

THE EU INDO-PACIFIC BID

SAILING THROUGH ECONOMIC AND SECURITY COMPETITION

edited by **Filippo Fasulo**
introduction by **Paolo Magri**



ISPI

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Edited by Filippo Fasulo

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2. QUAD Plus EU: A Viable Option for the Times?

Jagannath Panda

Undoubtedly, today the primary contest in the Indo-Pacific is not just about the China-US hegemony. It also involves a range of so-called “middle powers” – including Australia, France, Germany, India, Indonesia, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands and South Korea, among others – coming to terms with their own global ambitions and objectives, and being compelled to secure their economic concerns (e.g. maritime trade routes) in an unstable region. Therefore, it is as much about “preventing Chinese hegemony while avoiding catastrophic conflict”, as it is about forcing the US to reconfigure its alliances and partnerships in a region that is an economic and political hotspot.¹

Against this context, relationships between “like-minded” partners, whether through shared values or interests or narratives, become very important. Much has been written about the “rise of the minilaterals” in the Indo-Pacific in the era of multipolarity.² These largely “ad hoc” groupings between a limited number of states/entities without institutionalised ties are drawn from their strong bilateral ties. In an era of

¹ R. Medcalf, “The Season of Caucuses: QUAD, AUKUS, and the Exclusive-Inclusive Duality of Indo-Pacific Asia”, in S. Saran and A. Khanna (eds.), *Raisina Files 2022*, vol. 6, Observer Research Foundation (ORF), New Delhi, 25 April 2022.

² H. Haqqani and N. Janardhan, “The Minilateral Era”, *Foreign Policy*, 10 January 2023.

ineffective and inefficient multilateralism where the institutions are digging their own graves by refusing to reform or adapt to the current diverse milieu, smaller groups focus on national interests and attempt to avoid the complications inherent in a larger multilateral setup. Out of a number of still-emerging such mechanisms, two stand out: the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) comprising the democratic states of Australia, India, Japan and the United States; and the AUKUS defence pact between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Notably, both are US-led or US-centred.

However, as the debate around middle powers assuming greater responsibilities is gaining ground and the Indo-Pacific middle powers themselves are diversifying their own autonomous networks, the quest for balancing parties continues. European entities including the European Union, its members and the UK are being seen as important partners. According to the recently published *State of Southeast Asia 2023* survey report, the EU is the most preferred “third party” ahead of Japan and India and seen as a defender of free trade and international law, with trust in the EU as an economic and political actor increasing substantially.³

At the same time, although the EU and its member states have had long-standing ties in Asia – bilaterally with states like India and Japan, multilaterally through the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and via a decade-long engagement in non-traditional security avenues like counter-piracy operations in the (primarily western) Indian Ocean – most Asian states see the EU as a non-player in the regional security architecture.⁴ Moreover, there is also concern that Europe’s lack of internal unity may hamper the efforts needed to counter the ill effects of US-Chinese competition.⁵

³ D. Hutt, “Survey: EU’s influence Surging in Southeast Asia”, *DW*, 10 February 2023.

⁴ E. Brattberg and P. Le Corre, “The Case for Transatlantic Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific”, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 18 December 2019.

⁵ J. Dempsey, “Can Europe Influence U.S.-China Rivalry?”, Carnegie Europe, 16

Hence, with the increasingly fraught equations between states globally, especially post Russia's invasion of Ukraine, will the EU remain a concerned spectator or shed inhibitions about its strategic intentions, even if they seem relatively confrontational, in the Indo-Pacific? Can Europe's favoured status among ASEAN states and its growing tilt towards QUAD inspire states like Indonesia and Vietnam – who are warming up to the Indo-Pacific construct due to increasing tensions with Beijing in the South China Sea – to consider becoming “QUAD Plus” partners?⁶

Wither the Indo-Pacific Congruence Between EU and QUAD?

The Indo-Pacific's rise and standing as the “economic engine of the world”; its critical dependence on regional maritime routes for trade (linking Europe to the Pacific Ocean, via the Indian Ocean and Southeast Asia); China's disruptive behaviour; and a fleet of stakeholders vying for strategic advantages have compelled European states to pivot towards this region. In fact, over the last five years, China's adventurism in the Indo-Pacific, as well as in Europe's own backyard of Central and Eastern Europe, has become a pressing concern for Europe.

In its 2019 “strategic outlook”, Brussels framed Beijing as a “partner, competitor and rival”. This has continued to hold true even as China's abysmal human rights' record in Tibet, Hong Kong, Xinjiang, and inner Mongolia; economic coercion and unfair trade practices; and stance on the war in Ukraine are deteriorating the relationship.⁷ In the last year, China's growing

February 2023.

⁶ Vietnam and Indonesia are two of the (at least) seven territorial claimants on the South China Sea – China, Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines and Taiwan are the rest – even as Indonesia has often claimed not being a party to South China Sea disputes. See M. Yeo, “[How a New Vietnam-Indonesia Deal Will Affect South China Sea Disputes](#)”, *Defense News*, 13 February 2023.

⁷ European Union External Action, “[EU-China Relations Factsheet](#)”, 1 April

“no-limits” partnership with Russia – especially at a time when EU-Russia relations have brought into being new uncertainties, including a possible clash between nuclear powers, has made China a more immediate threat to EU member states, too, at least to a certain extent.

As a result, the EU and its members must look for, and if needed create, opportunities for a more formal, structural engagement with the Indo-Pacific security mechanisms. The still nascent “QUAD Plus” is the perfect beginning for the EU; the bloc would be hesitant to enter into more exclusively military clubs like AUKUS even if the Anglosphere alliance were keen to include others, which seems highly unlikely in the near future. Despite repeated assertions by commentators about the feasibility of Japan joining AUKUS (JAUkus), Tokyo and Washington have dismissed the AUKUS plus notion.⁸

It must be noted that while the UK looks to ensure an enhanced European security presence via the AUKUS, the rift caused between the EU and the UK due to Britain’s controversial exit from the bloc (“Brexit”) has ensured that the UK’s involvement does not necessarily imply greater European access or presence, and vice versa.⁹ Moreover, the unceremonious announcement of the Anglosphere pact in September 2021 overshadowed the release of the EU’s Indo-Pacific strategy document the same month, even as the cancellation of the US\$90 billion France-Australia submarine deal opened a great divide in the transatlantic relationship, now on the mend after the Ukraine invasion in 2022.¹⁰

However, the launch of AUKUS has not only shifted power dynamics in the Indo-Pacific but also necessitated

2022; European Commission, “[EU Refers China to the WTO following Its Trade Restrictions on Lithuania](#)”, 27 January 2022.

⁸ M. Auslin, “[Why AUKUS should really become JAUkus](#)”, *Financial Review*, 17 November 2022.

⁹ J. Panda, “[Between AUKUS and the Quad: Scaling European Interest in the Indo-Pacific](#)”, Hague Centre for Strategic Studies (HCSS), February 2022.

¹⁰ J. Panda, “[Is ‘AUKUS Plus’ a Viable Option?](#)”, *The Diplomat*, 26 January 2022.

greater strategic autonomy calls within the EU. The high-risk endeavour, which is expected to cost about US\$268-368 billion, has been called out by China as a “path of error and danger” for its potential to fuel an arms race.¹¹ In March 2023, the trilateral unveiled the roadmap to create a new fleet of nuclear-powered submarines (called the SSN-AUKUS), aimed at enhancing the partners’ “individual and collective ability to deter threats” from China in the Indo-Pacific.¹² Clearly, a “collective defence agreement” is not what the EU would desire at this juncture.¹³ This implies greater potential for an EU-QUAD narrative: both have thus far shied away from direct military involvement, but they seek to create a free, open, prosperous and secure landscape in the region.

The “collective diplomatic cooperative forum” of the QUAD finds its roots in the ravages of the 2004 Tsunami in the Indian Ocean, when the four democracies of the US, Australia, Japan and India joined forces for humanitarian purposes.¹⁴ Subsequently, its first version in 2007, which failed for multiple reasons including a lack of cohesive regional agenda and fear of Chinese reprisals, and successful revival in 2017 have nonetheless pushed forward the idea of the late Shinzo Abe’s “broader Asia” into a steadfast commitment to a “free and open Indo-Pacific that is inclusive and resilient”.¹⁵

It is during this period that European states began to take earnest notice of such collaborative developments in Asia. Amid the protectionist policies favoured by former US President Trump and the rise of an aggressive China, the EU and its member states began to strengthen their connections

¹¹ A. Hawkins and R. Kwan, “China Says Aukus Submarines Deal Embarks on Path of Error and Danger”, *The Guardian*, 14 March 2023.

¹² UK Ministry of Defence, “The AUKUS Nuclear Powered Submarine Pathway: A Partnership for the Future”, 14 March 2023.

¹³ J. Panda, “Between AUKUS and the Quad: Scaling European Interest in the Indo-Pacific”..., cit.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ S. Abe, “Confluence of the Two Seas”, Speech at the Indian Parliament, 22 August 2007.

with Asia. However, it was only after the release of the 2021 EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific that the rhetoric truly gained momentum.¹⁶ Earlier, France, Germany and the Netherlands had unrolled their respective strategies in 2018 and 2020 (the latter two within months, September and November), expecting the EU to follow shortly in order to highlight enhanced goals and presence in the Indo-Pacific.¹⁷

The EU's intent to pursue enhanced ("principled and long-term") engagement with the Indo-Pacific cannot be achieved without viable cooperation with partner states, including minilaterals such as the QUAD.¹⁸ One of the core EU goals in this context is maintaining Europe's prosperity as one of the world's largest trading powers, in addition to its other territorial and sovereign interests.¹⁹

The document reiterates the need for Europe to secure sea lanes of communication, because 90% of its external and 40% of its internal trade is seaborne. The QUAD as a primarily "security-orientated" strategic Indo-Pacific platform that upholds freedom of navigation and the rule of law thus becomes vital for the EU.²⁰ Importantly, the EU strategy document highlights deepening "engagement with partners that already

¹⁶ European Commission, "Questions and Answers: EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific", 16 September 2021.

¹⁷ Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, "France's Indo-Pacific Strategy", 2018; Federal Foreign Office, "Germany-Europe-Asia: Shaping the 21st Century Together: The German Government adopts policy guidelines on the Indo-Pacific region", 1 September 2020; Government of Netherlands, "Indo-Pacific: Guidelines for Strengthening Dutch and EU Cooperation with Partners in Asia", 13 November 2020.

¹⁸ European Commission, "Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council: The EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific", 21 September 2021.

¹⁹ France is an Indo-Pacific resident power; the EU has Outermost Regions (Indian Ocean) and Overseas Countries and Territories (Pacific) in the Indo-Pacific. For details, refer European Commission, "EU & Outermost Regions" and "Overseas Countries and Territories".

²⁰ M. Reuter, "Friends in Deed: How the EU and the Quad can Promote Security in the Indo-Pacific", European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), 16 April 2021.

have Indo-Pacific approaches of their own” (all QUAD states do), in particular with the QUAD.²¹

Thus, the talk of the EU and the QUAD being “natural” strategic partners is inexorably linked to the EU’s focus on maritime security, which is vital for Europe’s own economic aims and the region’s stability. The intense geopolitical competition and instability due to military buildup (both Chinese and the US, as evidenced by AUKUS) have compelled the EU to enhance its maritime presence to secure key shipping routes. The EU’s Maritime Security Strategy (EUMSS) is also in line with its strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, in that both seek to develop international cooperation through bilateral dialogues, port calls, counter-piracy operations (Atalanta) and live exercises with countries such as Australia, Japan, India, Indonesia and South Korea, among others.²²

The EU’s comprehensive goals correspond to the QUAD’s “positive and practical” agenda, which looks to respond to the region’s developmental challenges in areas ranging from Covid-19 health concerns and humanitarian assistance to climate change and quality infrastructure connectivity.²³ That QUAD and the EU are steadfast, vocal supporters of ASEAN centrality, the ASEAN-led architecture and ASEAN’s Outlook on Indo-Pacific is an important binding factor.

Merits of the EU as a “QUAD Plus” Actor

Since 2020, when the QUAD states included three Indo-Pacific countries, namely New Zealand, South Korea and Vietnam, as well as Brazil and Israel for coordinating responses to the

²¹ European Commission, “[The EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific](#)”..., cit.

²² The EUMSS, valid since 2014 and last revised in 2018, is in the process of being updated. See European Commission, *Maritime Security Strategy*, 10 March 2023.

²³ The White House, “[Quad Leaders’ Joint Statement: “The Spirit of the Quad”](#)”, 12 March 2021.

Covid-19 pandemic over regular telephonic consultations, the question of the QUAD expanding its outreach has been gaining ground.²⁴ Keeping in mind the QUAD's "humanitarian aid" origins, it is reasonable to expect that it would broaden its regional cooperation scope and involve other "like-minded" partners to share the responsibilities in the so-called (unofficially termed) grouping of the "QUAD Plus." The EU and its member states, with their strengthening bilateral ties with individual QUAD states and their growing bonhomie with ASEAN, provide the perfect background for potential inclusion into the extended grouping.

As the QUAD grows into its anticipated role as a major regional security mechanism, it has added more thrust into first developing multifaceted cooperation between members for securing the respective national interests and then looking for ways to expand cooperation via a broad range of issues. Notably, promoting direct security measures even for deterrence purposes is not yet an option, but tougher times may change the QUAD's current view – *à la* what AUKUS has done for Australia, a dramatic turn for a country that was largely held responsible for the QUAD 1.0 breaking up.²⁵

Nonetheless, the need for liaising with "like-minded" partners for ensuring inclusive regional development goals becomes imperative; such goals include maximising initiatives in technologies; harnessing innovation for climate action (clean energy); establishing quality infrastructure; pursuing fair (non-discriminatory) trade practices; helping establish relevant governance norms; and ensuring regional stability.

²⁴ J. Panda, "India and the 'Quad Plus' Dialogue", Royal United Services Institute for Defense and Security Studies (RUSI), 12 June 2020; Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), "DFAT Secretary Discusses COVID-19 Response with Indo-Pacific Countries", 13 May 2020; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, "Meeting on the Novel Coronavirus Disease among Foreign Ministers of Interested Countries, Hosted by the United States", 11 May 2020.

²⁵ For revisiting other aspects, read D. Flitton, "Who Really Killed the Quad 1.0?", *The Interpreter*, 2 June 2020.

Embracing areas of cooperation?

In today's fast-evolving political landscape, power both during peacetime and war is greatly shaped by frontier technologies (e.g., artificial intelligence, nanotechnology, big data, Internet of Things and supercomputing) – from spreading chaos using disinformation (e.g., interfering in elections) to using unmanned aerial systems and the internet for financing and planning extremist activities. In an unstable region with multiple flashpoints such as Asia, technology can simultaneously provide states the means to improve the daily lives of ordinary citizens, such as by digitalisation of critical infrastructure and communication networks, while also potentially exploiting vulnerabilities (e.g., by disregarding privacy standards or infringing citizens' personal privacy for nefarious purposes).

The QUAD and the EU can come together via the QUAD (Plus) working groups to establish people-centric, responsible and safe mechanisms, processes or norms for using new technologies in developmental sectors – utilising the EU's strengths in creating high value-added products and services and leveraging its innovation capacity.²⁶ For example, the newly announced QUAD working group on counterterrorism, which will explore cooperation among Indo-Pacific partners, to counter the use of new and emerging technologies in terrorism is a good cooperation platform considering the EU's expertise in successful counter-piracy operations like Atalanta.²⁷

Another top global priority is fighting climate change and environmental degradation, which is reflected in both the QUAD's joint statements and in EU strategies such as “Global Gateway” and the “Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific”, as well as through the “EU Climate Diplomacy”.

²⁶ J. Ringhof and J.I. Torreblanca, “The Geopolitics of Technology: How the EU Can Become a Global Player”, Policy Brief, European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), 17 May 2022.

²⁷ US Department of State, “Joint Statement of the Quad Ministerial Meeting in New Delhi”, 3 March 2023; EU Naval Force Operation Atalanta, “Mission”.

The International Solar Alliance (ISA), an Indo-French joint venture to deploy solar energy solutions in the fight against climate change, is an avenue for cooperation. Ninety-two countries have ratified the ISA framework agreement, including all QUAD states, the UK, and several EU member states, and 114 are signatories as of March 2023.²⁸ Another is the Quad Climate Change Adaptation and Mitigation Package (Q-CHAMP), which includes green shipping and ports; clean energy cooperation; developing an engagement strategy with Pacific island countries; climate-smart agriculture; and disaster and climate resilient infrastructure, including the efforts through the Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure (CDRI) – all areas that can benefit from European inputs, and vice versa.²⁹

The QUAD nations have increasingly highlighted that they are in the process of increasing multifaceted cooperation between one another bilaterally, trilaterally, and in other regional formats as well as with other like-minded nations to “drive forward coordinated responses to the most pressing challenges” – primarily referring to China’s aggression – in the Indo-Pacific.³⁰ In this context, France leading the QUAD navies during the three-day La Perouse exercise in the Bay of Bengal not only provided opportunities for these “high-end navies” to develop “closer links, sharpen their skills and promote maritime cooperation throughout a free and open Indo-Pacific” but also strengthened speculations about the “QUAD Plus” framework amid rising interest from external and regional stakeholders alike.³¹

²⁸ International Solar Alliance (ISA), “[Countries Who Have Signed and Ratified the ISA Framework Agreement](#)”.

²⁹ The White House, “[Quad Joint Leaders’ Statement](#)”, 24 May 2022.

³⁰ J. Panda, “[Making ‘Quad Plus’ a Reality](#)”, *The Diplomat*, 13 January 2022.

³¹ In March 2023, the multi-nation exercise started its third chapter, but it is the second QUAD plus France edition. K. Purohit, “[India Joins French-Led Naval Exercise, Revealing Clues about Quad’s Plans to Contain China in Indo-Pacific](#)”, *South China Morning Post*, 4 April 2021.

Such large-scale exercises among QUAD plus European states give impetus to “like-minded” Asian naval forces to become partners in spite of their wariness of China’s view of the QUAD as a US tool of containment. For example, in 2022, the participation of the EU members France, Germany, and the Netherlands along with the QUAD states and Southeast Asian partners Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand, among others, in the biennial “Pitch Black” exercises, highlighted the EU members’ intent to increase military presence in the Indo-Pacific and a provided a clear signal about solidarity between these “value” partners.³²

The EU can also contribute via support for maritime security under its development cooperation, humanitarian aid and foreign policy support measures or by participating in awareness-sharing multilateral mechanisms such as the Shared Awareness and Deconfliction (SHADE) Conferences, as outlined in its EUMSS vision.³³ The QUAD’s new initiative, the Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA), is tailored for a partnership with the EU and its members with their operations in the Indian Ocean and Pacific Islands that centres on development, fisheries and climate change.

In addition, the EU could cooperate with the QUAD on building dialogue mechanisms, practical cooperation and capacity in areas such as counter-terrorism, cybersecurity, maritime security and crisis management via its co-financed project Enhancing Security Cooperation in and with Asia (ESIWA).³⁴

At a deeper level, the QUAD is also looking to frame “rules, norms, guidelines and principles” for sustainable/peaceful use of space, and so it will need to move beyond bilateral agreements

³² M. von Hein, “[German Military Ramps Up Indo-Pacific Presence](#)”, *DW*, 3 September 2022; S. Waters, “[Pitch Black 2022 concludes International Interoperability Exercise](#)”, 12 September 2022.

³³ Combined Maritime Forces, “[Shade Conference 2022](#)”; European Commission, *Maritime Security Strategy*, 10 March 2023.

³⁴ Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), “[Enhancing Security Cooperation in and with Asia](#)”.

among the core partners. As the EU approach also commits to a “safe, secure and sustainable” space (which it regards as a global commons), the two are natural partners to coalesce international efforts in areas such as space traffic management.³⁵ They could also create awareness through joint workshops in the Indo-Pacific with respect to the UN Committee on the “Peaceful Uses of Outer Space (COPUOS) Guidelines for the Long-Term Sustainability of Outer Space Activities”, in line with the QUAD’s vision.³⁶

Another critical area is infrastructure, where the immense gaps can be bridged only via collaborative efforts. The EU with its Global Gateway connectivity initiative – a scheme launched in 2021 to compete against China’s ambitious Belt and Road Initiative – would be vital in complementing the QUAD’s more than US\$50 billion of infrastructure assistance and investment in the Indo-Pacific over the next five years.³⁷ Besides, the Global Gateway’s quest for resilient supply chains should also take into account cooperation with the Supply Chain Resilience Initiative (SCRI, co-established by Australia, India and Japan).

The QUAD states have welcomed the EU’s reinvigorated focus on the Indo-Pacific in spite of the additional financial pressure on Europe’s limited resources triggered by the Ukraine war.³⁸ Nonetheless, some have highlighted the need for the EU to prioritise its economic and development agenda over security affairs, and in turn for excluding QUAD and AUKUS as potential partners.³⁹ However, as highlighted above, the “QUAD Plus” and AUKUS cannot be seen through the same lens; and the former offers myriad opportunities for complementing Europe’s “soft” approach.

³⁵ European Commission, “Factsheet on Space Traffic Management”, 2022; The White House, [Quad Joint Leaders’ Statement](#), 24 May 2022.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ S. Lau and H. Cokelaere, “EU Launches ‘Global Gateway’ to Counter China’s Belt and Road”, *Politico*, 15 September 2021.

³⁸ R. Medcalf, “AUKUS, the QUAD and the EU: Inclusive and Exclusive Visions for the Indo-Pacific”, ISPI, 18 March 2022.

³⁹ F. Kliem, “How the EU Can Still Succeed in the Indo-Pacific Despite the War in Ukraine”, *The Diplomat*, 28 May 2022.

At the same time, completely dissociating from the Indo-Pacific security architecture may not be a future-oriented approach, if the intention is to avoid a Ukraine-like invasion in the Indo-Pacific region. On the contrary, the EU's participation in security affairs become necessary, especially with fears of multiple serious conflicts (in the Taiwan Strait, Himalayas, East and South China Seas) exacerbating the region's descent into the so-called Thucydides Trap post Xi Jinping's renewed (and unprecedented) third term as general secretary of the ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and as China's President.⁴⁰

Unity where it matters?

The launch of several Indo-Pacific strategies by not just major EU members like France, Germany or Netherlands but also smaller nations like the Czech Republic indicates a strong desire to partake in Indo-Pacific politics, for primarily economic but also strategic reasons. No matter the ripples in the transatlantic relationship, Brussels is in the process of aligning its China policy somewhat closer to the more confrontational US approach, especially after China's continuing support for Russia during the Ukraine war.

On the other hand, Europe's divided stance over ties with China and the EU's Strategic Compass, released in March months before the NATO strategic document, dilly-dallying about China's future role in European affairs, both have strengthened the present cooperation-competition angle. However, the inclusion of China's "coercive" policies as well as its partnership with Russia as a strategic threat highlighted in the 2022 NATO Strategic Concept – which however does not go as far as calling China an adversary – highlights Europe's solidarity with the US to secure Western interests.⁴¹

⁴⁰ J. Panda, "Will India and China Escape the Thucydides Trap?", *The Diplomat*, 12 September 2022; "Xi Awarded 3rd Term as China's President, Extending Rule", *AP*, 10 March 2023.

⁴¹ "NATO Declares China A Security Challenge for the First Time", *Al Jazeera*, 30 June 2022.

The pooling of maritime resources between member states like Spain, Portugal, Germany, France and the Netherlands has been reiterated; some of these states have already increased their naval presence via joint exercises with the QUAD (as mentioned above) in the Indo-Pacific region.⁴² And despite the fracas with the UK over Brexit or AUKUS, the cooperation between France and UK in select areas such as maritime security or climate action is not unreasonable, especially considering they are both United Nations Security Council permanent members, NATO (founding) members and nuclear powers.⁴³ Hence, France, Germany, the UK (which is yet to publish an Indo-Pacific strategy, but whose “Integrated Review” tilts extensively to the region) and the Netherlands are well-equipped and ready to push for cooperation not only in non-traditional security areas such as climate change but also in critical technologies and maritime security via the respective QUAD working groups.

Apart from these, Italy, too, has seen a gradual shift in its engagement with the region.⁴⁴ Although it has been a dialogue partner of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and an ASEAN development partner for a few years, its trilateral with India and Japan in 2021 thrust it toward the Indo-Pacific vision. Because of Italy’s extensive engagement in the western Indian Ocean, maritime cooperation with the QUAD is a logical extension, in addition to engagement with the SCRI. Reportedly, a flagship Italian aircraft carrier is being deployed in the Indo-Pacific, highlighting the country’s proactive intent in the region.⁴⁵

⁴² M. Reuter, “[Friends in deed](#)”, European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), 16 April 2021.

⁴³ A. Billon-Galland and H. Kundnani, “[The UK Must Cooperate with France in the Indo-Pacific](#)”, Chatham House, 23 September 2021.

⁴⁴ G. Abbondanza, “[Italian Interaction with Indo-Pacific: Slow but Steady](#)”, Institute for Security and Development Policy (ISDP), 13 March 2023.

⁴⁵ G. Carrer and E. Rossi, “[Italy looks to the Indo-Pacific by sending carrier, fostering defence ties](#)”, *Decode 39*, 15 March 2023.

The Czech Republic is one of the latest entrants with a separate Indo-Pacific strategy in 2022. It is also looking to exit China's "zombie" 16+1 framework, highlighting the growing distance from Beijing.⁴⁶ Its core goal of strengthening multilateral partnerships with the QUAD, apart from bilaterals with India, Japan, the Republic of Korea, Taiwan and other "like-minded" states makes it a likely partner for the security dialogue. The two could pursue engagement in various areas, ranging from counteracting hybrid threats to disaster risk reduction and support for regional security mechanisms, as outlined in the Czech strategy document.⁴⁷ On the other hand, countries like Sweden are focused on regional development cooperation, particularly in digitalisation and innovation, via its "Strategy for Sweden's regional development cooperation with Asia and the Pacific Region in 2022-2026".⁴⁸

Overall, while engaging with the QUAD presents some challenges to being seen as part of a US security network in Asia, engagement with the QUAD Plus with its wide-ranging ambit would be a middle-ground approach. In any case, members like France and Germany have already been part of naval exercises or port calls in the Indo-Pacific, while maintaining their outreach successfully with China. At the same time, any European cooperation with the QUAD will not be above reproach for Beijing.

⁴⁶ T. Gosling, "Czech Republic Eyes Exit from China's 16+1 Investment Club", *Al Jazeera*, 8 June 2022.

⁴⁷ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic, "The Czech Republic's Strategy for Cooperation with the Indo-Pacific: Closer than We Think", October 2022.

⁴⁸ Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Strategy for Sweden's regional Development Cooperation with Asia and the Pacific Region in 2022-2026", 17 May 2022.

Taking Advantage of the Narrative: Implications for EU's Bilaterals with India, Japan and Australia

The criticism of QUAD Plus as only a temporary arrangement of select nations coordinating an infrequent developmental concern such as the Covid-19 pandemic finds some resonance largely because of a lack of concrete official meetings/announcements to that effect. However, the promise the format holds cannot be negated. If the EU is included in the QUAD Plus, it would not only be great optics – representing an “amalgamation of the Eastern and Western ‘like-minded’ countries” – but also a common platform for cooperation with wide-ranging relevant powers committed to a free and open Indo-Pacific, as well as one that reflects democratic solidarity while including all states with shared interests.⁴⁹

Naturally, the EU's inclusion into the QUAD Plus will imply the EU's strengthening of its strategic intent – a goal which both India and Japan (as also Australia with its strong regional commitment) have been keen for the EU to prioritise.⁵⁰ To that effect, not only would strong bilaterals impact EU's entry into the QUAD Plus, the reverse would be true as well.

For India, ties with the EU have been looking up since the first India-EU summit in 2020. However, 2022 was a remarkable year of growth for India-EU ties; for example, they relaunched negotiations for a free trade agreement (FTA) in June and established an India-EU Trade and Technology Council, in addition to frequent ministerial-level meetings at various forums the world over. They have over the years also institutionalised political dialogues on counter-terrorism,

⁴⁹ University of Warsaw, “Quad Plus: Is There a Space for Europe?”, Seminar, June 2022.

⁵⁰ “Strategic Conversation on EU-India Relations”, Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS), 18 November 2020; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, “Foreign Minister Motegi's Attendance at the EU Foreign Affairs Council (Virtual Format)”, 25 January 2021.

cybersecurity, migration and mobility, maritime security, human rights, non-proliferation and disarmament, which highlights the convergence with the wide-ranging QUAD agenda, as well as India-EU increasing appetite for strategic concerns besides the economic ties.⁵¹ Importantly, the much-anticipated India-EU-Japan trilateral could either be an offshoot of the QUAD Plus collaboration or enhance it.

For Japan and the EU, since 2018 – which marks the beginning of the Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) and the Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA) – bilateral cooperation in several areas has pushed the envelope against protectionist measures. It has also resulted in the two sides consolidating their shared values on fundamental principles such as democracy, human rights and the rule of law; strengthening the multilateral trading system; shaping digital developments, transforming climate action and enhancing connectivity in the Indo-Pacific.⁵² The EU's connect with QUAD (Plus) will only enhance these shared core values, apart from boosting sectoral cooperation (e.g. space, information and communication technologies, energy, research and innovation) covered by their SPA.⁵³

Similarly, the EU's engagement with Australia, which has taken a regional priority with the 2018 Framework Agreement (came into effect in October 2022), is finding new grounds.⁵⁴ As with the EU's multifaceted cooperation agenda with India and Japan, this too has a broad strategic scope including foreign policy and security, humanitarian aid, research and innovation, sustainable development and energy, health, fisheries and maritime affairs – thus providing multiple opportunities for

⁵¹ Indian Embassy in Brussels, “[India-European Union Bilateral Relations](#)”, 2 December 2022.

⁵² Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan (2021).

⁵³ European Union External Action, *EU-Japan Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA)*, 1 February 2019.

⁵⁴ P. Murray and M. Matera, “[EU and Australia: From Conflict to Cooperation](#)”, Australian Institute of International Affairs, 29 May 2018.

engagement with QUAD Plus initiatives.⁵⁵ Notably, there are renewed, if still unsteady, prospects for the FTA, which is under negotiation and seems to have overcome the AUKUS-related tensions with France.⁵⁶

Against a weakened multilateral system, broader cooperation via minilaterals like the QUAD Plus will naturally help the bilaterals that the EU is reconfiguring with these Indo-Pacific QUAD partners.

Summing Up: QUAD + EU = Promising but Fantastical?

The Indo-Pacific is integral to the future of the international order and the longevity of norms and institutions that the EU is intent on protecting, and thus it must strengthen its role in multilateral and minilateral fora to achieve this.⁵⁷ The EU has expressed interest in engaging with the QUAD on “issues of common interests” and the bloc has the most potential as an Indo-Pacific actor through non-military contributions.⁵⁸ Areas of cooperation should capitalise on the market and regulatory power of Brussels and target connectivity, infrastructure, supply chains, critical technology and climate change.⁵⁹ Working within the QUAD Plus, the EU would be able to jointly deliver on trans-national issues and provide public goods, whilst also promoting a stable security order that involves the US and China.⁶⁰ Centring the QUAD Plus around these regional issues

⁵⁵ European Council, “EU-Australia Relations: Framework Agreement Enters Into Force Today”, 21 October 2022.

⁵⁶ D. Hurst, “Australia Closer to a Free Trade Pact with EU but Minister Warns There Won’t Be a Deal ‘for the Sake of it’”, *The Guardian*, 15 February 2023.

⁵⁷ D. Fiott and L. Simón (eds.), *Centre of Gravity: Security and Defence in the Indo-Pacific – What Role for the European Union*, Brussels School of Governance, December 2022.

⁵⁸ R. Medcalf, “AUKUS, the QUAD and the EU: Inclusive and Exclusive Visions for the Indo-Pacific”..., cit.

⁵⁹ Kliem (2022).

⁶⁰ Ibid.

would be an effective way for the EU to engage in the region and build on the partnerships that it already has.

Although not currently the EU's greatest asset, military contributions could also be an area of cooperation within the QUAD Plus. The EU has extended its Coordinated Maritime Presence into the Indo-Pacific and several of its member states already have significant naval experience and resources within the region. France, for example, has been a long-term participant in the QUAD's Bay of Bengal naval exercises and has strong maritime cooperation with the QUAD members such as India. Of course, any impactful association between the EU and the QUAD Plus will depend on coordination and agreement between its member states, which could be challenging given their range of interests.

Several key member states like France and Germany introduced Indo-Pacific strategies before the EU, meaning that they had recognised the importance of the region first. It could make them keen to bolster their presence through individual membership to the QUAD Plus rather than under the bloc. Nevertheless, pooling resources would be more effective, and enable the EU to be an attractive partner for the QUAD Plus, given that nations with a strong Indo-Pacific presence like the UK are also looking to strengthen their regional role. At the same time, it will be a challenge for Europe to send resources to Asia given the current European security issues and future rebuilding of post-war Ukraine.

Regarding the QUAD, as the grouping grows towards greater goals, including the hard security aspects, questions about its institutionalisation are bound to continually resurface. However, the QUAD's increasing relevance means that the mechanism will need figure out ways to include other partners like the EU and its member states or South Korea under the Yoon government with shared narratives and needs, without disturbing the present quadrangular bonhomie.

Importantly, for the EU, participating in the QUAD Plus as a dialogue partner or through the working groups will give the

bloc leverage in negotiating with China as a trade partner. On the other hand, the inclusion of the pluralistic EU in the QUAD Plus, with members such as France and Germany still tilting towards China and EU members divided over a confrontational stance against China, will help give the mechanism a nuanced perception, to mitigate the unprecedented tensions fuelled by its perception (and to an extent rightly so) as an exclusive counter-China club.⁶¹ Above all, the EU-QUAD Plus collaboration also has the potential to grant middle powers greater leeway in shaping the economic and geopolitical contours to spearhead largely non-confrontational, if not all-inclusive, geopolitics in the Indo-Pacific.

⁶¹ Germany favours “substantive and reciprocal” relations between the EU and China, as well as increased EU unity towards China. Read, Federal Foreign Office, “[Germany and China: Bilateral Relations](#)”, 27 October 2022.