

Europe's Involvement in the Indo-Pacific Region: Determined on Paper, Timid in Reality

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Summary

- France adopted its Indo-Pacific strategy in 2018, Germany in 2020 and the EU in 2021. None of this comes a minute too soon. China's territorial expansionism such as occupying and building military bases on disputed islands in the South China Sea, its oppressive policies in the Chinese province of Xinjiang, unlawful interference in Hong Kong's political and judicial affairs and increasingly frequent intrusions into Taiwanese-controlled airspace have in April of this year led to the EU announcing a 'meaningful naval presence' in the region.
- EU member-states' Indo-Pacific policy papers analysed in this paper point to a more visible and sustainable EU and European involvement in the Indo-Pacific Region. But what actual impact will European and EU Indo-Pacific policies as formulated in the respective policy papers have on European ability to make a sustainable contribution to stability in the Indo-Pacific? Will European naval forces join U.S., Japanese, Australian and Indian naval forces in deterring Chinese ever growing territorial ambitions and expansionism in the region?
- While France and the UK are already doing just that, Germany's navy is reluctant to openly challenge China's unlawful territorial claims. In fact, Germany's upcoming naval operation in the Indo-Pacific in general and the South China Sea in particular is designed to ruffle as few feathers as possible in Beijing.

- While Germany's Indo-Pacific policy paper is often vague, lacking details on how exactly Berlin is planning to increase its role in regional security, the French paper has a plan to protect and defend the 1.6 million French residents and French economic interests in the Indo-Pacific with determination and resources on the ground.
- France is a 'resident power' in the region and the French Indo-Pacific strategy clearly means business. Shortcomings and European concerns about Chinese economic retaliation, blackmail tactics and bullying aside, the Indo-Pacific policy papers are evidence that Europe has (finally) decided to make a more tangible and sustainable contribution to security in the Indo-Pacific.
- Brussels and EU member-states have seemingly decided that watching from a safe distance and talking about engaging China politically is no longer an option. Beijing, on its part, seems unimpressed, dismissing European naval presence as sabre-rattling ordered in Washington and has accelerated the construction of military bases on unlawfully occupied islands.
- This brings us to the 'endgame' question: how far and until what extent is Europe—alone and with its allies—prepared to go to get Beijing to respect and follow international law and play by the Western rules of international politics in the region and beyond? Dialogue and 'being concerned' have not worked, sanctions, sea blockades and containment might. Is Europe up for that?

Introduction

France adopted its Indo-Pacific strategy in 2018, Germany in 2020 and the EU in 2021.¹ None of this comes a minute too soon as geo-political and geo-economic competition in the Indo-Pacific Region is here to stay and rapidly intensifying. Much of this is due to China's belligerent actions, for instance, its efforts in building civilian and military facilities on disputed islands in the South China Sea or turning the Indian Ocean into a 'Chinese lake', as policymakers in New Delhi fear. Amidst such postures, what role is Europe poised to play in the Indo-Pacific security landscape? Does it plan on taking a leadership role in the region? EU member-states' Indo-Pacific policy papers are pointing to a more visible and sustainable EU and European involvement in the Indo-Pacific Region. The presence of European naval forces (for further details see below) in the Indian and Pacific Oceans patrolling Asian territorial waters, including the disputed waters of the East and South China Seas are strong indicators of these rising trends. Policymakers in Brussels and EU member-states' capitals confirm, albeit preferably off the record,² that there is increasing European interest in making a contribution to stability and security in the Indo-Pacific. The key rationale behind this is Chinese assertiveness accompanied by successful Chinese attempts to tip the territorial status quo in its favour. China remains—at least on the record—unimpressed and seems to believe unwanted Western interest in the Indo-Pacific will go away as Chinese

¹ The EU's Indo-Pacific Policy paper was published in April 2021 but will not be dealt with in this paper.

² Author's conversations with EU policymakers in Brussels in 2020 and early 2021. None of this author's interlocutors left any doubt that Europe's interest to make a more tangible contribution to security in the Indo-Pacific is 'because of China', so to speak.

Foreign Minister Wang Yi announced in March 2018. The Indo-Pacific concept is an “attention-grabbing idea that will dissipate like ocean foam,” he concluded (in his usual very self-confident borderline arrogant manner). It did not, and two and a half years later China is building numerous military facilities on disputed islands in the South China Sea, blatantly—and from an international law perspective—illegally interfering in Hong Kong’s judicial affairs, and frequently violating Taiwanese airspace.

As a result, Western countries are more eager than ever to give fellow Asian democracies in the region a hand deterring China and its aggressive and expansionist policies in the region. Indeed, China has been put on notice and obviously anticipated a reaction from within and outside the Indo-Pacific, including from Europe. Since March 2019, the EU has referred to China as a ‘systemic rival’,³ and lately one does not hear many official voices in Brussels speaking of attempts to successfully engage China politically. On the contrary, in September 2020 the UK, Germany and France jointly submitted a *Note Verbale* to the United Nations (UN), reminding the international community and more importantly China of the 2016 verdict pronounced by the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) based in The Hague. At the time, the court decided that China’s historic territorial claims in the South China Sea were obsolete and indeed illegal as they do not comply with international law and violate the provisions stipulated in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).⁴ Make no mistake, China did not amend, let alone reduce, its territorial claims because of a European reminder that Beijing is breaching international law. In fact,

³ See Andrew Small, “The Meaning of Systemic Rivalry: Europe and China Beyond the Pandemic,” Policy Brief European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), May 13, 2020, https://ecfr.eu/publication/the_meaning_of_systemic_rivalry_europe_and_china_beyond_the_pandemic/; Also Hans von der Buehard, “EU Slams China as Systemic Rival as Trade Tension Rises,” Politico, March 12, 2019, <https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-slams-china-as-systemic-rival-as-trade-tension-rises/>

⁴ Christia Marie Ramos, “UK, France, Germany Refute China’s Expansive South China Sea Claims,” Inquirer.Net September 18, 2020, <https://globalnation.inquirer.net/190953/uk-france-germany-refute-chinas-expansive-south-china-sea-claims>.

the opposite happened. Every time Western countries put their opposition to Chinese territorial expansionism on paper, it is almost as if Chinese state-owned contractors receive orders to speed up the illegal construction of Chinese facilities on disputed islands. Indeed, satellite pictures provide unambiguous evidence⁵ that China has accelerated the construction of military bases on islands the PCA has decided are not part of Chinese territory, even if Chinese maps drawn in the Ming or Qing Dynasty hundreds of years ago allegedly provide evidence that 99 per cent of the South China Sea belongs to China. This paper will critically analyze the merits and shortcomings of the German (2020) and French (2018) Indo-Pacific policy papers, seeking to assess whether they provide a sustainable and credible basis for more and more sustainable French and German contributions to security in the Indo-Pacific region. As it turns out, this is only the case in parts and the paper will explain why.

⁵ Daniel Bishton, "Spratly Islands Military Bases Revealed," Spatial Source, March 6, 2018, <https://www.spatialsource.com.au/gis-data/satellite-images-reveal-completed-military-bases-spratly-islands>. The images showed a deep water port, aerodomes, hangars, military barracks, communications infrastructure and a 2.7 km long runway on the Subi and Mischief reefs.

A Matter of Definition

How should one define the construct of Indo-Pacific? How do the mainstream European countries perceive or define the Indo-Pacific? The region is comprised of the Indian and Pacific Oceans, home to nearly 33 per cent of the world's population and accounts for 50 per cent of global maritime trade. Also, 50 per cent of the container traffic and 70 per cent of global oil and gas travels through the Indian Ocean region. The Straits of Malacca in the east and Hormuz in the west are some of the most strategic choke points in this region, which host 64 per cent of the world's oil trade and movement. The Indian Ocean is home to 40 per cent of the world's offshore petroleum and mineral deposits.⁶

From the perspective of European powers, the term 'Indo-Pacific', as per French diplomat and scholar Frederic Grare,⁷ is defined differently by different states according to their interests and presence in the region. For the 'resident power' France, the Indo-Pacific extends from the shores of East and Southern Africa to the coasts of North, Central, and South America. Countries like Germany and the Netherlands, despite showing active interest in the region, are yet to present a formal definition of their outlooks. On the other hand, for the U.S., the Indo-Pacific Region is much smaller,

⁶ See, for example, Timothy Doyle, "Blue Economy and the Ocean Rim," *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region* 14 (2018): 1-6. Also Gayathri Iyer, "Mega-ships in the Indian Ocean: Evaluating the Impact and Exploring Littoral Cooperation," ORF Occasional Paper No. 204, Observer Research Foundation, July 2019, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/mega-ships-in-the-indian-ocean-evaluating-the-impact-and-exploring-littoral-cooperation-53235/>.

⁷ Former French Ministry of Defence official and currently Non-resident Fellow, South Asia Programme at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

ending at India's shores.⁸ Alan Gyngell of the Australian Institute of International Affairs (AIIA) agrees that the Indo-Pacific is a "framing device, not a geographical reality—its proponents shape it around their different interests. Each country has its own 'Indo-Pacific'. Like Asia-Pacific or Asia itself, the Indo-Pacific is simply a way for governments to define an international environment suited to their policy objectives in particular circumstances."⁹ India's version of the Indo-Pacific is an extension of its 'Act East Policy' towards Southeast Asia and a defence of its geo-strategic interests in the region. New Delhi's perspective on the Indo-Pacific encompasses the East Coast of Africa to the Indian Ocean to the Pacific Ocean, with a maritime focus. The Indian perception is linked closely to power politics vis-à-vis China. Finally, when Tokyo talks about 'free and open' in the context of 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' policy, it—like the US—means problem-free access to maritime routes in the Indo-Pacific, as well as cooperation and coordination among democratic and liberal democracies.¹⁰ The sort of cooperation and coordination practised and promoted in the framework of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), initiated by then Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in 2007, calls for synergy vis-à-vis Indo-Pacific security between the US, Japan, India and Australia.

⁸ Frederic Grare, "France, the Other Indo-Pacific Power," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 21, 2020, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/10/21/france-other-indo-pacific-power-pub-83000>.

⁹ Alan Gyngell, "To each their own Indo-Pacific," East Asia Forum, May 23, 2018, https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2018/05/23/to-each-their-own-indo-pacific/?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=newsletter2018-05-27.

¹⁰ Yuichi Hosoya and Nicolas Szechenyi, "Working Toward a Free and Open Indo-Pacific," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace Alliance Policy Coordination Brief, October 10, 2019, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/10/10/working-toward-free-and-open-indo-pacific-pub-80023>.

The Gloves are Off

The EU, Garima Mohan writes, is the largest trading partner of many countries in the Indo-Pacific region: 27 member-states export more than 35 per cent of their exports to the region and 90 per cent of these exports ship through the Indian and Pacific Oceans.¹¹ According to Mohan, "...Europe and countries in the region share the same geopolitical concerns, namely not to be caught in great power politics and US-China competition."¹² Those concerns, however, are arguably no longer shared by Japan, India or Australia, who seemed to have decided getting caught in a Sino-US rivalry is all but completely unavoidable and /or worth the price to be paid for their security. At this point, countering China's aggressive policies—alone or jointly—has become a routine for these states, albeit a cumbersome and time-consuming one. European countries too are waking up to the reality that non-democratic and authoritarian Beijing is politically troublesome and indeed the kind of 'systemic rival' it identified China as in 2019. Against this background, the UK and France are currently envisioning more than informal, but concrete and on the ground security cooperation with Washington, Tokyo, Delhi and Canberra in the framework of the aforementioned Quad. French and British naval vessels joining Quad military exercises and jointly patrolling international waters in the South China Sea are on the agenda. Ultimately, the gloves have been off for some time as satellite pictures made public by European Space Imagery in March

¹¹Garima Mohan, "A European Approach to the Indo-Pacific?" Global Public Policy Institute, August 20, 2020, <https://www.gppi.net/2020/08/20/a-european-approach-to-the-indo-pacific>.

¹² Mohan, "A European Approach," p.7.

2018 provide unambiguous evidence that China has built military bases on the disputed Spratly Islands in the South China Sea.¹³ Bases, which—if push came to shove—pose a direct threat to the safety of the sea lines of communication (SLOCs) used by European tankers and vessels shipping goods to and from the Indo-Pacific region. Furthermore, Beijing continues to challenge the legitimacy of Japanese-controlled islands in the East China Sea (the Senkaku Islands, which have de facto been part of Japanese territory since the first Sino-Japanese War in 1894-1895),¹⁴ and is sailing more frequently into the Indian Ocean and building up economic and military relations with countries such as India's arch-enemy Pakistan and recipients of large-scale Chinese investments such as Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and the Maldives. Of course, none of this comes for free. Rather, Chinese lending comes with strings attached as part of a strategy that 'weaponises' debt to expand its economic and geopolitical influence; for instance, Laos recently gave a Chinese company control of its national power grid under a 25-year concession agreement.¹⁵

¹³ James Griffith, "China Beijing May Have Built Bases in the South China Sea, but that Doesn't Mean it can Defend Them Report Claims," *CNN*, December 7, 2020, <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/12/07/china/south-china-sea-bases-military-intl-hnk/index.html>.

¹⁴ A group of islands Japan annexed after its victory in the first Sino-Japanese War of 1894-1895. Beijing claims until today that the islands (which are called Diaoyu Islands in China) have always belonged to China while Tokyo insists that they were 'terra nullius' when Tokyo annexed them. The Senkaku Islands were formally returned to Japanese sovereignty in May 1972. Together with Okinawa, the Senkaku Islands have been under US administration since the adoption of the San Francisco Peace Treaty in 1952.

¹⁵ Brahma Chellaney, "China's debt-trap diplomacy," *The Hill*, May 2, 2021, <https://thehill.com/opinion/international/551337-chinas-debt-trap-diplomacy>; "Laos Grants 25-Year Concession to Chinese Company to Manage Power Grid," *Radio Free Asia*, March 16, 2021, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/laos/grid-03162021152622.html>.

Always About the Money

Will Europe now begin making its presence felt in the Indian Ocean, South China Sea and East China Sea, patrolling disputed Asian territorial waters and helping like-minded nations (Japan, India and Australia) keep Chinese territorial expansionism and ambitions in check? Not yet, partially because the EU has not yet—at least not on the official record—completely given up on the objective of engaging with China politically. However, it is beginning to sink in for Brussels that the EU and China cannot—as it was hoped and announced in the past—jointly address and solve issues in international politics and security. Not least as China is often part of the problem and not the solution. Beijing, of course, knows all of this and therefore cheered when Europe’s trade and investment ties with China took centre stage at the end of 2020. On December 30, the EU and China signed their long-awaited bilateral trade and investment agreement, the EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI), which had been under negotiation since 2014.¹⁶ The bilateral trade agreement is evidence that the German-led EU Commission decided to let business rule over principles, taking next to completely implausible assurances at face value that Beijing will abide by international labour rights’ standards—Beijing’s refusal to abide by those standards had been the agreement’s last stumbling block before its signing. Brussels allowed itself to be fooled into believing that Beijing will actually do something about labour rights in China, the chair of EU Parliament’s

¹⁶ For details, Jim Brunnsden, Mehreen Khan and Michael Peel, “EU Hails China Deal despite Risk of Conflict with Biden White House,” *Financial Times*, December 30, 2020. Also Jim Brunnsden, Michael Peel and Sam Fleming, “Human Rights Questions Remain over Brussels-Beijing Pact,” *Financial Times*, December 31, 2020.

delegation for relations with China Reinhold Bütikofer¹⁷ said at the time. This is the same Reinhold Bütikofer who has not been allowed to travel to Mainland China, Hong Kong, or Macau since March 2021 as part of a Chinese campaign to 'punish' European politicians and scholars with sanctions for daring to have opinions on Chinese interference in Hong Kong and torture and arbitrary detention of Muslims in Xinjiang.

The CAI merely stipulates that Beijing will "make continued and sustained efforts" to ratify the International Labour Organization's (ILO) labour protection conventions¹⁸ In essence, it is a free pass for China to drag its feet for as long as it wants, claiming that it is undertaking efforts.¹⁹ Even Chinese scholars have no illusions about what the agreement means. Shi Yinhong of Renmin University confirms that Beijing has no intention whatsoever to respect or ratify ILO conventions. "On labour, it is impossible for China to agree. Can you imagine China with independent labour unions?" he is quoted as saying in the *Financial Times* on December 31, 2021.²⁰ The expansion of trade and investment ties through the signing of the CAI could have a negative impact on Europe's willingness to take a strong and meaningful stand against oppressive Chinese domestic and foreign policies. This is especially true in countries with massive business and investment interests in China. Again, above all Germany comes to mind although German Chancellor Angela Merkel displayed some political courage in April during an encounter with Chinese Prime Minister Li Keqiang when she asked for the Germany-Chinese bilateral human rights dialogue to be resumed as soon as possible. In response, Beijing 'reminded' – like so many

¹⁷ Jim Brunsten, Michael Peel and Sam Fleming, "Human Rights Questions Remain over Brussels-Beijing Pact." *Financial Times*, December 31, 2020.

¹⁸ European Commission, "EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment," January 22, 2021, <https://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/press/index.cfm?id=2237>.

¹⁹ Tom Mitchell and Katrina Mason, "Xi's Trade Deal with the EU Rings Alarm Bells in US," *Financial Times*, January 2, 2021.

²⁰ Cited in Tom Mitchell and Katrina Mason, "China Sees Investment Deal as Diplomatic Coup as US Battles," *Financial Times*, December 31, 2020.

times before—Berlin not to interfere in China’s ‘internal affairs’ suggesting that the resumption of the German-Chinese human rights dialogue is not in the offering any time soon, if at all.²¹ However, there is one caveat—the chances of the agreement passing the European Parliament and becoming official are currently close to zero. This is because Beijing recently imposed the aforementioned sanctions on EU parliamentarians and scholars in a tit-for-tat retaliation for Brussels sanctioning Chinese politicians and entrepreneurs associated with the operation of so-called ‘re-education camps’ in Xinjiang.²²

German policymakers—with the support of (or pressure from) Siemens, Volkswagen and other German multinational corporations with massive presence in China—all supported the trade agreement with China. Despite evidence to the contrary, Berlin continues to claim that engagement with China will favour and promote political engagement. In reality, Berlin’s ‘change through trade’ approach did not in any way facilitate political engagement with China, nor did it encourage Beijing’s policymakers to respond positively to European requests for the respect of human rights, rule of law, and freedom of speech. In fact, it can be argued that increased trade and investment ties further strengthen China’s position. The fact that the agreement was signed when Germany held the EU presidency was most likely not a coincidence. More than 50 per cent of EU exports to China take place between Germany and China.²³ Then again, Berlin could probably have afforded to not to push for the agreement’s adoption come what may. Trade with China makes up 7 per cent of Germany’s overall trade. Andreas

²¹ Daniel Brössler, “China Warnt Deutschland vor Einmischung [China Urges Germany not to Interfere],” *Sueddeutsche Zeitung*, April 28, 2021, <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/merkel-china-li-keqiang-1.5278975>; also “Germany’s Merkel Calls for Human Rights Dialogue with China,” *Reuters*, April 28, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/merkel-calls-human-rights-dialogue-with-china-resume-2021-04-28/>.

²² Jim Brunsten and Yuan Yang, “Sanctions Row Threatens EU-China Investment Deal,” *Financial Times*, March 24, 2021.

²³ German carmaker Volkswagen generates close to 50 per cent of its revenue in China

Fulda (mentioned below) cites Mikko Huotari, Director of the Mercator for China Studies in Berlin. Thus, frequent talk about German dependence on China as trading partner and destination for German investments lacks credibility and urgency.²⁴ However, by imposing the aforementioned sanctions on EU parliamentarians and European scholars, accompanied by aggressive language and accusations, Beijing has achieved two things: firstly, the trade agreement will not be adopted any time soon (or indeed ever), and secondly, interest in increasing Europe's footprint and presence in the Indo-Pacific is bound to increase. This is arguably the very opposite of what Beijing intended when it imposed the sanctions (or, it understands that the sanctions would be counterproductive but imposed them anyway, sending what it thought would be perceived as a message of political strength). Against this background, EU leaders and the EU Commission might have realised that it was a bad idea to agree to adopt a trade agreement with China in December 2020. Now, it is up to the European Parliament to strike the deal down.

²⁴ Two-way trade between the EU and China amounted to 480 billion in 2020, and between 8 and 12 per cent of trade conducted by the UK, France and Germany in the region passes through the South China Sea.

The French and the Indo-Pacific

In 2018, France published its Indo-Pacific strategy, in which it emphasises the country's obligation to defend French sovereignty in the region: the islands of Mayotte and La Réunion, the Scattered Islands, and the French Southern and Antarctic Territories in the southern part of the Indian Ocean.²⁵ Furthermore, France has territories in New Caledonia, Wallis and Futuna, French Polynesia, and Clipperton Island. France calls itself a 'resident power' and an 'island state in the Indo-Pacific', a call back to French colonialism in the region. Roughly 1.6 million French citizens live in the Indo-Pacific region and about 8,000 French troops are permanently based in the region. However, France's relations with its overseas territories are far from problem-free, for some of them could seek independence from their former colonial masters in the future. French sovereignty is already being contested by local populations in New Caledonia and French Polynesia, while the governments of Mauritius and Madagascar are challenging France over control of Tromelin Island and the Scattered Islands (both part of the French Southern and Antarctic Lands).

France's Indo-Pacific strategy will therefore only be successful, Frederic Grare argues, "...if France's overseas territories redefine their relations with the metropolis to become vectors of political, diplomatic, military, economic, and cultural influence." That is one way of seeing things, and it is safe to assume that the French conclusion on who needs to play by whose rules will most likely not only be met with enthusiasm in the overseas

²⁵ See "France's Indo-Pacific Strategy, Gouvernement France 2018," https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/en_indopacifique_web_cle0f44b5.pdf.

territories. The aforementioned 8,000 French military troops are stationed in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Djibouti, together with six Rafale fighter jets in the UAE and four Mirage-2000 fighters in Djibouti, respectively. In the southern Indian Ocean, French troops are stationed on La Réunion and Mayotte islands, equipped with two surveillance frigates equipped with one helicopter each, a supply and support vessel, two patrol vessels, and two tactical transport aircraft. In the Pacific Ocean, French Armed Forces are stationed in New Caledonia and French Polynesia, operating two surveillance frigates, each equipped with a helicopter, three patrol vessels, two multi-mission ships, five maritime surveillance aircraft and four tactical transport aircraft. Furthermore, Paris has 18 resident and non-resident defence attachés stationed in 33 countries in the Indo-Pacific Region. Finally, France is working with the regional centres charged with the surveillance of maritime spaces and sea lines of communication of the region. Paris has deployed three naval officers working to the Information Fusion Centre of Singapore (IFC), the Regional Centre for the Fusion of Maritime Information (CRFIM) in Madagascar, and the Information Fusion Centre–Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR), located in New Delhi. Finally, Grare cites French President Macron's speeches on the Indo-Pacific in 2018, in which he spoke about the challenges posed by China's rise, the Sino-US rivalry and tensions, most importantly about what he called an 'axis of cooperation between Canberra, Delhi and Paris.' In September 2019, Grare writes, Macron positioned France as a 'balancing power' in the Indo-Pacific. This sentiment sounds visionary, but the reality is that there is no clear or obvious way for how France will 'balance' Washington and Beijing, or what such balancing will entail and lead to.

France's Ministry of Defence furthermore warns that scientific and technological progress has led to new risks and sources of conflict in the region. A recent paper from the ministry identifies access to deep water resources, the expansion of military power projection capabilities, anti-

access/area denial capabilities, and advances in cyberspace and satellite capabilities as challenges Paris needs to meet in order to compete with China in the region.²⁶ To address these issues, Paris is planning to expand the country's strategic partnership ties with countries such as Australia, India, Japan, Malaysia, New Zealand, Indonesia and Vietnam. In recent years, France has stepped up its multilateral cooperation in the region through the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting-Plus (ADMM+), which in addition to the 10 ASEAN member-countries, gathers Japan, the US and China at the table for discussions on regional security. However, such meetings tend to produce every general-sounding statement that does not oblige participants to undertake any specific actions. The proponents of similar informal gatherings argue that it is better to talk than not, even if the meetings do not produce any legally binding outcomes. That might be true, but it is reasonable to assume countries like China relish these informal gatherings because they produce only general-sounding statements that do not in any way oblige countries to change or adjust policies.

²⁶For details see "France and Security in the Indo-Pacific," Ministère des Armes France, May 2019, <https://www.defense.gouv.fr/layout/set/print/content/download/532754/9176250/version/3/file/France+and+Security+in+the+Indo-Pacific+-+2019.pdf>.

The German Indo-Pacific Guidelines: Much Ado About Very Little

The Indo-Pacific policy guidelines Germany released in 2020 left much to be desired in terms of contributions to maritime security in the region.²⁷ The guidelines cite increased security engagement in the region through port calls, joint exercises and the protection of global maritime trade routes. Further, the guidelines call for Berlin to pursue increased partnerships with states in the region beyond China.²⁸ However, this assertion is awkward, for democratic Germany's 'partnerships' are with fellow democracies in the region, such as Japan, Australia, India and South Korea. Furthermore, the German guidelines extensively talk about an 'ASEAN-centric' security architecture. Again, the statement does not reflect reality. On numerous occasions, ASEAN (typically under Chinese pressure) has cited the 'principle of non-interference' when it failed to condemn Chinese aggression and expansive territorial policies in recent years. This is arguably not the kind of reaction that comes from a forum that is allegedly at the 'centre' of Asian security. Consequently, where and why the German government has detected an ASEAN-centric security architecture remains unclear. ASEAN's security forum, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), established in 1994, has been an informal gathering of heads of states that

²⁷ Federal German Foreign Office, "German-Europe-Asia. Shaping the 21st Century Together," Berlin, August 2020, <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/blob/2380514/f9784f7e3b3fa1bd7c5446d274a4169e/200901-indo-pazifik-leitlinien--1--data.pdf>.

²⁸ Mathieu Duchâtel, "Franco-German Divergences in the Indo-Pacific: The Risk of Strategic Dilution," Institut Montaigne, October 30, 2020, Franco-German Divergences in the Indo-Pacific: The Risk of Strategic Dilution.

does not deliver legally binding decisions of consequence for the region's security conflicts. This is not to disregard and dismiss the kind of contributions ASEAN and the ARF are making to address and deal with non-traditional security issues in the Indo-Pacific, such contributions play a secondary role for the purpose of this paper. Security in this paper is defined as traditional/hard security, i.e. the kind of security that is under threat and challenged when for example, one country is building military bases on disputed islands.

Moreover, Berlin seems to have (wrongly) concluded naively that a new Code of Conduct between China and ASEAN can resolve tensions and territorial disputes in the South China Sea, writes the scholar Andreas Fulda.²⁹ Berlin's Indo-Pacific policy guidelines are an indication that Germany will continue to watch from a safe distance while inviting China and ASEAN to settle territorial disputes on their own. The code of conduct is as good as obsolete for China has, through the construction of civilian and military facilities on the disputed islands, made it very clear that there is nothing left to negotiate; Beijing has unilaterally decided the whole South China Sea is its territory. Indeed, in the real world, negotiations—if they can be referred to as such—on the China-ASEAN Code of Conduct (COC) for the South China Sea are stuck. In fact, it can be assumed that the code will not be adopted any time soon (or even if at all). In addition, Beijing has made it perfectly clear in 2016 that it refuses UNCLOS provisions in the South China Sea. This is obviously because UNCLOS provisions do not in any way confirm China's vast territorial claims in the South China Sea. The code is also unlikely to be adopted because ASEAN members will not meet China's

²⁹ Andreas Fulda, "Germany's New Policy Paper for the Indo-Pacific: Some Change in Tone, Little in Substance," RUSI Commentary, September 11, 2020, <https://rusi.org/commentary/germanys-new-policy-paper-indo-pacific-some-change-tone-little-substance>. See also Viet Hoang, "The Code of Conduct for the South China Sea: A Long and Bumpy Road," *Diplomat*, September 28, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/09/the-code-of-conduct-for-the-south-china-sea-a-long-and-bumpy-road/>.

requests not to conduct military exercises with outside parties as a precondition—needless to say, the aforementioned Quad countries in general and the U.S. in particular are meant to be the ‘outside parties’ as far as Beijing is concerned.³⁰

Finally, the German guidelines emphasise multilateralism and talk about NATO expansion to include Japan and South Korea without offering any details on how it would take place. The guidelines further mention proposed partnerships with India and ASEAN numerous times (India is mentioned 57 times in the document; ASEAN 66 times). The proposals entail a focus on non-traditional security issues and cooperation, such as climate change, environmental security and public health, as opposed to hard security and military cooperation. In sum, by claiming and repeating constantly that ASEAN is the forum in which regional security issues are discussed and solved, Berlin gives the impression that it has chosen—for political and diplomatic reasons—to offer contributions to an inter-governmental forum whose members’ preparedness to point the finger at Beijing vary depending on current levels of Chinese foreign direct investment. Finally, Andreas Fulda mentions in his paper what Berlin does not mention in its guidelines: China’s well-funded disinformation campaigns and Taiwan. Berlin, like the EU, shies away from naming China as the main source of disinformation campaigns over the Internet in general and on social media in particular. The guidelines merely address disinformation spread by ‘authoritarian states’, despite the fact that there is ample evidence of Chinese disinformation campaigns, Fulda writes. “The guidelines descend into the outright farcical when it comes to one of the biggest geopolitical hotspots in the region: Taiwan is not even mentioned once. But how can Germany contribute to peace and security without taking

³⁰ “In the South China Sea, America is Churning Waters Claimed by China,” *Economist*, July 25, 2020, <https://www.economist.com/asia/2020/07/23/in-the-south-china-sea-america-is-churning-waters-claimed-by-china>.

a stand against Xi Jinping's threat to annex Taiwan by military means?" Fulda laments. Not mentioning Taiwan amounts to Berlin silently but completely caving in to China's insistence that Taiwan is not an independent country but instead merely a renegade Chinese province.

The German guidelines do mention concerns about China unilaterally altering the territorial status quo, accusing the country of 'calling into question existing rules of the international order'. This is very much in line with a larger EU approach towards China: express concern (often to no avail) on a steadily increasing number of Chinese regional policies while at the same time not giving up hope of cooperating with China in a few 'uncontroversial' areas such as climate change. Not only is this optimistic, but the number of 'controversial' issues the EU is unwilling to confront Beijing on is growing constantly. Australia, Canada, the UK and the EU have all confronted China on human rights violations, torture, and forced sterilisations in Xinjiang, and have all felt the effects in political and trade relations³¹ "The document's long list of disparate activities (listed in the guidelines) does not add up to a coherent approach," Fulda writes. The guidelines indeed read like a shopping list of political and security issues in Indo-Pacific that Germany may or may not address in the years ahead. Mathieu Duchâtel and Garima Mohan conclude in a joint paper that France and Germany are pursuing Indo-Pacific strategies with different focuses. While the French policy approach towards the Indo-Pacific is, as they argue, compatible with the US approach, the German is not.³²

³¹"Uighurs: Western Countries Sanction China over Rights Abuses," *BBC*, March 22, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-56487162>; also Robin Emmott and David Brunnstrom, "West Sanctions China over Xinjiang Abuses, Beijing Hits back at EU," *Reuters*, March 22, 2021.

³² Mathieu Duchâtel and Garima Mohan, "Franco-German Divergences in the Indo-Pacific: The Risk of Strategic Dilution," *Institut Montaigne*, October 30, 2020, <https://www.institutmontaigne.org/en/blog/franco-german-divergences-indo-pacific-risk-strategic-dilution>; also Gurjit Singh, "Germany Takes View of the Indo-Pacific," *Observer Research Foundation (ORF)*, October 1, 2020, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/germany-takes-view-indo-pacific/>.

The French Indo-Pacific policy strategy paper and the one issued by the US State Department in November 2019 both list a free and open Indo-Pacific characterised by adherence to international law, freedom of navigation in international territorial waters, and freedom from coercion as priority areas.³³ Duchâtel and Mohan point out the German guidelines do not reflect similar priorities, nor do they provide any details on other possible bilateral or multilateral partnerships in the region. In contrast, the French guidelines mention the expansion of bilateral, trilateral and multilateral ties with Australia, India and Japan. Of course, simply talking about expanding French bilateral or multilateral security ties in the Indo-Pacific is not the same as actually doing it. However, Paris' decision to seek collaboration with the aforementioned Quad on the ground is an indication that France is taking its role and its position in the Indo-Pacific seriously.

³³ Nilanthi Samaranayake, "Future US-France Cooperation: Think Indo-Pacific. Does Franco-American Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific have Room to Grow?" *Diplomat*, February 3, 2020. <https://thediplomat.com/2020/02/future-us-france-cooperation-think-indo-pacific/>.

Opportunity for Synergy Between Berlin and Tokyo

In November 2019, Berlin, in an action-oriented show of will, announced that it would deploy a naval frigate to the Indian Ocean in 2020, including a cameo in the South China Sea.³⁴ The global pandemic, however, prevented this development from happening in 2020. In March 2021, Berlin announced the vessel will be deployed in the Indo-Pacific Region in August and will return to Germany six months later.³⁵ On its way back to Europe, the German naval vessel would also sail through the South China Sea, albeit not within 12 nautical miles (nm) of Chinese-claimed territories in the region. According to UNCLOS, every state has the right to establish the extent of what UNCLOS defines as ‘territorial sea’ to 12 nautical miles.³⁶ Within this zone, coastal states exercise sovereignty over the air space above the sea, the seabed, and subsoil. By announcing it does not intend to sail within 12 nautical miles of Chinese-claimed disputed islands in the South China Sea, it can be argued that Germany, therefore, de facto recognises Beijing’s illegal territorial claims in the South China Sea. Furthermore, Germany, like other countries’ naval forces that call their passages through the South China Sea ‘innocent passage’, is indicating that their operation is not aimed at challenging China’s territorial claims in the disputed waterway.

³⁴ Björn Müller, “Marine Plant die Entsendung einer Fregatte in den Indo-Pazifik,” *Pivot Area*, November 26, 2019, <https://www.pivotarea.eu/2019/11/26/fregatte-in-den-indo-pazifik/>.

³⁵ Johannes Leithäuser, “Deutschland Entsendet Fregatte in Ostasiatische Gewässer,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* March 2, 2021, <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/inland/deutschland-entsendet-fregatte-in-indo-pazifik-raum-17224589.html>.

³⁶ The territorial sea extends to a limit of 12 nautical miles from the baseline of a coastal state.

Berlin, as Michito Tsuruoka and Hans Kundnani argue, is probably and indeed concerned about an angry Chinese reaction to German vessels sailing through the South China Sea. Possibly the reason, the scholars argue in a joint Chatham House paper, why Berlin's policymakers decided to ask Beijing to grant the German frigate to call at Shanghai during its operation in the Indo-Pacific. This port visit does, Tsuruoka and Kundnani suspect, somehow give the impression that Berlin had asked Beijing for prior permission to enter the South China Sea.³⁷ They suggest, Beijing would not have allowed the German vessel to stopover in Shanghai if the frigate sailed into the South China Sea without Beijing's 'approval.' On August 4, however, news emerged that indicated that Berlin might not have talked to Beijing about the quality of its mission in the South China in order to be able and get permission to call the port of Shanghai. On August 4, the *South China Morning Post* reported that the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs is requesting the German government to 'explain' what exactly the German frigate is planning to do and achieve when sailing into the South China Sea (the German frigate Hamburg departed for the Indo-Pacific on August 2). If Berlin failed to do so, the paper reported, Beijing would not grant the German frigate to call the port of Shanghai.³⁸

Tsuruoka and Kundnani further point out that recent changes to the German deployment plan in the Indo-Pacific make encounters between German and other European naval forces deployed in the Indo-Pacific next to impossible. Before the decision to change course, Germany's frigate could have joined three overlapping deployments in the region: the British carrier strike group led by the HMS Queen Elizabeth II, which will include a Dutch frigate and the French Mistral-class amphibious assault ship Tonnerre. Such

³⁷ Michito Tsuruoka and Hans Kundnani, "Germany's Indo-Pacific Frigate May Send Unclear Message," Chatham House Expert Comment, May 4, 2021, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/05/germanys-indo-pacific-frigate-may-send-unclear-message>.

³⁸ See Amber Wang, "Beijing to Berlin: Clarify Warship's Intentions in South China Sea or Forget Shanghai Visit", *South China Morning Post* August 4, 2021.

encounters, however, will not happen as Berlin decided that its frigate will sail anti-clockwise through the Indian Ocean. A “missed opportunity”, Tsuruoka and Kundnani cite a German official in their paper.

In the past, the U.S. navy has conducted Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) in the South China Sea, challenging (now officially illegal) Chinese territorial claims in the South China Sea. This entailed U.S. navy vessels sailing within the aforementioned 12 nm zones around Chinese-claimed islands. Beijing went ballistic every time this happened, and the German navy has ruled out conducting similar FONOPs, instead suggesting its frigate would navigate on a zig-zag course around the Chinese-defined 12 nm zones. This very much sounds like an announcement from a country which will instruct its sailors not to do anything during their voyage in the Indo-Pacific lest it incur the wrath of China. Then again, the past has shown that foreign vessels sailing through the South China Sea always have the potential to ruffle Beijing’s feathers and kickstart the Chinese propaganda organs into overdrive. Chinese government mouthpiece newspapers like the *Global Times* can be counted on to threaten foreign intruders with consequences when sailing into international territorial waters claimed as Chinese territory. It can, therefore, be assumed that even if the German vessel does not sail within 12 nm of Chinese-claimed disputes, Beijing will complain in any event when and once the German frigate shows up in the South China Sea. One could argue that this might be the whole point of German and European naval vessels sailing into international territorial waters claimed by China in the region. The German frigate will also reportedly sail towards the Korean Peninsula in order to join a multinational mission monitoring the United Nations sanctions regime imposed on North Korea.

In early April 2021, the German and Japanese defence and foreign ministers held their first 2+2 discussions on security in the Indo-Pacific.³⁹ The *Nikkei Asia* has been quick to identify a significant shift in German foreign and security policies towards China, accompanied by increased German on-the-ground contributions to security in the Indo-Pacific.⁴⁰ During the bilateral (virtual) encounter, “the Japanese side raised the possibility of bilateral cooperation on the occasion of the deployment of the German Navy frigate, including joint exercises as well as monitoring and surveillance activities against illicit ship-to-ship transfers by North Korea-related vessels” as the Japanese press release after the encounter reads.⁴¹ However, whether such joint naval exercises will actually take place when the German frigate arrives in the region remains to be seen.

German foreign and security policies towards China have indeed been reactive and timid in recent years. To sail towards and through the South China Sea on an ‘innocent’ passage is one thing. To sail alongside Japanese destroyers will kick Chinese aggressive ‘wolf-warrior’ diplomacy and propaganda into high gear.⁴²

³⁹ Julian Ryall, “Japan, Germany’s First 2 Plus 2 Shows Extent of Tokyo’s Outreach Amid China’s Rising Assertiveness: Analysts,” *South China Morning Post*, April 5, 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3128366/japan-germanys-first-2-plus-2-dialogue-shows-extent-tokyos>.

⁴⁰ Takuya Mizorogi, “Japan Woos Germany on Indo-Pacific with first 2-Plus-2 Talks,” *Nikkei Asia*, April 6, 2021, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Japan-woos-Germany-on-Indo-Pacific-with-first-2-plus-2-talks>.

⁴¹ Japan Ministry of Defense, “Japan-Germany Foreign and Defense Ministers’ Meeting (2 Plus 2),” April 13, 2021, <https://www.mod.go.jp/en/article/2021/04/aa9ac5d279ca488488a60a5983f0320dfe9d99cd.html#1>.

⁴² Chinese ‘wolf-warrior’ diplomacy makes reference to a very popular Chinese action movie series, in which soldiers and fighters easily and gloriously defeat China’s adversaries and enemies, accompanied by aggressive language and also insults directed at China’s alleged enemies. The language and style used in the Twitter accounts of China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokespersons’ in particular seem to have inspired by the aforementioned Chinese (government-approved) action movie series. Language and rhetoric aggressively defending China against all accusations of all kinds via social media channels which are not accessible to ordinary Chinese citizens. See “China’s Wolf-Warrior

It is appropriate to conclude that Beijing has brought all of this upon itself. Changing territorial statuses on land and sea and insisting Chinese-drawn maps authorise it to unilaterally claim territory is an open invitation to democratic countries to pool resources in a bid to stop it. Further, many European scholars, analysts and policymakers demonstrated a near complete lack of realisation about China's ambitions that has inevitably led to the affected Asian countries seeking outside help to ensure their sovereign territory is not swallowed up as part of China's 'empire' without a fight. China has, as London School of Economics China scholar William Callahan documented in his book *China Dreams: 20 Visions of the Future*, a de facto plan for how to reincorporate much of the rest of Asia into a new Chinese empire.⁴³ Aided by Chinese scholars, retired military generals, and self-declared thinkers and intellectuals, the Chinese government may indeed be thinking about re-establishing a Chinese empire as big and powerful as the one that existed during the first half of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1912). In such a case, the rest of Asia would then be relegated back to the 'periphery' of the Chinese empire, paying tribute and homage to Beijing. This scenario is hopefully the worst-case, but Asian countries today cannot be blamed for being all ears when Chinese scholars and policymakers boast about China as the 'Middle Kingdom' surrounded by 'small countries' on its periphery.

Gamble. Foreign Policy is not like an Action Film," *Economist*, May 30, 2020. Also Rachel Cheung, and Benjamin Wilhelm, "Why China's 'Wolf-Warriors' won't Back Down," *World Politics Review* (WPR), April 7, 2021, <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/trend-lines/29554/china-s-wolf-warrior-diplomacy-is-here-to-stay>.

⁴³ For details, see William A. Callahan, *China Dreams: 20 Visions for the Future* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

Pooling Resources

Collin Koh of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies in Singapore argues that apart from France, European countries do not have the capacity to project significant hard power in the Indo-Pacific region. "The Europeans will put more focus on their economic presence. The military presence is secondary and to reinforce the image that they are engaged and interested," Koh told the *Financial Times*.⁴⁴ That is certainly the case for the German navy. In fact, Germany's naval command has made it clear on more than one occasion in 2020 that only one frigate can be deployed to the Indo-Pacific without jeopardising the German Navy's other ongoing missions. This is why pooling resources could do the trick. The UK and the British Royal Navy are prepared to cooperate with the Quad countries in the Indo-Pacific/Indian Ocean Region.⁴⁵ France too has recently voiced interest in collaborating with the Quad. It makes operational sense for like-minded democracies to cooperate wherever feasible.

For now, however, the Quad is not an institution but rather a small and informal club of like-minded countries that gathers for military exercises and consultations on regional security issues. Given the quality and experience of the Royal Navy, there is little doubt that the UK would receive a warm welcome by the Quad countries currently engaged in efforts to keep Chinese territorial and military ambitions in the region in check. Of course, the governments in Washington, Delhi, Canberra and Tokyo do not

⁴⁴ Katerina Ang, "Europe Pivots to Indo-Pacific with 'Multipolar Ambitions,'" *Financial Times*, February 8, 2021.

⁴⁵ A former British Defence Secretary confirmed this when speaking to the author in December 2020.

officially admit that their aforementioned quadrilateral security cooperation is about containing China. It really is and should be considered as such against the background of Chinese territorial expansionism in the South China Sea, together with the increasing Chinese naval presence in the Indian Ocean and in territorial waters, which India traditionally refers to as its 'sphere of influence.'

Conclusion

Paris and Berlin did what they thought was necessary: write a strategy paper declaring their desire to 'do more' in the Indo-Pacific Region. If Europe's goal is to actually deter China from treating disputed waters and territories as their own and building military runways on them, the jury is still out on whether the French and German Indo-Pacific policy papers make a contribution towards that end. Probably more so the French Indo-Pacific policy paper given its well-defined objectives and focus. As argued above, the German version is quite simply too vague and toothless to keep Beijing's Indo-Pacific policy planners up at night. The options available to Europeans to actually keep Beijing from building military bases on disputed islands are limited and potentially dangerous. Blocking Chinese access to disputed islands in the South China Sea with an international sea blockade will undoubtedly be interpreted as an act of war by Beijing, even as Chinese propaganda insists the country is ready if such a provocation ever arose.

If increased European interest and military presence in the Indo-Pacific was meant to keep Chinese policymakers awake at night, the mission is thus far successful. This fact, however, will not be reflected in any self-confident reporting in Beijing's mouthpiece newspaper *Global Times*. The outlet's editorials occasionally accuse Europe and the EU of teaming up with the US on containment policies, but such practice is standard and common for *Global Times*' 'journalists', who follow Beijing's orders to hammer out propaganda and analysis of very dubious quality. The U.S. is the main target for Chinese party-officials-turned-journalists, but Europe and the EU are receiving their fair share of accusation for conspiring against China, among others. While Brussels' recent China policy paper, the 'EU-China 2020

Strategic Agenda for Cooperation',⁴⁶ sounds very optimistic about the possibilities and prospects of EU-Chinese result-oriented cooperation in international politics and security, there are arguably and currently next to no illusions left among EU policymakers that the EU and China can jointly address and solve issues in international politics and security. In fact, the EU and (almost all) of its member-states' reactions and concerns about Beijing's policies towards and in Hong Kong and Xinjiang, together with concerns about China's territorial expansionism in the South China Sea and the increasingly frequent intrusion of Chinese fighter jets in Taiwan's air identification zone (ADIZ)⁴⁷ suggest that the prospects of actual EU-China cooperation in international politics and security are slim, to say the least. All of these concerns, however, did not stop Brussels from signing the aforementioned CAI, which will not see the light of day thanks to the European Parliament's refusal to approve an agreement that should never have been up for approval in the first place.

In 2016, French policymakers feared China's territorial ambitions and disregard for international law would go beyond the Indo-Pacific if left undeterred. While China's gradual undermining of the status quo in the South China Sea in complete violation of the UNCLOS has long been identified in Paris as an issue of global significance, former French Defence (and current Foreign Affairs Minister) Jean-Yves Le Drian is on record warning that, "If the law of the seas is not respected today in the China seas, it will be threatened tomorrow in the Arctic, the Mediterranean, and elsewhere."⁴⁸ Le Drian made a major point in 2016 suspecting Chinese

⁴⁶ "EU-China 2020 Strategic Agenda for Cooperation," European External Action Service (EEAS), 2020, https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/china/docs/eu-china_2020_strategic_agenda_en.pdf.

⁴⁷ "Taiwan: Record Number of China Jets Enter Air Zone," *BBC*, April 13, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-56728072>.

⁴⁸ Cited in Mathieu Duchâtel and Garima Mohan, "Franco-German Divergences in the Indo-Pacific: The Risk of Strategic Dilution," Institut Montaigne, October 30, 2020, <https://www.institutmontaigne.org/en/blog/franco-german-divergences-indo-pacific-risk-strategic-dilution>.

policymakers will continue to remain in the business of disregarding laws of the seas, testing the limits for how far they can stretch international law. Thus far, the policy has its limits for in 2016 the Permanent Court of Arbitration ruled that the construction of Chinese military bases on islands was illegal because the islands were not part of Chinese territory.⁴⁹ The fact that France is the aforementioned 'resident power' in the region sharply casts how Paris and Berlin's approaches to the Indo-Pacific differ, as confirmed by the nature and focus of their respective Indo-Pacific policy papers.

While Germany will continue to have the luxury of only being obliged to protect and defend its trade and investment ties in the Indo-Pacific, Paris will have to protect those plus the 1.6 million French citizens permanently based in the region. The French Indo-Pacific policy guidelines are concrete and give analysts a good understanding of what France and its naval forces are planning to do in the region in the years ahead. The German version is far less concrete, and as mentioned above, comes across as borderline trivial, not allowing the reader to understand how and to what extent Berlin's Indo-Pacific policy guidelines stand for a new approach towards the region. Putting ASEAN at the centre of German efforts to contribute to security in the Indo-Pacific, is not exactly evidence that German foreign policymakers have their eyes on the ball of Asian security. This could be intentional and indeed reflects the German 'realpolitik' policy approach towards China more than anything else. A country, at least so it seems to the outside observer, that is taking up 50 per cent of the EU's overall share of trade and investment relations with China, has chosen to limit its 'outspokenness' on issues that Beijing considers sensitive as much as possible. This is taking place at the same time Berlin does not want to be accused of disinterest in

⁴⁹ For details see Françoise Nicolas, "France's Indo-Pacific Strategy: Inclusive and Principled," East Asia Forum, December 12, 2019, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2019/12/12/frances-indo-pacific-strategy-inclusive-and-principled/>.

contributing to peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region.⁵⁰ Berlin's deployment of the aforementioned frigate to the region is to be welcomed, but it is bound to remain a very symbolic contribution—maybe too symbolic for the world's fourth largest economy and Asia's biggest European trading and investment partner.

In mid-April 2021, the Council of the European Union issued its 'Conclusions on an EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific.'⁵¹ This paper will not go into further details on the nature and impact of the EU's first Indo-Pacific policy strategy paper and limits itself to note that the EU policy paper announces what it calls a 'meaningful European naval presence in the Indo-Pacific.' The meaning of that exact phrase and who would be deployed to the region has yet to emerge, but the phrase 'a meaningful presence' paired with 'EU strategic autonomy in Asia' signals a new approach by policymakers in Brussels, at least on paper and in theory. Is this the start of something new for EU involvement in the Indo-Pacific? Possibly, but Antoine Bondaz of the Foundation for Strategic Research in Paris made his caution known in a *Politico* article. "At the moment, France is the only country to have a real security strategy in the Indo-Pacific. Strategic autonomy in writing speeches is one thing, strategic autonomy in doing things and defending our interests is another."⁵²

Indeed, and time will tell whether Brussels and the EU member-states' governments will have the guts and courage to endure Chinese threats of

⁵⁰ Garima Mohan, "Germany Gets On Board With The Indo-Pacific," *9DashLine*, September 11, 2020, <https://www.9dashline.com/article/germany-gets-on-board-the-indo-pacific/>; Gurjit Singh, "Germany Takes View of the Indo-Pacific," *Observer Research Foundation (ORF)*, October 1, 2020, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/germany-takes-view-indo-pacific/>.

⁵¹ Council of the European Union, "Conclusions on an EU Strategy in the Indo-Pacific," April 16, 2021, <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-7914-2021-INIT/en/pdf>.

⁵² Stuart Lau, and Jacopo Barigazzi, "Europe's Long Shot: More Warships in the Indo-Pacific," *Politico*, April 18, 2020, <https://www.politico.eu/article/europes-strategic-long-shot-more-warships-in-the-indo-pacific/>.

economic retaliation and same old, same old warnings not to 'interfere' in Chinese domestic and foreign policies.

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