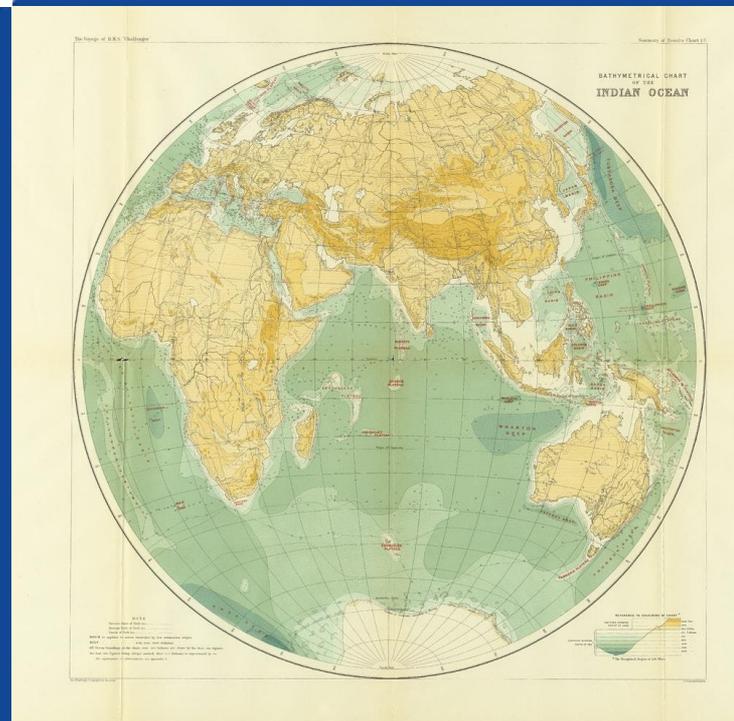


European Indo-Pacific Strategies in Comparative Perspective



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Introduction

Within the last two years, the “Indo-Pacific” region has become a hot topic among European policy makers and researchers. Most recently, on 16 April 2021, the European Council announced its initial “conclusions” on an “EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific”. This EU-level statement builds on member state Indo-Pacific strategy documents from France, Germany and the Netherlands in 2019 and 2020. As the momentum for an EU-level decision to formalize the bloc’s Indo-Pacific strategy builds, a process set to culminate in September of 2021, a number of questions about the importance of the strategy for the Netherlands and the EU remain. What is the Indo-Pacific and what are the origins of growing interest in the region, including in Japan and the United States? What does a focus on the Indo-Pacific mean for European and other regions’ or countries’ China policies? What are the core objectives of the European Indo-Pacific strategy, and do they align with, or diverge from, the Indo-Pacific policies of other countries?

Background: The Emergence of the Indo-Pacific

The concept of the Indo-Pacific as a distinct geographic region, especially as it has been articulated in a growing number of official strategy documents from governments around the world, is often traced to Japan and the two periods when Abe Shinzo served as Prime Minister (2006-07 and 2012-2020). Abe [first spoke](#) of the importance of the Indo-Pacific in 2007, which his administration then built on during his second term through a series of statements and [policy documents](#) constructed around the concept of the “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” (FOIP). In addition to emphasizing strategic maritime linkages between the Indian and Pacific oceans, Japan’s FOIP policies have also highlighted the significance of Indian Ocean connections to Africa. Japan’s FOIP policies have focused specific attention on Southeast Asia, and ASEAN in particular, as the pivot between the two oceans. Thematically, Japan has emphasized 1) rules-based and open navigation and trade, 2) the promotion of economic well-being, especially via “connectivity” and free trade, and 3) the importance of peace and stability, especially related to maritime matters.

While Japan was an early adopter and promoter of the concept of the Indo-Pacific, and of FOIP specifically, the United States has demonstrated a rising interest in the region since at least the Obama administration's "pivot" to Asia (including a focus on enhanced U.S. ties to India). The Trump administration in particular became a vocal advocate for the concept of the Indo-Pacific, formally renaming the U.S. Armed Forces long-standing Pacific Command as the Indo-Pacific Command in May of 2018. In 2019 the U.S. State Department issued a [strategy document](#) titled "A Free and Open Indo-Pacific: Advancing a Shared Vision", the first line of which stated that "The United States is and always will be an Indo-Pacific nation." Prior to that, however, the Trump administration had [already decided](#) on the Indo-Pacific as the principal regional theatre for the maintenance of America's "strategic primacy" and for "preventing China from establishing new, illiberal spheres of influence". The Trump administration's 2017 *National Security Strategy* [claimed](#) that "China seeks to displace the United States in the Indo-Pacific region, expand the reaches of its state-driven economic model, and reorder the region in its favor" and that "a geopolitical competition between free and repressive visions of world order is taking place in the Indo-Pacific region."

For the U.S. under Donald Trump, the Indo-Pacific thus came to designate the primary geographic arena for contesting China's growing role and influence and for shoring up a community of like-minded partners in doing so. Under the Trump administration, the "Quad", a grouping of the U.S., India, Japan and Australia, became a focal point for such an American-led alliance in the Indo-Pacific. Under the Trump administration, the Quad often focused on military cooperation based on a shared perception of China's assertive maritime policies in the region. At least initially, the Biden administration has retained elements of this posture, including naming Kurt Campbell as the Indo-Pacific Coordinator in the National Security Council's top Asia position as well as directing Quad cooperation for Covid-19 vaccine production and distribution in Southeast Asia and the Pacific islands.

Three other Indo-Pacific vision, or strategy, statements from "within" the Indo-Pacific region itself, from ASEAN, India, and Australia, add further to the complexity of proliferating views on the region's strategic and practical importance. On 23 June 2019 ASEAN adopted its "[ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific](#)", an effort led in part by Indonesia and emphasizing an inclusive and cooperative vision of the region in contrast to the more exclusive and rivalry-

focused American view. The ASEAN “Outlook” thus specifically aimed to play down an American-led push to frame the Indo-Pacific as a region exclusive of, and in tension with, China. Instead, it emphasized the economic vitality of the region and the need to further expand economic openness while also working on shared problems like climate change.

India, in the meantime, while not formally adopting an Indo-Pacific strategy document, has aimed to steer more of a middle path. The Indian Ministry of External Affairs [affirmed](#) in 2018 that “we believe in a free, open and inclusive Indo-Pacific region, which includes all nations in this geography and others who have a stake in it.” Yet as border tensions between India and China have flared in the past year and given longstanding Indian [skepticism](#) about China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), India’s own approach to Indo-Pacific cooperation may yet become aligned with America’s more China-focused, confrontational and exclusive approach, albeit on [continental rather than maritime matters](#).

Australian discussions about the Indo-Pacific round out the perspectives from within the region itself. In an April 2019 speech, the Secretary of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade gave a [speech](#) titled “The Indo-Pacific: Australia’s Perspective” in which she shared Australia’s “vision for a peaceful Indo-Pacific, with ASEAN at its core, international law supporting its stability, and open markets driving its prosperity.” Yet the [roots of Australian government thinking](#) and interest in the Indo-Pacific goes back nearly a decade and include elements of 1) Australian self-identity as an Indo-Pacific country, 2) concern about China’s growing role and influence and 3) interest in enhanced strategic ties to the US, India and Japan. In 2017, the Australian government issued a [White Paper](#) with heavy focus on the Indo-Pacific, including discussions of “power shifts” (i.e., China’s growing role and US-China rivalry) in the region and the need for strengthened partnerships to respond to these shifts. Official Australian perspectives on the Indo-Pacific have included a wide range of issues, from concerns about China’s economic and political influence, to a stress on creating economic prosperity, through enhanced trade and investment ties with ASEAN, to working on climate change in the South Pacific. Australian perspectives on the Indo-Pacific thus often read as a lens for a broader sweep of Australian foreign policy, with officials emphasizing Australia’s identity and interests as an Indo-Pacific nation. Yet for as balanced as many Australian official policy documents on the Indo-Pacific often read, it’s clear that Australia has itself been at the

heart of geopolitical shifts in recent years, including a [rapid deterioration in official ties](#) with China and willingness to cooperate closely with the Trump administration's adversarial China policies. Therefore, Australia's own Indo-Pacific policies, as nuanced as they may have been, are increasingly linked to an American-led push to create what amounts to an Indo-Pacific bloc aligned against China.

Europe and the Indo-Pacific

European Indo-Pacific strategy documents have emerged against this background of growing focus on the region, including from important European partners like the U.S., Japan, ASEAN, India and Australia. A series of individual country strategy documents predated the more recent EU-level approach:

- Beginning with a speech in Australia in 2018, **France** under President Emmanuel Macron has led European efforts to articulate an Indo-Pacific strategy. With a series of policy documents from the French Ministries of the Armed Forces and Foreign Affairs in 2019 and 2020 (with an updated, [summary document](#) issued in April 2021), France has argued that the Indo-Pacific is a crucial region of French interest. Such interests are based in the presence of French territories and citizens stretching from the western reaches of the Indian Ocean to the South Pacific.
- **Germany** was next to articulate its Indo-Pacific "[policy guidelines](#)" in September of 2020, but compared to France places more emphasis on the region's economic vitality, the need to ensure peace and stability in the region. Moreover, the German approach to the Indo-Pacific is explicit in noting its openness to cooperation with China, including on climate.
- The most recent EU member state [Indo-Pacific strategy document](#) was published by the **Netherlands** in November 2020 and emphasized Dutch and EU cooperation with "like-minded democracies and countries with open-market economies". The Dutch Indo-Pacific "guidelines" also expressed the need to ensure the international legal order in the region, especially on issues related to maritime disputes, while also contributing to peace and stability through sustainable trade.

- Lastly, while no longer in the EU, the UK has also entered into the broader European discussion about the importance of the Indo-Pacific. In its “[Integrated Review](#)” of foreign policy published in March 2021, and amidst multiple statements about the importance of the Indo-Pacific to the UK, the Integrated Review announced that “By 2030, we will be deeply engaged in the Indo-Pacific as the European partner with the broadest, most integrated presence in support of mutually-beneficial trade, shared security and values.”

Ultimately, the EU’s April 2021 [conclusions](#) for an “EU strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific” are an amalgam of the separate member state documents, emphasizing six priority areas: 1) “working with partners in the Indo-Pacific region”, 2) “supporting the international community’s global agenda”, 3) “advancing our economic agenda and protecting our supply chains”, 4) “playing our part in the field of security and defence”, 5) “ensuring high quality connectivity, and 6) “advancing our collaboration in the field of research, innovation and digitalization”. While China looms large in the background, the EU document clearly states that the EU’s “renewed commitment to the region is inclusive of all partners wishing to cooperate with the EU”, presumably including China. Moreover, the EU strategy is keen to emphasize “cooperation” in the Indo-Pacific and expresses concerns about “intense geopolitical competition” in the region that “threaten[s] the stability and security of the region and beyond, directly impacting on the EU’s interests”, again presumably with a focus on U.S.-China rivalry.

Analysis: Implications for Research and Policy

Amidst this proliferation of Indo-Pacific strategy documents, including most recently in Europe itself, a key challenge is making analytical and practical sense of the various constituent parts. What does this newfound focus on the Indo-Pacific mean, at the end of the day, for any given country or institution, including the Netherlands and the EU? One path forward is to highlight key issue areas that stand out when comparing the various different approaches to the Indo-Pacific. The following issue areas and questions are especially important and merit follow-up for future research and/or policy dialogues. Each of these involves a key aspect of the broader question of “what is the purpose and value of a focus on the Indo-Pacific”?

1) The China Factor

Maybe the most important, if sometimes implicit, issue that runs through all of the various government Indo-Pacific strategy documents from around the world is the China factor. It is often difficult to escape the impression that any effort to formulate an official approach to the Indo-Pacific also implies a willingness to be part of a coordinated stance to counter China. As one recent [Chatham House report](#) argues, “strategic shifts” at the heart of various Indo-Pacific strategies “are largely the result of China’s economic and military expansion” (the author quotes the U.S. 2019 “Indo-Pacific Strategy Report” for evidence). Foremost among those governments that explicitly focus on the Indo-Pacific as a zone for standing up to China, or even “[maintaining strategic primacy](#)”, is certainly the U.S. Yet even among those Indo-Pacific strategy reports that stress a more inclusive vision for the region, there is the unmistakable sense that China is the elephant in the room that necessitates such a strategy in the first place. This is true even in the more positive-sum, economic components of the various Indo-Pacific policy documents that emphasize the region as a vital global economic engine.

Linked to this focus on China, there is a sense that almost any given Indo-Pacific strategy in part necessitates an articulation of a response, or alternative, to China’s BRI. For example, the Dutch Indo-Pacific “guidelines” state that China’s BRI “can be viewed as its particular Indo-Pacific strategy”. Such statements fit into a more general pattern of [viewing the BRI as China’s grand “geoeconomic” strategy](#) where commerce and geopolitics are one. Especially for the EU and member states that have signaled their intention to be more “geopolitical” actors, Indo-Pacific strategies may be aimed at demonstrating that they are at least thinking along these lines. The results of the recent [G7 summit](#) in June 2021 underscored a desire among member countries to coordinate on a combined alternative to the BRI, dubbed Build Back Better World (B3W) and at the same time coordinate their Indo-Pacific strategies. Yet, if the majority of Indo-Pacific strategies are at least in some important part a response to China, then it should come as little surprise that Chinese officials will be carefully scrutinizing their intent and formulating China’s own responses.

2) The U.S. Factor

The U.S. may not have invented the Indo-Pacific concept or been the first to articulate a strategy for the region, but as with so much in international affairs, the U.S. is difficult to ignore. Especially given the tone the Trump and now the Biden administrations have set with their Indo-Pacific framing, one in which the Indo-Pacific has become a byword for a more adversarial U.S. relationship with China, when other countries or institutions also articulate an official vision for the Indo-Pacific they are also sending a signal to the U.S. (and to China). That could be a sign of support or divergence from U.S. positions, or of an alternative prioritization of issues or emphasis (e.g., on economic versus military issues). Ultimately, for as close as China will be monitoring various Indo-Pacific policy statements, the U.S. is likely to be paying just as much attention.

It is yet unclear what the Biden administration's Indo-Pacific approach or strategy will be, but all indications are that it will emphasize cooperation with allies and partners to "compete from a position of strength" – with a clear emphasis on China as the target competitor. Especially as the EU and member states like the Netherlands move forward with the formulation and implementation of European Indo-Pacific strategies, they will have to keep a close eye on U.S. perceptions and priorities. In other words, in what ways will the U.S. view European Indo-Pacific strategies as implying support for U.S. policies or potentially as divergent and not aligned with U.S. interests?

3) Prioritization of Issues

A cursory glance at any of the growing range of official Indo-Pacific policy documents from around the world will quickly give rise to questions about relative priorities. Many of these documents, including the EU's April 2021 conclusions about "Indo-Pacific Cooperation", list multiple issue areas that fall under the Indo-Pacific framework. The following is an overview of topics that appear in most official Indo-Pacific strategy documents, the prioritization of which will be fundamental to coordinating and implementing related policies.

- a. **Geographic Scope and Emphasis** – what a given country or institution identifies as the geographic scope of the Indo-Pacific region varies considerably. Some, such as France, include the entire region stretching from the East Coast of Africa all the way to the West Coast of North and South America, whereas others are far more limited. For example, the U.S. Department of Defense continues to clearly separate its Indo-Pacific from its African command theaters. But to the extent that some Indo-Pacific frameworks include a response to China’s BRI, there may be a temptation to formulate trade or connectivity “corridors” that can compete with those so expansively envisioned in the seemingly boundless BRI.
- b. **Security and Stability** – the U.S. has heavily emphasized naval and other traditional security dimensions of its approach to the Indo-Pacific, including working through the Quad. Some countries’ Indo-Pacific policy documents, such as the French, British, and Australian ones have also emphasized maritime military cooperation, whereas others (including the Netherlands) have stressed the importance of rule-based maritime dispute resolution, including in the South China Sea. Yet others, including the EU policy document, highlight concerns about growing geopolitical competition, especially U.S.-China rivalry, in the Indo-Pacific that could undermine regional or global stability.
- c. **Trade and Investment** – most Indo-Pacific policy documents include substantial discussions about the region as an essential economic hub. For example, the Dutch Indo-Pacific “guidelines” [note](#) that “the geopolitical and geo-economic balance of power is shifting rapidly” and that the Indo-Pacific is the “world’s primary growth region”. There is a clear thread running through the various European policy documents that stresses the need for Europe to broaden its economic relations in the Indo-Pacific away from too narrow a focus (or dependency) on China, especially with an eye toward Southeast and South Asia. In this sense, EU efforts to shore up existing or to sign new trade agreements in the Indo-Pacific echo America’s earlier “pivot to Asia”. At the same time, European emphasis on the Indo-Pacific also includes a significant

element of simply rebranding or drawing public attention to the fact that Europe is already a key economic partner in the region.

- d. **Connectivity** – as noted above, one element of European Indo-Pacific strategies is an effort to provide a European response to China’s BRI. As such, there is a strong emphasis on “connectivity”, including in transport, energy, and digital infrastructure, especially in Southeast Asia. The Japanese Indo-Pacific approach includes heavy emphasis on connectivity promotion, which aligns with Japan’s long-standing role in financing and building infrastructure in Southeast Asia and beyond for decades before China introduced the BRI. The EU Indo-Pacific strategy also includes a dedicated section on connectivity promotion. Alongside the G7 decision to combine efforts on the B3W, the EU’s focus on connectivity as part of its reinvigorated push on the Indo-Pacific may jump-start the bloc’s stalled [2019 Europe-Asia Connectivity strategy](#). To the extent that most Indo-Pacific frameworks include some focus on connectivity promotion, there will likely be room for multilateral cooperation, but member state and EU-level approaches may also end up in competition with other “BRI alternatives”.
- e. **Public Goods** – most Indo-Pacific policy documents include a discussion about the importance of a range of public goods that need to be addressed in the region, including issues like climate and the environment, health, and regional peace and stability. As is often the case, at least on climate, this is one set of issues that often lends itself to multilateral cooperation, including with possible or even necessary Chinese participation. Yet as in some of the other issue areas, it’s not always clear what the Indo-Pacific framing necessarily brings to already existing policy and research discussions (e.g., on climate standards).
- f. **Values, Democracy, and Human Rights** – As the emphasis on a “free and open” Indo-Pacific indicates, there is also a shared focus on values-based cooperation among proponents of enhanced engagement in the region. Again, with an eye toward China, most Indo-Pacific policy documents emphasize “like-minded” cooperation among democracies in the promotion of democratic and rules-

based governance and support for human rights. To what extent an Indo-Pacific framing helps facilitate coordinated policy, especially on difficult issues like Myanmar's reversion to military rule, will be a crucial test of the framework's added value for Europe and its like-minded partners.

Next Steps

As Dutch and EU-level discussions about bringing an effective and coordinated Indo-Pacific strategy into reality continue to progress, a next step for further research could be to scope out how India and ASEAN (or select member countries) view the potential for practical engagement with Dutch and EU-level Indo-Pacific policies. Such steps could build on already established research and collaboration between the LeidenAsiaCentre and its Indian partner at the Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies (IPCS). A similar scoping exercise could be conducted with a focus on Transatlantic ties, including a focus on where US and European Indo-Pacific frameworks and strategies have the potential for overlap but also for misperception or disagreement. Separate but similar exercises could be conducted with other partners in the region, for instance in Australia or Taiwan. Collaboration with Japanese researchers and officials might be especially valuable, given Japan's longstanding interest and on-the-ground experience with related Indo-Pacific issues. An iterative process that includes Dutch policy makers, businesses, and researchers in order to understand Dutch interests and priorities in the Indo-Pacific would be a key and practical part of such a process. Finally, and while more challenging, the Centre should also include as a priority in any such projects an effort to acquire in-depth knowledge of Chinese perspectives, especially given how so many Indo-Pacific strategies seem aimed directly or indirectly at China.

There is a real possibility that European Indo-Pacific discussions could fall into the same morass as the previous Europe-Asia Connectivity strategy. A continued debate in a wider circle could play an important role in preventing this from happening.