



SASAKAWA USA
Sasakawa Peace Foundation USA

The EU's Strategy for Indo-Pacific Engagement

Featuring remarks by Mr. George Cunningham

Abstract

On Monday, February 28, 2022, Sasakawa Peace Foundation USA (Sasakawa USA) hosted the virtual policy briefing, “The EU’s Strategy for Indo-Pacific Engagement,” featuring Mr. George Cunningham, former Strategic Adviser, Asia-Pacific Department, the European External Action Service. Mr. Cunningham spoke on the EU’s current strategy which is outlined in his recent publication with Sasakawa USA, [“The EU’s Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific.”](#) as well as the outcomes of the Indo-Pacific Ministerial Forum hosted by the French EU Presidency in Paris on February 22 and the implications of the recent Ukrainian crisis on the EU’s strategy in the Indo-Pacific.

This talk was presented by Sasakawa USA’s Policy Briefing Series and was held virtually via Zoom. Attendees included distinguished guests from the Washington, D.C. policy community along with members of academia, think tanks, and media, as well as current and retired members of the U.S. military and Japanese Self Defense Forces. Introductory remarks were provided by Dr. Satohiro Akimoto, Chairman and President of Sasakawa USA, who also facilitated the event and moderated the Q&A discussion.

Europe and the Indo-Pacific: Together on Ukraine

Mr. Cunningham opened the event with his remarks on the crisis in Ukraine and thanked the European Union (EU)’s likeminded Indo-Pacific partners – Australia, Canada, Japan,

Singapore, South Korea, Taiwan, and the United States – for having joined them in imposing sanctions on Russia. With its complex relations with Russia, India has been reluctant in taking similar firm action, which Mr. Cunningham suggested may need to be addressed by its partners in the future.

French EU Presidency Ministerial on the Indo-Pacific

On February 22, 2022, France hosted a ministerial meeting welcoming 27 EU Member States, 30 Indo-Pacific Partners, 5 Indo-Pacific regional organizations, the 4 French Overseas Communities and Territories as well as the European Investment Bank. The forum sought to reaffirm the EU's engagement and strong political and economic interests in the region based on its recently published EU's Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific. The event focused on three major areas: (1) connectivity; (2) global issues such as climate, health, biodiversity, and ocean issues; and (3) security and defense.

The ministerial resulted in the EU and its regional partners affirming their commitment to cooperatively achieve these goals. Among a series of initiatives in the region announced at the meeting, the EU would - ensure a significant European naval presence in the north-western Indian Ocean and pursue its maritime security program in the Red Sea, and other parts of the Indo-Pacific region. The EU announced that there was support for launching digital negotiations for partnerships with Japan, Singapore, and South Korea. In its joint declaration on privacy and the protection of personal data, the EU expressed its intention to collaborate closely with Australia, Comoros, India, Japan, Mauritius, New Zealand, South Korea, Singapore, and Sri Lanka.

Public development banks and financing institutions from both regions came together in Paris at a separate event to catalyze support for sustainable infrastructure projects and public and private finance. Many projects were discussed during the ministerial, including a submarine cable project extending from Africa to Asia.

EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific - Background

Mr. Cunningham provided deeper insight on the significance of the Indo-Pacific region for the EU. As is well known, the region is the world's manufacturing hub, central to global value chains as well as international trade and investment. Furthermore, the EU has been the number one investor, top development assistance provider, and one of the largest traders (EUR 1.5 trillion in 2019) in the region.

While the EU has significant economic involvement in this region, geopolitical competition between the U.S. and China over technological, political, and security-related areas has been intensifying in recent years, creating strains on trade and supply chains. Increasing instability and insecurity in the Indo-Pacific endanger the EU's own security and economic interests.

Mr. Cunningham noted that the EU's strategy defines the Indo-Pacific as extending from East Africa to the Pacific Island states. This differs from the interpretations of some of its regional partners such as the United States, which defines the Indo-Pacific region as extending from Asia all the way across the Pacific Ocean to its own western coast. Moreover, France is a Pacific power in its own right, being the only European nation to have 1.5 million citizens protected by French military forces in the region: if one EU Member State has a stake in the region, it follows all Member States have a stake.

The EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific came out in 2021. Many of its partners had already formulated Indo-Pacific strategies of their own by that point, including Japan (2007), Australia (2013), India (2014), the United States (2017), and ASEAN (2019). Individual member states like France (2018), Germany (2020), and the Netherlands (2020) had also adopted their own Indo-Pacific strategies or policies and played a role in pushing the EU to establish a comprehensive strategy on behalf of all its Member States. Mr. Cunningham pointed out that the EU was hesitant initially in running the risk of alienating China by using the term "Indo-Pacific" but the harder policies being pursued by China in the region, such as in Hong Kong and Xinjiang, coupled with antagonism generated by Chinese diplomats' Wolf Warrior Diplomacy changed European attitudes. The New EU-U.S. Agenda for Global Change in December 2020 – issued immediately after Mr. Biden had won the US Presidential election – heralded the change in the EU's approach when it stated, "Increased EU focus on the challenges and opportunities in the Indo-Pacific region will help deepen cooperation with like-minded partners."¹

The EU's Indo-Pacific Strategy – An Inclusive Strategy Based on Universal Values and Principles

The EU's strategic document does not talk about China much. Relations continue to be governed by the EU's 2019 Strategic Outlook on China. Instead the main message of the

¹ "Joint Communication to the European Parliament, The European Council and The Council: A New EU-US Agenda for Global Change," European Commission High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, December 12, 2020, Page 8, https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/joint-communication-eu-us-agenda_en.pdf

Strategy is to encourage companies and individual not to put all their eggs in one basket but to diversify trade, investment and contacts more to the many other dynamic partners which exist in the region. Mr. Cunningham emphasized that not all countries hold the same values or principles as the EU but this should not stop cooperation based on mutual interest (a philosophy known as “principled pragmatism” in the EU) while tackling human rights issues through formal channels like dialogues.

Hence, some have referred to the EU’s approach as the “third way” strategy which seeks pragmatic opportunities to collaborate while not forcing partners to make a definitive choice to join a specific camp. This approach has been welcomed by the region. Coming at the beginning of the EU’s seven-year budget cycle, such as the 2021-27 EU Global Europe Budget and EU Peace Facility, the EU is in a position financially to enact its strategy.

Areas of Focus Within the EU’s Strategy

The EU’s strategy is divided into seven parts, with the importance of human rights emphasized as an overarching feature:

- Sustainable and Inclusive Prosperity
- Green Transition
- Ocean Governance
- Digital Governance
- Connectivity
- Security and Defense
- Human Security (health systems, disaster risk reduction)

For sustainable and inclusive prosperity, the EU will seek to build resilient and sustainable global value chains and intends to continue leading in the setting of standards and norms. The EU aims to conclude trade negotiations with Australia and New Zealand. There are also intentions to negotiate trade agreements with India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, and Thailand. A longer-term goal would be an ASEAN region-to-region trade agreement.

The EU will increase its naval presence in the region to assist with protecting sealines under FOIP operations based on UNCLOS, boost Indo-Pacific partners’ maritime security capacity, counter terrorism, cybersecurity and crisis management capability. This will be accomplished by organizing more joint exercises and port calls between Indo-Pacific and EU Member States’ Navies and the EU Naval Force Operation Atalanta; encouraging Indo-Pacific participation in EU’s Common Security & Defense missions; expanding

security and defense dialogues to include more partners; and engaging strongly in the ASEAN Regional Forum. However it needs to be borne in mind that the pool of EU Member States' naval resources have been reduced because of the British Royal Navy' departure on account of Brexit (albeit cooperation is expected to be continued) plus concerns about Russia closer to home.

EU-Japan and EU-U.S. Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific

The EU continues its policy of strong relations with Japan and the United States. Prime Minister Kishida recently stated, "Considering the stability of the region, it is extremely important for European and U.S. countries to be interested and involved in Asia's security environment."² The first EU Connectivity Partnership with Japan was signed in 2019. The world's largest Free and Safe Data Flows Area was established between the EU and Japan in the same year. The Strategy highlights the expansion of EU cooperation with Japan with the implementation of their comprehensive free trade agreement; joint naval exercises; coordination on the semiconductor supply chain; cooperation on satellite systems, environment, transportation, ocean affairs and fisheries; and action to address plastic pollution in the Indo-Pacific.

Across the Atlantic Ocean, the EU continues to place Trans-Atlantic relations at the top of its agenda. After a break of several years, EU-U.S. summits restarted in June 2021. An EU-U.S. Trade and Technology Council has been established. More specifically, the EU and U.S. have commenced regular formal consultations on the Indo-Pacific covering many of the areas of the EU's strategy plus good governance and countering disinformation. Connectivity continues to be a major area where coordinated activity is vital. President Biden perceives Europe as the United States' natural partner, committed to the same global order based on shared democratic norms and institutions.

Q&A Session

There was an engaging Q&A with the audience following Mr. Cunningham's remarks. Questions covered topics including: strengthening coordination between the EU and its Indo-Pacific partners; the EU's space policies; reconciling domestic priorities with key issues in international relations; the EU-Japan strategic partnership; the EU's ability to

² Kana Inagaki and Leo Lewis. "Fumio Kishida Pledges to Steer Japan Away from Abenomics," *The Financial Times*, 14 October 2021, Accessed 10 March 2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/ffa6754f-3c12-4729-921d-aa2acc5e96ee>

sustain its Indo-Pacific strategy given the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine; and the EU's green policy.

Sasakawa USA is grateful to Mr. George Cunningham for sharing his insights on the EU's strategy on Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific. Sasakawa USA also thanks the Q&A participants and attendees for joining us in this engaging discussion.

The summarized views of the speakers expressed herein are entirely the work of Sasakawa USA and do not represent the official positions of any of the speakers.

For more information about Sasakawa USA's Policy Briefing Series, click [here](#).
