The strategic relevance of technological competition increasingly extends beyond industrial competitiveness to questions of technological sovereignty, industrial ecosystems, AI governance, cyber resilience, and dual-use innovation[26]. For Germany and Europe alike, economic security and geopolitical relevance are becoming increasingly intertwined. As several analysts note, European actors remain constrained in their ability to project hard power in the Indo-Pacific.[27] However, this underestimates that even limited deployments – such as German naval transits through the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait[28] – have acquired notable signalling effects, including episodes of close surveillance by Chinese naval forces. These incidents underscore that even symbolic military presence is increasingly embedded in contested strategic environments.

Evolution of Germany's Indo-Pacific Engagement

Against this backdrop, Germany's Indo-Pacific engagement has undergone a gradual but discernible shift. While multilateralism and inclusiveness remain guiding principles, policy practice has become more selective, interest-driven, and strategically framed. India has emerged as a central partner and is now explicitly described as a key actor in preserving a multipolar order.[29]

This reflects both Germany's economic diversification agenda and India's growing relevance as a geopolitical counterweight to China.

Engagement with ASEAN continues to play an important role but is increasingly complemented by differentiated bilateral partnerships. The elevation of EU-ASEAN relations to a strategic partnership in 2020 has been paralleled by intensified bilateral engagement with individual ASEAN member states, particularly Indonesia, Vietnam, and Singapore. At the same time, German initiatives are increasingly embedded in existing European frameworks, including the EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, the Global Gateway initiative[30], and sector-specific connectivity partnerships with regional actors. German Indo-Pacific policy is therefore no longer merely national in character, but increasingly nested within a broader European strategic architecture. However, the emphasis on ASEAN "centrality" often functions more as a normative anchor than as a structuring prin-

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[25] Federal Government, Germany (2023) *China Strategy of the Federal Government*, July, 9-12, Berlin.

[26] European External Action Service (2021) *Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council: The EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific*,16 September, Brussels; European Commission (2024) *European Economic Security Strategy – Joint Communication on European Economic Security*, Brussels.

[27] International Institute for Strategic Studies (2025) *The Military Balance 2025*, London: Routledge for the International Institute for Strategic Studies; Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (2025) *SIPRI Yearbook 2025: Armaments, Disarmament and International Security*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[28] Federal Ministry of Defence, Germany (2024) *Frigate Baden-Württemberg transits Taiwan Strait, Official Press Release*, September; Federal Ministry of Defence, Germany (2024) *Official reporting on the Indo-Pacific deployment of FGS Baden-Württemberg and Task Group*, May.

[29] Federal Foreign Office, Germany (2024) *Germany and India: Strong Partners in a Multipolar World,* Berlin.

[30] European External Action Service (2021) *EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific;* European Commission (2021) *Global Gateway Strategy;* European Council (2022) *EU-India Connectivity Partnership.*

ciple of German action.

Germany's diplomatic outreach has also expanded significantly to the Pacific Island countries. This outreach reflects not only climate diplomacy but also growing awareness that geopolitical competition increasingly extends into the Pacific Islands, including in areas such as infrastructure, connectivity, maritime domain awareness, and strategic access[31]. In this context, Indo-Pacific policy has also served as a signalling instrument – particularly vis-à-vis key partners such as Japan, where alignment on sanctions against Russia after 2022 was reinforced through intensified political and security dialogue. In this sense, the Indo-Pacific guidelines have not only structured engagement but also helped consolidate political trust among like-minded partners.

Security engagement has become more visible but remains limited in scale. Naval deployments are increasingly framed in strategic terms yet remain episodic. As SIPRI notes, European Indo-Pacific engagement is still characterized by symbolic presence rather than sustained military capability.[32] In sum, Germany's Indo-Pacific engagement has evolved from a predominantly economic and normative framework into a more integrated approach linking economic, technological, and security considerations. However, this evolution remains incremental rather than transformative, constrained by fiscal limitations, institutional fragmentation, and a continued preference for multilateral framing.

Implications for German Policy

The evolving environment has triggered an internal debate within the German government – particularly within the Federal Foreign Office – on whether the existing Indo-Pacific guidelines remain sufficient or whether they should be replaced by a more explicit strategy. This discussion reflects a broader shift toward strategic prioritisation. As one internal paper states, "the time of framework documents without prioritization is over."[33]

Three implications follow: First, clearer prioritisation is required: The 2020 guidelines deliberately avoided hard choices. However, Germany's strategic environment now demands clearer focus on key partners – especially India, Japan, Australia, Indonesia, and selected ASEAN states. This also implies a more explicit balancing between inclusiveness and selectivity.
Second, integrated policymaking must move from principle to practice: The distinction between economic, technological, and security policy is increasingly obsolete. The Federal Government's concept of "integrated security" is a step in this direction, but operational coordination remains uneven.

Third, Germany's strategic communication must become more explicit: A recurring tension persists between inclusiveness and alignment. While engagement with China remains necessary, Germany has become more explicit in defending its interests. At the same time, strategic communication increasingly requires clarity vis-à-vis partners and competitors alike, particularly where economic resilience, technological sovereignty, and security commitments intersect.

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[31] Federal Foreign Office, Germany (2026) *The Indo-Pacific Region*, official mission statement,Hasenkamp, O., Köllner, P. (2023) *Die Neuentdeckung des Pazifiks,* GIGA Focus Asia 4; Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (2022) *Joint Statement on Partners in the Blue Pacific Foreign Ministers Meeting*, September 22, available online.

[32] Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (2025) *SIPRI Yearbook 2025, Armaments, Disarmament and International Security*, Stockholm.

[33] Author interviews with officials of the German Federal Foreign Office, Berlin, February-April 2026.

Fourth, strategic ambition increasingly collides with finite resources. Every frigate deployed to the Indo-Pacific, every diplomatic post opened, and every development programme expanded in the region necessarily competes with commitments in Europe, the Middle East and Africa.

Germany's Indo-Pacific policy therefore faces not merely a strategic challenge, but a fundamentally budgetary and prioritisation challenge. This raises a politically sensitive question: can German sustain a visible Indo-Pacific presence without dedicated budget lines? Thus far, much of Germany's engagement has been financed through reallocation rather than through structurally increased resources.

Germany's Experience Offers Several Lessons for Italy

The first lesson concerns strategic framing. Germany's Indo-Pacific guidelines have provided a coherent but deliberately flexible framework. For Italy, a comparable strategy could enhance coherence and visibility, particularly given Italy's already growing Indo-Pacific footprint.

The second lesson concerns diversification. Germany's experience illustrates both the benefits and vulnerabilities of deep economic exposure to China. Italy has already encountered similar dynamics, including its recalibration of Belt and Road participation. A more diversified Indo-Pacific engagement – particularly with India and ASEAN – would reduce strategic exposure while expanding economic opportunities.

The third lesson concerns security integration. Italy's strong maritime tradition and naval capabilities provide a natural basis for deeper engagement in maritime security cooperation, including EU-led and multilateral Indo-Pacific missions.

The fourth lesson concerns European coordination. The Indo-Pacific increasingly requires coordinated European approaches. Germany's experience shows that bilateral and EU-level initiatives can reinforce each other, but only if strategically aligned. Italy may also draw on historical relationships that differ from those of Germany. Long-standing industrial and defence cooperation with India, strategic industrial partnerships with Japan – including participation in the Global Combat Air Programme[34] – and a historically active commercial presence in parts of Southeast Asia provide Rome with assets that could support a distinctly Italian Indo-Pacific profile.

Does Italy Need an Indo-Pacific Strategy?

The need for greater European coordination in the Indo-Pacific has become increasingly evident. The EU's 2021 Indo-Pacific Strategy provides a common framework, but its implementation remains uneven. France and Germany have played leading roles, though with different strategic logics: France is a resident Indo-Pacific power with military assets, Germany as a primarily economic and diplomatic actor. These differences are not contradictory but potentially complementary.

More fundamentally, Europe faces the question whether it can develop an Indo-Pacific strategy that remains compatible with transatlantic cooperation while achieving a greater degree of strategic and operational autonomy from US leader-

[34] Global Combat Air Programme (GCAP) "Joint Leaders Statement", 9 December; GCAP International Government Organisation (GIGO), official updates 2025.

ship[35]. The return of more transactional tendencies in Washington has made this question considerably less theoretical that it appeared only a few years ago.

For Italy, closer coordination with both partners would offer significant added value, particularly in maritime security, infrastructure, and defence-industrial cooperation. Joint naval deployments coordinated diplomatic initiatives, and co-investment in critical technologies would significantly enhance Europe's strategic visibility in the region. At the same time, the EU will need to update its Indo-Pacific strategy to reflect current realities: increased geopolitical fragmentation, technological competition, and the need for resilience-oriented policy frameworks.

Finally, Europe – and Germany in particular – must clarify what kind of power it seeks to project in the Indo-Pacific. European hard-power capabilities in the region remain limited, episodic, and geographically constrained. Yet Europe retains significant comparative advantages as a regulatory, technological, and economic actor. The more fundamental strategic question may therefore not be whether Europe can match military presence, but whether it can translate comparative advantage in standard-setting – whether in AI governance, green technologies, digital regulation, supply-chain security, or industrial norms[36] – into geopolitical influence.

Conclusion

Germany's Indo-Pacific engagement since 2020 illustrates both continuity and adaptation. While the original guidelines provided a flexible and inclusive framework, the evolving geopolitical environment has required gradual strategic recalibration. Germany's experience offers no blueprint for other European actors, but it does provide several strategically relevant lessons. For Italy, the development of a distinct Indo-Pacific strategy could strengthen policy coherence, enhance strategic visibility, and translate existing economic, industrial, and security engagement into greater geopolitical agency. Such a strategy should be interest-driven, selective, and embedded within EU coordination structures. More fundamentally, Germany's own experience raises a broader European question: whether Europe is prepared to move from Indo-Pacific engagement to Indo-Pacific strategy – from presence to prioritisation, and from declaratory ambition to sustained political and budgetary commitment. This question becomes even more pressing in an environment in which American strategic leadership can no longer be assumed as a constant, while European hard-power projection in the region remains necessarily limited. Under these conditions, Europe's long-term relevance in the Indo-Pacific may depend less on matching military presence than on its ability to combine selective security engagement with economic resilience, technological sovereignty, and the capacity to shape international standards. Ultimately, the Indo-Pacific has become a central arena of global politics. For European states – including Italy – the central challenge is therefore no longer whether to engage in the Indo-Pacific, but how to translate engagement into sustained strategic relevance under conditions of finite resources, competing theatres, and an increasingly contested international order.

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[35] Fiott, D. (2025) "The Three Images of EU Strategic Autonomy: Perspectives on Wedging, Binding and Hedging," *Journal of European Integration*, 3, 373-390.

[36] European Commission (2025) "Global Gateway Implementation Review", Brussels, available online; European Commission (2025) *International Digital Strategy for the European Union*, Brussels, available online.

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The Indo-Pacific Engagement: Lessons from the Dutch Case for Italy's Indo-Pacific Turn

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This report examines the Netherlands' Indo-Pacific approach following the adoption of its 2020 Indo-Pacific Guidelines and draws policy lessons for Italy. It argues that the Dutch Guidelines did not introduce new policies but instead reframed existing economic, maritime, and institutional ties within a coherent strategic framework that improved coordination, prioritisation, and political signalling. The Dutch experience demonstrates that European involvement in the Indo-Pacific is centred on economic security, maritime security, and institutional partnerships rather than sustained military presence. At the same time, it reveals structural limitations, including a capability-ambition gap and the risk of symbolic security engagement. The report argues that Italy should adopt a selective Indo-Pacific framework in the form of national guidelines, anchored in the Mediterranean-Red Sea-Indian Ocean corridor. Such an approach would strengthen policy coherence, reinforce Italy's role within EU Indo-Pacific policy, and prioritise geoeconomic cooperation and institutional partnerships. More broadly, the report concludes that Indo-Pacific frameworks for European middle powers function primarily as instruments of coordination and strategic prioritisation rather than mechanisms of military power projection.

Introduction

Over the past decades, the Indo-Pacific has emerged as the central arena of global economic growth, geopolitical competition, and maritime connectivity. For European countries, the region is no longer geographically distant but economically and politically central. European prosperity depends heavily on maritime trade routes passing through the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea. European industries remain deeply integrated into Asian supply chains, particularly in sectors such as manufacturing, energy, and critical technologies. Recent disruptions in key maritime chokepoints, including the Strait of Hormuz in 2026, highlight the extent of this interdependence. As one of the world's most critical energy transit corridors, instability in this region has immediate consequences for global energy markets, maritime insurance, and supply chains. These developments illustrate how closely European economic security is tied to maritime routes linking the Indo-Pacific to the Mediterranean. From this perspective, the Indo-Pacific is better understood not as a distant geographic region but as part of an integrated maritime system that connects Europe to Asia through the Suez Canal, the Red Sea, the Indian Ocean, and the Western Pacific.

At the same time, intensifying geopolitical competition, particularly between the United States and China, has transformed the Indo-Pacific into a strategic theatre where economic security, technological standards, maritime stability, and the

international legal order intersect. For European actors, the primary challenge lies in navigating this interdependence. This involves maintaining economic ties with Asia while managing strategic risks linked to supply chain dependencies, technological competition, and geopolitical rivalry.

Within this evolving strategic context, several European countries have adopted Indo-Pacific strategies, including France, Germany, and the Netherlands, followed by the European Union's Indo-Pacific Strategy in 2021.[1] These strategies reflect a broader shift in European foreign policy from a primarily economic approach toward a more integrated geoeconomic and geopolitical perspective. However, European Indo-Pacific strategies differ significantly depending on national capabilities, geography, and strategic culture. For most European countries, the Indo-Pacific is defined more by economic interdependence rather than territorial presence. Except for France, European actors are not resident powers in the region. Their engagement is, therefore, shaped less by territorial defence considerations and more by trade, supply chains, maritime security, and institutional partnerships. In this context, European engagement in the Indo-Pacific can be understood through the lens of complex interdependence, where economic and security considerations are closely intertwined through maritime connectivity and supply chain resilience.[2] Within this framework, neoliberal institutionalism explains how states seek to manage interdependence through cooperation, multilateral institutions, and rules-based arrangements aimed at reducing uncertainty and maintaining stability of global economic and security systems.[3]

This report examines the Netherlands' Indo-Pacific engagement since the launch of its 2020 Indo-Pacific Guidelines and develops policy lessons for Italy's emerging approach to the region. The Dutch case is particularly relevant because the Netherlands, like Italy, is a trading nation without a permanent military presence in the Indo-Pacific, yet with significant economic exposure to the region and strong support for multilateralism and international law. The Dutch case, therefore, offers a practical example of how a European middle power can engage in the Indo-Pacific through functional cooperation, economic statecraft, and institutional partnerships rather than through sustained military power projection. The report argues that, for European middle powers such as Italy, effective Indo-Pacific engagement does not require expansive military commitments, but rather strategic coherence, prioritization, and sustained implementation within EU frameworks. The Dutch experience demonstrates that policy guidelines can serve as effective instruments for coordination and EU agenda-setting, provided they are linked to clearly defined and implementable priorities.

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[1] European Commission (2021) "EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific", Joint Communication, September, available online.

[2] Keohane, R. O., Nye, J. S. (1977) *Power and Interdependence: World Politics in Transition*, Boston: Little, Brown and Company.

[3] Keohane, R. O. (1984) *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

The Netherlands as a Middle Power in the Indo-Pacific

In international relations literature, the Netherlands is often described as a middle power that relies on diplomacy, multilateral institutions, and economic statecraft rather than military power.[4] Middle powers typically exercise influence through coalition-building, institutional engagement, and niche diplomacy.[5] Rather than seeking dominance, they aim to shape international norms, institutions, and economic networks. In the Dutch case, this approach is reflected in a focus on areas of comparative advantage, including maritime law, water management, logistics, semiconductor supply chains, and international legal governance. The Netherlands is a major global logistics hub, centred around the Port of Rotterdam, and plays a key role in European trade flows. It is also home to advanced high-technology industries, most notably ASML, which occupies a critical position in global semiconductor supply chains.

These structural characteristics shape Dutch foreign policy and explain why economic security and maritime connectivity are central to its Indo-Pacific engagement. Unlike France, which is a resident Indo-Pacific power with overseas territories and a permanent military presence, the Netherlands is a non-resident actor. Its regional role relies on partnerships, economic linkages, and institutional frameworks. This makes the Dutch case particularly relevant for Italy, which also lacks a permanent territorial presence but maintains vital economic and maritime interests in the region.

From a theoretical perspective, Dutch Indo-Pacific engagement reflects the logic of complex interdependence and neoliberal institutionalism.[6] As argued by Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye, interdependent systems increase the importance of cooperation, institutions, and rules-based arrangements for managing risks and reducing uncertainty. For middle powers, this functions as a force multiplier, enabling them to exercise influence beyond their material capabilities. Within this framework, the Dutch Indo-Pacific strategy can be understood as a middle power approach centred on multilateralism, economic statecraft and trade diplomacy, and functional cooperation in niche sectors.

The Dutch case illustrates these dynamics in practice. The Netherlands advances its Indo-Pacific engagement primarily through multilateral frameworks and structured partnerships aligned with the European Union (EU) strategy, alongside enhanced cooperation with actors such as ASEAN. Its emphasis on secure maritime trade routes, respect for international law, and the diversification of economic ties reflect a preference for managing interdependence and mitigating risks through cooperation rather than unilateral action. At the same time, Dutch cooperation in areas such as maritime security, climate policy, and sustainable connectivity underscores the role of institutionalised cooperation in addressing shared challenges and supporting regional stability.

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[4] Abbondanza, G., Grgić, G. (2025) *Europe's Indo-Pacific Pivot: Navigating New Horizons*, Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan.

[5] Cooper, A. F. (1997) *Niche Diplomacy: Middle Powers after the Cold War*, Macmillan.

[6] For complex interdependence, see Keohane, R. O., Nye, J. S. (1977) *Power and Interdependence: World Politics in Transition*, Boston: Little, Brown and Company. For neoliberal institutionalism, see Keohane, R. O. (1984) *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Dutch Engagement in the Indo-Pacific: Continuity and Change

Dutch engagement in the Indo-Pacific predates the publication of the Indo-Pacific Guidelines in 2020.[7] The Netherlands had long-standing economic, development, and diplomatic ties across Asia and the Indian Ocean region, particularly with Indonesia, Singapore, Japan, South Korea, India, and ASEAN countries. Dutch foreign policy toward Asia traditionally focused on trade, development cooperation, water management, maritime logistics, and multilateral diplomacy. The Indo-Pacific Guidelines, therefore, did not introduce entirely new policies but instead reframed existing Dutch activities within a broader strategic framework, improving coordination and political signalling.

Pre-2020: Economic and Institutional Engagement

Before 2020, Dutch involvement in Asia was substantial but not framed as part of an Indo-Pacific policy. Dutch activities in the region were primarily driven by economic diplomacy, institutional cooperation, and maritime security initiatives. First, the Netherlands maintained strong commercial and trade relations with Asian economies, reflecting its position as a trade-dependent economy and a major logistics hub in Europe. Dutch policy toward Asia was often pursued through EU trade frameworks, bilateral economic diplomacy, and investment promotion.

Second, Dutch engagement was characterised by functional and technocratic cooperation. Long-term partnerships with Indonesia in water management and climate adaptation represent a flagship example of sustained institutional collaboration. These partnerships developed over decades through memoranda of understanding, knowledge exchange programmes, and technical collaboration between Dutch and Indonesian institutions. Together, they created a durable Dutch presence in the region, even in the absence of a formal Indo-Pacific policy.

Third, the Netherlands participated in maritime security initiatives in Asia through multilateral frameworks such as the Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia (ReCAAP), which it joined in 2010. However, these activities were not yet embedded within a broader Indo-Pacific framework and were instead framed as sectoral contributions to regional security and international cooperation.

The defining feature of Dutch policy before 2020 was, therefore, not the absence of engagement, but the absence of strategic coherence. Dutch activities in the region existed across multiple policy domains but lacked a unifying strategic narrative.

The 2020 Indo-Pacific Guidelines: Strategic Framing and Coordination

In November 2020, the Dutch government published the *Indo-Pacific: Guidelines for strengthening Dutch and EU cooperation with partners in Asia*.[8] The publication of the Guidelines marked a significant shift in how the Netherlands conceptualised and articulated its role in the region. Rather than introducing entirely new policy priorities, the document provided a strategic framework that brought together existing strands of Dutch foreign policy. It linked trade, technology, maritime security, connectivity, and international law into a coherent narrative, thereby enhancing policy coordination and external visibility.

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[7] Government of the Netherlands (2020) "Indo-Pacific: Guidelines for strengthening Dutch and EU cooperation with partners in Asia", Ministry of Foreign Affairs, available online.

[8] *Ibidem.*

The Guidelines identified a set of priority areas that reflect both Dutch capabilities and broader European concerns. These include maritime security and freedom of navigation, supply chain resilience, cooperation with like-minded partners, climate and sustainable development, digital governance, and the strengthening of the international legal order. These priorities reflect a distinctly geoeconomic approach, in which economic interdependence, technological competition, and maritime connectivity are treated as interlinked dimensions of security.

An important aspect of the Dutch approach is the deliberate choice of the term 'guidelines' rather than 'strategy'. This choice reflects a pragmatic assessment of national capabilities and signals an intention to provide direction and coherence without overstating ambition. In this sense, the Guidelines function less as a grand strategy and more as a coordination instrument that aligns policy across ministries and clarifies priorities for external partners. The document also serves an important signalling function, communicating Dutch commitment to the Indo-Pacific while maintaining flexibility in implementation.[9]

The geographic scope of the Dutch Indo-Pacific concept is also notable. Defined as stretching 'from Pakistan to the islands of the Pacific', it is more limited than broader conceptualisations advanced by actors such as Japan or the EU.[10] This narrower definition is strategically deliberate. By focusing on the main maritime routes linking Europe and Asia, the Netherlands anchors its approach in its identity as a maritime trading nation rather than a resident territorial power. This emphasis reinforces the centrality of shipping lanes, logistics networks, and economic flows in Dutch strategic thinking.

The Guidelines also explicitly align Dutch policy with the emerging EU Indo-Pacific strategy. This reflects a dual-track approach in which national initiatives are designed to complement and shape EU-level engagement. By positioning itself as an active contributor to European Indo-Pacific policy, the Netherlands enhances its influence within the EU while expanding its external reach. In this sense, the Dutch Guidelines function not only as a national policy document but also as a tool of European agenda-setting, demonstrating how middle powers can leverage EU frameworks to extend their strategic influence.

Post-2020: Naval Diplomacy and Strategic Signalling

After 2020, Dutch engagement in the Indo-Pacific combined selective naval deployments with long-term functional cooperation and institutional partnerships. One of the most visible demonstrations of Dutch involvement was the deployment of the Dutch frigate *HNLMS Evertsen* in 2021 as part of the United Kingdom-led Carrier Strike Group 21 deployment to the Indo-Pacific.[11] The mission took the vessel through the Mediterranean, the Indian Ocean, and into the Indo-Pacific, where it participated in joint exercises and operations with allies and partners. Politically, the mission signalled the Netherlands' willingness to contribute to maritime security and freedom of navigation, despite its limited naval capacity. It also underscored the importance of allied integration as a means of extending Dutch strategic reach.

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[9] Van Willigen, N., Blarel, N. (2024) "Why, how and to whom is the European Union signalling in the Indo-Pacific? Understanding the European Union's strategy in the Indo-Pacific in the epicentre of multipolar competition", *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 27(1), 69-90.

[10] Heijmans, M. (2021) "The Netherlands and the EU turn to the Indo-Pacific". *Clingendael Institute*, 14 July, available online.

[11] Ministry of Defence (2021) "UK Carrier Strike Group to sail with Netherlands Frigate on 2021 deployment". *GOV.UK*, 31 March, available online.

Building on this experience, the Netherlands announced in 2022 its intention to deploy a naval vessel to the Indo-Pacific every two years. This biennial deployment model was intended to introduce greater predictability and continuity in Dutch naval engagement while remaining compatible with existing resource constraints. The approach reflects a calibrated effort to balance ambition with capability. In 2024, the Dutch frigate *HNLMS Tromp* conducted a multi-month deployment to the Indo-Pacific, marking a further step in the institutionalisation of Dutch presence in the region.[12] During this mission, the vessel participated in the Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) exercises, conducted operations related to UN sanctions monitoring in East Asia, and carried out a series of high-profile port visits across Southeast Asia.[13] These activities reinforced Dutch commitments to the rules-based order and strengthened operational cooperation with regional partners.

Looking ahead, Dutch policy continues to follow this pattern of periodic yet structured presence. In April 2026, the Dutch frigate HNLMS *De Ruyter* departed for a five-month Indo-Pacific deployment, reaffirming the Netherlands' commitment to maintaining a recurring maritime presence in the region.[14] During the mission, the vessel is expected to participate in exercises and operations with regional partners, contribute to maritime security initiatives, and conduct port visits across the Indo-Pacific. This deployment demonstrates the consolidation of the biennial model and reflects the gradual institutionalisation of Dutch maritime engagement in the Indo-Pacific.

Collectively, these deployments reflect a form of naval diplomacy centred on strategic signalling, with the Netherlands relying on periodic deployments rather than maintaining a permanent presence in the Indo-Pacific. While missions such as *Evertsen*, *Tromp,* and *De Ruyter* indicate a growing degree of continuity and institutionalisation, Dutch policy remains anchored primarily in long-term institutional and functional cooperation. This combination of selective presence and sustained partnerships enables the Netherlands to maintain a credible role in the Indo-Pacific without overstretching its resources.

The Functional Core of the Dutch Indo-Pacific Engagement

The Dutch experience suggests that European involvement in the Indo-Pacific is driven less by military power projection than by geoeconomic interests, maritime connectivity, and institutional cooperation. The Dutch approach is centred on three interconnected areas: economic security, maritime security, and institutional partnerships. Together, these form the operational core of the Dutch Indo-Pacific approach and illustrate how a European middle power can maintain influence through coordination, specialisation, and long-term cooperation.

Economic Security and Supply Chain Resilience

Economic security constitutes a central driver of Dutch Indo-Pacific policy. As a major trading nation and logistics hub, the Netherlands is highly dependent on maritime trade routes passing through the Indo-Pacific. Disruptions along these routes would have immediate implications for both the Dutch and wider European economies. Consequently, Dutch policy has prioritised supply chain resilience, critical technologies, port infrastructure, maritime logistics, and digital

[12] Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2024) "Why is a Dutch navy ship travelling the world over?". *Government of the Netherlands*, 27 June, available online.

[13] *Ibidem.*

[14] Ministry of Defence of the Netherlands (2026) "Marineschip naar Indo-Pacific", available online.

standards. This reflects a broader European shift toward geoeconomics and economic statecraft, in which trade, technology, and infrastructure are increasingly linked to security concerns, particularly in the context of strategic competition with China. The Dutch approach has been described as 'inclusive, but not value-neutral', reflecting efforts to balance economic engagement with China alongside the protection of the rules-based international order.[15]

The Netherlands has also played an active role in European debates on economic security and de-risking, particularly regarding critical technologies such as semiconductors and the role of ASML. More broadly, the Dutch case illustrates how middle powers can exert influence through economic, technological, and regulatory networks rather than through military power projection.

Maritime Security and Strategic Signalling

The Netherlands has expanded its maritime role in the Indo-Pacific through naval deployments and participation in joint exercises. These activities primarily serve as strategic signalling, demonstrating political commitment to maritime security and the rules-based international order rather than conventional power projection.[16] At the same time, these deployments reveal the structural limits of European involvement in the region. Their episodic nature and limited scale mean that visibility does not necessarily translate into sustained influence. The Dutch case, therefore, highlights the distinction between symbolic visibility and long-term strategic influence, which depends on continuity, follow-up cooperation, and integration within broader institutional and security frameworks.

Institutional Partnerships and Issue-Based Cooperation

The third pillar of Dutch engagement lies in institutionalised cooperation rather than ad hoc initiatives. Long-term partnerships in areas such as water management with Indonesia, maritime information-sharing, and technical collaboration have created durable institutional linkages. These partnerships reflect a broader European approach based on capacity building, regulatory coordination, and development-oriented cooperation. Compared to episodic military deployments, such forms of issue-based cooperation generate longer-term influence by embedding relationships across ministries, agencies, and knowledge institutions.

Collectively, these three functional areas demonstrate that Dutch Indo-Pacific engagement is grounded in economic interdependence, strategic signalling, and institutional anchoring rather than territorial presence. This approach enables the Netherlands to maintain a credible role in the Indo-Pacific while remaining aligned with its capabilities and resources.

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[15] Heijmans, M. (2021) "Netherlands and the Indo-Pacific: Inclusive, but not value-neutral", Clingendael Institute, August, available online.

[16] Kim, S., Van Hooft, P. (2023) *Capability and Ambition Mismatch in the Indo-Pacific: A Middle Power Strategy for the EU*, The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, January, available online.

Assessing the Dutch Approach: Limits and Dilemmas

While the Dutch Indo-Pacific Guidelines provide a valuable model of middle power engagement, the Dutch experience also highlights several lessons that Italy should consider as it develops its own Indo-Pacific strategy. The Dutch case illustrates that effective management of strategic interdependence extends beyond strategic framing to encompass sustained resource allocation, institutional capacity, prioritisation, and long-term investment in specialised sectors.

The Capability-Ambition Gap

A central challenge is the gap between political ambition and available resources, often described as a capability-ambition gap. The Guidelines encompass a wide range of thematic priorities and geographic areas, but Dutch diplomatic, military, and financial resources remain limited. This creates a risk of strategic dispersion, where policy attention is spread too thinly across multiple policy domains and partners without sufficient strategic depth.

Symbolic vs Structural Presence

A related limitation concerns the risk that periodic naval deployments remain primarily symbolic rather than strategically transformative. While Dutch maritime activities have strengthened visibility and political signalling, their episodic nature limits their capacity to generate sustained regional influence. This illustrates a broader constraint of European Indo-Pacific engagement: without long-term institutional follow-up and sustained resource commitments, visibility alone does not necessarily translate into strategic weight.

The China Dilemma and European De-risking

The Dutch approach reflects a broader European dilemma in managing relations with China. China remains one of the Netherlands' most important trading partners, while also increasingly being viewed as a 'systemic rival' and a source of strategic dependency in critical sectors.[17] Dutch policy has responded to this tension through a focus on de-risking rather than decoupling, seeking to reduce strategic vulnerabilities while preserving economic ties. This balancing act is likely to shape European Indo-Pacific strategies in the coming decade and is highly relevant for Italy, which faces similar challenges in aligning economic interests with emerging European concerns about economic security.

Overall, these considerations suggest that while the Dutch approach functions effectively as a coordination framework, it reflects trade-offs between ambition, resources, and strategic focus.

Lessons for Italy: Adaptation and Strategic Prioritisation

The Dutch case offers important lessons for Italy, although these should be approached as requiring adaptation rather than direct policy transfer. The main value of the Dutch Indo-Pacific Guidelines lies less in the introduction of new policy instruments than in their role as a mechanism for coordination. In the Dutch context, the Guidelines improved coherence across ministries, linked economic and security policy domains, and provided a clearer framework for engagement with regional partners and the EU. For Italy, the central lesson is that an Indo-Pacific strategy can serve most effectively as a coordination framework.

[17] European Commission (2019) *EU-China – A strategic outlook*. Brussels: European Commission, available online.

Its effectiveness is closely linked to the ability to define priorities, align policy across government, and embed national initiatives within broader EU frameworks. Without these functions, such a strategy risks remaining declaratory rather than operational.

The second lesson concerns the importance of selectivity. One of the limitations of the Dutch approach has been the breadth of its engagement and wide thematic ambition, which can create risks of strategic dispersion for a middle power with finite diplomatic and military resources. Italy should, therefore, adopt a more focused approach, concentrating on a smaller number of priority partners and policy areas where long-term political and economic cooperation can be sustained over time. Priority partnerships could focus on South Asia, ASEAN, and selected countries in the Western Indian Ocean where Italy's diplomatic, economic, and maritime interests are most closely aligned. A more focused approach would help maintain continuity and prevent resources from being spread too thinly across multiple priorities.

The third lesson concerns the role of geography in shaping strategic engagement. While the Dutch approach is shaped primarily by maritime trade and supply chain linkages with Asia, Italy's strategic position suggests a different orientation. For Italy, the maritime corridor linking the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean via the Suez Canal and the Red Sea provides a natural strategic lens for Indo-Pacific engagement. This corridor encompasses critical chokepoints and energy routes that are central to Italian and European economic security. Anchoring Italy's Indo-Pacific approach in this space could strengthen policy coherence by linking Indo-Pacific engagement with Italy's existing Mediterranean priorities.

Finally, the Dutch case highlights the importance of institutional presence over episodic visibility. While naval deployments can strengthen political signalling, they do not necessarily generate sustained influence. Long-term impact is more likely to emerge through institutionalised cooperation, industrial partnerships, infrastructure development, and capacity-building initiatives. Italy possesses significant comparative advantages in sectors such as shipbuilding, energy infrastructure, port management, and maritime security, which could form the foundation of its Indo-Pacific engagement. In this sense, Italy's role in the region should be defined less by military projection and more by geoeconomic and industrial partnerships.

Overall, these lessons suggest that Italy would benefit more from adapting the underlying logic of the Dutch model than from replicating it in line with its own capabilities, geographic position, and strategic priorities. Such an approach offers a means of strengthening policy coordination, maintaining strategic focus, and fostering durable partnerships, rather than expanding military presence in the region. In this context, Italy could further develop its role as a key maritime link between Europe and the wider Indo-Pacific.

Should Italy Adopt an Indo-Pacific Strategy?

The key policy question is not whether Italy should increase its involvement in the Indo-Pacific, but whether this engagement should be formalised through a national strategy or guidelines document. Italy has already expanded its role in the region through naval deployments, defence cooperation, industrial partnerships, and diplomatic initiatives. This growing involvement, often described as a 'quiet pivot', reflects a gradual broadening of Italy's strategic horizon.[18] However, these

[18] Abbondanza, G. (2023) "Italy's quiet pivot to the Indo-Pacific: Towards an Italian Indo-Pacific strategy", *International Political Science Review*, 45(5), 669-679.

activities remain fragmented across policy domains, highlighting the need for greater coherence and prioritisation.

Italy's recent activities illustrate this trajectory. The deployment of the frigate *Carabiniere* in 2017, followed by the multipurpose frigate *Francesco Morosini* in 2023 and the *Cavour* Carrier Strike Group in 2024, signals a willingness to operate beyond the Mediterranean.[19] Italian naval units have participated in multilateral exercises such as RIMPAC and Komodo, conducted sanctions monitoring operations, and carried out port visits across South and Southeast Asia.[20] These initiatives suggest that Italy is already developing a security and industrial presence in the Indo-Pacific through naval diplomacy and defence cooperation, albeit without a unifying strategic framework.

The Dutch experience suggests that Indo-Pacific frameworks can serve as useful instruments for improving coordination, clarifying priorities, and positioning countries within broader EU strategies. In the Dutch context, the Indo-Pacific Guidelines enhanced coherence across ministries without fundamentally altering foreign policy. For Italy, adopting a similar framework could strengthen coordination and prioritisation while avoiding unrealistic great power ambitions.

At the same time, the Italian approach should reflect its own strategic geography. For Italy, the Indo-Pacific extends beyond East and Southeast Asia to include the Indian Ocean, the Red Sea, and the maritime routes linking Asia to Europe through the Suez Canal and the Mediterranean. This perspective enables Italy to connect its Indo-Pacific role with its Mediterranean policy and broader European connectivity initiatives. Rather than representing a shift away from the Mediterranean, Italy's Indo-Pacific approach is best viewed as an extension of its existing maritime and economic interests.

An Italian Indo-Pacific framework is likely to be most effective when it strengthens coordination across ministries, defines clear geographic and thematic priorities, and positions Italy within the broader EU Indo-Pacific strategy. At the same time, Italy should avoid adopting an overly ambitious approach that exceeds its capabilities. The Dutch experience underscores the importance of balancing strategic ambition with available capabilities and resources. A focused and flexible set of guidelines centred on coordination, prioritisation, and partnerships would provide a coherent basis for Italy to formalise its role, improve policy coherence, and avoid strategic overstretch.

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[19] Scott, D. (2025) "On Wider Seas: Italian Naval Deployments and Maritime Outreach to the Indo-Pacific", *CIMSEC*, 5 March, available online.

[20] Defence Security Asia (2024) "Indonesia acquires two multi-role patrol ships from Italy worth RM5.9 billion", *Defence Security Asia*, 29 March, available online.

Policy Recommendations for Italy

Drawing on the Dutch experience and Italy's strategic position, the following recommendations outline how Italy could develop a selective and geographically anchored Indo-Pacific approach.

- Italy should adopt a concise Indo-Pacific guidelines document aimed at improving coordination across ministries, defining strategic priorities, and signalling sustained commitment to regional partners rather than announcing a major strategic shift.
- Italy's Indo-Pacific approach should be anchored in the maritime corridor linking the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean through the Suez Canal and the Red Sea. This would allow Italy to align its Indo-Pacific priorities with its Mediterranean role and broader European connectivity and energy security initiatives.
- Italy should prioritise a limited number of strategic partners where long-term cooperation is sustainable. These should include India, Japan, Indonesia, Pakistan, Vietnam, Singapore, ASEAN, and selected partners in the Western Indian Ocean. Prioritisation is essential to ensure continuity and avoid strategic dispersion.
- Italy should leverage its comparative advantages in geoeconomic and industrial sectors, including shipbuilding, energy infrastructure, port management, and maritime technology. Its regional role should focus on industrial partnerships, connectivity projects, and energy cooperation rather than large-scale military deployments.
- Italy should align its regional approach with the broader EU Indo-Pacific strategy. By positioning itself as a bridge between the Mediterranean and the Indo-Pacific, Italy can maximise political and economic leverage while avoiding policy duplication.
- Italy should prioritise long-term institutional partnerships. Sustained influence in the Indo-Pacific is more likely to emerge from capacity building, development cooperation, and technical partnerships than from episodic naval deployments.

Conclusion

The Dutch Indo-Pacific approach demonstrates how a European middle power can develop a strategic presence in the region through partnerships, economic engagement, and maritime security cooperation rather than through large-scale military power projection. The Dutch case shows that Indo-Pacific frameworks function primarily as tools of coordination, signalling, and partnership-building. Their purpose is not to transform foreign policy, but to organise it more strategically, prioritise resources, and position countries within broader European and international frameworks.

For Italy, engagement in the Indo-Pacific is less a question of expanding its regional role than of structuring existing activities in a way that reflects its strategic geography, economic interests, and institutional capacities. The Dutch experience suggests that a guidelines-based approach can improve coordination, clarify priorities, and signal long-term commitment to regional partners. Rather than mirroring the Dutch model, Italy could adapt its underlying logic to its own position as a Mediterranean country whose economic and energy security is closely linked to the maritime routes connecting Europe with Asia through the Suez Canal, the Red Sea, and the Indian Ocean.

From this perspective, the Indo-Pacific is not a distant region but part of a broader maritime system that directly shapes European and Italian economic security. Italy's engagement should be understood not as a shift away from the Mediterranean, but as an extension of its existing maritime and economic interests. Its comparative advantage lies not in maintaining a permanent military presence in the Indo-Pacific but in leveraging its strengths in maritime security, industrial cooperation, infrastructure, and connectivity.

More broadly, the Dutch case illustrates that for European middle powers, the effectiveness of an Indo-Pacific strategy depends less on ambition than on focus, prioritisation, and institutionalisation. A selective and geographically anchored approach would allow Italy to contribute meaningfully to European Indo-Pacific policy while avoiding strategic overstretch. European countries have adopted distinct roles in the region: France operates as a resident power, Germany as a trade-oriented actor, and the Netherlands as a middle power coordinator within the EU framework. Italy, by contrast, could position itself as a maritime corridor connector linking Europe to the Indo-Pacific through the Mediterranean-Red Sea-Indian Ocean axis, a role that reflects both its geography and its economic profile. Ultimately, the lesson from the Dutch case is not that Italy should do more in the Indo-Pacific, but that it should act with greater strategic focus, selectivity, and consistency. For Italy, the Indo-Pacific does not begin in the South China Sea, but in the Suez Canal.

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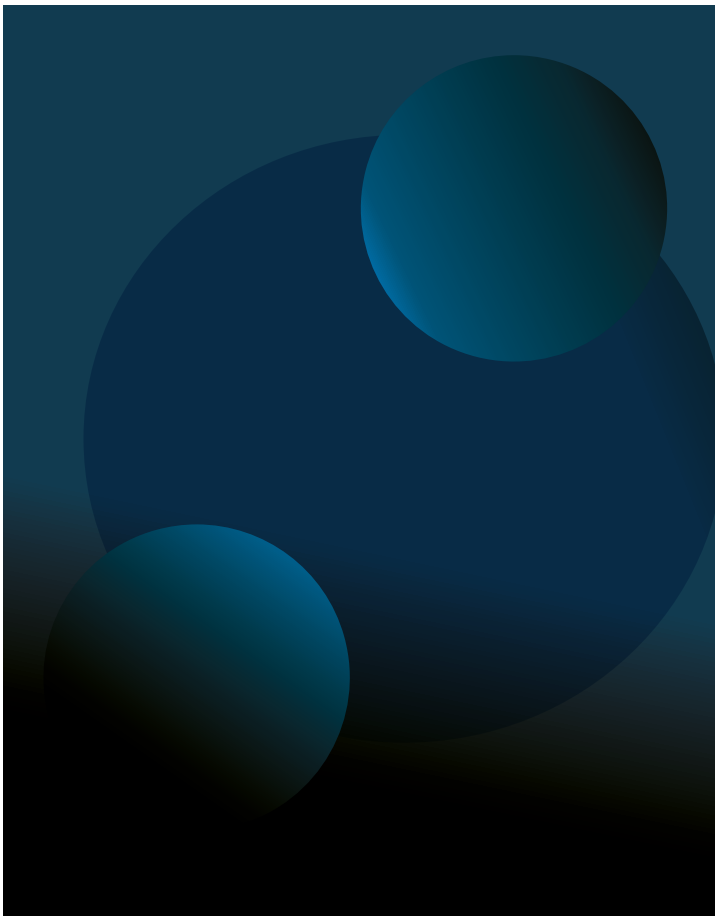
SECTION FOUR

VIEWS FROM THE REGION



Japan's Perspective on Italian and European Engagement in the Indo-Pacific

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This chapter examines how Japan perceives, encourages and instrumentalises the growing engagement of Italy, and of Europe more broadly, in the Indo-Pacific. Drawing comprehensively on official policies, public opinion polls and academic scholarship, it argues that Japan has come to treat European participation as a structural component of its Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) vision rather than as a symbolic supplement. Confronted with an increasingly transactional United States and with intensifying Chinese economic coercion, Tokyo is pursuing a deliberately multilayered strategy in which the European Union provides normative and economic ballast, while individual member states supply committed operational presence. Within this design, Italy has emerged as a privileged industrial and military partner, exemplified by the Global Combat Air Programme, the 2024 carrier strike group deployment and the Special Strategic Partnership proclaimed in 2026. The chapter also assesses recent domestic political shifts underpinning Japan's more assertive posture and the immediate challenges – American unpredictability, Chinese retaliation, domestic constraints and European capacity limits – that could yet slow this Euro-Japanese convergence.

Introduction

Over the past decade the Indo-Pacific has displaced the Euro-Atlantic region as the primary theatre of great-power competition, concentrating the majority of global economic growth alongside the world's most consequential maritime chokepoints. Japan was the first state to translate this geographical intuition into a coherent strategic programme. When then Prime Minister Shinzō Abe launched the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) concept in Nairobi in 2016, he offered a vocabulary – the rule of law, freedom of navigation, quality infrastructure and connectivity across two continents and two oceans – that has since been absorbed, with notable national variations, by the United States, ASEAN member states, India and, belatedly, Europe. Between 2018 and 2021, France, Germany and the Netherlands adopted national Indo-Pacific strategies or guidelines, followed by the European Union itself, while Italy, though it has never published a formal strategy document, has arguably become the most dynamic European newcomer to the region.

This chapter examines these developments from the vantage point that matters most for their long-term viability: Tokyo's. As the principal architect of, and chief demandeur for, Indo-Pacific coalition-building, Japan is not a passive beneficiary

of European attention but an active shaper of it. Japanese diplomacy spent years persuading European capitals that the security of Europe and that of the Indo-Pacific are indivisible. It must now decide how much strategic weight to assign to the resulting engagement, and how to reconcile it with an American alliance that has become simultaneously more indispensable and less predictable.

The argument advanced here rests on three claims. First, Japan's FOIP has evolved from an aspirational vision into an operating system for statecraft, within which the diversification of partnerships is a deliberate hedge against both Chinese coercion and American transactionalism. Second, Tokyo assigns differentiated roles to Europe: the European Union is valued primarily as a normative, regulatory and economic-security partner, while individual member states – above all France, Germany and Italy – are valued as providers of military presence, defence-industrial cooperation and diplomatic weight within the G7 and NATO. Third, Italy has undergone the most remarkable trajectory of any European state in Japanese strategic thinking, moving within half a decade from near-invisibility to the status of quasi-ally, anchored by the Global Combat Air Programme (GCAP) and consecrated by the bilateral Special Strategic Partnership of January 2026.

Nevertheless, the chapter emphasises that this European layer complements, and cannot substitute for, the Japan–US alliance, and it proceeds in four substantive steps: Japan's own role conception in the Indo-Pacific; its cooperation with the EU; its cooperation with Italy; and the immediate challenges confronting both.

Japan in the Indo-Pacific: The FOIP and Japan's Envisioned Role

The genealogy of FOIP is well established. Abe's 2007 address to the Indian Parliament on the confluence of the two seas prefigured the formal launch of the concept at the Sixth Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD VI) in Nairobi in August 2016, where the Indian and Pacific Oceans and the Asian and African continents were presented as a single strategic space to be ordered around freedom, openness and the rule of law.[1] The initiative combined three components: the promotion of universal norms, the pursuit of economic prosperity through connectivity and quality infrastructure, and a commitment to peace and stability delivered largely through capacity-building for maritime law enforcement in littoral states.[2] Scholars have debated whether FOIP is best read as soft containment of China or as an order-shaping enterprise that leaves the door open to Chinese participation on Japanese terms. Koga (2020) characterises it as a form of institutional balancing that seeks to socialise, rather than simply exclude, Beijing; Satake and Sahashi (2021) similarly stress that Tokyo has calibrated FOIP to avoid forcing Southeast Asian states into binary choices. At the same time, the competitive dimension is unmistakable: FOIP emerged in explicit counterpoint to the Belt and Road Initiative and to China's maritime assertiveness in the East and South China Seas.[3] This duality – inclusive rhetoric wrapped around hard-edged balancing – remains the defining tension of Japanese regional strategy.

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[1] Abe, S. (2016) *Address at the Opening Session of the Sixth Tokyo International Conference on African Development* (TICAD VI), Nairobi, 27 August, Tokyo: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, available online.

[2] Hosoya, Y. (2019) "FOIP 2.0: the evolution of Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy", *Asia-Pacific Review*, 26(1), 18-28.

[3] Insisa, A. , Pugliese, G. (2022) "The free and open Indo-Pacific versus the belt and road: spheres of influence and Sino-Japanese relations", *The Pacific Review*, 35(3).

FOIP was institutionalised in December 2022, when the Kishida government adopted a new National Security Strategy together with a National Defense Strategy and a Defense Buildup Program.[4] The documents identified China as the greatest strategic challenge, committed Japan to acquiring counterstrike capabilities and to raising defence-related spending to two percent of GDP by 2027, and – crucially for present purposes – elevated the construction of a multilayered network of allies and like-minded partners into a formal pillar of national security policy.[5] Hughes (2022) describes the cumulative result as Japan's emergence as a genuine global military power, characterised by deeper alliance integration and a distinctive bilateralism-plus in which webs of bilateral ties are knitted into minilateral and plurilateral formats. Kishida's March 2023 New Plan for FOIP, announced in New Delhi, extended the vision towards the Global South, with India and ASEAN as indispensable partners.[6]

Japan's internal politics have since shifted markedly, with direct consequences for its regional posture. Sanae Takaichi, elected in October 2025 as the country's first female prime minister and widely seen as Abe's ideological heir, assumed office at the head of a reconfigured coalition after Kōmeitō's departure ended a twenty-six-year partnership.[7] Within weeks she was engulfed in the gravest Sino-Japanese crisis in a decade: her statement in the Diet on 7 November 2025 that a Chinese attack on Taiwan could constitute a survival-threatening situation permitting collective self-defence provoked furious protests from Beijing,[8] followed by escalating economic retaliation that culminated in January 2026 in export controls on rare earths and other dual-use items – materials for which Japan relied on China for roughly two thirds of its imports.[9] Takaichi declined to retract her remarks, and her government pressed ahead with the deployment of surface-to-air missile units to Yonaguni, barely 110 kilometres from Taiwan.

Far from weakening her, confrontation consolidated her position. Calling a snap election in late January 2026, Takaichi led the Liberal Democratic Party to the largest lower-house majority in its post-war history, securing a supermajority that has made revision of Article 9 of the constitution politically attainable for the first time.[10] The Diet had already approved Japan's largest-ever defence budget in December 2025, reaching the two-percent threshold two years ahead of schedule,[11] and the government committed to revising all three strategy documents during

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[4] The three documents are the National Security Strategy, the National Defense Strategy and the Defense Buildup Program, all adopted in December 2022. The Takaichi government has committed to revising all three during 2026.

[5] Government of Japan (2022) *National Security Strategy of Japan,* Tokyo: Cabinet Secretariat, December.

[6] Kishida, F. (2023) "The Future of the Indo-Pacific: Japan's New Plan for a 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific'". Speech at the Indian Council of World Affairs, New Delhi, 20 March, Tokyo: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan.

[7] Kōmeitō, the LDP's coalition partner since 1999 and a consistent restraining influence on security policy, left the coalition in October 2025. Its replacement by the right-leaning Japan Innovation Party (Ishin) removed an important internal brake on constitutional revision.

[8] A survival-threatening situation (*sonritsu kiki jitai*) is one of the legal categories introduced by the 2015 Legislation for Peace and Security. Its recognition by the Cabinet permits the limited exercise of collective self-defence even where Japan itself has not been directly attacked.

[9] CNN (2026) "Japanese PM's Taiwan comments prompt China to ban certain exports to Japan", 6 January, available online; CSIS (2026a) "China's rare earth campaign against Japan", Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 13 January; Foreign Policy (2025) "Sanae Takaichi's China fight may be trouble for Japan", 25 November, available online.

[10] Lee, C. , Blane, B. (2026) "'Japan First' in the Indo-Pacific: Takaichi's shift from pacifist constraint to allied mobilization", *Small Wars Journal*, 1 April, available online.

[11] The Washington Post (2025) "Japan boosts defense spending amid China tensions, Trump urging", 22 December, available online.

2026 while overhauling intelligence structures and further relaxing arms-export rules.[12] Whether these shifts help or hinder Japan's regional role is genuinely double-edged. On the one hand, a stable government with a clear mandate has accelerated FOIP diplomacy, defence-industrial opening and coalition-building; on the other, Takaichi's assertiveness has hardened confrontation with Beijing, complicated the inclusive narrative that made FOIP palatable to ASEAN, and tied Japan's regional standing to a constitutional project whose referendum stage remains deeply uncertain.[13]

The clearest programmatic statement of the new course came on 2 May 2026, when Takaichi used a speech in Hanoi to unveil an updated FOIP built on three priorities: economic infrastructure for the age of artificial intelligence and data, including resilient supply chains for energy and critical materials; the co-creation of growth opportunities through public–private collaboration and shared rules; and intensified security cooperation for regional stability.[14] Pledging that Japan would be more proactive than ever, she framed the update explicitly against the twin backdrop of Chinese pressure and uncertainty about the United States.[15]

That uncertainty is in fact the second structural driver of Japanese strategy. The second Trump administration subjected the alliance to what Japanese commentators experienced as a stress test: sweeping tariffs resolved only in July 2025 through an agreement imposing a fifteen-percent rate alongside a 550-billion-dollar Japanese investment pledge; public demands that Tokyo raise defence spending towards 3.5 or even five percent of GDP; the cancellation of a scheduled 2+2 ministerial meeting; and a looming renegotiation of host-nation support.[16] Japanese polling registered a collapse of confidence in Washington's reliability, and senior LDP figures spoke openly of disrespect.[17] Yet the operational alliance has proved resilient – command-structure integration has continued around Japan's new Joint Operations Command – and Takaichi invested heavily in personal diplomacy with President Trump in Tokyo in October 2025 and in Washington in March 2026.[18] The lesson Tokyo has drawn is not to abandon the alliance but to insure around it.

Insurance takes the form of a dense regional lattice in which region-wide coalition-building and intensely bilateral agreements deliberately coexist. Japan continues to invest in the Quad and in trilateral formats with the United States, South Korea, Australia and the Philippines,[19] while simultaneously constructing bilateral

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[12] Congressional Research Service (2026) *Japan's Evolving Defense Policy and the U.S.–Japan Alliance*, Congressional Research Service, 14 July.

[13] Constitutional amendment under Article 9 requires a two-thirds majority in both houses of the Diet followed by a national referendum – a hurdle no Japanese government has ever attempted to clear.

[14] MOFA (2026b) *The Updated 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP)*, Tokyo: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2 May; Bloomberg (2026) "Japan's Takaichi outlines new Indo-Pacific strategy in Vietnam speech", 2 May, available online.

[15] The Japan Times (2026c) "Takaichi pledges "more proactive" role for Japan in Indo-Pacific strategy update", 2 May, available online.

[16] Pajon, C. (2025) "Japan Under Trump: Alliance Strains, the Push for Autonomy and Essential Partnerships", *Ifri*, available online; Govella, K. (2025) "Japan's Response to Trump 2.0: Sustaining U.S. Ties, Strengthening International Partnerships", *Center for Strategic and International Studies,* available online.

[17] Asia Society Policy Institute (2025) *A Stress Test for Resilience: Risks and Opportunities for the U.S.–Japan Alliance*, Asia Society Policy Institute, December, available online.

[18] Yamaguchi, M. (2025) "Japan says it plans to tell Trump it will build up military and upgrade security strategy", *Associated Press* 22 October, available online; Congressional Research Service (2026) *Japan's Evolving Defense Policy and the U.S.–Japan Alliance*, Congressional Research Service, 14 July.

[19] The Quad (Japan, the United States, Australia and India) has continued to meet at ministerial level, but leader-level momentum has slowed under the second Trump administration, reinforcing Tokyo's interest in the Japan–Australia–India triangle within the grouping (ORF, 2026).

instruments of unprecedented depth. The Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA) with the Philippines – signed in July 2024, approved by the Diet in June 2025 and in force since 11 September 2025 – is emblematic: the first such agreement with a Southeast Asian state, it was applied within weeks to a bilateral disaster-relief exercise, and discussions have followed on transferring Abukuma-class escort vessels to Manila.[20] With Australia, an RAA has been in force since 2022 and Canberra's selection of an upgraded Mogami-class frigate design in 2025 made Japan, for the first time, the source of a major allied warship programme; Takaichi's visit to Australia in May 2026 deepened the agenda further. With India, the August 2025 summit produced a Joint Vision for the next decade and a ten-trillion-yen private investment target, followed in July 2026 by Takaichi's visit to New Delhi, a first joint defence co-development pact and exploratory talks on frigate co-production.[21] Japanese vessels have meanwhile joined multilateral maritime cooperative activities with American, Australian and Philippine forces inside the South China Sea – calibrated but unmistakably assertive shows of presence along the first island chain. It is into this lattice that Europe has been invited.

Japan's Collaboration with the European Union in the Indo-Pacific

The Japan–EU relationship rests on an unusually complete contractual base. The Economic Partnership Agreement, in force since 2019, created one of the world's largest free-trade areas; the Strategic Partnership Agreement, applied provisionally from 2019 and fully in force since 1 January 2025, provides the political framework; and a 2019 connectivity partnership aligned Japanese and European infrastructure diplomacy as an implicit alternative to the Belt and Road Initiative. Japanese officials also worked assiduously to encourage a European Indo-Pacific turn: Tokyo welcomed the German Policy Guidelines of September 2020 and the French strategy as vindication of FOIP's universality, and lobbied for the EU-level strategy that materialised in September 2021.[22] German and French scholarship of the period records both the momentum and the heterogeneity of European approaches – a heterogeneity Tokyo learned to navigate rather than lament.[23]

The qualitative leap came on 1 November 2024, when Japan became the first Indo-Pacific country to conclude a Security and Defence Partnership with the EU.[24] The document expands cooperation well beyond traditional defence diplomacy into maritime security, cyber, hybrid threats and foreign information manipula-

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[20] MOFA (2025a) *Exchange of Diplomatic Notes for Entry into Force of the Japan–Philippines Reciprocal Access Agreement*, Tokyo: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 12 August, available online; Japan Ministry of Defense (2025) First Application of the Japan–Philippines Reciprocal Access Agreement, Tokyo: Ministry of Defense, October, available online.

[21] Chinoy, S. (2026) "Modi–Takaichi summit: deepening India–Japan ties in a changing Indo-Pacific", *Observer Research Foundation*, 1 July, available online.

[22] Federal Government of Germany (2020) *Policy Guidelines for the Indo-Pacific*, Berlin: Federal Foreign Office, September, available online; Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs (2022) *France's Indo-Pacific Strategy. Paris: Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires étrangères*, available online; European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (2021) *The EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific*, JOIN(2021) 24 final, Brussels, 16 September, available online.

[23] Heiduk, F. , Wacker, G. (2020) *From Asia-Pacific to Indo-Pacific: Significance, Implementation and Challenges*, SWP Research Paper 9, Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik; Grare, F. , Reuter, M. (2021) *Moving Closer: European Views of the Indo-Pacific*, Berlin: European Council on Foreign Relations, September.

[24] MOFA (2024) *Release of the Japan–EU Security and Defence Partnership*, Tokyo: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 1 November; European External Action Service (2024) *Japan–EU Security and Defence Partnership*, Brussels and Tokyo: EEAS, 1 November. Japan was the first of nine such partnerships concluded to date under the framework created by the 2022 Strategic Compass; the others include South Korea, India, the United Kingdom, Canada, Norway and Moldova (European Parliamentary Research Service, 2026).

tion, space security, and – most consequentially from Tokyo's standpoint – defence industry. It also created machinery: a foreign-ministerial strategic dialogue and an annual Security and Defence Dialogue, first convened in Brussels in June 2025 and again in May 2026, at which the Japanese side briefed the EU on the strategic evolution of FOIP and received, in MOFA's telling, the EU's understanding.[25] An EUobserver assessment captured the broader significance: the partnership reflects Japan's ambition to act as a major power in its own right within a fragmenting order, not merely as Washington's regional deputy.[26]

The thirtieth Japan–EU summit, held in Tokyo on 23 July 2025, consolidated this agenda around what the two sides styled a Competitiveness Alliance. The joint statement affirmed that the security of Europe and the Indo-Pacific are interconnected, endorsed cooperation on maritime security and the protection of critical undersea infrastructure under UNCLOS, welcomed the launch of negotiations on a security-of-information agreement, and – reflecting shared exposure to both Chinese export controls and American tariffs – placed economic security, supply-chain resilience and resistance to coercion at the centre of the relationship.[27] For Japan, whose 2022 strategy had already designated economic security a core national-security domain, the EU is the indispensable partner in this field: no other actor combines comparable regulatory weight, market size and normative alignment.

The war in Ukraine supplied the strategic glue. Japan's uncompromising response – sanctions, financial support for Kyiv, and Kishida's much-quoted warning that Ukraine today could be East Asia tomorrow – earned Tokyo standing in European capitals that decades of trade diplomacy had not, while North Korean troop deployments alongside Russian forces gave concrete form to the inter-theatre linkage both sides had previously asserted rhetorically. Japanese participation in successive NATO summits as an Indo-Pacific partner, and the EU's reciprocal presence at Indo-Pacific ministerial forums – most recently the fourth EU Indo-Pacific Ministerial Forum in November 2025 – institutionalised the connection.

Tokyo has been equally attentive to what individual member states do at sea. France, a resident Indo-Pacific power with territories and permanent forces in the region, has exercised regularly with the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force, including through carrier deployments. Germany's frigate Bayern in 2021 marked Berlin's cautious return to the region, followed in 2024 by a two-ship deployment that included a Taiwan Strait transit and port calls in Japan. The Netherlands has attached vessels to British and other task groups. From a Japanese perspective, these deployments perform three functions: they normalise third-party naval presence in contested waters, diluting Beijing's preferred framing of regional order as a bilateral Sino-American affair; they thicken the web of exercises, port calls and information exchange that underpins interoperability; and they signal to Chinese planners that a Taiwan or East China Sea contingency could carry European consequences.[28]

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[25] MOFA (2026c) *The 2nd Japan–EU Security and Defence Dialogue,* Tokyo: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, May.

[26] EUobserver (2025) "What does the new EU–Japan defence partnership actually mean?", 15 January, available online.

[27] Council of the European Union (2025) *EU–Japan Summit,* Tokyo, 23 July, Brussels: Council of the European Union; MOFA (2025b) *Japan–EU Summit 2025 Joint Statement*, Tokyo: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 23 July.

[28] Scott, D. (2025) "On wider seas: Italian naval deployments and maritime outreach to the Indo-Pacific", Center for International Maritime Security, 5 March, available online.

Japanese officials nonetheless retain a clear-eyed view of the division of labour. The EU as an institution is not a security guarantor and commands no fleets; its comparative advantage lies in rules, market access, sanctions capacity, technology partnerships and development finance. Tokyo has therefore adopted a deliberate two-track approach – EU-level cooperation for economic security, connectivity and norms; bilateral cooperation with capable member states for defence – and treats occasional European ambitions to speak with one strategic voice with polite scepticism. The still-unfinished security-of-information agreement, without which classified-information exchange remains constrained, illustrates both the promise and the current ceiling of the EU track.

Japan's Collaboration with Italy in the Indo-Pacific

Within this European mosaic, Italy's trajectory has been the steepest. Historically cordial but strategically thin, the bilateral relationship was transformed in barely four years. Giorgia Meloni's visit to Tokyo in January 2023 upgraded ties to a strategic partnership; the consecutive Japanese (2023) and Italian (2024) G7 presidencies synchronised agendas on economic security and Ukraine; and the Japan–Italy Action Plan of June 2024 gave the partnership a structured programme across defence, economic security, science and culture for 2024–2027.[29] The intellectual foundations had been laid earlier: scholars had already identified in Abe-era Japan a Realpolitik openness to new security partners beyond Washington,[30] while Rome's doctrine of an enlarged Mediterranean – subsequently stretched into a Global Mediterranean reaching the Indian Ocean – supplied the geographical rationale on the Italian side.[31]

The hinge of the relationship is the Global Combat Air Programme, announced in December 2022, through which Japan, the United Kingdom and Italy are jointly developing a sixth-generation combat aircraft for service by 2035.[32] Its significance for Tokyo can hardly be overstated: it is the first time post-war Japan has developed a frontline combat capability with partners other than the United States, and it required a politically fraught revision of arms-export rules to permit sales of the aircraft to third countries.[33] Reported cost-sharing assigns roughly forty percent each to Japan and the United Kingdom and some twenty percent to Italy, whose industrial champion Leonardo anchors the Italian workshare.[34] By early 2026 both governments described the programme as having entered its operational phase.[35] GCAP embeds Italy in Japan's defence-industrial future for decades – precisely the kind of mutual material dependence that Japanese strategy now prizes over declaratory alignment.

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[29] Kantei (2025) *Japan–Italy Action Plan Fact Sheet*, Tokyo: Prime Minister's Office of Japan, March.

[30] Pugliese, G. , Patalano, A. (2020) "Diplomatic and security practice under Abe Shinzō: the case for Realpolitik Japan", *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 74(6), 615-632.

[31] Patalano, A. (2024) "What is an Italian carrier strike group doing in the Indo-Pacific?", *War on the Rocks*, 29 August, available online.

[32] The programme is managed by the treaty-based GCAP International Government Organisation (GIGO), headquartered in the United Kingdom, and industrially by a joint venture uniting BAE Systems, Leonardo and Japan Aircraft Industrial Enhancement Co., itself anchored by Mitsubishi Heavy Industries.

[33] In 2024 Japan eased its defence-equipment transfer rules specifically to permit the export of the future GCAP aircraft to third countries, a decision that was politically contentious at home and that Kōmeitō conditioned on case-by-case Cabinet approvals.

[34] Euronews (2026) "Italy and Japan upgrade ties to strategic partnership as Meloni meets Takaichi in Tokyo", 16 January, available online.

[35] Decode39 (2026a) "Meloni and Takaichi push Italy–Japan ties forward", 16 January, available online.

Military-operational cooperation caught up with industrial cooperation in 2024, when Italy despatched its first carrier strike group to the Indo-Pacific. Centred on the carrier *Cavour* and the frigate *Alpino*, accompanied at stages by the patrol vessel *Raimondo Montecuccoli* and the sail training ship *Amerigo Vespucci*, the five-month deployment was designed, as Patalano[36] argues, not as flag-showing but as the presentation of professional credentials to Japan. The group became the first carrier formation to join Australia's Pitch Black air exercise, conducted the first Italian multi-large-deck event with a US carrier strike group in the Pacific, and spent late August at Yokosuka base, where the Italian Navy declared initial operational capability for its embarked F-35Bs and exchanged short-take-off and vertical-landing expertise with Japanese naval and air officers.[37] The *Montecuccoli* meanwhile conducted Italy's first patrols in support of the UN sanctions-monitoring regime against North Korea – a contribution of direct value to Japan, which hosts the enforcement coordination cell.[38] Japanese defence officials framed the visit as the opening of a new era; the fact that Italian, French and German warships lay simultaneously alongside in Yokosuka in August 2024 gave Tokyo a tableau of exactly the multinational presence FOIP had sought.

Institutionalisation followed rapidly. An Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement, enabling reciprocal logistical support between the Self-Defense Forces and the Italian armed forces, entered into force in September 2025, and regular foreign-ministry strategic dialogues and politico-military talks now underpin joint training.[39] The culmination came on 16 January 2026, when Meloni and Takaichi, meeting in Tokyo in the 160th anniversary year of diplomatic relations, redefined the relationship as a Special Strategic Partnership – a designation Japan otherwise reserves for a handful of countries such as India and Australia.[40] The joint statement is a revealing document of convergence: it opposes unilateral attempts to change the status quo by force in the East and South China Seas, reaffirms UNCLOS, deplores economic coercion and market-distorting practices – language read as aimed at Beijing's export controls and, obliquely, at Washington's protectionism – and launches cooperation on critical-minerals supply chains, a bilateral space dialogue and a structured dialogue linking Italy's Mattei Plan for Africa with Japan's TICAD process.[41] Implementation has been unusually brisk. In May 2026 Tokyo hosted the first sessions of the new bilateral economic-security dialogue and space dialogue; in June, Takaichi travelled to Rome – her first bilateral visit to Italy – where the two governments signed an intergovernmental memorandum on supply-chain resilience covering semiconductors, critical minerals and frontier

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[36] Patalano, A. (2024) "What is an Italian carrier strike group doing in the Indo-Pacific?", *War on the Rocks*, 29 August, available online.

[37] USNI News (2024) "Carrier Cavour's Pacific deployment extends Italy's reach in the Pacific, says admiral", 11 October, available online. The experience is directly relevant to the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force, which is converting its two Izumo-class helicopter destroyers to operate the F-35B; Italy has one of very few navies with recent carrier-based F-35B certification experience outside the United States and the United Kingdom.

[38] Scott, D. (2025) "On wider seas: Italian naval deployments and maritime outreach to the Indo-Pacific", Center for International Maritime Security, 5 March, available online.

[39] MOFA (2026a) *Japan–Italy Joint Statement,* Tokyo: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 16 January.

[40] The Japan Times (2026a) "Takaichi and Italy's Meloni agree to deepen security and economic ties", 17 January, available online; Kantei (2026a) *Japan–Italy Summit Meeting*, Tokyo: Prime Minister's Office of Japan, 16 January.

[41] MOFA (2026a) *Japan–Italy Joint Statement,* Tokyo: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 16 January; Euronews (2026) "Italy and Japan upgrade ties to strategic partnership as Meloni meets Takaichi in Tokyo", 16 January, available online; Decode39 (2026a) "Meloni and Takaichi push Italy–Japan ties forward", 16 January, available online.
The Mattei Plan, launched in January 2024 with an initial endowment of some €5.5 billion, is Italy's flagship framework for energy, infrastructure and development partnerships in Africa; TICAD (the Tokyo International Conference on African Development) has been Japan's equivalent instrument since 1993.

technologies, announced a further Italian naval port call in Japan for September 2026, and coordinated positions ahead of the G7 summit.[42] Bilateral trade reached some €12.3 billion in 2025, modest by Japanese standards but growing, with co-operation extending into artificial intelligence, biotechnology and next-generation civil nuclear energy.[43]

Why then, all of sudden, does Italy loom so large in Japanese eyes? Five reasons stand out. First, Italy is a G7 economy and EU founding member: cultivating Rome gives Tokyo an additional advocate inside both the G7 and Brussels. Second, Italian and Japanese strategic geographies are read in Tokyo as complementary – the Global Mediterranean and FOIP meet along the sea lines of communication running from Suez through the Indian Ocean, and Italy's leading role in Red Sea escort operations demonstrated a practical commitment to the same maritime order Japan depends upon.[44] Third, defence-industrial cooperation with Italy diversifies Japan's supplier base without the political sensitivities of dependence on Washington. Fourth, Rome's exit from the Belt and Road Initiative was registered in Tokyo as evidence of durable China-scepticism.[45] Fifth, and not least, the personal and ideological affinity between two stable conservative governments has lowered transaction costs: Meloni and Takaichi have met twice within six months and jointly authored calls for like-minded states to shape the global order. Japanese assessments are not uncritical – questions persist about Italian defence spending and the sustainability of episodic deployments – but the direction of travel is unambiguous: Italy has become the test case for Japan's cultivation of new allies beyond its traditional circle.

Immediate Challenges

The first challenge is managing Washington. The 2025 tariff settlement stabilised but did not settle the economic relationship: the investment pledge attached to it remains subject to American discretion, tariff snap-backs are contractually possible, and host-nation-support renegotiation looms alongside continuing pressure – codified in the December 2025 US National Security Strategy – for Japanese defence spending well beyond two percent of GDP.[46] Tokyo's insistence that force development is a sovereign decision has so far held, but the deeper problem is psychological: Japanese elite and public confidence in American reliability has eroded to historic lows, even as Japan's exposure to Chinese pressure makes the alliance more necessary than ever.[47] European partnerships mitigate this dilemma at the margins – they diversify defence-industrial risk and diplomatic support – but no European actor can replicate American extended deterrence, and Tokyo must calibrate its hedging so that it reads in Washington as burden-sharing rather than drift.

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[42] Kantei (2026b) *Visit to Italy: Japan–Italy Summit Meeting in Rome*, Tokyo: Prime Minister's Office of Japan, 15 June; Decode39 (2026b) "Italy and Japan move to operationalize the Special Strategic Partnership", 15 June, available online.

[43] Decode39 (2026b) "Italy and Japan move to operationalize the Special Strategic Partnership", 15 June, available online.

[44] Patalano, A. (2024) "What is an Italian carrier strike group doing in the Indo-Pacific?", *War on the Rocks*, 29 August, available online.

[45] Italy formally notified Beijing of its withdrawal from the Belt and Road Initiative memorandum in December 2023, the only G7 state ever to have joined it.

[46] Pajon, C. (2025) "Japan Under Trump: Alliance Strains, the Push for Autonomy and Essential Partnerships", *Ifri*, available online; Govella, K. (2025) "Japan's Response to Trump 2.0: Sustaining U.S. Ties, Strengthening International Partnerships", *Center for Strategic and International Studies,* available online.

[47] Asia Society Policy Institute (2025) *A Stress Test for Resilience: Risks and Opportunities for the U.S.–Japan Alliance*, Asia Society Policy Institute, December, available online

The second challenge is the unresolved crisis with Beijing. China's response to the Taiwan remarks has settled into a grinding campaign of economic pressure whose rare-earth dimension strikes directly at Japanese – and European – industrial capacity, and analysts caution that both sides now have fewer off-ramps than in previous crises.[48] Japan's efforts to diversify critical-minerals supply, pursued for over a decade, remain incomplete.[49] The risks are twofold: escalation around the Senkaku Islands or the first island chain, where Chinese military activity has intensified; and the quieter risk that coercion succeeds in deterring third parties, including European states with their own dependencies, from deeper regional involvement. China's pressure also targets the very minerals essential to GCAP, and European rearmament has, paradoxically, strengthened the logic of Japan–Italy–EU economic-security cooperation – but converting shared vulnerability into actual resilient supply chains will take years.

The third challenge is domestic. Takaichi's supermajority is an unprecedented window, but constitutional revision still requires a national referendum whose outcome no poll guarantees, and an over-hasty push could reawaken the pacifist reflexes that constrained her predecessors. Japan's fiscal position – the developed world's highest debt ratio, an ageing society, persistent inflation – makes sustained spending above two percent of GDP contentious, while the Self-Defense Forces struggle with recruitment shortfalls that money alone cannot fix.[50] There is, finally, a diplomatic cost to assertiveness: the same posture that reassures Manila and Canberra unsettles parts of ASEAN, whose centrality the updated FOIP continues to proclaim.

The fourth challenge concerns European sustainability and coherence. European naval deployments remain episodic: a carrier group every few years is a signal, not a presence, and the war in Ukraine – together with renewed instability in the Middle East and around the Strait of Hormuz in 2026 – will continue to claim first call on European resources and attention. Member-state approaches to China still diverge, EU-level and national initiatives overlap, and Tokyo must orchestrate an increasingly crowded field of bilateral, minilateral and EU frameworks without duplication. Instruments matter too: until the Japan–EU security-of-information agreement is concluded, classified cooperation will lag behind political ambition.

Finally, the flagship itself carries risk. GCAP's 2035 in-service date is demanding; sixth-generation programmes elsewhere have suffered cost growth and schedule slippage; workshare and export-policy differences among three democracies with distinct strategic cultures require constant management; and reported debates over admitting additional partners, such as Saudi Arabia, test trilateral cohesion. Since GCAP is the backbone of the Japan–Italy relationship, programme turbulence would reverberate far beyond industrial ministries. None of these challenges is unmanageable, but together they counsel against triumphalism: the Euro-Japanese convergence in the Indo-Pacific is real, yet recent and reversible.

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[48] Baskaran, G., Schwartz, M. (2026) "China's rare earth campaign against Japan", *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, 13 January, available online.

[49] The Japan Times (2026b) "Japan struggling to reduce rare earth dependence on China", 30 January, available online.

[50] Congressional Research Service (2026) *Japan's Evolving Defense Policy and the U.S.–Japan Alliance*, Congressional Research Service, 14 July; Lee, C. , Blane, B. (2026) "Japan First" in the Indo-Pacific: Takaichi's shift from pacifist constraint to allied mobilization", *Small Wars Journal*, 1 April, available online.

Conclusion

Viewed from Tokyo, European participation in the Indo-Pacific has ceased to be a curiosity and has become a component of national strategy. A decade after Nairobi, FOIP functions less as a slogan than as an operating system through which Japan organises coalitions, allocates diplomatic capital and hedges risk. Within that system the European Union supplies what Japan's other partners cannot – regulatory power, economic-security alignment and a second Western pole in an age of American unpredictability – while member states supply presence, exercises and industrial partnership. The November 2024 Security and Defence Partnership, the 2025 Competitiveness Alliance and the dense calendar of dialogues that followed have given this division of labour durable institutional form.

Italy occupies a special place in this design. In the space of four years, Rome moved from the periphery of Japanese strategic attention to the inner circle of the Special Strategic Partnership, propelled by GCAP, validated by the Cavour deployment and consolidated through economic-security, space and African-development cooperation. For Japan, Italy demonstrates that the cultivation of new allies can yield concrete capability and industrial depth, not merely communiqués – a lesson Tokyo is applying simultaneously in Manila, Canberra and New Delhi, where region-wide architecture and tightly drafted bilateral agreements deliberately coexist as mutually reinforcing layers of the same lattice.

Japan's internal transformation under Takaichi – accelerated rearmament, the drive to revise Article 9, a harder line towards Beijing and a franker acknowledgement of American unreliability – has, on balance, enabled rather than hindered this outward turn, supplying both the political mandate and the sense of urgency that sustain it. But the same transformation has raised the stakes. Whether the Euro-Japanese convergence matures into a lasting pillar of Indo-Pacific order will depend on factors only partly within Tokyo's control: the durability of European commitment beyond symbolic deployments, the discipline of the three-nation programme management in GCAP, the containment of the crisis with China, and the preservation of an American alliance that remains, for all its frictions, the foundation on which every other layer rests. Japan's wager is that a multifaceted Europe – and a newly ambitious Italy – will help ensure that the Indo-Pacific's future is written by many hands, and not dictated by one.

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Baskaran, G., Schwartz, M. (2026) "China's Rare Earth Campaign against Japan", *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, 13 January, available online at: https://www.csis.org/analysis/chinas-rare-earth-campaign-against-japan, accessed 19 July 2026.

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MOFA (2025b) *Japan–EU Summit 2025 Joint Statement*, Tokyo: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 23 July.

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Indonesian Perspectives on European Engagement in the Indo-Pacific: The Case for Multi-Alignment

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The Indo-Pacific as a foreign-policy construct has reshaped how Asian regional space is both defined and governed. From a Southeast Asian perspective, its rise not only reflects less predictable leadership of the United States (US), heightened concern about China, particularly at sea, but simultaneously growing unease about how the US-China rivalry could destabilise the region and decentralise its existing regional institutions. Against this backdrop, this chapter assesses the relevance of European engagement in the Indo-Pacific and examines how European approaches are perceived in Southeast Asia, with a focus on Indonesia. It argues that European engagement is best received when it aligns with development priorities and works through existing regional mechanisms, rather than reproducing great-power signalling. While Europe can match neither the scale of the Belt and Road Initiative's infrastructure funding nor US security provision, it retains assets that Indonesian stakeholders often value, for instance, technical expertise and long-term institutional partnerships. Building on this, the chapter reframes what is often described as ASEAN "hedging" more accurately as multi-alignment: a deliberate strategy of issue-based cooperation with multiple partners to preserve autonomy. It shows how multi-alignment shapes Indonesian expectations of European engagement, favouring initiatives that reinforce regional agency and respect existing Asian frameworks. As Italy develops a formal Indo-Pacific strategy later than other partners, it should signal this understanding by grounding its regional delimitation in Southeast Asian perspectives and by working through its established institutions.

Introduction

Italy's engagement in the Indo-Pacific has often been characterised as quiet[1] and slow. While Rome may well benefit from developing its own formal strategy, the overarching framework for that strategy should not be defined by efforts to catch up with the French and German strategies in the region. While comparisons across European engagement strategies are analytically useful, they should not set the baseline for future engagement. Rather, such engagement should start from the vision and needs of Southeast Asian partners, as articulated in the 2019 ASEAN *Outlook on the Indo-Pacific* (*AOIP*).[2]

[1] Abbondanza, G. (2024) "Italy's Quiet Pivot to the Indo-Pacific: Towards an Italian Indo-Pacific Strategy", *International Political Science Review*, 45(5), 669-679.

[2] ASEAN (2019) *ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific*, Jakarta, available online.

Italy's "Global Mediterranean" concept and the Mediterranean-Red Sea-Indian Ocean corridor framing[3] have been put forward as a link between Italy and the Indo-Pacific. Yet geography is only part of the story. Unlike France and the Netherlands, Italy does not carry the colonial intrusion[4] and legacies that continues to complicate European[5] and Japanese[6] presence in the region. It also holds a cultural legitimacy that precedes the modern state system entirely. In fact, Southeast Asia has never truly been peripheral to Italy, as shown by ancient trading ties, Marco Polo's passage through the Strait of Malacca, Niccolò de' Conti's travels through Sumatra and Java, Ludovico di Varthema's journeys to the Banda Islands. In fact, Indonesia's own historiography records these encounters.[7]

European engagement in the Indo-Pacific has nonetheless tended to misread Southeast Asian perspectives on what the region represents. From Jakarta's vantage point, the Indo-Pacific construct is an instrument of regional self-governance, *not* a security alignment project. Understanding Indonesian foreign policy through the lens of *multi-alignment*, a sovereignty-preserving logic of issue-specific partnerships, helps explain both Jakarta's approach to external actors and the persistence of ASEAN's non-confrontational instincts.

Italy's comparatively late entry, rather than being simply a disadvantage, creates scope for an approach grounded in Southeast Asian perspectives rather than calibrated primarily through intra-European comparison. Any Italian presence in the Indo-Pacific should therefore be expressed through sustained institutional commitment and technical cooperation, rather than through forms of engagement that reproduce the logics of great-power competition.

This chapter argues that the concept of *multi-alignment*, a deliberate, sovereignty-preserving strategy of issue-specific partnerships, provides a more accurate and more policy-useful framework for understanding Indonesian foreign policy than hedging in the Indo-Pacific *and* that this conceptual reframing has direct consequences for how European actors, including Italy, should design their engagement in the region.

The Indo-Pacific from Jakarta

The Indo-Pacific lacks any agreed geographical definition, and this ambiguity is not accidental. The contestation around the concept's scope reflects competing attempts by state actors to shape the emerging regional framework in ways that serve their own strategic interests.[8] The result is a set of Indo-Pacific strategies that share a label while diverging sharply in their assumptions, priorities, and implied alignments. The Indo-Pacific strategies of the United States (US) and Japan, collectively oriented around what Tokyo and Washington have termed the

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[3] Rossi, E., Zeneli, V. (2026) "Italy's 'Global Mediterranean' turns to the Indo-Pacific", *The Diplomat*, 6 April, available online.

[4] Raben, R. (2014) "The Colonial Intrusion: Boundaries and Structures" in Owen, N.G. (ed.) *Routledge Handbook of Southeast Asian History*, New York: Routledge.

[5] Reid, A. (1993) *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce, 1450-1680. Expansion and Crisis*, *Vol. 2*, New Haven: Yale University Press.

[6] Reid, A., Akira, O. (eds) (1989) *The Japanese Experience in Indonesia: Selected Memoirs of 1942-1945*, Athens: Ohio University Press.

[7] Anwar, D.F. (2025) "Challenges and Opportunities in Forging Closer ASEAN-EU Relations", in Gabusi, G. (ed.) *Indo-Pacific Outlooks: Implications for the EU-ASEAN Relationship and Italy's Role in Southeast Asia*, Torino: T.wai - Torino World Affairs Institute, 3 October, 76-87, available online.

[8] Kwon, M. (2023) "The emergence of the Indo-Pacific: Geopolitical turn or continuity?", *E-International Relations*, 11 April, available online.

"Free and Open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP), are formulated around a perceived need to balance and contain China.[9] Australia's vision emphasises maritime security and alliance management.[10] ASEAN's version, crystallised in the AOIP, insists on inclusivity, "ASEAN centrality", and cooperation with all dialogue partners, China included.[11] For that reason, the AOIP was the only Indo-Pacific strategy accepted by Beijing.[12]

While the *European Union (EU)'s 2021 Strategy* foregrounds rules-based order and economic connectivity,[13] European strategies towards the Indo-Pacific have progressively shifted towards a more securitised framing,[14] centred on supply-chain resilience, critical-technology competition and de-risking from Chinese dependencies.[15]

In Jakarta, however, such language sits uneasily.[16] While Indonesia shares some of these concerns, particularly in the maritime domain and around critical minerals, it is deeply reluctant to frame its external partnerships through a China-balancing lens. This is precisely why Indonesia invested significant diplomatic capital in promoting the AOIP in order to counter a FOIP framing that risked turning the Indo-Pacific into a theatre of rivalry, weakening ASEAN centrality and constraining Indonesia's strategic autonomy. From Jakarta's perspective, the problem is not simply great-power competition itself, but the possibility that ASEAN-led regionalism could be sidelined in favour of more overtly strategic and exclusionary arrangements.[17] This is particularly acute in a context in which "ASEAN's claim to its central role in the regional architecture" is being challenged.[18] AOIP's four pillars (maritime cooperation, connectivity, sustainable development and economic cooperation) were intentionally kept broad and inclusive in order to welcome multiple partners without signalling alignment against any one actor. This reflects a deeper regional tradition of non-alignment and non-intervention rooted in formative moments such as the 1947 Asian Relations Conference and the 1955 Bandung Conference. It corresponds to what Amitav Acharya has described as Asia's "cognitive prior"[19] or the "existing set of ideas, belief systems, and norms,

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[9] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Japan (2023) *New Plan for a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP)"*, Tokyo, available online.

[10] Department of Defence, Government of Australia (2024) *National Defence Strategy 2024*, Canberra, available online.

[11] Anwar, D.F. (2020) "Indonesia and the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific", *International Affairs*, 96(1), 111-129.

[12] Ho, B. (2019) "How China Sees the Indo-Pacific: What Next After AOIP?", *S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies*, CO No. 19254, 30 December, available online.

[13] European Commission (2021) *Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council: The EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific*, Brussels, available online.

[14] Buzan, B., Wæver, O. (2003) *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Buzan, B. (1983) *People, States, and Fear: The National Security Problem in International Relations*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

[15] Liu, Z. (2025) "The 'Pan-Securitization' of the EU's Connectivity Policy and China–EU Cooperation", in Xiang, G. et al. (eds) *The Belt and Road Initiative: Past, Present, Future*, Singapore: Springer Nature, 259-278; Ziegler, M., Weck, T. (2025) "The EU and Its Member States: Increasing Securitisation Moves Vis-à-Vis China", *Zeitschrift für Europarechtliche Studien*, 28(3), 446-481; Casarini, N. (2015) "The Securitisation of EU-Asia Relations in the Post-Cold War Era", in Christiansen, T. et al. (eds) *The Palgrave Handbook of EU-Asia Relations*, Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan.

[16] European Commission (2021) *Joint Communication…*; Council of the European Union (2025) *Conclusions on the Implementation of the EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific*, Brussels, available online.

[17] Kwon, M. (2024) "ASEAN's sempiternal challenge: Maintaining centrality in the Indo-Pacific", *E-International Relations*, 21 November, available online.

[18] Hoang, T.H. (2022) "Understanding the Institutional Challenge of Indo-Pacific Minilaterals to ASEAN", *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 44(1), 1-30.

[19] Acharya, A. (2009) "Arguing about ASEAN: What Do We Disagree About?", *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 22(3), 493-499.

which determine and condition an individual or social group's receptivity to new norms".[20] Understood this way, the "ASEAN Way" is not a symptom of weakness or indecision, rather it should be understood as a deliberate form of political agency, calibrated to preserve unity amid sharp asymmetries and to keep regional order open-ended. External actors, including Europeans, need to recognise that effective engagement depends less on strategic signalling than on working within this logic.

The Limits of Hedging

International Relations (IR) theory has long approached the question of how states respond to shifting balances of power through a binary lens: containment and balancing on one side, engagement and bandwagoning on the other.[21] In the Asian context, where the behaviour of small and medium states resists easy categorisation as either balancing or bandwagoning, this binary has proved increasingly inadequate. In response, scholars working within realist traditions have developed the concept of *hedging* to capture the complexity of refusing to "choose sides". Derived from financial jargon, the concept of hedging entered the IR lexicon with the *2006 US National Security Strategy*.[22] It refers to a middle position among great power competitors which can be declined as set of strategies aimed at avoiding, or planning for contingencies in, a situation in which states cannot decide upon more straightforward alternatives such as balancing, bandwagoning, or neutrality, and instead cultivate a middle position that forestalls or avoids having to choose one side at the obvious expense of another. Although the strategies of individual ASEAN member states can vary significantly,[23] hedging has become the dominant IR framework applied to Southeast Asia[24] and to ASEAN foreign policy in the context of the US-China rivalry.[25] It captures the idea that Southeast Asian states avoid full alignment with either Washington or Beijing, while maintaining ties with multiple actors to manage uncertainty and maximise leverage.

This triangulation, necessary in a context of changed security architecture in the region formerly known as the "Asia-Pacific", has also been specifically applied to Indonesia.[26] But while the notion of hedging holds analytical value in moving beyond traditional IR binaries and has been productively applied to attend to the specificities of the Southeast Asian context,[27] it presents two significant limitations when applied to Indonesian foreign policy. First, it tends to frame Indonesian foreign policy as a response to great-power pressure, which overlooks the deliberate, proactive character of Indonesian foreign policy. Second, it implies a binary underlying choice being deferred, whether to align with the US or with China, which

[20] Acharya, A. (2009) *Whose Ideas Matter?*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

[21] Waltz, K.N. (2007) *Theory of International Politics*, Boston: McGraw-Hill.

[22] Goh, E. (2006) "Understanding 'Hedging' in Asia-Pacific Security", *PacNet*, 43(31), 1.

[23] Goh, E. (2016) "Southeast Asian Strategies toward the Great Powers: Still Hedging After All These Years?", *The Asan Forum*, 22 February, available online.

[24] Haacke, J. (2019) "The Concept of Hedging and Its Application to Southeast Asia: A Critique and a Proposal for a Modified Conceptual and Methodological Framework", *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, 19(3), 375-417.

[25] Kuik, C.C. (2016) "How Do Weaker States Hedge? Unpacking ASEAN States' Alignment Behavior towards China", *Journal of Contemporary China*, 25(100), 500-514.

[26] Priamarizki, A. (2024) "Understanding the Domestic Determinants of Indonesia's Hedging Policy towards the United States and China", *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 46(1), 19-42.

[27] Goh, E., Simon, S.W. (eds) (2008) *China, the United States, and Southeast Asia: Contending Perspectives on Politics, Security, and Economics*, Abingdon and New York: Routledge.

Indonesia's *bebas aktif* ("free and active") doctrine explicitly rejects.[28] The free and active principle is not deferral, rather it is a positive commitment to autonomy as a value in itself, pursued through diversified, issue-specific engagement, which is better accounted for by the notion of "multi-alignment" rather than hedging.

Multi-alignment refers to an intentional strategy whereby a state develops parallel, sector-specific relationships with a range of external partners while avoiding any hierarchy that would place one of them in a position of privileged influence. Rather than responding defensively to structural uncertainty, as the language of hedging often suggests, multi-alignment involves the active organisation of partnerships according to distinct policy needs. Different external ties are therefore assigned different functions, depending on the issue at stake, without locking the state into a uniform strategic posture across all domains. It has been developed most explicitly in the Indian foreign policy literature,[29] but its logic maps onto Indonesian practice with important modifications. Where India's multi-alignment is partly driven by the desire to punch above its weight in great-power competition, Indonesia's is driven by the desire to insulate the region from great-power competition by making exclusivity structurally unattractive to all parties. Multi-alignment better captures this logic of diversification and is the framework that Southeast Asian actors themselves have increasingly articulated and revendicated.

From Non-Alignment to Multi-Alignment

To understand the significance of multi-alignment for countries like Indonesia, the specificity of Southeast Asian strategic positioning must be understood in the *longue durée*, particularly in the notion of "non-alignment". During the Cold War, non-alignment was an attempt to avoid being drawn into either the US-led or Soviet-led bloc, maintaining equidistance under pressure while occasionally exploiting superpower hostility to advance national interests. The end of the Cold War was widely thought to have rendered the Non-Aligned Movement obsolete, as the bipolar structure that had given it strategic coherence dissolved. Yet the underlying dynamic it responded to, namely small and medium states navigating between competing great powers while trying to preserve autonomy, has returned under different structural conditions. Multi-alignment is the contemporary successor concept allowing to operate simultaneously across multiple partnerships rather than maintaining studied distance from all of them.

The two concepts differ in a fundamental respect. Whereas non-alignment relied on formal equidistance and deliberate abstention from rival blocs, multi-alignment rests on sustained and differentiated engagement. The autonomy it seeks to protect is not achieved by standing apart but by retaining control over the terms, scope, and distribution of external cooperation. Each partnership is calibrated to a specific domain without setting the terms for the others.

Indonesia's recent diplomatic trajectory illustrates this logic with unusual clarity. In June 2025, President Prabowo Subianto praised Russia and China at the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum as powers that had stood by developing countries without double standards.[30] Weeks later, in Brussels, he described EU

[28] Sukma, R. (1995) "The Evolution of Indonesia's Foreign Policy: An Indonesian View", *Asian Survey*, 35(3), 304-315.

[29] Mohan, C.R. (2025) *India and the Rebalancing of Asia*, Abingdon: Routledge; Hall, I. (2019) *Modi and the Reinvention of Indian Foreign Policy*, Bristol: Bristol University Press.

[30] Tanamal, Y. (2025) "Following 'the most powerful' is a mistake, Prabowo says in Russia", *The Jakarta Post*, 21 June, available online.

and Indonesian economic interests as mutually symbiotic. The same period saw Indonesia formalise its membership of BRICS+,[31] conclude the long-negotiated Indonesia-EU Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (IEU-CEPA) and maintain its existing ASEAN-US partnership. These are not contradictory signals, but evidence of three substantive partnerships pursued concurrently without extending exclusivity to any of them. Rather than indicating incoherence, this pattern reflects a deliberate strategy of managing multiple relationships in ways that prevent any single partner from determining the terms of engagement.

Multi-alignment is not, however, without internal tensions. Indonesia's *bebas aktif* doctrine is under genuine pressure from several directions simultaneously. US unpredictability under the Donald J.Trump administration has complicated the assumption that Washington remains a reliable security anchor, while deepening economic ties with China create their own dependencies that sit uneasily with the free and active principle. Domestically, strong pro-Palestinian public opinion has constrained Jakarta's room for manoeuvre in its relations with Western partners, requiring careful face-saving diplomacy to manage the gap between popular sentiment and strategic pragmatism. These pressures do not invalidate the multi-alignment framework, but they do underline that it is a strategy under active management rather than a settled equilibrium, and one whose durability cannot be taken for granted by external partners, including European ones.

Rethinking European Engagement Through the Lens of Multi-Alignment

To translate multi-alignment into concrete policy terms requires a fundamental reorientation of the way in which European actors, Italy included, approach the Indo-Pacific. For Italy, the principal point of reference should be the AOIP rather than the EU's 2021 *Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific*. The distinction is not simply technical. It concerns the perspective from which the strategy is organised and made intelligible. A strategy anchored in the AOIP signals to Indonesian and ASEAN partners that Italy has understood the region on its own terms. A strategy derived primarily from comparisons between different European strategies risks reproducing the very great-power signalling logic that Southeast Asian multi-alignment is designed to resist. The following recommendations are therefore framed not around what Italy wants to project into the region, but around what Indonesia's multi-alignment logic makes room for.

On issue-based cooperation

From a Southeast Asian perspective, the most valued form of external engagement is one that enhances national and regional capacity without attaching strategic conditions to it. This is precisely the domain in which European actors have genuine comparative advantage. Technical expertise delivered through long-term institutional partnerships, without the expectation of political loyalty in return, fits multi-alignment logic because it treats each cooperation domain as functionally distinct and does not require Indonesia to signal alignment with a broader strategic agenda.

[31] Wardhana, A., Dharmaputra, R. (2025) "What BRICS membership means for Indonesia's foreign policy", *The Diplomat*, available online.

Development cooperation offers the clearest illustration of this pattern through issue-specific forms of engagement that do not presuppose deference.[32] The ASEAN-Italy Development Partnership, which comprises fourteen projects at different stages of implementation, Dutch cooperation with Indonesia in the field of water management,[33] German environmental and industrial programmes, and the EU's Global Gateway initiative all operate along similar lines. As Gul-i-Hina van der Zwan warns in this volume, this kind of long-running engagement generates greater sustained credibility than episodic naval deployments.[34] Italy holds a comparable development cooperation infrastructure asset through the Italian Agency for Development Cooperation (AICS), already present in the region and already aligned with ASEAN's sustainable development pillar.[35]

The credibility of this model is not, however, guaranteed. Italy's development partnership currently suffers from underfunding and bureaucratic delays, a finding well documented by Michele Boario.[36] The EU's Global Gateway initiative exemplifies this structural problem at a larger scale. While it has been widely framed as a rules-based alternative to China's Belt and Road Initiative, in Southeast Asia it has also attracted criticism for the discrepancy between its ambitions, the resources committed to it and the pace at which funds are actually disbursed. For Indonesia, the issue is not only how to attract external partners, but how to translate such partnerships into forms of institutional capacity that outlast donor cycles. Seen through the lens of multi-alignment, the gap between declaratory ambition and operational delivery directly weakens a partner's appeal within Indonesia's diversified strategy of external cooperation. For European partners, and for Italy in particular, the priority should therefore be reliability of implementation over the magnitude of the project.

On normative diplomacy

Southeast Asian perspectives on European normative engagement are markedly more ambivalent than European actors typically acknowledge. From Jakarta's vantage point, the question is less whether European values of human rights, environmental standards, and democratic governance are legitimate, but whether European actors apply them consistently and equitably. When they do not, normative engagement is read not as principled diplomacy but as a form of conditionality that fails the equity test central to Indonesia's strategic self-understanding, and that sits uneasily with the multi-alignment preference for partnerships that do not attach political conditions to functional cooperation.

The IEU-CEPA negotiations provide the clearest evidence of this tension. Nine years of talks, with the EU's Deforestation Regulation and Renewable Energy Directive II as major flashpoints, produced in President Prabowo a scathing pre-agreement characterisation of Europe as applying double standards, protecting its own markets while lecturing Indonesia on environmental governance. The World Trade Organisation's panel ruling of 2023, in which Indonesia brought a

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[32] Nouwens, V., Baruah, D.M. (2025) "Europe and the Indo-Pacific: New Opportunities for a 'Special Relationship'", *International Institute for Strategic Studies*, 29 July, available online.

[33] Dutch Water Authorities (2024) *Blue Deal Indonesia Partners Visit the Netherlands*, 9 July, available online.

[34] Van der Zwan, G.H. (2026) *From The Hague to Rome: Lessons from the Dutch Case for Italy's Indo-Pacific Turn*, in Gabusi, G. (ed.), *The Indo-Pacific and the European Approaches to the Region: Implications for Italy*, Torino: T.wai - Torino World Affairs Institute, 167-180, available online.

[35] ASEAN (2025) *ASEAN, Italy Strengthen Cooperation and Discussed Future Direction at the 5th ASEAN-Italy Development Partnership Committee Meeting*, 26 November, available online.

[36] Boario, M. (2025) "Italian Development Cooperation in ASEAN: A Strategic Partnership for Sustainable Growth", in Gabusi, G. (ed.) *Indo-Pacific Outlooks…*, available online.

successful complaint finding EU discrimination against palm oil-based biofuels, demonstrates that this tension reached formal adjudication, not merely diplomatic rhetoric.[37] The conclusion of the IEU-CEPA in 2025 represents a genuine turning point, but the underlying dynamic has not disappeared. Indonesia's multi-alignment calculus rewards partners who support its *own* governance priorities rather than those who condition market access on external standards.

The Just Energy Transition Partnership (JETP), to which Italy contributes through AICS, offers a partial model of how to get this right, as it channels climate finance in ways that acknowledge Indonesian sovereignty over its energy transition pathway, rather than imposing European timelines and standards. Italy should position itself explicitly as a champion of this approach within EU deliberations, advocating for an implementation of the IEU-CEPA that respects Indonesian development priorities, particularly on palm oil and critical minerals, and framing its normative engagement as reinforcing Indonesian agency rather than constraining it. In a region where the memory of double standards is long, being on the right side of the equity question is a strategic asset.

On defence industrial cooperation

From Jakarta's perspective, the objective is to avoid dependence on any single great power while strengthening autonomous military capability. In this sense, defence procurement constitutes a practical modality of multi-alignment. Rather than binding Indonesia to a single strategic patron, it enables Jakarta to diversify security relationships across several partners, according to capability needs and without exclusivity. This is not a secondary consideration, but a core expression of strategic autonomy. It also creates a significant opening for European defence suppliers able to offer capability without the alliance implications often attached to partnerships with the US.

Indonesia's current procurement trajectory under President Prabowo illustrates this extension of the multi-alignment logic to the defence-industrial sphere. In recent years, Jakarta has ordered forty-two *Rafale* jets and two *Scorpène* submarines from France,[38] signed a contract for forty-eight *KAAN* fighters from Turkey,[39] confirmed plans to acquire at least forty-two Chinese-made *Chengdu* J-10 fighters,[40] abandoned its plans to acquire US-made F-15 *EX Eagle II* jets, and acquired two *Thaon* di Revel-class multipurpose combat ships from the Italian shipbuilder Fincantieri.[41] At the operational level, the same logic governs exercise choices, in November 2024, the Indonesian Navy conducted its first-ever joint bilateral exercise with the Russian Navy, and in the same period held its largest-ever combined exercise with Australia, while preparing for a joint exercise with China's People's Liberation Army Navy. These engagements should not be read as a pivot toward any single bloc but as a deliberate effort to maintain relationships across all geopolitical blocs, in line with President Prabowo's stated conviction that in geopolitics "a thousand friends are too few and one enemy is too many".[42]

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[37] Kettunen, E., Pratiwi, A. (2025) "Towards Collaborative EU-Indonesia Bargaining on Palm Oil Policy: Deconstructing the Public Discourse", *Asia Europe Journal*.

[38] Strangio, S. (2026) "Indonesia takes delivery of first French-made Rafale fighter jets", *The Diplomat*, 27 January, available online.

[39] Strangio, S. (2025) "Indonesia signs contract with Türkiye to buy 48 KAAN fighter jets", *The Diplomat*, 30 July, available online.

[40] The Jakarta Post (2025) "Prabowo's pivot: Geopolitical risk of hodgepodge arms deals", 28 October, available online.

[41] Manuel, R. (2026) "Fincantieri delivers second Indonesian Navy Brawijaya patrol ship", *The Defense Post*, 24 March, available online.

[42] Malufti, M.F. (2024) "Prabowo's global vision: Can the Indonesian military handle the pressure?", *The Diplomat*, 19 November, available online.

This strategy is not without costs. The diversification of procurement across so many incompatible platforms risks creating serious logistical and financial burdens. The KF-21 *Boramae* funding dispute with South Korea, in which Indonesia accumulated arrears of approximately ₩1.6 trillion, illustrates Indonesia's procurement strategy stalls under financial and industrial capacity constraints. A further structural tension is the risk of inadvertent leakage as the US may feel compelled to limit certain types of military engagement with Indonesia if it perceives a risk of indirect leakage of intelligence, technology, or tactics between Indonesian and Chinese or Russian armed forces.[43] This constraint is significant for the European case because it creates a structural opening: Italian and broader European defence engagement carry far less of the strategic sensitivity that US partnerships generate, making it more compatible with Indonesia's multi-alignment posture and less likely to trigger the leakage concern that constrains deeper US-Indonesia cooperation.

Italy's position in this landscape is already operational rather than merely aspirational. The acquisition of two *Thaon* di Revel-class ships from Fincantieri establishes an existing defence industrial relationship grounded in Indonesian procurement priorities rather than European strategic ambitions. Indonesia's proposed purchase of the former Italian aircraft carrier *Giuseppe Garibaldi* deepens this relationship further, and in ways that are entirely consistent with multi-alignment logic.[44]

The recommendation for Italy is to develop this existing relationship steadily and on commercial terms, framing any engagement explicitly as supporting Indonesian strategic autonomy and *bebas aktif* rather than as integrating Jakarta into a European security architecture. What multi-alignment makes acceptable in the security domain is capability provision and capacity building that respects Indonesian sovereignty and serves Indonesian priorities. On the other hand, what it filters out, consistently and deliberately, is bilateral alliance signalling or force projection that implies a China-balancing function.[45]

On soft power and institutional presence

From a Southeast Asian perspective, the most durable form of external engagement is not defined by the scale of strategic engagement but by the gradual cultivation of relationships through institutional presence, recognised expertise and respect for regional agency. This is precisely the domain in which Italy's comparative strengths align most closely with the logic of multi-alignment, yet it is also the dimension that Italian strategy has tended to underestimate.

Italy enters the relationship without the colonial memory that continues to complicate French and Dutch engagement in the region, and with a cultural legitimacy rooted in pre-colonial trading ties that Indonesian historiography itself records. These are not merely historical curiosities. They constitute a relational foundation that is genuinely rare among European actors in Southeast Asia and that cannot be manufactured through diplomatic initiatives alone. Italy's reputation in luxury goods, design and architecture resonates strongly with Indonesia's rapidly expanding middle class and aligns with Indonesian development priorities in ways that create people-to-people connections.

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[43] *Ibidem*.

[44] Kristanto, J., De Xian, C. (2026) "Why Indonesia's proposed aircraft carrier acquisition makes sense", *The Diplomat*, 19 March, available online.

[45] Laksmana, E. (2021) "AUKUS mixed reception a symptom of strategic fault-lines in Southeast Asia", *East Asia Forum*, 17 October, available online.

Soft power partnerships, including cultural institutes, university exchanges and professional networks are consistent with the multi-alignment preference for relationships that build capacity. Italy's network of "Istituti Italiani di Cultura" in Jakarta and Singapore is an underused strategic asset. The Netherlands offers a relevant comparison, as Leiden University's longstanding role in Southeast Asian studies has provided Dutch engagement with an institutional depth and credibility that has proved durable. Italy would benefit from a comparable investment in academic and cultural presence.

To begin from Southeast Asian perspectives is to recognise that, in a regional context shaped by institutional memory, relational continuity and sensitivity to sovereignty, soft power is not secondary to strategy but part of its substance. An Italian approach to the Indo-Pacific that privileges formal strategic signalling over these dimensions may be visible, but it is unlikely to be well received. By contrast, an approach attuned to them would find that the logic of multi-alignment does not hinder European engagement but rather creates space for the kind of partner Italy could credibly become.

Conclusion

This chapter has argued that *multi-alignment*, understood as a deliberate, sovereignty-preserving strategy of issue-specific partnerships, is not only an analytical extension of the hedging literature. It is the actual logic that Indonesian and broader Southeast Asian foreign policy actors have consistently pursued, from the Cold War non-alignment movement to the articulation of the AOIP. Recognising this logic and taking it seriously as a starting point rather than a complication to be managed, is the precondition for any European engagement in the Indo-Pacific that aspires to be more than symbolic.

This chapter's central argument is that European strategies have too often been calibrated to intra-European debates vis-à-vis the US-China competition rather than to Southeast Asian realities. The Indo-Pacific frenzy that swept European capitals in the early 2020s was, in important respects, a response to US strategic framing and to the internal dynamics of European strategic autonomy debates, not a response to what ASEAN partners were actually asking for. The AOIP predates most European Indo-Pacific strategies and encodes a vision of the region that is fundamentally different from the securitised, China-balancing frameworks that have progressively shaped other Indo-Pacific strategies. As Anna Caffarena and Giuseppe Gabusi have noted, both the EU and ASEAN Indo-Pacific strategies are now becoming outdated[46] and updating them offers an opportunity to reground European engagement in a more genuinely reciprocal framework. That rethinking must start from Southeast Asian perspectives, not from Brussels.

Italy's position in this context is distinctive, since it arrives in the Indo-Pacific policy space later than France and Germany, without a formal national strategy, and without the military presence, economic scale, or colonial history that has shaped their respective engagements. These are not simply deficits. As this chapter has argued, Italy's absence of colonial memory in the region, its pre-colonial trading ties with Southeast Asia, its existing defence and development cooperation relationships with Indonesia and its soft power assets together constitute a profile that

[46] Caffarena, A., Gabusi, G. (2025) "Two Regions, One Order: Framing Strategic Collaboration for a Rules-Based International System", in Gabusi, G. (ed.) *Indo-Pacific Outlooks…*, 11-21

is unusually well suited to what multi-alignment logic actually demands from external partners. While part of the question is whether or not Italy should develop a formal Indo-Pacific strategy,[47] a fundamental consideration relates to the conceptual foundations any Italian engagement, formal or otherwise, should rest on.

This chapter has argued that the principal point of reference for a credible Italian presence in the Indo-Pacific should be the AOIP rather than the EU Strategy for Cooperation. A strategy anchored in the AOIP's four pillars (maritime cooperation, connectivity, sustainable development and economic cooperation) would signal to Indonesian and wider ASEAN partners that Italy is engaging the region on the region's own term. By contrast, an approach derived primarily from intra-European comparison with France and Germany risks reproducing the very logic of strategic signalling that Southeast Asian multi-alignment is intended to resist.

In the present geopolitical context, marked by less predictable US engagement and by the unease generated across Southeast Asia by China's regional posture, Indonesia's multi-alignment creates demand for new partnerships. If Italy is willing to respond on terms that reflect regional priorities rather than external projections, it is better placed to do so than its current strategic profile would suggest.

[47] Louis, Y.M. (2025) "Italy as Europe's Bridge to the Global South: A Southeast Asian Perspective", in Gabusi, G. (ed.) *Indo-Pacific Outlooks…*, 105-114.

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Germany's Indo-Pacific Strategy through Korean Eyes: Perceptions and Prospects for Cooperation

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As Germany and other Member States of the European Union (EU) have gradually developed their own strategies for the emerging strategic space of the Indo-Pacific, they have become increasingly important partners for regional actors, particularly South Korea. Germany, in particular, stands out as a leading European advocate of a rules-based and multilateral order in the region. Yet, Seoul's strategic ambivalence toward the Indo-Pacific introduces uncertainty into the future trajectory of its cooperation with Europe. While Seoul's Indo-Pacific strategy, formulated in 2023 for the first time under the conservative administration, emphasized cooperation among like-minded partners grounded in shared rules and norms, the current liberal government has yet to officially endorse this strategy, revealing a deeper fissure in South Korea's ambivalent strategic thinking regarding the Indo-Pacific as a strategic space. This chapter seeks to show that despite South Korea's ambivalent strategic posture, it remains a key strategic partner for Germany and other EU states based on shared strategic interests for a stable regional order in the time of greater geopolitical uncertainties. The chapter also seeks to identify challenges for cooperation such as Germany's lack of visibility and South Korea's lack of strategic vision.

The Indo-Pacific has now firmly established itself as a critical strategic space in the minds of policymakers and the public alike. While it is geographically bound by the Indian and Pacific Oceans by definition, its significance extends far beyond physical boundaries as a site for global geopolitical competition between the United States (US) and China. As a result, countries both within and beyond the region are recalibrating their strategies to redefine their roles in the Indo-Pacific. It is in such a context that many of the European countries began to develop their policies vis-à-vis the region starting from France who redefined itself as "an Indo-Pacific nation" in 2018.[1] Following the French lead, Germany became the second European Union (EU) member state to publish its own strategic document on the Indo-Pacific under the title *Policy Guidelines for the Indo-Pacific*. Given France's unique identity as a 'resident' power in the region, Germany's adoption of Indo-Pacific as the central strategic space where "the shape of tomorrow's international order will be decided" heralded a new era of European engagement with Asia.[2]

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[1] Camroux, D. (2024, 1st edition) "France within the European Rediscovery of the Indo-Pacific", in Tran, C.T., Chirathivat, S., De. P. (eds) *Indo-Pacific and ASEAN: New Balances and New Challenges for Asian Integration and Stability*, Abingdon: Routledge.

[2] The Federal Foreign Office, Government of Germany (2020) *Germany – Europe – Asia: Shaping the 21st Century Together": The German Government adopts policy guidelines on the Indo-Pacific region*, 1st September, available online.

The aim of this chapter is to assess this emerging European engagement with the Indo-Pacific region as a new site for strategic importance through South Korea's response to Germany's Indo-Pacific strategy. There are specific reasons why examining European Indo-Pacific strategies through Korean eyes constitute a fruitful exercise. First, the Indo-Pacific is an "imagined region" that is still in the process of taking a concrete shape.[3] As such, its boundaries, organising principles, and institutional contours remain undefined and subject to ongoing contestations. While the future of regional order depends primarily on the rivalry between the two hegemonic powers, secondary states are still capable of influencing the great power competition, particularly in the period of transition.[4] In this respect, South Korea occupies a particularly important position as a middle power deeply embedded in the region's security and economic networks. Second, South Korea is also uniquely positioned to reveal the contested nature of emerging regional order. As a long-standing ally of the US and simultaneously a major trading partner and close neighbour of China, its strategic posture reflects the inherent tensions faced by secondary states navigating intensifying great power rivalry. South Korea's strategic understanding of the Indo-Pacific, therefore, provides a useful window into regional dynamics.

This chapter proceeds as follows. It will first discuss South Korea's evolving understanding of the Indo-Pacific as it relates to changing strategic responses. The next section will specifically focus on South Korea's response to German engagement of the Indo-Pacific as a strategic space. I will conclude with challenges and prospects for cooperation between South Korea and Germany (and Europe).

Indo-Pacific in South Korean Eyes

Despite being one of the most influential secondary states in the region, South Korea's Indo-Pacific strategy came to see the light of the day only in 2023. This delay in formally articulating its Indo-Pacific strategy reflects a strategic dilemma South Korea faces amid intensifying Sino-American competition. In fact, South Korea deliberately avoided using the term Indo-Pacific until the official adoption of its strategy. Under the liberal Moon Jae-in administration (2017-2022), in particular, South Korea's strategic vision was primarily focused on improving relations with North Korea, which culminated with the hyped summit diplomacy between the North and the US. With the US pivot toward the Indo-Pacific as a new strategic space, however, South Korea responded with a lukewarm and cautious approach, unlike other US allies in the region, such as Japan and Australia. President Moon reportedly said when asked about his response to the newly published Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy of the Donald J. Trump administration, "it was a suggestion that I never heard of before" and "it is difficult to understand the purpose" of the strategy.[5] Rather than aligning with the US-led Indo-Pacific framework, South Korea opted to advance its regional engagement by launching the "New Southern Policy" (NSP) as a major foreign policy initiative.

Introduced by the president himself during his visit to Indonesia in November 2017, the NSP was a designed as a strategic rejoinder to the intensifying great power competition in the region, the emergence of a US-led coalition against Chi-

[3] Goh, E. (2021) "The Asia–Pacific's 'Age of Uncertainty': Great Power Competition, Globalisation and the Economic-Security Nexus", in Patman, R.G., Köllner, P., Kiglics, B. (eds) *From Asia-Pacific to Indo-Pacific: Diplomacy in a Contested Region*, Singapore: Springer Nature.

[4] Kim, J. (2024) "The Agency of Secondary States in Order Transition in the Indo-Pacific", *The Pacific Review*, 37(1), 1-29.

[5] Wilkins, T., Kim, J. (2022) "Adoption, Accommodation or Opposition? – Regional Powers Respond to American-Led Indo-Pacific Strategy", *The Pacific Review*, 35(3), 432.

na under the framework of Indo-Pacific, and growing economic coercion from China. The ultimate goal, therefore, was to find alternative strategic partners in Southeast and South Asia to alleviate the dilemma of having to choose between the US and China. Based on the three pillars of "people, prosperity, and peace", the NSP sought to deepen socio-cultural, economic, and diplomatic ties with Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and India, thereby expanding South Korea's economic and strategic networks beyond its immediate neighbourhood. ASEAN in particular had already become one of South Korea's major trading partners following the implementation of the ASEAN-Korea Free Trade Agreement in 2010. In addition, Seoul had also established its diplomatic engagement through participation in ASEAN led regional institutions such as the ASEAN plus Three and ASEAN Regional Forum. South Korea's southward turn in search of a strategic alternative was thus grounded in pre-existing economic and diplomatic linkages.[6] By diversifying its strategic partnership, the NSP ultimately aimed to expand Seoul's room for manoeuvre and enhance its foreign policy autonomy.

South Korea's tepid response to the Indo-Pacific framework drew criticism from both domestic opposition and regional partners. Critics argued that Seoul's reluctance to explicitly embrace the new Indo-Pacific concept signalled strategic ambiguity at a time when closer alignment was expected amid intensifying great power rivalry between the US and China. Within South Korea, some analysts and conservative politicians contended that the liberal Moon administration prioritised its progressive ideology over national interests.[7] They argued that a long -held progressive agenda – perceived as more conciliatory toward North Korea and China, and relatively more confrontational toward the US – constrained Seoul's ability to objectively assess the evolving security environments. In their view, this orientation risked pushing South Korea to the margins of an emerging regional security order aimed at countering China's growing influence. Such perception heightened anxieties about alliance cohesion at a time when Washington was seeking stronger coordination among like-minded partners in the region.[8] The controversy over South Korea's potential participation in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) underscored this tension. While Seoul was viewed by many in Washington and its allies as a natural candidate for closer cooperation, the Moon administration remained cautious, wary of provoking China.[9]

While some criticised the Moon government's reluctance to embrace the Indo-Pacific framework, South Korea's hedging against great power rivalry is far from unprecedented.[10] In fact, South Korean leaders after the end of the Cold War – whether conservative or progressive – have consistently sought to walk a tightrope between a long-standing ally as a security guarantor and an increasingly crucial trading partner. The latter, in particular, has historically been the most important neighbour for Korea, shaping its ideas and interests over millennia. The progressives have certainly put a greater emphasis on South Korea's strategic autonomy

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[6] Botto, K. (2021) "South Korea Beyond Northeast Asia: How Seoul Is Deepening Ties with India and ASEAN," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 19 October, available online; Choe, W. (2021) "'New Southern Policy", Korea's Newfound Ambition in Search of Strategic Autonomy", *IFRI – Institut français des relations internationales*, Asie.Visions, 118, available online.

[7] Kim, M. (2023) "Hedging between the United States and China? South Korea's Ideology-Driven Behavior and Its Implications for National Security," *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, 23(1), 129-158.

[8] Kim, D. (2021) "Washington and Seoul Must Heal Their Alliance", *Foreign Affairs*, 26 January, available online.

[9] Byun, D. (2020) "Seoul's participation in 'Quad' may jeopardise regional security: S. Korean Adviser", *Yonhap News Agency*, 28 October, available online.

[10] Yeo, A. (2022) "South Korean Foreign Policy in the Indo-Pacific Era", *Brookings*, November, available online.

and have adopted a more ambivalent stance amid US-China competition. Yet, South Korean hedging has not been limited to progressives, as conservative president Park Geun-hye's attendance at China's commemoration of the 70th anniversary of Japan's defeat in the Pacific War underscores. Seoul's strategic dilemma is thus deeply embedded in its geographical position at the crossroads of great powers and in its modern history marked by colonialisation and division.[11]

It is in such context that the successor of Moon, Yoon Suk Yeol, sought to reorient South Korea's foreign policy toward the Indo-Pacific through his initiative titled "Strategy for a Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region". This new strategy indeed marked a significant departure from South Korea's traditional reliance on strategic ambiguity.[12] Under Yoon, Seoul was keen on articulating more explicit alignment with like-minded democracies and a stronger commitment to values-based diplomacy. By emphasising principles such as the rule of law, freedom of navigation, democracy, and human rights, the Yoon government signalled a clear willingness to move closer to the strategic vision promoted by the US and its regional partners, particularly Japan. A central component of this shift was its effort to mend and strengthen ties with Japan, which had deteriorated under the previous administration. In doing so, Seoul elevated trilateral cooperation with the US and Japan to a cornerstone of its regional strategy, reflecting an effort to institutionalise security and economic coordination in the Indo-Pacific.

Seoul's new Indo-Pacific strategy was embedded within a broader strategic vision of South Korea as a "Global Pivotal State" (GPS).[13] This vision represented a shift away from the previous Moon administration's heavy focus on inter-Korean relations to a more expansive and proactive foreign policy agenda. Under this framework, South Korea, as a key middle power in the region, was expected to assume greater roles and responsibilities in addressing regional and global challenges across the Indo-Pacific and beyond. Central to this approach was the recognition that South Korea should move beyond punching below its weight and rediscover its strategic relevance amid a shifting global security environment. For the Yoon government, this entailed playing a more active role beyond the confines of the Korean peninsula while embracing values and principles such as freedom and democracy in support of a rules-based international order. All this was meant to firmly anchor the Korean strategic position within its alliance with the US. As both a reflection and extensions of the vision embodied in GPS, Yoon administration's Indo-Pacific strategy clearly revealed this US-centred orientation. In fact, it was the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' North American Affairs Bureau – not the Asian and Pacific Affairs Bureau – that took the lead in drafting the Indo-Pacific strategy after careful examination of the US Indo-Pacific strategy.[14] As one Korean watcher noted, the Korean Indo-Pacific strategy was "all about the United States and not about Asia" – or, Indo-Pacific for that matter.[15]

When it comes to China, Yoon articulated a clearer stance against unilateral attempts to change the status quo in the region – language widely interpreted as di-

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[11] Snyder, S.A. (2018) *South Korea at the Crossroads: Autonomy and Alliance in an Era of Rival Powers*, New York: Columbia University Press.

[12] Ryo, S., Jeong, J. (2025) "South Korea and Japan's Responses to the US Latticework for the Indo-Pacific System", *The Asan Forum*, January 15, available online.

[13] Yoon, S. (2022) "South Korea Needs to Step Up", *Foreign Affairs*, 8 February, available online.

[14] Yeo, A. (2023) "South Korea as a Global Pivotal State", *Brookings*, 19 December, available online.

[15] Mobrand, E. (2023) "What's Korean about South Korea's Indo-Pacific strategy?" *The National Interest*, 10 January, available online.

rected at Beijing. However, such tilt toward the US did not amount to a full abandonment of Seoul's long-stranding hedging strategy.[16] China remained central to South Korea's economic prosperity, and Seoul continued to exercise caution in order to avoid overtly antagonising China. Indeed, South Korea's Indo-Pacific strategy document refers to its relations with China only once in a carefully worded language. It describes China as a "key partner for achieving prosperity and peace in the Indo-Pacific" and characterises the strategy as an "inclusive initiative that neither targets nor excludes any particular country".[17] It also emphasises "inclusiveness" as one of the three principles of cooperation. Given South Korea's geopolitical constraints – particularly its geographical proximity to and economic interdependence with China – the Yoon administration's call for greater strategic clarity fell short of endorsing any form of strategic decoupling. Instead, it ultimately disclosed the persistence of Seoul's inherent strategic dilemma: the need to reconcile deepening security alignment with the US in the Indo-Pacific with enduring economic dependence on China.

South Korea's Response to Germany's Indo-Pacific Turn

In light of South Korea's evolving understanding of the Indo-Pacific, how has it responded to Germany's embrace of the concept following the publication of its official strategic statement in 2020, *Policy Guidelines for the Indo-Pacific, Germany-Europe-Asia: Shaping the 21st Century Together*"?[18] This comprehensive document marked Germany's first formal adoption of the term "Indo-Pacific" and underscored the importance of the region for a global mercantile power with significant economic interests in the region. Most notably, its emphasis on inclusivity and the avoidance of unilateralism and bipolarity can be interpreted as an indication that Germany's vision does not seek to contain China, but rather to promote the regional order not defined by great power rivalry. At the same time, the statement stresses the importance of embedding German strategy and foreign policy within a broader European framework and its close coordination with EU partners.

Despite the German strategy's designation of South Korea as a core cooperation partner across multiple areas – such as security, trade, and digital transformation – Seoul's official response remained rather restrained compared to that of other regional states. As a Korea expert based in Berlin pointed out, there were neither official statements nor notable media coverage regarding Germany's strategic shift to the Indo-Pacific.[19] Such a muted reaction can be understood in light of South Korea's broader foreign policy priorities and strategic positioning. As discussed earlier, under the Moon Jae-in administration, Seoul remained hesitant to fully embrace the Indo-Pacific concept as part of its regional strategy. Even when the US announced its first Indo-Pacific strategy in 2017, Seoul's response was visibly cautious, avoiding explicit engagement and for the most part refrained from using the terminology in official discourse. It was not until 2019 that Moon publicly mentioned the "Indo-Pacific" in a joint press conference with then US President Trump.[20] Even in that

[16] Ballbach, E.J. (2023) "South Korea's Evolving Indo-Pacific Strategy: Opportunities and Challenges for Cooperation with the EU", *German Institute for International and Security Affairs*, available online.

[17] The Government of the Republic of Korea (2022) *Strategy for a Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region*, December, available online.

[18] The Federal Government of Germany, *Germany – Europe – Asia…*, available online.

[19] Ballbach, E.J., Morazzini, L. (2021) "A Restrained Embrace. South Korea's Response to Germany's Indo-Pacific Strategy", *SWP Comment*, available online.

[20] Huynh, T. (2023) "Bolstering Middle Power Standing: South Korea's Response to U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy from Trump to Biden", *The Pacific Review*, 36(1), 32-60.

instance, the reference was carefully framed, emphasising areas of overlap between Seoul's NSP and Washington's Indo-Pacific strategy, far from signalling strategic alignment of any sort.

Nonetheless, there were already significant areas of convergence between Germany's Indo-Pacific strategy and South Korea's NSP. In fact, they both reflect similar strategic dilemmas and geopolitical constraints as trading economies with stakes in regional stability. As such, both German and Korean strategies are formulated as broad and "catch-all" frameworks aimed primarily at expanding networks of cooperation.[21] In particular, Germany's emphasis on ASEAN as a central pillar of regional multilateralism ("ASEAN centrality")[22] aligns closely with South Korea's NSP, which prioritizes strengthening relations with Southeast Asian countries.

While NSP did not explicitly envision closer cooperation with countries beyond the geographical boundaries of the Indo-Pacific, South Korea's subsequent Indo-Pacific strategy places greater emphasis on engaging European actors in the region. In particular, it highlights the importance of strengthening the strategic link between the Indo-Pacific and Europe under the broader vision of the GPS. The global repercussions of Russia's invasion of Ukraine further contributed to broadening Seoul's strategic outlook. In this context, Germany – alongside France and the United Kingdom – is identified as a like-minded partner who share "the same core values of freedom, democracy, and human rights".[23]

Despite this rhetoric of elevated strategic partnership, however, concrete policy implementation has remained limited on both sides. In the case of Germany, the most visible step has been the deployment of naval frigates to the Indo-Pacific – first in 2020 and again in 2024 – marking its return to Asian waters in two decades. Yet, its strategic shift toward the Indo-Pacific has largely remained a "technocratic exercise attracting relatively little public interest".[24] The more fundamental question has consistently revolved around China, Germany's most important trading partner in the region. In fact, Germany's economic exchange with other Indo-Pacific countries pales in comparison to those with China, underscoring the structural constraints on any meaningful strategic reorientation.[25] For South Korea, on the other hand, domestic politics hindered the realisation of its Indo-Pacific vision. The Yoon administration faced unprecedented unpopularity due to political scandals early in its term, significantly limiting its capacity to translate strategic ambition into concrete policy measures.

Seoul has instead made its mark primarily through diplomatic engagement with the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) in the aftermath of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Under Yoon, he became the first South Korean head of state to attend the NATO summit. He attended the summits annually from 2022 to 2024 as part of the "Indo-Pacific Four" (IP4) initiative, signalling its strong willingness to align closely with the US-led Western alliance. As a tangible demonstration of commitment, Seoul established its first diplomatic mission to NATO in Novem-

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[21] Ballbach, Morazzini, "A Restrained Embrace…"

[22] Krause, D. (2025) "German and Korean Approaches to the Indo-Pacific: Middle Power Strategies for a Global Key Region", *Korea Europe Review: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Politics, Society, and Economics*, 7, 6.

[23] The Government of the Republic of Korea, *Strategy for a Free…*, 20.

[24] Jaffrelot, C., Plagemann, J. (2025) "Europeans and the Indo-Pacific: Is There a 'Third Way' Between China and the United States?," in Allès, D., Jaffrelot, C., Köllner, P. (eds) *Order and Agency in the Indo-Pacific*, Cham: Springer Nature, 228.

[25] Ulatowski, R. (2024) "Germany and the Indo-Pacific in an Age of Superpower Competition", *International Political Science Review*, 4(5), 647-657.

ber 2022. While cooperation with NATO had already begun under the previous administration, the Yoon government elevated it to a new strategic level by broadening the scope of engagement. In a milestone step, Seoul participated for the first time in the NATO defence ministers' meeting in October 2024, reflecting its clear strategic orientation toward linking Indo-Pacific and European security frameworks.[26]

Prospects and Challenges

The new government in Seoul has been betting on what it calls "pragmatic diplomacy" to navigate an increasingly volatile geopolitical landscape. In his inaugural address on June 4, 2025, the new President Lee Jae-myung outlined a clear vision to steer the country away from his predecessor's values-based approach to foreign policy, emphasising instead the need to adopt a pragmatic policy to "strengthen the US-Korea alliance, bolster Korea-US-Japan cooperation based on it, and manage relations with neighbouring countries from a practical, national-interest perspective".[27] This marked a notable shift for Lee, who had long championed a more traditional progressive foreign policy stance. He was once considered by his critics as a left-leaning nationalist for his critical remarks on military cooperation with Japan and taking a relatively accommodating position toward China. What pragmatism in Seoul's foreign policy ultimately entails, however, remains open to interpretation. In a public statement that would have been difficult to imagine from past liberal leaders in South Korea, Lee made clear that the era in which Seoul could rely on "the U.S. for security and China for the economy" is no longer sustainable.[28] This nonetheless does not suggest full alignment with Washington. Rather, while emphasising the alliance with the US as the foundation of South Korea's security, Lee has also pursued a strategy of "maximum flexibility" in managing relations with China to avoid unnecessary confrontation, as reflected in his engagement with President Xi Jinping during summit diplomacy at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) last year and a state visit to Beijing in January.[29]

What is clearer, however, is the new administration's intent to recalibrate South Korea's foreign policy discourse away from the Indo-Pacific. During the election campaign, Lee made it explicit that his government would no longer pursue the Indo-Pacific strategy advanced by his impeached predecessor. Notably, the term "Indo-Pacific" was completely absent from his foreign policy pledges.[30] This continued after he took office as the administration refrained from using the term all together in statements and foreign ministry's briefings.[31] Instead, Lee envisioned a revival of the Moon administration's NSP as the guiding framework for Seoul's engagement with the region. Taken together, this raises important questions about how Seoul will implement its pragmatic diplomacy while navigating the increasingly turbulent strategic competition between the US and China.

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[26] Nemeth, B., Kim, S. (2024) "South Korea and NATO: From Unlikely Companions to Key Partners", *International Affairs*, 100(2), 609-629.

[27] The Korea Herald (2025) "Full Text: Lee Jae-Myung's inaugural address", 4 June, available online.

[28] Wakabayashi, D. (2025) "Trapped between US and China, South Korea feels Trade war's pressure", *The New York Times*, 27 October, available online.

[29] Cho, S. (2026) "Korea Policy Series: Explaining the Lee Jae Myung Administration's China Policy," *Korea Economic Institute of America*, 7 January, available online.

[30] Lee, D. (2025) "South Korea moves away from former Indo-Pacific strategy", *East Asia Forum*, 21 July, available online.

[31] Kim, E.J. (2025) "Indo-Pacific – A missing word in South Korean diplomacy", *Chosun Ilbo*, 28 July, available online.

While it remains unclear where Europe fits within this evolving strategic vision, the new government appears to have inherited Seoul's commitment to expanding its partnership with Europe, especially through NATO. The list of key national policy tasks issued to guide the new administration's priorities reaffirms this orientation, signalling continuity in efforts to deepen strategic dialogue and security cooperation with European partners, including Germany. In fact, the Lee administration envisions South Korea's status as a "G7+ Diplomatic Power", positioning itself on an equal footing with its key European partners.[32] Reflecting this vision, Lee, upon his inauguration, appointed the largest number of presidential special envoys to Europe in the nation's history, sending missions to France, Germany, Poland and the United Kingdom. Although he did not personally attend last year's NATO summit, the decision aligned with those of Australian and Japanese counterparts amid ongoing transatlantic alliance crisis. The importance of this relationship was underscored when South Korea and NATO further strengthened their ties by launching a defence industrial cooperation dialogue in September.[33] This approach aligns closely with Germany policy as outlined in its Indo-Pacific strategy, which emphasises NATO's role in "expand[ing] relations with the Partners Across the Globe, which includes Indo-Pacific players such as Australia, Japan, New Zealand and South Korea".[34]

There are compelling cases for Seoul and Berlin – as well as other European capitals – to strengthen their ties. They share fundamental strategic interests in the region, regardless of whether it is labelled the Indo-pacific or otherwise. As established liberal democracies and major trading economies, South Korea and Germany both envision the region as a stable and prosperous environment for business opportunities and multilateral diplomacy.

From Germany's perspective, cultivating reliable partners in the region is essential to maintaining its presence, given its limited capacity to directly project influence. South Korea, already a close and capable partner, stands out as a natural choice.[35] Germany's participation in the US-led United Nations Command in South Korea – a body that helps monitor the 1953 armistice and oversee the border between the two Koreas – offers a concrete example of such engagement. In fact, Seoul can serve as a bridge by offering regional insight and operational cooperation that enable Berlin to sustain and amplify its Indo-Pacific engagement. For South Korea, closer cooperation with external powers such as Germany can help amplify its voice as it seeks to become a rule-maker in the region rather than merely a passive rule-taker. Germany is a particularly suitable partner in this regard, given their shared interest in de-risking their economic and strategic dependencies on both Washington and Beijing.

Yet, challenges remain for deeper cooperation. As security issues become more prominent in regional affairs, Germany is inherently constrained in what it can offer, regardless of its genuine willingness to engage the Indo-Pacific. Among the European powers, only France can credibly claim a consistent presence and visibility with its sovereign presence and military deployments. In the context of a protracted war

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[32] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Korea (2025) "Lee Jae Myung government's key diplomatic tasks view: Press releases", 16 September, available online.

[33] Pacheco Pardo, R. (2026) "South Korea-Europe Relations in 2025: Partners in an Uncertain World", *Korea Observer*, 57(1), 136.

[34] The Federal Government of Germany, *Germany – Europe – Asia…*, 39.

[35] Köllner, P. et al. (2022) "Towards Closer European Union and German Cooperation with South Korea in the Indo-Pacific", *German Institute for Global and Area Studies*, GIGA Focus Asien 5, available online.

in Europe, moreover, there are clear limits to how much strategic attention Germany can realistically devote to the Indo-Pacific. As a result, Germany is unlikely to be counted in as a serious security actor in the region.[36]

For Seoul, on the other hand, the challenge lies in articulating a clear and reliable strategic position toward the Indo-Pacific region. The lack of domestic consensus further complicates this task, particularly amid growing political polarisation. The current administration's pragmatic foreign policy may offer a viable middle path, but it must find a way to overcome criticism from both its traditional supporters and opponents. Conservatives view Lee's approach as echoing Moon's strategic ambiguity, which they argue tilts toward Beijing at the expense of Washington. Progressives, by contrast, call for a more decisive departure from Yoon's values-based strategy and a full-fledged embrace of American conception of the Indo-Pacific.

Conclusion

We are currently witnessing a period of profound geopolitical transformation in which long-standing assumptions about security and economic order are increasingly being called into question. Under Trump's transactional approach to the world, the US has not been reluctant to threaten traditional allies and undermine institutions and norms that have underpinned the international order for decades. At the same time, Europe continues to grapple with the ongoing war in Ukraine, while the US is being drawn again into the conflict in the Middle East. In this evolving context, the Indo-Pacific becomes even more important in the global strategic landscape. In particular, uncertainty surrounding the reliability of US security commitments carries significant implications for regional security dynamics. While the American military posture in the region remains intact, perceptions of transactionalism in US foreign policy may prompt regional actors to reassess existing alignments and diversify their strategic partnerships.

In this regard, South Korea, as a middle power navigating the tensions between its alliance with the US and its deep economic ties with China, occupies a particularly pivotal position. Given its strategic interest in maintaining a stable and inclusive regional order, South Korea stands to benefit from strengthening strategic partnerships with European actors – including Germany – that are increasingly engaged with the Indo-Pacific. While periods of systemic transition can provide secondary states with greater agency and flexibility, such opportunities are most effectively realised when these states coordinate and cooperate to advance common strategic visions and shared interests.

[36] Ulatowski, "Germany and the Indo-Pacific…", 648.

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Botto, K. (2021) "South Korea Beyond Northeast Asia: How Seoul Is Deepening Ties with India and ASEAN", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 19 October, available online at: https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/research/2021/10/south-korea-beyond-northeast-asia-how-seoul-is-deepening-ties-with-india-and-asean, accessed 23 March 2026.

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