SASAKAWA USA
Sasakawa Peace Foundation USA

Where Does Europe Fit in India's Indo-Pacific Policy?

Dr. Garima Mohan
Fellow, Asia Program, German Marshall Fund

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

Introduction

The rapid speed with which the Indo-Pacific agenda has gained momentum within the European Union has taken its partners around the world by surprise. While individual strategies from Germany and the Netherlands created a few ripples in the Indo-Pacific, an EU-wide adoption carried enough weight for partners in the region to seriously consider where Europe could factor in and contribute to their Indo-Pacific approaches. This changed assessment of Europe's role in the Indo-Pacific is expressed most clearly in the Biden administration's Indo-Pacific strategy which speaks of bridging the Euro-Atlantic and the Indo-Pacific.[1] India was slow to warm up to this European interest. Beyond its strong bilateral ties with France, it was hard for New Delhi to imagine what a European role in the region would look like. However, since the EU's adoption of its Indo-Pacific strategy in September 2021,[2] India has made strong statements of support and now is beginning to see the Indo-Pacific as an expanded arena for the EU-India partnership.

This paper will analyse the role European strategies envision for India, note India's reaction to the various European strategies, and review how EU-India cooperation in the Indo-Pacific is playing out in practice.

Background: India in the EU's Indo-Pacific Outlook

India figures prominently in the EU's newly released Indo-Pacific strategy, alongside older and trusted partners like Japan. This document presents both a vision for the EU to increase its engagement with India and reflects the strides already made in the partnership so far. The EU strategy states its aim to "deepen engagement" with partners like India, Japan, and Australia, who "already have their own Indo-Pacific strategies." This list of partners most obviously leaves out China and is an attempt by the EU to underscore who it views as its most important partners in the region.

---

[1] "Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States," Executive Office of the President, National Security Council, The White House, February 2022, https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/U.S.-Indo-Pacific-Strategy.pdf.

[2] "Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council: The EU strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific," European Commission, September 2021, https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/jointcommunication_2021_24_1_en.pdf.

In addition, India is mentioned as an existing or potential partner in all the priority areas listed in the EU strategy. For instance, the EU seeks to invest more in supporting green and digital transitions and aiding resilient and diversified value chains in the Indo-Pacific. Here the EU-India agreement of May 2021 is highlighted as an example of partnerships the EU seeks to create. The document also mentions the resumption, after a decade in limbo, of the EU-India free trade and investment agreement negotiations as part of the broader EU strategy of deepening economic ties with the region. On digital partnerships, it highlights the EU-India agreement to deepen cooperation on emerging technologies ranging from AI, High Performance Computing, Quantum technologies, 5G and public sector digitization. Japan and India are also the first two "connectivity partners" of the EU with whom it will work on providing alternatives to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). India also is listed as an important partner on the issue of health and pandemic response with whom the EU already is working on developing active pharmaceutical ingredients and securing access to vaccines through the COVAX initiative and beyond.

On the defence and security components of the EU strategy, India figures prominently, as well. The strategy highlights security cooperation already instituted with India – for example, on maritime security, counter terrorism, cyber security, and crisis management. India is one of the few 'pilot' countries where the EU has instituted cooperation focusing on these issues as part of a broader program of increasing security cooperation with and in Asia. Going forward, the strategy mentions the need to conduct more joint naval activities including exercises, port calls, and multilateral exercises with India to protect the freedom of navigation in the Indo-Pacific. And, finally, the EU strategy also accords a place of prominence to the Indian Ocean, which it calls the "gateway to the Indo-Pacific," where India is a key actor, with the ambitions of becoming a net security provider. India will no doubt be an important actor as the EU builds its "network of partnerships" in the Indian Ocean region.

Beyond the bilateral partnership with India, the strategy also lists the potential of working with groupings like the Quad, where India is a key member, on issues of common interest like climate change, technology, and vaccines.

This place of importance for India is also reflected in the Indo-Pacific approaches of European member states, as well. The French Indo-Pacific strategy has a clear focus on strengthening the strategic partnership with India, focusing on areas of bilateral cooperation like defence, civil nuclear energy, and space. Recently, France and India have made rapid progress on cooperation in the broader Indo-Pacific including in maritime security – focusing on strategic exchanges, cooperation between their two navies, joint exercises, and arrangements related to sharing maritime information. Their partnership in the Indo-Pacific also has a component on ocean governance and Blue Economy, and cooperation in third countries like the Pacific Islands. While the German policy guidelines on the Indo-Pacific don't specifically mention an elevated role for India, the new German government's coalition agreement specifically mentions improving the strategic partnership with India as a key priority.

The EU, under the French Presidency, organized an Indo-Pacific Ministerial Forum on February 22, with the aim of making the EU strategy more concrete and invited key regional partners to Paris. India also participated at the foreign minister level. The Forum announced several concrete projects the EU will undertake with partners in three broad areas of security and defence, infrastructure connectivity, and delivering common goods in the Indo-Pacific – all areas where, as the Ambassador of France to India noted, "we believe India has an important role to play".[3]

India's Reaction

While India figures prominently in all European strategies, how has New Delhi reacted to this increasing European interest in its region? Where does Europe fit, if at all, in India's Indo-Pacific vision?

[3] Emmanuel Lenain, "The significance of the EU-India partnership in the Indo-Pacific," *The Indian Express*, February 21, 2022, https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/the-significance-of-eu-india-partnership-in-the-indo-pacific-france-7782871/.

Two years ago, when individual European countries were releasing their Indo-Pacific strategies, there was considerable scepticism in New Delhi. France was considered a legitimate Indo-Pacific actor given its territories, citizens, and defence engagement with the region. It was harder for New Delhi to understand the interest or potential role countries like Germany or the Netherlands could play in the Indo-Pacific. India also was keenly aware that this didn't represent a unified European shift towards the region and assumed that since the EU has no unified position on China and was reluctant to even use the term Indo-Pacific in official interactions with India, that European interest in the region would continue to remain marginal.

The speed at which the EU adopted its Indo-Pacific strategy took New Delhi, like many other regional actors, by surprise. The strategy showed a European consensus towards engaging with the region. This combined with the historic EU-India Leaders' Summit of May 2021, where the Indian Prime Minister Modi met with all 27 EU Heads of State for the first time, credibly demonstrated to New Delhi that Europe was serious about engaging more with the Indo-Pacific and diversifying its partners in the region beyond China. At the Indo-Pacific Forum in Paris on February 22, the Indian Foreign Minister Jaishankar made the strongest official statement yet on Europe's role in the Indo-Pacific. "India appreciates the enormous contribution that Europe can make to world affairs," with its "considered voice and mature capabilities."[4] He argued that the EU-India partnership had strengthened greatly and going forward, "the Indo-Pacific will certainly be an important area of its expression."[5]

Most importantly, India now seems to recognize that Europe has a stake in the stability of the Indo-Pacific. As the Foreign Minister noted, "France was among the first countries in the world to recognize this strategic geography. It is, of course, a resident power in the Indo-Pacific. And by extension, so too is the European Union." This represents a major shift in tone from New Delhi. India therefore "welcomes the EU's commitment to contributing to the region." India and the EU's "collective efforts can keep the oceans peaceful, open, and secure, and [at] the same time, contribute to conserve its resources and keep it clean." This indicates that India envisions a European contribution to security – on both traditional and non-traditional challenges such as maritime safety, climate change, and pollution. India also noted the "economic heft and expertise" the EU brings to the Indo-Pacific and can promote economic development, infrastructure connectivity, and digital transformation especially through its Global Gateway initiative.

Policy makers in New Delhi also note the similarities between the EU's and India's Indo-Pacific visions as both seek to work on providing a positive agenda of solutions for the region rather than a logic of military confrontation. Both Europe and India focus on diversifying partnerships, diplomacy, and place a greater emphasis on burden sharing. A key pillar of India's Indo-Pacific approach is working with minilaterals or as India calls them, "plurilaterals" including with the Quad. The EU, while not nimble enough to work in these small formats, specifically states its openness to working with the Quad's working groups where possible.

Individual EU member states are more open to engaging in these smaller formats. For example, France has a trilateral dialogue with India and Australia which was elevated to the Ministers' level in 2021 before being suspended due to the AUKUS announcement. This France-India-Australia grouping focused on three priority areas including maritime security and safety, management of marine resources and the environment, and deepening cooperation within multilateral forums. It addressed important challenges around information sharing, humanitarian aid and disaster response, and increasing the interoperability of the three countries' navies. Similarly,

---

[4] Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian and Vice President Josep Borell, "Remarks by External Affairs Minister at the Opening Session of the EU Ministerial Forum on Indo-Pacific," Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, February 22, 2022, https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/34884/Remarks+by+External+Affairs+Minister+at+the+Opening+Session+of+the+EU+Ministerial+Forum+on+IndoPacific.

[5] Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian and Vice President Josep Borell, "Remarks by External Affairs Minister at the Opening Session of the EU Ministerial Forum on Indo-Pacific," Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, February 22, 2022, https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/34884/Remarks+by+External+Affairs+Minister+at+the+Opening+Session+of+the+EU+Ministerial+Forum+on+IndoPacific.

Italy, India, and Japan have instituted a trilateral dialogue which is currently at the track 1.5 stage and focuses on economic issues such as supply chain resilience.[6]

India-EU Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific

As shown above, New Delhi has largely recalibrated its approach to Europe's increasing interest in the Indo-Pacific, and now sees it in line with India's policy priorities in the region. In practice, this also has translated into cooperation on security and defence, infrastructure connectivity, supply chain resilience and trade, and global health and pandemic response. This section will examine each of these areas to see where Europe fits into India's policies for the Indo-Pacific.

Maritime Security

India has a strong partnership with France in the maritime domain, but it has also significantly stepped-up cooperation with the EU as well. As India's Foreign Minister Jaishankar remarked at a recent address in Paris, "in security, France is already among India's foremost partners" and he noted that with the EU, India "now has an enhanced partnership and operational level of access."[7]

A major component of the India-France bilateral partnership is cooperation on maritime security in the Indo-Pacific. As the French Indo-Pacific strategy notes, both countries are working towards, "upholding the law of the sea in the region" particularly through joint naval exercises such as their annual "Varuna" drills. In May 2021, India joined the French La Perouse exercise for the first time in the Bay of Bengal, which also included navies from the other Quad members. The Indian and French navies also have participated in several multilateral exercises in the region. Both countries have a long-standing and regular maritime security dialogue which was instituted in 2016. There are frequent meetings between the National Security Advisors and defence ministers of both countries. In addition, France and India are cooperating within institutions such as the Indian Ocean Rim Association (where France recently gained membership with the support of India) and in the EU-led Indian Ocean Commission where India is a dialogue partner. On non-traditional security issues as well, India views France as a key partner. Both countries signed a roadmap on Blue Economy and Ocean Governance in February 2021, which includes cooperation on combatting illegal fishing, pollution, countering climate change, and promoting research and innovation.[8] France also supports the marine resource pillar of India's newly launched Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative.

While the cooperation with France should come as no surprise to observers of Indian foreign policy, EU-India maritime cooperation also has seen a significant increase. As an issue, maritime security has moved from an area which was largely ignored to the EU and India establishing a high-level, annual maritime security dialogue. This covers Indo-Pacific initiatives launched by both sides, developments in maritime security and the environment, and allows dialogue on the evolving strategic landscape in the Indo-Pacific. In June of 2021, the EU and India conducted their first ever joint military exercise in the Gulf of Aden.[9] There is scope for improvement and the level of cooperation on maritime issues is not as sophisticated as with individual countries,

---

[6] Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury, "India launches new trilateral with Italy and Japan for Indo-Pacific Stability," *The Economic Times*, June 18, 2021, https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/india/india-launches-new-trilateral-with-italy-and-japan-for-indo-pacific-stability/articleshow/83624187.cms.

[7] Dr. S. Jaishankar, "Address by External Affairs Minister at French Institute of International Relations on 'How India sees France,'" Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, February 23, 2022, https://mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/34886/Address+by+External+Affairs+Minister+at+French+Institute+of+International+Relations+on+How+India+sees+France.

[8] "India-France Roadmap on Blue Economy and Ocean Governance," Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, February 20, 2022, https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/34882/INDIAFRANCE+ROADMAP+ON+THE+BLUE+ECONOMY+AND+OCEAN+GOVERNANCE.

[9] "Maiden Indian Navy – European Union Naval Force (EUNAVFOR) Exercise in Gulf of Aden," Indian Navy, June 6, 2021, https://www.indiannavy.nic.in/content/maiden-indian-navy-european-union-naval-force-eunavfor-exercise-gulf-aden.

especially given the limits of the EU's mandate on security and defence. However, interest in the Indian armed forces in engaging and understanding the EU has only grown. Given the announcement of the EU's Coordinated Maritime Presence idea and a new zone of maritime interest declared in the North-Western Indian Ocean,[10] there is potential for this cooperation to increase substantially. India will watch keenly how the EU builds on this idea and coordinates the naval assets of its member states to ensure a greater, more sustained presence in the Indian Ocean. The EU Delegation in India also lacks a defence attaché even though the position has been created. Once in place, a defence attaché would facilitate greater engagement.

New Delhi sees more potential in working with the EU on areas like maritime domain awareness and information sharing, where the EU has well-established programs like the Critical Maritime Routes in the Indian Ocean (CRIMARIO). There have been regular workshops and exchanges between the Indian navy, India's own Information Fusion Centre (IFC-IOR) and CRIMARIO. These exchanges have covered challenges in the Indian Ocean including illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing; pollution; smuggling; hybrid threats; capacity constraints of smaller countries; climate change; and natural disasters. The scale and scope of these challenges make collaborative efforts and interoperability necessary. India appreciates the EU's IORIS (Indo-Pacific Regional Information Sharing) program, which will consolidate information sharing mechanisms in the region and is much needed.

India has stepped-up cooperation with other European member states, as well. The port call by the German frigate Bayern in Mumbai opened doors for maritime security conversations between New Delhi and Berlin. The Indian foreign secretary suggested expansion of maritime cooperation and naval cooperation on defence technology and shared naval interests with Germany. With the dramatic changes in German foreign and defence policy "Zeitenwende" announced in the wake of the war on Ukraine, New Delhi will keenly watch how this will impact Germany's position and posture in the Indo-Pacific.[11]

Infrastructure Connectivity

Connectivity and providing alternatives to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) investments is a central element of India's and the EU's Indo-Pacific strategies. Even before the EU adopted its strategy, it had signed a connectivity partnership with Japan (September 2019) and later with India (May 2021). Both partners agreed to work on physical and digital connectivity projects in the Indo-Pacific and promote quality infrastructure based on sustainable growth, shared norms, and values. This also would include partnerships between public and private sectors. The EU and India already have listed a number of potential projects – both in India and in the region. India's preferred approach to connectivity is to coordinate on strategic projects, rather than working on joint projects with partners like the EU in third countries. This stems from India's experience of working with other government partners which can often get bogged down in bureaucratic delays. There will be more progress on identifying countries, sectors, and projects likely by the next EU-India summit this year.

Health

Finally, responding to the COVID-19 pandemic is a part of the EU's Indo-Pacific strategy and here, too, it has identified India, the world's largest pharmaceutical manufacturer, as an important partner. At the Indo-Pacific Ministerial Forum in Paris, it was announced that an Indo-Pacific Health campus will be established in India – bringing together India's pharmaceutical prowess and Europe's technological capacity for the benefit of the region. Moreover, India and Europe are in talks on equitable distribution of COVID-19 vaccines to countries in the region.

---

[10] "Coordinated Maritime Presences: Council extends implementation in the Gulf of Guinea for two years and establishes a new Maritime Area of Interest in the North-Western Indian Ocean," Council of the EU, press release, February 21, 2022, https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/02/21/coordinated-maritime-presences-council-extends-implementation-in-the-gulf-of-guinea-for-2-years-and-establishes-a-new-concept-in-the-north-west-indian-ocean/.

[11] Rachel Tausendfreund, "Zeitenwende—The Dawn of the Deterrence Era in Germany," German Marshall Fund, February 28, 2022, https://www.gmfus.org/news/zeitenwende-dawn-deterrence-era-germany.

Conclusion

India has started envisioning a role for Europe in its broader Indo-Pacific strategy. Building on the remarkable momentum in the India-EU bilateral partnership, cooperation in the broader Indo-Pacific has increased. India has invested in partnerships with individual European member states including the Nordic countries and central and eastern Europe. This has benefitted Europe's assessment of India as a strategic partner. A more geopolitical and united Europe, which is on course to emerge in the wake of the war on Ukraine, would undoubtedly be an important partner in the Indo-Pacific in the long run. Russia's invasion of Ukraine, however, has also created serious obstacles for India-Europe partnership. India's reluctance to openly criticize Russia and abstain from UN resolutions condemning the Russian invasion of Ukraine has created serious problems for its partnership with Europe. For European publics and policy makers unfamiliar with India's long-standing partnership with Russia and its dependence on Russia for crucial military equipment, India's position on the current crisis is baffling, to say the least. In India too, this war and perceived pressure from partners in Europe and the US to take a stronger position has brought to surface latent anti-western sentiment, which is still prominent across the political spectrum. Delhi's position has evolved as the war worsens, and policy makers in India realize they do not want to be associated with President Putin's imperialist ambitions. If India wants to salvage the recent progress made in its ties with the West and reap the benefits of the diplomatic investments it has made particularly in Europe, it will have to work hard to overcome this roadblock.

Dr. Garima Mohan wrote in her personal capacity. The views and interpretations expressed by the author are solely her own.

Dr. Garima Mohan is a fellow in the Asia program, where she leads the work on India and heads the India Trilateral Forum. Based in GMF's offices in Berlin, her research focuses on Europe-India ties, EU foreign policy in Asia, and security in the Indo-Pacific. Prior to joining GMF, she was the acting team leader and coordinator for the EU's Asia-Pacific Research and Advice Network (APRAN), which supports EU policymakers on issues concerning the Asia-Pacific. She also led the Global Orders program at the Global Public Policy Institute in Berlin.

Garima holds a PhD from the Freie Universität Berlin and received her master's degree from the London School of Economics. She is also a non-resident fellow at Carnegie India, an Asian Forum for Global Governance Fellow, and a 2017 Raisina Young Fellow. She has published widely on Indian foreign and security policy, EU-Asia relations, Germany-India ties, and maritime security in the Indo-Pacific, and is a frequent commentator for European and Indian media including NZZ, The Hindu, The Wire, and Deutsche Welle.