

ENGAGING THE INDO-PACIFIC: SOME POINTERS FOR EUROPE

Sarabjeet S. Parmar



The regional dynamics of the Indo-Pacific Region (IPR), particularly maritime security-related, are distinctly different from other regions, especially Europe. There are existential sub-regional dynamics that vary across the IPR, which need to be viewed through an Indo-Pacific lens and not a European or NATO lens. This issue brief argues that while the ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict may temporarily impact European maritime security interactions in the Indo-Pacific, there is a parallel need to enhance capacity and capability and organizational interactions to shape the European approach to the IPR and enhance its maritime footprint in line with the common aim of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific.

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From Asia to Indo-Pacific

The re-entry of Europe into Asia-Pacific, now termed the Indo-Pacific, is being steered by new dynamics. These dynamics are based on the contemporary environment where economics is a complex web woven by globalization, and security-related issues steered by the ongoing post-Cold War balance of power and linked power transition. These two aspects reflect some vistas whose roots can be traced back to the days of colonization and both the world wars, especially sovereignty-related sensitivities. However, the ascendance of strategic partnerships, which are not as stringent and binding

like alliances, and the changed security environment has provided opportunities for nations, especially erstwhile adversarial nations, to engage in a host of mutually beneficial avenues.

The regional dynamics of the Indo-Pacific Region (IPR), particularly maritime security-related dynamics, are distinctly different from other regions, especially Europe. There are existential sub-regional dynamics which vary across the IPR, and these need to be viewed through an *Indo-Pacific* lens and not a *European or NATO* lens. This approach is applicable to most European nations and the EU, except

France, which is a resident Indo-Pacific nation and thus can navigate the various sub-regions of the IPR with relative ease. Contemporary European interests in the IPR can be traced back to 1994, with the release of the European Commission's 'Towards a New Asia Strategy',¹ updated in 2001 to 'Europe and Asia: A Strategic Framework for Enhanced Partnerships'.² The focus was mainly economics, which is still a major aspect as can be seen in the various IPR strategies/ guidelines/ intentions that have been released by the EU and several European nations. The last two decades have seen additions to the European approach, starting from the usage of the term Indo-Pacific in lieu of Asia and Asia-Pacific, to cooperation on many fronts while obliquely addressing the China factor. While the ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict may temporarily impact European maritime security interactions in the Indo-Pacific, there is a need to shape Europe's approach to such interactions and enhance the European maritime footprint in line with the common approach of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific.

For the EU, the IPR extends from the east coast of Africa to the Pacific Island States,³ which encompasses a vast maritime area. As per a survey conducted by the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) in 2021, EU nations can be placed in four groupings based on geographical extents of the IPR (see Table 1).⁴ Germany does not figure in this listing but in its guidelines considers the "Indo-Pacific to be the entire region characterized by the Indian Ocean and the Pacific",⁵ hence can be viewed as aligned with EU's geographic stretch.

The EU's geographical stretch could be considered a comfort zone, due to geographical convergence and overlaps, and historical linkages of several member nations to the region. Of these several nations, three declared their approach to the Indo-Pacific before the EU released its Indo-Pacific Strategy. France released its detailed Indo-Pacific Strategy in 2022, which was preceded by several presidential declarations in 2018 and 2019,⁶ while Germany

and the Netherlands had released their Indo-Pacific Guidelines in September 2020 and November 2020, respectively. More recently, Italy announced its intentions to support the EU's Indo-Pacific Strategy with the main focus being economics, specifically sources of raw materials and an export market for goods.⁷

Table 1: IPR geographical stretch of EU nations

S.No	Geographical Stretch	Nation(s) and Remarks
(a)	East coast of Africa to the west coast of the Americas	Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Estonia, Czech Republic, France, Greece, Lithuania, Malta, Romania, Spain, and Sweden Remarks: This area is aligned with that of India ⁸
(b)	East coast of Africa to the Pacific Islands	Denmark, Finland, Italy, Luxembourg, and Portugal Remarks: This area is aligned with that of the EU
(c)	Pakistan to the Pacific Islands	Ireland, Latvia, the Netherlands, and Slovakia
(d)	From India to Japan through southeast Asia including South Korea and China	Hungary

Source: Frederic Grare and Manisha Reuter, "Moving Closer: European Views of The Indo-Pacific," European Council on Foreign Relations, September 13, 2021, p. 6.

The ECFR 2021 survey ascertained the stance of European nations on various issues related to the IPR. The survey revealed that "despite the region's growing economic and political importance, indifference to it prevails in many EU member states."⁹ The success of Europe's Indo-Pacific approach would be the sum total of support the EU's Indo-Pacific Strategy receives from member nations, which in turn would be decided by national agendas and the capacity and capability

to engage the Indo-Pacific. This indifference to the IPR is accentuated by the difference in opinion on the “geographical definition of the Indo-Pacific or what the concept means”, which in turn can “could limit their participation in policies.”¹⁰ Therefore, the onus of rolling out the EU’s Indo-Pacific Strategy would rest on the nations which have evinced, or in the future will evince an interest in the IPR through released strategies/ guidelines/ policies/ political statements. Currently, till the time Germany and the Netherlands, and any other EU nation in the future, establish themselves as effective non-resident Indo-Pacific nations, “it is evident that France (a resident Indo-Pacific nation) would be the lynchpin of the EU’s engagement at least until such time as the EU establishes a physical presence and, therefore, an identity of its own, independent of the engagement of its member nations.”¹¹

Coordinating Maritime Presence

As per the ECFR Survey, there is clear tilt in favor of national economic interests with 10 nations viewing the EU strategy as “a way to deal with China and a way for Europe to take advantage of new economic and other opportunities”, and 13 nations viewing it as “merely a field of opportunity to pursue economic interests” with the China factor occupying a low level of prominence.¹² The economic angle is not restricted by any geographic parameters as the International Shipping Lanes

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(ISLs) or Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs) ensure global trade connectivity, which runs on the internationally accepted norm of *Freedom of Navigation*, and the degree of stability, security and peace in the region they traverse and the choke points they cross. Pursuance of a *Holistic Maritime Security*¹³ requires a high level of cooperation and interoperability to address common maritime challenges, threats, and risks, by availing of suitable cooperative opportunities. There are several maritime security cooperative mechanisms existing in the IPR from bilateral to multilateral levels across its several sub-regions and organizations.

The introduction of the EU’s Coordinated Maritime Presences (CMP) in the Northwest Indian Ocean (NWIO), which will “complement both the EU’s and EU member states’ activities in the region while respecting the mandate and chain of command of EUNAVFOR Operation ATALANTA”,¹⁴ adds to the mechanisms. During his visit to India in February 2023, in an interview, Ambassador Michael Pulch, the EU’s CMP coordinator, stated that “the European Union needs to engage with the outside world more than ever before, especially post Russia’s war on Ukraine and must engage closer with the Indo-Pacific, economically, politically and on some security matters.”¹⁵ Much is expected out of the CMP concept, the broad contours of which were mentioned in the Council

of the EU’s conclusions on the implementation of the CMP in the NWIO.¹⁶ The Maritime Area of Interest (MAI) within which the CMP is to be implemented stretches north to south from the Strait of Hormuz to the Southern Tropic (Tropic of Capricorn) and west to east from the north of the Red Sea towards the center of the Indian Ocean.¹⁷ This geographic stretch falls either outside of or with slight overlap with the western edge of the IPR geographic stretch of five EU nations—Hungary, Ireland, Latvia, the Netherlands, and Slovakia—which is from Pakistan to the Pacific Islands and misses out the western Indian Ocean.

Of these five nations, the Netherlands, which like Germany and Spain has observer status on the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), is actively seeking a role in the Indo-Pacific. The observer status of the Netherlands’ thus gives it access to interactions with other IONS members and also covers the gap between Pakistan to the east coast of Africa. To avoid any miscommunications, and for clarity, the Netherlands could formally

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intimate its geographic stretch of the IPR. The MAI within which the CMP is planned to be implemented covers a larger area than the Somalian piracy threat map or measles map as it was called, which indicated the spread of piracy up to 2011 (see Figure 1).

While deposing before the British Parliament’s Foreign Affair Committee regarding piracy off the coast of Somalia in 2011, Major General Buster

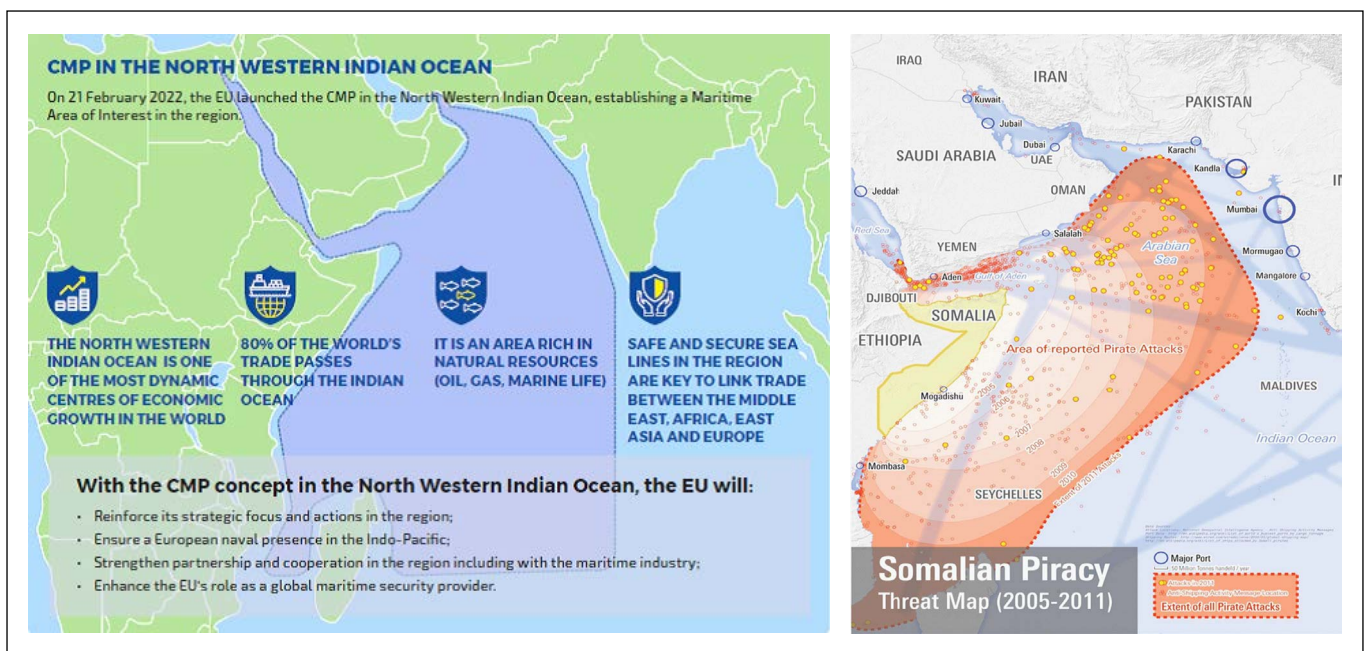


Figure 1: Comparison of EU’s MAI in the NWIO and Piracy Threat Map (2005-2011)

Sources: EEAS Factsheet, “Coordinated Maritime Presences,” <https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/2022-03-coordinated-maritime-presences-newlayout.pdf>; Sarabjeet Singh Parmar, “Somali Piracy: A Form of Economic Terrorism,” *Strategic Analysis* 36, no. 2 (March 2012): 293.

Howes, the then OP ATALANTA Commander, stated that he needed 83 helicopter equipped frigates or destroyer size ships and five maritime reconnaissance aircraft to cover the Indian Ocean and provide a ~30 minute response time to combat a pirate attack on a merchant ship.¹⁸ This statement by an operational commander is indicative of the contemporary enormity of the task faced to effectively address the growing non-traditional holistic maritime security challenges and threats within the MAI where the CMP is to be implemented. Therefore, as the aim is to “increase the EU’s capacity as a reliable partner and maritime security provider, offering a greater European engagement, ensuring continuous maritime presence and outreach in designated Maritime Areas of Interest as established by the Council, as well as promoting international cooperation and partnership at sea”,¹⁹ the EU will need to stringently examine the capacity and capability its member nations to provide the necessary *presence* and, more importantly, *permanency of that presence*. While France is likely to provide the initial main support, the longevity of the support could be limited by France’s own interests in the region.

Permanency of Presence

There are two issues that will need to be addressed. The first issue contends with permanency of

Much is expected of the EU’s Coordinated Maritime Presences (CMP) in the Northwest Indian Ocean (NWIO) and it will complement both the EU’s and EU member states’ activities in the region.

There is need for more EU nations to seek entry into Indo-Pacific organizations, especially ASEAN related forums, where even France is absent. This is an important aspect as ASEAN centrality is a major convergence point in most Indo-Pacific strategies.

presence. As the presence of ships and aircraft have their own inherent visible impact, there will be a need for EU to position such assets, operating under two flags for enhancing the visibility aspect—the EU’s and the respective national flag. The passage in the IPR of the Dutch frigate HNLMS Evertsen as part of the United Kingdom’s Carrier Strike Group,²⁰ the German frigate Bayern,²¹ and the planned deployment by Italy of an Offshore Patrol Vessel (OPV) for patrolling activities alongside allied activities²² though important, are symbolic and need to be followed up by more deployments to certify intent and enhance visibility, thereby ensuring *permanency of presence*.

The assessment of threats and challenges to be addressed, and exercises to be conducted with the maritime forces of resident Indo-Pacific nations would decide the numbers and types of assets to be positioned. This thrust line would take some time to fructify as the defense capabilities of most European nations saw a steady decrease since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the associated threat as military expenditure was progressively reduced. Figure 2 gives military expenditure as a share of government spending in respect of four nations.

The 2008 economic crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic have further impacted the state of defense

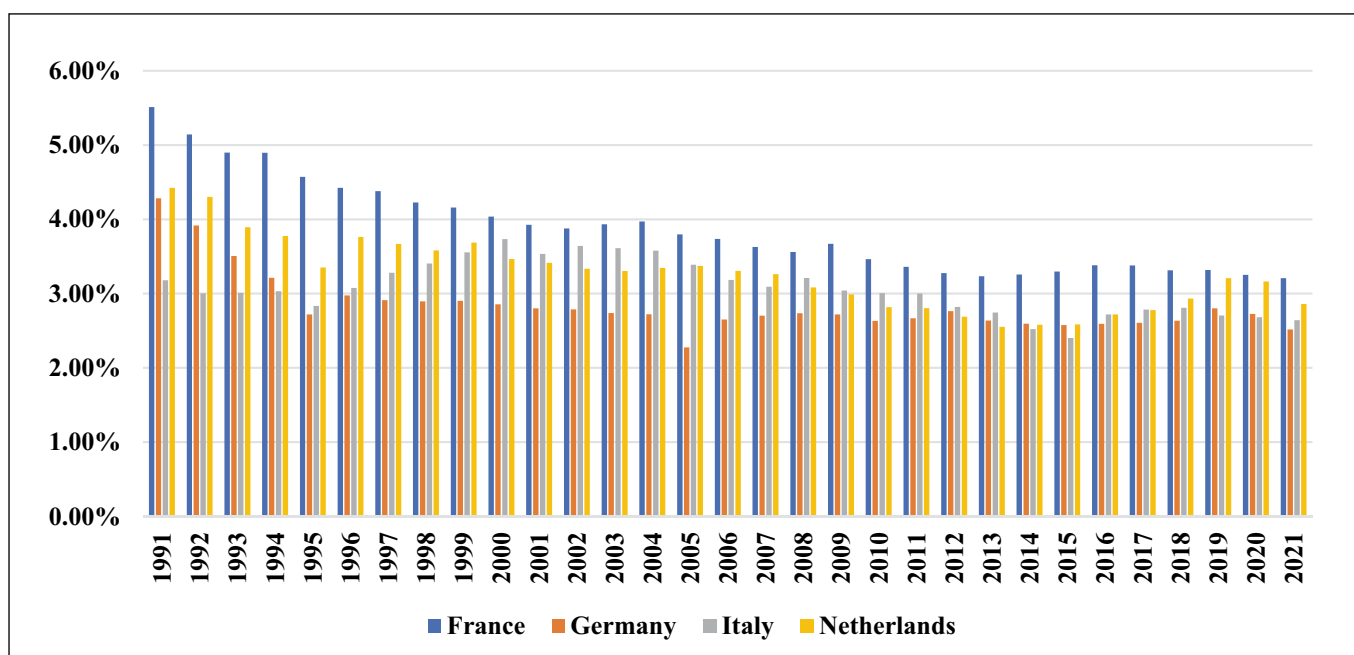


Figure 2: Military Expenditure as a Share of Government Spending

Source: Compiled by Author from the SIPRI Military Expenditure Database, <https://milex.sipri.org/sipri>.

preparedness of most EU nations. Therefore, the EU nations would be hard pressed to provide assets for ongoing Combined Maritime Force task forces, OP ATALANTA and for specific CMP requirements, while contending with the emerging Russia threat in Europe. Therefore, even if the EU nations provide assets on a rotational basis, the establishment of a credible EU maritime footprint in the defined MAI would take some time. Although tasking the assets to further the CMP aim in the MAI while operating with any of the CMF task forces may seem an attractive option, it would impact development of the EU’s maritime footprint. Further, creation of more MAI’s in the Indo-Pacific should be considered based on the experiences and lessons that will be drawn from CMP in the NWIO MAI.

Organizational Interactions

The second issue relates to interactions with resident Indo-Pacific nations. At the political level the multilateral structures include the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), all ASEAN related structures like the ASEAN Defense Ministers’ Meeting Plus (ADMM Plus), the

ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), and the East Asia Summit (EAS). Two evolving mechanisms include the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) and the Quad based initiatives that have flowed from the Quad leader summit meetings held in quick succession since 2021. At the maritime forces level, the multilateral structures include the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) and the Western Pacific Naval Symposium (WPNS). The status of EU nations in these Indo-Pacific organizations is shown in Table 2.

Table 2 clearly points out three issues. First, there is a small but significant presence in the Indian Ocean, which can be considered as EU’s gateway to the broader Indo-Pacific. Secondly, there is need for more EU nations to seek entry into other Indo-Pacific organizations, especially ASEAN related forums, where even France is absent. This is an important aspect as ASEAN centrality is a major convergence point finding high degree of mention in most Indo-Pacific strategies. Thirdly, the responsibility of bringing the EU and other member nations into Indo-Pacific organizations

will mainly be the remit of France, with other like-minded Indo-Pacific nations supporting their entry.

Table 2: Status of EU and EU Nations in Indo-Pacific Organizations

S.No	Organization	Status of EU Nations
(a)	IORA	France: Member Germany, Italy: Dialogue Partners
(b)	IONS	France: Member Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, and Spain: Observers
(c)	ASEAN	EU: Dialogue Partner France, Germany, and Italy: Development Partners
(d)	EAS, ADMM Plus, and ARF	Nil presence
(e)	IPOI	France: Maritime Resource Pillar Italy: Science, Technology and Academic Cooperation Pillar ²³
(f)	WPNS	France: Member

Source: Collated by Author from the main page website of the organizations

Absence from these organizations will not only limit the vision from an Indo-Pacific lens but will also impact the required integration into the region at multiple levels from political downwards. This would require a well-considered approach based on a strong rationale to justify the presence of the EU and its member nations, as both individual entities and a part of the EU, in the region and the concerned Indo-Pacific organizations. Joining organizations has a long processing time, hence the EU and EU nations could look at the easier access portals of IPOI and the Quad initiatives. The present status of the IPOI is seen in Table 3.

There is ample space in the IPOI for nations to join. The IPOI, which was proposed by the Indian Prime Minister during the 14th EAS on November 4, 2019 as a cooperative effort to “translate principles for the Indo-Pacific into measures to secure our shared

maritime environment”²⁴ is not looking at creating any new institutional framework and would rely on an ASEAN-led EAS framework but would also not be limited to it.²⁵ Therefore, coming onboard the IPOI could strengthen the chances of the EU and member nations joining the EAS.

Table 3: IPOI Pillars and Lead Nations

S.No	Pillar	Lead Nation(s)
(a)	Maritime Security	India and UK
(b)	Maritime Ecology	Australia
(c)	Maritime Resources	France and Indonesia
(d)	Capacity Building and Resource Sharing	Nil
(e)	Disaster Risk Reduction and Management	India
(f)	Science, Technology and Academic Cooperation	Singapore, Italy (from 03 March 2023)
(g)	Trade, Connectivity and Maritime Transport	Japan: Connectivity only

Source: Address by India’s EAM at Chulalongkorn University on *India’s Vision of the Indo-Pacific*, August 18, 2022.²⁶

The Quad like the EAS is a *Leaders-led Platform* and has showcased several initiatives²⁷ that resonate with the IPOI pillars, and the principles and four objectives of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP).²⁸ Several Quad initiatives like the IPOI pillars focus on common sets of challenges and threats. These include global health, climate change, critical and emerging technologies, infrastructure, people to people exchange and education, cyber security, space, and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR). Like the IPOI, EU nations would find it easy to join the initiatives as the 2022 US Indo-Pacific Strategy recognizes “the strategic value of an increasing regional role for the EU”.²⁹

These IPOI pillars and Quad initiatives focus mainly on non-traditional threats and hence would be more acceptable to resident Indo-Pacific

nations, especially ASEAN nations, who want to avoid choosing sides between China and the U.S. The EU and its member nations would have to balance the China factor and thus may step cautiously. However, to establish a footprint in the IPR there will be a need to take some hard decisions. For this, a coordinated approach would be more beneficial as unity could provide the shield to counter China's bilateral approach from a position of strength.

Reviewing the Situation

The Indo-Pacific is a vast area and unlike Europe is not a homogenous region. Engaging the Indo-Pacific will entail engaging its several sub-regions, which will require a strong economy and a high caliber capacity and capability to address the diverse challenges and opportunities of the sub-regions. Hence, engaging the Indo-Pacific can test the resilience of non-resident Indo-Pacific nations. Currently, one major limitation the EU and its member nations face in engaging the Indo-Pacific is capacity and capability. The latest EU Maritime Security Strategy released on 10 March 2023 looks at only the NWIO in the Indo-Pacific via OP ATALANTA, EUCAP Somalia, and CMP³⁰ which is perhaps indicative of the recognition of this limitation. This limitation fuelled by reduction in defense budgets after the collapse of the Soviet Union has been exacerbated by the ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict. It also raises the question that if the defense of Europe still depends on the U.S.,³¹ then how much can the EU member nations, who also have a parallel NATO commitment, focus on the Indo-Pacific, starting with the EU's CMP in the NWIO. Further, the associated energy and rising cost of living crises will impact planned investments in the Indo-Pacific. Therefore, while "Europe's economy is indeed settling down",³² it may take time for EU and its member nations to recover and effectively engage the Indo-Pacific. This provides the EU and its member nations the time and opportunity to seek entry into identified Indo-Pacific regional organizations and engage the

sub-regions at opportune times. This incremental approach would provide a better understanding of the varying dynamics of the several IPR sub-regions and the development of an Indo-Pacific lens that would enable a cogent approach.

Author –

Captain Sarabjeet S Parmar is a serving Indian Naval Officer and is currently a Senior Fellow at the National Maritime Foundation, New Delhi. The views expressed are his own and do not reflect the policy of the Government of India or the Indian Navy. He can be contacted at seniorfellow2.nmf@gmail.com and ssparmar669@gmail.com

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