



**SASAKAWA USA**  
Sasakawa Peace Foundation USA

# The EU's Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific

**Mr. George Cunningham**

Former Strategic Adviser, Asia-Pacific Department, European External Action Service

*\*This paper is a part of a series on Europe's evolving strategic vision for the Indo-Pacific.*

## Background

“Now the dark clouds are dispersing, the sun has started to shine.” With these words, after being unable to reach consensus at the same meeting on a contentious EU-China issue, EU Member States joined together to give their green light in early April 2021 to begin the process of approving the EU's Strategy (the Strategy) for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific.

The Indo-Pacific, as a region, was not seen as a real top priority by the European Union as a whole until late 2020. Even in February 2021, in addition to improving Trans-Atlantic and EU-China relations, the geographic priorities stated in the EU's Trade Policy Review,<sup>1</sup> were the EU's neighborhood and Africa. Asia-Pacific and South America were lumped together last, with limited ambition.

Yet on April 19, 2021, the EU's “Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific” was adopted by the 27 EU Foreign Ministers,<sup>2</sup> followed swiftly by a Joint Communication<sup>3</sup> on the Indo-Pacific from the European Commission and EU High Representative Mr. Josep Borrell<sup>4</sup> in September. The EU's new Strategy was highlighted in European Commission President Von der Leyen's State of the Union address on September 16, 2021.<sup>5</sup> How did this turnaround happen?

---

<sup>1</sup> “Communication on the Trade Policy Review,” European Commission, February 18, 2021, [https://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2021/february/tradoc\\_159438.pdf](https://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2021/february/tradoc_159438.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> “Council Conclusions on an EU Strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific,” Council of the European Union, April 16, 2021, <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-7914-2021-INIT/en/pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> “Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council,” European Commission, September 16, 2021, [https://ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/jointcommunication\\_2021\\_24\\_1\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/jointcommunication_2021_24_1_en.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> His full title “High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy” is shortened here to “EU High Representative.”

<sup>5</sup> “2021 State of the Union Addressed by President von der Leyen,” European Commission, September 15, 2021, [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH\\_21\\_4701](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH_21_4701).

For some time, while other EU partners were adopting their own versions of Indo-Pacific approaches, the EU was tiptoeing around using the term. The reason is that the term “Indo-Pacific” has anti-China connotations. President Trump’s 2017 U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy reflected the intensification of U.S.-China rivalry already underway. The EU did not wish to be dragged into battles it did not necessarily believe were in its interest. Instead, the EU worked on different ways to keep Trans-Atlantic cooperation alive wherever it could during the challenging Trump Presidency.

For many years, EU Member States also did not wish to antagonize China and risk killing what was perceived to be the “goose that lays the golden egg.” China’s narrative – that countries would be punished if they stepped on China’s many sensitivities – was believed, even if China needed Europe, especially in research and development (R&D), at least as much as Europe needed China.

Nevertheless, the EU developed a more robust multifaceted policy towards China in its Joint Communication “EU-China: A Strategic Outlook” in March 2019.<sup>6</sup> Defining China as a cooperative partner, a negotiating partner, an economic competitor or (increasingly) a systemic rival, depending on the policy area, brought a more ‘realpolitik’ approach to EU-China relations. China itself created antagonism in European countries with its unnecessarily aggressive ‘wolf-warrior’ diplomacy.<sup>7</sup> This escalated into a blizzard of misinformation and disinformation on social media in an attempt to cover up the Chinese Communist Party’s responsibility for the initial suppression of information about the outbreak of COVID-19 in Wuhan, which led to the pandemic’s spread across the world. Ricketty Western European public opinion towards China crashed to an all-time low in 2020, marginally recovering in 2021 (Figure 1).

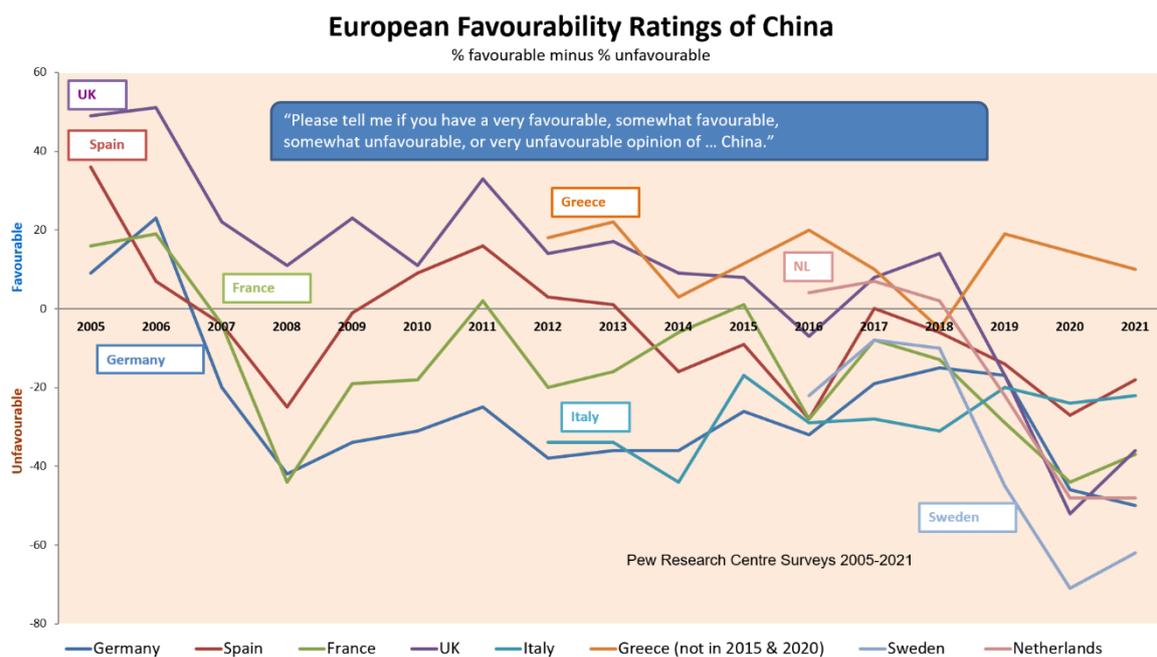


Figure 1. European Favorability Ratings of China

Source: Data from Pew Research Center Global Attitudes Survey, <https://www.pewresearch.org/>

<sup>6</sup> “EU-China – A strategic outlook,” European Commission, March 12, 2019, <https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/communication-eu-china-a-strategic-outlook.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> *The Guardian* newspaper reported that Chinese Ambassador to Sweden Gui Congyou had been summoned to Sweden’s Foreign Ministry more than 40 times in two years. He famously explained on Swedish radio in November 2019, “We treat our friends with fine wine, but for our enemies we have shotguns.”

The ASEAN Indo-Pacific Outlook<sup>8</sup> of June 2019, agreed by ten countries with very diverse views about their relations with China, and taking a broad perspective, helped detoxify the term “Indo-Pacific” somewhat. The first time the term “Indo-Pacific” appeared officially for the EU was in the joint EU-Japan statement on sustainable connectivity and quality infrastructure partnership in September 2019<sup>9</sup> when the EU was grateful to Japanese Prime Minister Abe for visiting Brussels for the second time that year. Then the word “Indo-Pacific” appeared in a more working-level joint statement with Australia. But not much more.

What really broke the ice was the election of Joe Biden as President of the United States. Keen to mend transatlantic ties after the Trump trauma, the European Commission and High Representative unveiled “The New EU-US Agenda for Global Change” on December 7, 2020,<sup>10</sup> even before the formal inauguration of the new US President. This advocated *inter alia* “increased EU focus on the challenges and opportunities in the Indo-Pacific region (which) will help deepen cooperation with like-minded partners in the region.”

At about the same time, France, Germany, and the Netherlands were already laying the groundwork for an EU Indo-Pacific approach. France, as a Pacific naval power in its own right with 1.5 million citizens and 8,000 military personnel in the Indo-Pacific region, was first amongst EU Member States, with its Indo-Pacific Strategy in 2018.<sup>11</sup> It addressed, first and foremost, the security challenges of the region and was launched by President Macron at the Garden Island naval base in Australia. This was followed by Indo-Pacific strategies from Germany and the Netherlands in the second half of 2020 which were more broad-based, also given their significant trade and investment links and not having military assets permanently in the Indo-Pacific. In December 2020, these three EU Member States were joined by seven others in presenting an internal EU paper calling for a unified EU Strategy for the Indo-Pacific.

Because Member States wanted quick action, the usual procedure of sometimes taking a year or more to produce a Joint Communication with proposals of action, followed by its endorsement in Council Conclusions, was reversed with the 27 EU Foreign Ministers setting the direction first. This was followed by details of how it should be implemented which were set out in a Joint Communication,<sup>12</sup> which came five months later.

## Rationale, Principles, and Values

In the Indo-Pacific, the EU is already the number one investor, top provider of development assistance, and among the largest trader in the region, which the EU Strategy defines as stretching from the east coast of Africa to the Pacific Island States.

The EU's Strategy promotes diversification. It highlights the opportunities for Europe in partnering with the many economies of the region whose fast growth is expected to pick up fully once the worst of the COVID-19 pandemic is over. China hardly gets a mention in the EU Strategy. The EU's approach is that the focus should be on the benefits the whole region can bring to the EU, at a time when existing supply chains were increasingly under strain and doing business with China was coming with growing risks.

The Strategy also recognizes that the security situation in the region is deteriorating with geopolitical competition, vulnerable supply chains, military buildup (including China's), climate change, increasing human rights abuses, malicious cyber activities, and increasing nuclear proliferation in the region. These developments are seen as increasingly threatening the stability and security of the region and beyond, thus directly impacting the

<sup>8</sup> “ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific,” ASEAN, accessed January 5, 2022, [https://asean.org/asean2020/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/ASEAN-Outlook-on-the-Indo-Pacific\\_FINAL\\_22062019.pdf](https://asean.org/asean2020/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/ASEAN-Outlook-on-the-Indo-Pacific_FINAL_22062019.pdf).

<sup>9</sup> “The Partnership on Sustainable Connectivity and Quality Infrastructure between Japan and the European Union,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, accessed January 5, 2022, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/000521432.pdf>.

<sup>10</sup> “Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the European Council,” European Commission, December 2, 2020, [https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/joint-communication-eu-us-agenda\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/joint-communication-eu-us-agenda_en.pdf).

<sup>11</sup> “France's Indo-Pacific Strategy,” France's Ministry for European and Foreign Affairs, accessed January 5, 2022, [https://au.ambafrance.org/IMG/pdf/en\\_indopacifique\\_web\\_cle0f44b5.pdf?13678/a892c4f93ab0687400274085650d6d72973af817](https://au.ambafrance.org/IMG/pdf/en_indopacifique_web_cle0f44b5.pdf?13678/a892c4f93ab0687400274085650d6d72973af817).

<sup>12</sup> The reality is that Member States, the EEAS, and Commission services will consult each other informally on particular points as drafts of texts progress to avoid surprises and that the approach is implementable.

EU's own security, especially its economic interests. The EU's reinforced presence in the region is aimed to be more a calming force for stability, even without a significant military presence of its Member States in the region apart from France.

To assuage those Member States concerned about offending China (and, therefore, to ensure unanimity amongst 27 EU Foreign Ministers for the Strategy), the entire document emphasizes that the Strategy is inclusive and not against any particular country. "Cooperation" features deliberately in the title of the Strategy. However, the EU also says that it will deepen its engagement in the Indo-Pacific in particular with those partners that have already announced Indo-Pacific approaches of their own. In this way, certain partners are favored more than others - and China is not one of them as it does not have an "Indo-Pacific Strategy" termed as such.<sup>13</sup>

The Strategy also makes clear that the EU will adapt and build its cooperation according to specific policy areas where partners can find common ground based on shared principles, values, or mutual interest. This is an EU policy of "principled pragmatism," first iterated in the EU's Global Strategy of 2016<sup>14</sup> and leaves the door open for cooperation with partners such as Vietnam that are friendly towards the EU whilst not necessary espousing the same values.<sup>15</sup>

Human rights are inevitably a part of this Strategy, but they do not dominate. The EU reiterates in its Strategy its commitment and position on the universality of human rights in the region and its willingness to use its new restrictive measures (sanctions) regime.<sup>16</sup> But there is also a deep-down recognition within the EU - not stated in the Strategy - that autocratic China gives succor to authoritarian governments in the region to the degree that it is blunting the effectiveness of what Europe and the United States can do to sufficiently protect the human rights of people in the Indo-Pacific. This is a serious issue that is still seeking an adequate answer, as can be seen in Myanmar and Cambodia for instance.

## Implementation

The EU's Strategy plays to the strengths of the EU. The EU has no armed forces of its own and significant defense cooperation still has its limitations. However, the European Commission has a wide range of competencies which it can use to further EU policies abroad, including fostering the development of technological standards and regulations in line with the EU's values and principles. The Strategy is in fact in many respects the externalization of internal EU policies, in particular when it comes to climate change and digitalization, the top two EU forward-looking policy priorities back home. The Joint Communication of September 2021 - focused mainly on implementing the Strategy - highlights seven priority areas for action:

### 1. Sustainable and Inclusive Prosperity

Despite the overarching importance of fighting climate change through the Green Transition, trade and investment top the list of EU actions for the Indo-Pacific. The February 2021 Trade Policy Review's lack of ambition in the region is now fully corrected in the Strategy. In addition to completing EU trade negotiations with Australia and New Zealand, the Strategy now mentions Indonesia as well as "resuming trade negotiations and starting investment negotiations with India; completing an Economic Partnership Agreement with the East Africa Community; assessing the possible resumption of trade negotiations with Malaysia, the Philippines, and

---

<sup>13</sup> Although China does have a Two-Oceans Strategy linked to its significant naval build-up and its geostrategic infrastructure Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). See: R. D. Kaplan, "China's Two-Ocean Strategy," *China's Arrival: A Strategic Framework for a Global Relationship* (Washington: Center for a New American Security 2009).

<sup>14</sup> "Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe," European Union Global Strategy, June 2016, [https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/top\\_stories/pdf/eugs\\_review\\_web.pdf](https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/top_stories/pdf/eugs_review_web.pdf).

<sup>15</sup> That does not mean that the EU does not simultaneously try to improve human rights situations in partner countries through persuasion by Human Rights Dialogues and other initiatives.

<sup>16</sup> On December 7, 2020, European Union adopted a new instrument, a new sanctions regime against human rights violations in the world, which makes it possible to sanction natural, legal or State entities that have allegedly violated human rights.

Thailand; and the eventual negotiation of a region-to-region trade agreement with ASEAN.” However, the EU does not mention or engage itself with negotiating to join the regional CPTPP trade agreement.

Tacked on, as well, in the Strategy is the EU's aim to “pursue its deep trade investment relationships with whom it does not have trade and investment relations, such as Taiwan.”<sup>17</sup> Taiwan is highlighted again when it comes to cooperation on semiconductors (as are increasing tensions in the Taiwan Strait and other hotspots having the potential of directly impacting European security and prosperity).

The politically agreed EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment is mentioned in the Strategy, but it is now indefinitely on ice, not least because of Chinese counter-sanctions on many EU politicians and other policy influencers coming after the EU's limited and measured use of its new sanctions regime targeting four Chinese individuals and a Chinese corporation's activities in Xinjiang.

## 2. Green Transition

The Green Transition is the signature policy of the EU, translated into external action in the region. The EU has just concluded its first high ambition Green Alliance with Japan. It will be seeking other alliances and partnerships with as many countries as possible wishing to make a significant effort to limit climate change and environmental degradation following COP26 in Glasgow. The support of Pacific and other island states will be critical in building support here. The EU says that at least around one-third of all its development funding will be “green.” However, the Green Transition might encroach on the interests of its partners in the Indo-Pacific, such as the new rules proposed by the European Commission this November to curb “EU-driven” deforestation<sup>18</sup> which might, inter-alia, impact on Malaysia and Indonesia's palm oil exports to the EU.

## 3. Ocean Governance

The EU wants to ensure the sustainable management of the ocean's resources and safeguard biodiversity.<sup>19</sup> It is working with partners against Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) fishing in the region. It will expand its engagement with Regional Fisheries Management Organizations, promote Marine-Protected Areas, and take action against marine pollution.

## 4. Digital Governance and Partnership

Cooperation here is with “like-minded” partners to develop standards for emerging technologies, including areas such as artificial intelligence which the Strategy emphasizes should be “in line with democratic principles and fundamental rights.” Japan, the Republic of Korea, and Singapore - as well as ongoing work with India - are identified for potential digital partnership agreements with the EU. Commissioner Thierry Breton of the Internal Market visited the first two partners on a “Tech and Chips” tour in late September 2021. The EU Strategy also says the EU is seeking to “strengthen cooperation on research and innovation with like-minded regional partners under the ‘Horizon Europe’ program” and has identified countries it wishes to work with.<sup>20</sup> The full potential in this area was captured by a special study commissioned by the EU on the subject.<sup>21</sup>

## 5. Connectivity

The EU has always been a significant player in the connectivity field, in particular in creating internal transport and other quality networks to help build its Single Market and link it with its neighboring countries. However, it has faced significant challenges to do more than it already does with its development assistance outside the EU

<sup>17</sup> “Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council,” European Commission, September 16, 2021, [https://ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/jointcommunication\\_2021\\_24\\_1\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/jointcommunication_2021_24_1_en.pdf).

<sup>18</sup> “European Green Deal: Commission adopts new proposals to stop deforestation, innovate sustainable waste management and make souls healthy for people, nature and climate,” European Commission, November 17, 2021, [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip\\_21\\_5916](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_21_5916).

<sup>19</sup> In 2019, imports and exports of fisheries and aquaculture products between the EU and the rest of the world totaled 8.55 million tonnes with a value of 33 billion EUR, making the EU the second largest trader of these products after China. See: “The EU Fish Market,” European Commission, November 2020, [https://www.eumofa.eu/documents/20178/415635/EN\\_The+EU+fish+market\\_2020.pdf](https://www.eumofa.eu/documents/20178/415635/EN_The+EU+fish+market_2020.pdf).

<sup>20</sup> Australia, Japan, Republic of Korea, New Zealand, and Singapore.

<sup>21</sup> Maaïke Okano-Heijmans and Brigitte Dekker, “Fostering Digital Connectivity In and With the Indo-Pacific,” accessed January 4, 2022, <https://www.clingendael.org/publication/fostering-digital-connectivity-and-indo-pacific>.

and its neighborhood since its ambitious plan launched in 2018 to connect Europe and Asia in the fields of transport, digital, energy, and people-to-people.<sup>22</sup> The September 2019 Connectivity Partnership with Japan has, for instance, been very slow to get off the ground despite the best intentions of both partners to do so. Facilitating the mobilization of the necessary funding has proven very difficult. Nonetheless, the huge pressure from its Member States<sup>23</sup> for the EU to do more led to its relaunch as “Global Gateway” in December 2021, enlarged to a worldwide remit.<sup>24</sup> <sup>25</sup> It remains to be seen if up to 300 billion EUR of public and private money for Global Gateway can really be raised, whether it can be put to good strategic use (rather than spent on disconnected localized and regional projects), and whether it can be seen sufficiently as a marked improvement on China’s Belt and Road Initiative which already has been going for eight years and has mopped up much of the money available in partner countries for such projects. Both the US and Japan join the EU as well, with their own quality infrastructure initiatives. The EU also has agreed to a connectivity partnership with India.

## 6. Security and Defense

Despite its lack of military might, there is much the EU can achieve with its “like-minded partners.” For the first time, EU Member States are called to have “a meaningful European naval presence” in the Indo-Pacific region. The anti-piracy EU Naval Force Somalia (EU NAVFOR) Operation Atalanta will increase its joint naval exercises and port calls with its Indo-Pacific partners. The EU’s Strategy certainly envisages more patrols in the region, building on the permanent French naval presence in the region, as well as the recent deployments of German and Dutch frigates in 2021.<sup>26</sup>

The EU’s Critical Maritime Routes in the India Ocean (CRIMARIO) capacity building project will be extended to the Southern Pacific. India, Indonesia, Japan, the Republic of Korea, Singapore, and Vietnam are pilot countries in an EU Enhancing Security Cooperation in and with Asia (ESIWA) project which covers counterterrorism, cybersecurity, maritime security, and crisis management. The EU will also step up its involvement in the ASEAN security architecture.

This is all underlined by a restatement of commitment in the Strategy to a rules-based regional security architecture and secure, free, and open sea lines of communication with the legal framework of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).

## 7. Human Security

The intense rivalry that has developed in particular between China, the European Union, Russia, and the United States, known as “vaccine diplomacy,” is well known. Around half of all vaccines produced by the EU are destined for overseas. “Team Europe” (EU plus its Member States) has been particularly concerned by the low levels of vaccination in Africa and is putting its priority there whilst, nonetheless, also providing vaccines to assist Indo-Pacific partners in difficulties such as Laos PDR and others through the COVAX facility. Not having been a priority in the past, the EU now says in its Strategy that it will aim to reinforce support to healthcare systems and pandemic preparedness for the least-developed countries in the Indo-Pacific region. This includes collaborative research through its Horizon Europe program.

Fortunately, the launch of the EU Strategy came at a time when the EU was in the process of programming the first four years of its next seven-year cycle of worldwide development assistance. Thus, the

---

<sup>22</sup> “Connecting Europe and Asia – Building blocks for an EU Strategy,” European Commission, September 19, 2018, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=JOIN:2018:031:FIN>.

<sup>23</sup> FACT SHEET: President Biden and G7 Leaders Launch Build Back Better World (B3W) Partnership,” the White House, June 12, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/06/12/fact-sheet-president-biden-and-g7-leaders-launch-build-back-better-world-b3w-partnership/>.

<sup>24</sup> “Global Gateway: up to €300 billion,” European Commission, December 1, 2021, [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip\\_21\\_6433](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_21_6433).

<sup>25</sup> “Joint Communication: The Global Gateway,” European Commission, December 1, 2021, [https://ec.europa.eu/info/files/joint-communication-global-gateway\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/files/joint-communication-global-gateway_en).

<sup>26</sup> Already in 2021, the German and Dutch governments had each made efforts in 2021 to send a frigate to the Indo-Pacific, including the South China Sea.

necessary steps have been taken to secure access to funding for the EU's Indo-Pacific Strategy within that programming and using other available EU financial instruments.

## Reactions and Further Developments

The EU's Strategy is described by some to be the “third way,” taking no sides, non-threatening, and therefore widely welcomed in the region. And the EU also has given its Asian partners a large palette for cooperation to choose from.

In all its seven priority areas, the EU's Strategy identifies specific partners in the region which are the most aligned with EU policies to work with or continue working with, while not excluding others. Japan and India have also pro-actively approached the EU to offer specific areas of cooperation. There are plenty of ongoing dialogues to keep developing the collaboration, especially those partners with Indo-Pacific approaches of their own. These include regular EU summits with India, Japan, the Republic of Korea, and the United States, as well as other high-level interactions with more partners in the region. This does not exclude, of course, using the opportunity of the regular EU-China summit to search for common ground where possible, as well as at its biannual Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) summit - its main forum for dialogue with the region as a whole which includes China, India, and Russia.

China, indeed, has been largely quiet about the EU's Strategy,<sup>27</sup> as was the case with the French, German, and the Netherlands Indo-Pacific Strategies when they were launched. China's focus of concern is squarely with the United States and allies with significant naval power.

In a careful way, the EU also offers cooperation with the QUAD<sup>28</sup> on what the Strategy calls “issues of common interest” and gives as examples climate change, technology, and vaccines. This naturally drew a favorable reaction from the QUAD leaders' summit on September 24, 2021, which welcomed the EU's Strategy, looking forward to working together with the EU on infrastructure projects.<sup>29</sup>

It was, however, extremely unfortunate that the AUKUS agreement was announced on September 15, 2021, distracting attention from the launch of the EU's Joint Communication of the EU's Strategy the day after. The ensuing loss of the submarine contract by France also unnecessarily rocked the boat among the like-minded. Nevertheless, the EU Strategy's implementation is now in full swing, awkward AUKUS or not. And the EU and US have established their own high-level consultations on the Indo-Pacific, with the first meeting having taken place in December 2021.

## Next Steps

France has been the strongest backer of the EU's Strategy and will use its six-monthly Presidency of the European Union in the first half of 2022<sup>30</sup> to push forward the EU's Indo-Pacific policy to its next stage. This is expected to include a Ministerial Forum on the Indo-Pacific, including partners invited from the region. The EU's access to “contested strategic areas” will include “the expanded application, in early 2022, of the Coordinated Maritime Presence in a new area of the Indo-Pacific.”<sup>31</sup>

---

<sup>27</sup> The EU Delegation in Beijing held an event with Chinese think tanks to discuss the Indo-Pacific soon after the release of the Council Conclusions in April.

<sup>28</sup> “Joint Communication,” European Commission, September 16, 2021, [https://ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/jointcommunication\\_2021\\_24\\_1\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/jointcommunication_2021_24_1_en.pdf).

<sup>29</sup> “Joint Statement from Quad Leaders,” the White House, September 24, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/09/24/joint-statement-from-quad-leaders/>.

<sup>30</sup> EU Member States take turns to hold the EU Presidency which rotates every six months. The turn of each of the current 27 Member States therefore comes up every 13 ½ years.

<sup>31</sup> “Recovery, Strength and a Sense of Belonging,” French Presidency of the Council of the European Union, accessed January 5, 2022, [https://presidence-francaise.consilium.europa.eu/media/qh4cg0qq/en\\_programme-pfue-v1-2.pdf](https://presidence-francaise.consilium.europa.eu/media/qh4cg0qq/en_programme-pfue-v1-2.pdf).

The French EU Presidency also aims to gain agreement within the EU on a “European Strategic Compass” for its security and defense which includes capability development, crisis management, resilience, and partnerships. Certainly, the moment has come to consider expanding EU Member State naval capabilities in a serious way.<sup>32</sup>

After the Strategy’s endorsement by the European Council meeting of EU Heads of State and Government on October 21 and 22, the European External Action Service and European Commission services have started implementing the Strategy based on the broad scope of concrete actions enunciated in the Joint Communication.

## Conclusion

It is clear that the EU has its Indo-Pacific Strategy about right, playing to its strengths in the region and using the opportunity of the Strategy to make some significant advances, especially on the trade and security side. The EU is, therefore, on steadier ground staying with its largely socio-economic approach and relatively light-touch, hard security approach which seeks to calm the increasingly choppy waters of the Indo-Pacific in its own way.

The Strategy also has helped the EU refocus internally on the region, what it has to offer, and ensure internal structures are put in place for implementation. However, the EU’s new connectivity initiative “Global Gateway” will need to raise significant sums of money, especially from the private sector, and prove itself to have a strategic approach which goes beyond just a rehashing of existing initiatives. There are good opportunities to create synergies with partners that have Indo-Pacific strategies of their own. This is more than a business-as-usual approach, but there must be focus, flexibility, and commitment of adequate resources by the EU to make the most of the opportunities and develop ideas.

As part of this, the EU needs to be more “strategic” and nimble in the use of its economic and financial muscle, especially when it comes to its development assistance. Real positive change ought to be felt in the Indo-Pacific and be seen to benefit European citizens.

Prime Minister Kishida of Japan seems satisfied with the EU’s approach. The main issue is for the EU and others to remain committed and active in the Indo-Pacific region. As Prime Minister Kishida was reported to reiterate last October, “Considering the stability of the region, it is extremely important for European and US countries to be interested and involved in Asia’s security environment.”<sup>33</sup>

*Mr. George Cunningham wrote in his personal capacity. The views and interpretations expressed by the author are solely his own.*

---

<sup>32</sup> The possible withdrawal of precious European naval resources away from potential flashpoints nearer to home such as those related to Russia, has created hesitation to deepen naval commitments in the Indo-Pacific. The issue of an increased naval construction program to tackle the deficit of EU Member State naval vessels given the state of the world has still to catch on sufficiently. Shipyard job creation is said to have been the main driver behind the UK’s original decision to construct its two new aircraft carriers.

<sup>33</sup> “Fumio Kishida pledges to steer Japan away from Abenomics,” *Financial Times*, October 14, 2021, <https://www.ft.com/content/ffa6754f-3c12-4729-921d-aa2acc5e96ee>.



*George Cunningham retired from the European External Action Service in July 2021 as its Strategic Adviser on Asia-Pacific Affairs. He is responsible for the EU's recent Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific. He was the EU Alternate Senior Official for the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) and the EU Governor of the Asia-Europe Foundation.*

*He was previously EU Deputy Ambassador to Afghanistan (2016-18); EEAS Deputy Head of Division for China, Hong Kong, Macao, Taiwan, and Mongolia (2012-16); Chargé d'Affaires of the EU's Delegation to New Zealand (2007-12); and Coordinator for EU-US bilateral trade relations at the EC's Trade Directorate General (2005-07). He was also Head of Accession Process and Cooperation at the EC's Delegation to Cyprus (2003-05) and Head of Press/Public Affairs and Political Counsellor at the EC's Delegation to the United Nations in New York (2000-03).*

*He has worked for thirty years for the EU across all the main foreign policy files, especially foreign and security policy, development, public diplomacy, and trade. He has particular interest in promoting social justice, fighting corruption, and security sector reform.*

*Before joining the European Commission, George Cunningham served as a United Nations official in New York (1987-1990) and was also an advisor on European integration to the Polish Council of Ministers in Warsaw (1992). At the start of his busy and varied career, he served as an officer in the British Army, and worked in marketing for British Petroleum and British Telecom. He founded and ran a non-governmental organization PACE International Affairs. He is a graduate of Oxford University (MA Oxon Modern History).*

*During his youth, he undertook a major expedition in Africa, with the backing of African Presidents, walking 9,000 kilometers on foot from Alexandria in Egypt to Cape Town in South Africa over a period of 27 months (1979-81).*

*George is also Chair of Lib Dems Overseas (2018-2021), having been Chair (2016) and Vice-Chair (2014-15, 2017) of Brussels and Europe Lib Dems. He became Chair of the newly formed party's subcommittee on China. He has attended Liberal International and ALDE Congresses as a member of the Council as part of the UK Lib Dems Delegation since 2017. He stood as a Lib Dem candidate for parliament in the 2015 UK General Election.*

*He is a member of Chatham House in London. His book - Journey to Become a Diplomat - was published in 2005 by the Foreign Policy Association of New York. He has enjoyed encouraging youth to get involved in international affairs by lecturing at universities and has spoken numerous times at the European Parliament in his professional capacity. He also trained Gulf Cooperation Council Diplomats in Riyadh on behalf of the College of Europe. He is currently undertaking many webinars on Afghanistan, China, and the Indo-Pacific.*

*George Cunningham was born in 1956 and has dual British-Polish nationality. He is married with two grown-up children.*