

The EU and India's Indo-Pacific Strategies: A Strategic Synergy

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Summary

Following the release of the European Union (EU) Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific in April 2021, the EU High Representative Joseph Borrell visited Indonesia in June 2021 and elucidated the potential of the bloc to contribute to the regional order as a trusted and reliable partner in the Indo-Pacific. As a newcomer and an external power to the region, the EU needs to manage relations and deepen cooperation with existing regional powers. In this context, India – being the most powerful state among Indian Ocean littoral – is an essential partner that the EU must engage with to secure its strategic interests in the Indo-Pacific region (IPR). The comparison between the EU and India's approaches towards the IPR implies that the two approaches have much in common, leaving ample space to achieve strategic synergy and aid each other in securing gains in the geopolitical gambit of the IPR.

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The European Union's (EU) Indo-Pacific region (IPR) strategy is, on many levels, similar to the Indian concept. First, they have almost the same strategic scope, paying much attention to East Africa and small island states and the position of the Indian Ocean within its respective Indo-Pacific strategy. For the EU, the scope of IPR is from the east coast of Africa to the Pacific Island States. Africa is Europe's closest neighbour, and the EU-Africa strategic alliance is most crucial for the bloc in a multipolar world.¹ In India's strategic vision, the IPR covers the entire Indian Ocean, extending from South Africa to Australia. It considers the Western Indian Ocean the most strategically significant IPR, while the Western Pacific and South Pacific are peripheral regions.²

During his multiple visits to the Indian Ocean Island states, India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi focused largely on countries with prominent Indian diasporic population, speaking fondly of India's historic transcendental social and trade links with the Indian Ocean.³ He put forth the concept of Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR), indicating India's willingness to build trust and maritime security with the littoral countries. Furthermore, India has always regarded itself as a "net security provider", holding a special responsibility in the Indian Ocean region. For the first time in 2018, the Indian Navy escorted the ship of the World Food Programme to Somalia to support the EU's 'Operation Atalanta'. Thus, we see the importance of the African littoral states and the Western Indian Ocean to the EU and India, reflecting an overlapping of interests in the IPR.

¹ European Commission, *Towards a comprehensive Strategy with Africa*, March 2020.

² Sinderpal Singh, "The Indo-Pacific and India-U.S. Strategic Convergence: An Assessment", *Asia Policy*, Vol. 14, No. 1, 2019, p. 79.

³ Alexander Davis and Jonathan Balls, *The Indian Ocean Region in the 21st Century: Geopolitical, Economic and Environmental Ties*, Australia India Institute, University of Melbourne, 2019.

Another area of EU-India convergence in IPR is the increased expansive focus on ocean governance, blue economy and climate change. The IPR is an important economic area that is highly vulnerable to climate change. In 2016, the EU published the 'International Ocean Governance: The Future Agenda of Our Ocean', which denoted guidelines and proposed priority areas of ocean governance. The latest IPR strategy further stressed strengthening ocean governance, assisting in disaster recovery and fighting climate change. Similarly, New Delhi put forth the Indo-Pacific Ocean Initiative to build a sustainable blue economy and promote scientific research on address climate change challenges. As a result of the strategic convergence, India and the EU have taken a more pragmatic basis for engagement in the maritime domain. They have started to enhance cooperation in the capacity building since 2008. The EU-India Maritime Security Dialogue launched in January 2021 reflects the ongoing mutual interest in maritime security.

For a long time, the EU has been viewed as the normative power; it develops relations with other countries through soft approaches such as multilateralism and constructing norms and principles. India, acting as the de-facto regional leader in South Asia and its extended neighbourhood, could benefit from working with the EU to establish the rules in the maritime domain. In addition, the extensive European experience and expertise in sustainability in ecological and infrastructure development could greatly benefit India. Further, both the EU and India regard the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) as an issue-based coalition rather than an anti-China grouping. Since its revival in 2017, the Quad has often been perceived as a quasi-alliance and an 'Asian NATO' to contain China. However, India and the EU are not following up on the American concept of containing China. Beijing was not mentioned in the EU's IPR strategy document, and the bloc expressed that the strategy is "not anti-China".⁴ Likewise, the official line from New Delhi maintains that its IPR concept is not targeted at any specific country.

Modi's address in 2018 revealed that the IPR is a natural region and not a strategy or group with limited members. He also endorsed China and Russia as potential partners within the region. India regards the Quad as a way for pluralism diplomacy and issue-based coalition; it serves as a functional platform for powers to work together on national, regional and global interests and focus on global and regional common issues.⁵

In his remarks, the EU's High Representative Joseph Borrell, highlighted the aims of the EU to promote multilateral cooperation and work with partners, including China, to respond to emerging dynamics.⁶ The EU thinks that the Quad could serve as an effective docking point for the bloc to engage in the IPR, allowing the diversification of relationships with like-

⁴ "EU sets out Indo-Pacific plan, says it's not 'anti-China'", *Reuters*, 19 April 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/eu-sets-out-indo-pacific-plan-says-its-not-anti-china-2021-04-19/>.

⁵ "External Affairs Minister participates in a panel discussion at the Raisina Dialogue 2021 – 'Crimson Tide, Blue Geometries: New Partnerships for the Indo-Pacific (14-04-2021)'", 14 April 2021, https://mea.gov.in/interviews.htm?dtl/33806/External_Affairs_Minister_participates_in_a_panel_discussion_at_the_Raisina_Dialogue_2021_Crimson_Tide_Blue_Geometries_New_Partnerships_for_the_IndoPa.

⁶ European External Action Service, "The EU approach to the Indo-Pacific: Speech by High Representative/Vice-President Josep Borrell at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)", 3 June 2021, https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/99501/eu-approach-indo-pacific-speech-high-representativevice-president-josep-borrell-centre_en.

mindful partners that many Europeans are now looking for.⁷ Thus, the same motivation for alternative, like-minded partners to provide global goods, cultivate sustainability and secure maritime security will draw the EU and India closer to each other.

In addition, the centrality of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is equally important to the EU and India in the strategic foray into the IPR. The EU wishes to engage with ASEAN-led regional architecture, putting ASEAN at the heart of its strategy. Borrell declared that the “EU-ASEAN partnership is no longer a luxury but a necessity”, proving that the EU is actively deepening its strategic engagement. As observers noted, the EU needs ASEAN more than ASEAN needs the EU.⁸ In 2020, the €800 million (\$1.29 billion) ‘European Team’ initiative was launched to provide ASEAN with assistance in response to the epidemic along with an additional investment of €20 million (\$32.2 million) for the ‘Southeast Asia Healthy Pandemic Response and Preparation’ project.

ASEAN is also an essential part of India’s Act East policy. India became a Summit Level Partner of ASEAN in 2002, and a decade later, the India-ASEAN Strategic Partnership was formalised. The eastward focus in India’s foreign policy witnessed considerable interactions between India and Southeast Asia. In 2020, India and ASEAN carried out a comprehensive review of strategic partnerships in various areas. They adopted a new five-year action plan ranging from trade cooperation to maritime security and counterterrorism.

Moreover, the EU and India have displayed a strong willingness to provide public goods for the IPR, as witnessed in the COVID-19 pandemic. The EU is one of the main funders of the World Health Organization-sponsored COVAX project, and the bloc activated its Civil Protection Mechanism to send aid into India to help it cope with the second wave of the pandemic. Additionally, the EU’s IPR strategy emphasises the need to prioritise the health sector, especially on diversifying health-related industrial supply chains to avoid overt reliance on Chinese supplies. Correspondingly, India – holding the reputation of being the world’s pharmacy – is looking for partners and markets. During the initial waves of the pandemic, India supplied vaccines to 95 states and provided medical and financial aids to regional states. Both the EU and India are willing to provide support to regional states. With both holding significant production capabilities and medical technologies, a partnership in this aspect would greatly benefit the region.

Possible Divergences

Although some convergence between the EU and Indian approaches in the IPR is present, this convergence is incomplete. The strategic decision making between the EU and India may differ in confronting China, a growing maritime power in the region. China’s expanding diplomatic and naval presence in the Indian Ocean has dramatically altered the region’s

⁷ Manisha Reuter, “Friends in deed: How the EU and the Quad can promote security in the Indo-Pacific”, European Council on Foreign Relations, 16 April 2021, <https://ecfr.eu/article/friends-in-deed-how-the-eu-and-the-quad-can-work-together-to-promote-security-in-the-indo-pacific/>.

⁸ Laura Allison-Reumann and Philomena Murray, “The ASEAN–EU Strategic Partnership’s coherence challenge”, East Asia Forum, 16 February 2021, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2021/02/16/the-asean-eu-strategic-partnerships-coherence-challenge/>.

security environment. Presently, Beijing is the only power with diplomatic missions across all six island nations in the Indian Ocean.⁹

The goal of securing economic gains by participating in ASEAN-led institutions and developing various trade linkages with countries in the IPR remains the EU's focus. The openness of trade and strengthening regional economic connectivity is of paramount interest to the EU, which long espoused the belief in a multilateral and rules-based global trading system. The EU Ambassador to ASEAN, Igor Driesmans, has commented that anything that does away with trade restrictions in the region is beneficial for European companies.¹⁰ The EU views India as a difficult trading partner that is against market liberalisation. The Indian withdrawal from the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership does not indicate much convergence in deepening economic ties with Southeast Asia.

With regard to neighbouring small states, India could put pressure on them to attain leadership in the region. Hence, small states in the Indian Ocean region may find it hard to maintain flexible strategic hedging. India could thus use its geographic advantage to influence small states, thereby changing the direction of its foreign policy. Senior Indian officials have contemplated that the country prefers to establish connectivity through cooperation rather than a unilateral approach. It cannot be ignored that other countries use connectivity to gain influence. India also launched its vaccine diplomacy initiative in South Asia before Chinese provision entered the region. Consequently, the objective of India in the Indian Ocean is to counter the increasing Chinese influence and naval capabilities. India wants more small states to choose its model rather than siding with China.

Besides, India is adjusting strategic postures and takes a competitive strategy towards China. Since the Galwan Valley dispute in 2020, China and India are becoming more antagonistic. In his latest speech, External Affairs Minister, Dr S Jaishankar, said that India is ready to manage relations with China in the IPR and must give full play to the potential of its partnership with the US and the Western states. Consequently, the China-India relations will become more tense and hostile in the foreseeable future. It remains unclear if the EU would emerge to be a reliable partner for India to check China. Even though the EU defined China as a "systemic rival" in 2019, there remain fundamental divergences among the member states on how to cope with China's assertive rise and influence. At the recent G7 summit, North Atlantic Treaty Organization meeting and the US-EU summit, the major powers reached a "symbolic solidarity" in forming a united front to counterbalance China whereas tangible cooperation appears unrealistic given internal differences and considerations of how far one could risk antagonising China without jeopardising trade relations.¹¹ Thus, India may not be able to seek guarantees from the EU to counterbalance China as it can from the US.

⁹ Darshana M Baruah, "What Is Happening in the Indian Ocean?", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 3 March 2021, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/03/03/what-is-happening-in-indian-ocean-pub-83948>.

¹⁰ "EXCLUSIVE: A European Union perspective on RCEP", *Astro Awani*, 1 December 2020, <https://www.astroawani.com/berita-dunia/exclusive-european-union-perspective-rcep-270964>.

¹¹ Shruti Pandalai, 'Why the West has problems defining a clear China policy,' *Channel News Asia*, 24 June 2021, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/commentary/us-china-policy-west-g7-unfriendly-competition-cooperation-15073480>.

Looking Ahead

Overall, the common interests between the EU and India outweigh their differences. With the rapid engagement of the EU, both sides can explore new areas to strengthen common interests. The recent EU-India leaders' virtual summit on 8 May 2021 was a success in many regards. Both sides identified areas of further cooperation and agreed on the resumption of the previously halted free trade agreement negotiations.

The two sides could cooperate on economic and infrastructure projects in small island nations; the EU-India connectivity partnership could emerge as an alternative to the island nations in need of better connectivity and infrastructure development. In this way, the small states could have more partners and multilateral relations, reducing dependency on one power.

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