POLICY BRIEF

The Transitioning Security Order in the Indo-Pacific

Furthering India-EU & Triangular Collaboration

DECEMBER 2022

IPCS
INSTITUTE OF PEACE AND CONFLICT STUDIES
INNOVATIVE RESEARCH • INDEPENDENT ANALYSIS • INFORMED OPINION

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Context

The 'Indo-Pacific' simultaneously represents a geography, a concept, a process, and an outcome. Yet, how the construct influences security order and the ordering process in the region has received limited attention, thus encouraging this topic's expansion. Moreover, there is no definitional consensus on what a 'security order' entails. The polysemic nature of the term 'order'—and by extension, 'security order'—typically also confounds more than it clarifies.

Meanwhile, the construct's operationalisation is inducing an ecosystem-level transition across the wider region, and faint contours of a networked security order seem to be emerging. Thus far, the US and its hub-and-spokes alliance system have been the most potent conduits for this proto-order's evolution. Paradoxically, this transition is strengthening and diffusing the US' security role in the wider region. Equally, patterns discernible in these transitions demonstrate a quest for ecosystem-level agility.

However, the construct's genesis and raison d'être—deterring and absorbing China's unchecked influence—also has the potential to kick the Asian security ordering can down the road. But China is a geographical reality and currently the nucleus of the Asian economic order. Therefore, 're-ordering' pursued via the 'Indo-Pacific' will need to move beyond mere power balancing at some point.

Regional stakeholders' actions reflect this calculus. For instance, what is underway is not a linear power-balancing effort involving a collective of entities working in concert merely to deter China. On the contrary, regional stakeholders are steering the process in directions they find manageable, reasonable, and beneficial to their respective national interests.

So where does the India-EU partnership figure in this matrix?

Indian and EU capabilities to produce a de-escalatory effect on Sino-US contestation are limited and are likely remain so for the foreseeable future. However, the construct provides valuable impetus to the India-EU politico-security partnership and a compelling opportunity to collaboratively temper the ordering process as co-shapers rather than passive participants. The two are uniquely positioned to foster a third way based on cooperative, consultative approaches as an alternative to the US' more binarily-inclined strategies and China's opaque security visions. Crucially, both are well-placed to engage proponents and critics.

The 10 recommendations articulated in this Policy Brief address the optimal utilisation of Indian and EU strengths—individual and collective—by placing inclusive security cooperation as the ideal outcome. A substantial portion of the overlaps across Indian and EU security interests, capabilities, and cooperation are non-military in nature. But sustainably producing Indo-Pacific security outcomes necessitates a degree of conventional security cooperation as well. Therefore, these recommendations are also intended to help synergise military and non-military security interests and capabilities.

This Policy Brief is curated as part of a wider report developed collaboratively by the Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies and the Leiden Asia Centre, with support from the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, under its 'Navigating the New Geopolitics of Asia and Global Order of Tomorrow' project.

1 MANAGE EXPECTATIONS & SET CLEAR GOALS

Identify respective core and non-core Indo-Pacific priorities and corresponding strengths. Develop an action plan tailored to tackle them

2 SET A REALISTIC GEOGRAPHICAL SCOPE

Prioritise traditional security cooperation in the IOR and NTS cooperation in the IOR and POR

3 GET CLARITY

Cultivate conceptual clarity on security orders and ordering, and what it means in practical terms for each other and for other Indo-Pacific stakeholders

4 INCLUDE & ENGAGE

Commence a broad-based Indo-Pacific Dialogue on a Track 1.5 level for multi-disciplinary and cross-sectoral practical insight; include China and Russia

5 REMEMBER LAND

Focus on both land and sea for security cooperation in the Indo-Pacific. The continental dimension has implications not just for India but also the EU

6 OPTIMISE & INNOVATE

Optimise projects like Sagarmala to achieve tangible Indo-Pacific goals

7 BUILD OPERATIONAL SYNERGIES

Jointly foster partnerships with the AU and its member states to co-shape security outcomes in the IOR and at global multilateral fora

8 PRACTICALLY REINFORCE MULTILATERAL INSTITUTIONS

Jointly carry out some traditional and mostly NTS cooperation with partners through extant regional organisations, wherever possible

9 EMPOWER & FUTURE-PROOF PRACTICALLY

Develop a scalable cooperation model for critical infrastructure security and digitalisation with partners, designed to reduce dependencies

10 PRIORITISE UNSC REFORM

Facilitate system-level reinforcement for security ordering by remedying system-level imbalance

Policy Recommendations

Manage Expectations & Set Clear Goals

Identify respective core and non-core Indo-Pacific priorities and corresponding strengths—individual and collective. Develop an action plan designed specifically to address those priorities. Roadmap 2025, 'Enhancing Security Cooperation in and With Asia', and related instruments are compatible with broader Indo-Pacific goals, but they do not represent a 'roadmap' for producing Indo-Pacific security outcomes. Nor were they designed for it. Set clear tasks and measurable outcomes. Organise associated expectations according to levels of priority, complexity, and timeframes. Aim big, but also focus on low-hanging fruit. Modest expectations of the scale and pace of cooperation is logical. Think laterally to identify practicable ways to reduce and/or overcome structural delays. Consider the merits of an informal intra-EU minilateral featuring Germany, France, and the Netherlands for issue-specific national-level coordination with India in the IOR.

Set a Realistic Geographical Scope

For traditional security actions, focus on the IOR. Non-traditional security cooperation can be carried out in both the IOR and POR. India and the EU do not possess the requisite capabilities or resources to contribute to East Asia's military balance of power. Across the Indo-Pacific, India and the EU are at best soft powers. The IOR is geographically closer and strategically less complex than East Asia, and is farther from the primary theatre of Sino-US contestation—it will prove more cost-efficient. The IOR is also a key conduit for EU eastbound and all Indian maritime trade. Therefore, for India and the EU, the IOR is strategically as significant as the Asia-Pacific, if not more.

Get Clarity

Cultivate conceptual clarity on 'security order' and 'ordering', and what this means in practical terms for each other and for other Indo-Pacific stakeholders. Indian and EU Indo-Pacific strategies must exhibit cogency on: a) a conceptual understanding of the intricacies of security ordering; and b) how they interact with Asian and African geographic, politico-economic, socio-economic, and politico-cultural realities. Devoid of this, any joint Indo-Pacific policies might end up nourishing security dilemmas and kicking sustainable security ordering down the road. Narrative basis also will benefit from a shift away from an 'against something' thrust to a 'for something' thrust that revolves around just and equitable cooperative security ordering.

Include & Engage

Institute a broad-based Indo-Pacific Dialogue on a Track 1.5 level to garner multi-disciplinary, cross-sectoral insight for conceptual and operational clarity. Include China and Russia. This can be structured on both Track 2 and Track 1.5 levels, but the latter will help knowledge-sharing geared to deliver greater practical value. Variations in understanding geographic scope lead to operational incoherence and frustrate coordination and expectation management. Therefore, initial engagement could include deliberations on frameworks of security ordering processes that will and will not work for the IOR and POR, the operative elements of those processes, geographic scope, and order of priorities. Importantly, the AU and African states should be proactively engaged as key stakeholders in a substantive manner and beyond rhetoric.

Remember Land

Focus on both land and sea for Indo-Pacific security cooperation. The continental dimension has direct politico-security implications not only for New Delhi but also Brussels. For India, security priorities emanate from both its maritime and continental flanks, which cannot be understood independently of each other. Security dynamics in Eurasia have a direct bearing on Indian and EU security interests. Ironing some wrinkles out of their security partnership will benefit from an understanding of where and how the continental dimension features in New Delhi's national security calculus—India's response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine is a case-in-point. Doing so could also offer a template to understand other regional Indo-Pacific stakeholders' security calculi.

Optimise & Innovate

New initiatives may not always be needed. Therefore, wherever feasible, rather than reinvent the wheel, innovate to derive cost-efficient solutions by harnessing existing options. For example, India's Sagarmala Project is a national framework to enhance domestic connectivity by improving maritime logistical infrastructure. Although it is not (yet) a regional initiative, scaling it up for regional connectivity could offer substantial value addition for India and the region, especially if it is conceptually and operationally linked to its SAGAR and IPOI verticals.

Build Operational Synergies

Jointly foster partnerships with AU member states like Mozambique, South Africa and others along the Indian Ocean Rim to collaboratively shape the Indo-Pacific security ordering process. Proactively engage partner countries to facilitate co-ownership of the process. Focus not only on capacity-building of partners but also on operational synergies with them. In doing so, engage both continental and island states. Take a consultative approach to co-shape security outcomes in the IOR; supplement with collaboration at global multilateral fora, too.

Practically Reinforce Multilateral Institutions

As far as possible, jointly carry out some traditional security cooperation actions and mostly NTS cooperation actions with partners through regional organisations like IORA, AU, and the Pacific Islands Forum. The peculiarities of many problems and opportunities in the Indo-Pacific are (sub)region-specific. Therefore, a focus on issue-based operational synergies with and via regional organisations is crucial. Doing so will give an impetus to multilateralism and strengthen the efficacy of institutional architectures. At the conceptual and diplomatic levels, act across the Indo-Pacific. On an operational level, prioritise the IOR, which offers much more space to manoeuvre for bilateral and triangular cooperation. Prioritise actions that strengthen the letter and spirit of international legal instruments like the UNCLOS.

Empower & Future-proof Practically

Develop a scalable cooperation model for critical infrastructure security and digitalisation, including with partner countries; design to reduce dependencies. Cybersecurity is a critical need but so is the affordability of associated infrastructure and capabilities. Help reduce dependencies by strengthening domestic capacity and empowering partners to become more self-reliant. With the global digital order increasingly becoming the theatre of strategic contestation, India and the EU have an opportunity to collaboratively assist with technological standards setting, digitalisation, ICT development, and cyber governance. Granted, there are disparities between Indian and EU in capacities to deliver in these domains. But there is also complementarity that can be harnessed for mutual, regional, and global benefit. For instance, where the EU is technologically stronger, India tends to innovate with cost-efficiency and value for money. The Indian Space Research Organisation's Mars mission is an example. Some of these actions can be executed in conjunction with other partners like Japan and South Korea. Crucially, take a consultative approach, and engage all partners as equals and not as donors-recipients.

Prioritise UNSC Reform

Actively work to enable system-level reinforcement for security ordering by reducing system-level imbalance. This is a tall order goal but has significant value. India and the EU must make UN Security Council (UNSC) reform a priority, especially the composition of its permanent members. The entire continents of Africa and South America are unrepresented among the permanent members, and yet, the P5 includes three Global North countries (two of whom are European), Russia, and China. Moreover, if the goal is to uphold a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific, part of this (re)ordering needs to take place at an international system-level. In the absence of equal (and equitable) representation among the permanent members of the UNSC, there is very little the Indo-Pacific region will be able to do in practice beyond a point, no matter how much resources are flung at it, or small-scale arrangements made. Remedying system-level imbalance for security ordering will benefit system-level reinforcement.