

# NAVIGATING THE INDO-PACIFIC: HOW AUSTRALIA AND THE EU CAN PARTNER FOR PEACE, STABILITY, AND PROSPERITY

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To navigate the choppy waters of the Indo-Pacific, the EU and Australia must be on the same wavelength regarding shared interests in rules, values, and an open and liberal economic order. Headwinds are plenty as the underpinnings of peace and stability are currently frail in an era of Indo-Pacific (re-)ordering. Proactive multilaterals and the agency of middle powers such as Australia provide tailwinds.

Besides dealing with a more assertive China, five key areas of convergence between the EU and Australia are: 1) Rejuvenating the multilateral trading system, which currently prioritizes security over efficiency and is suffering from a partially defunct WTO, 2) Providing developmental assistance in critical infrastructure and digital transformation via Global Gateway, 3) Coalescing support for climate action, particularly in the vulnerable Pacific Islands, 4) Exploring ways to increase the geopolitical resilience of ASEAN, a critical actor, and 5) Enhancing maritime security in the region.

The EU and Australia must rely on each other's strengths to expand their roles as security enablers across the Indo-Pacific. If the EU wants to be taken more seriously as a global geopolitical actor, its role and (perceived) effectiveness in the Indo-Pacific is *the* litmus test.

- The EU and Australia can help build regional capacity for maritime security, combating piracy, and promoting freedom of navigation. This aligns perfectly with Australia's strategic focus on the region and the EU's present naval presence.
- The EU and Australia must also rely on each other's strengths to expand their roles as security enablers. As both are making efforts at re-engagement, the EU's existing presence in the Western Indian Ocean and Australia's focused outreach in the Pacific must be leveraged to expand their initiatives across the Indo-Pacific.
- A key collaboration area is also crisis management; the Australia-EU Framework Partnership Agreement (FPA) is intended to identify areas of greater security cooperation.<sup>1</sup> Lending civilian expertise to crisis response while investing in capacity building as a testament to third-country cooperation must not remain commitments on paper and be judiciously implemented.
- With advanced cyber capabilities, the EU and Australia can partner to build regional cyber resilience and counter cyber threats, especially in the health sector. Collaborating in norm-setting for the Indo-Pacific and focusing on providing cyber-safety training to countries may ensure a stable and just digital space— combating disinformation is also crucial.

## Introduction

The Indo-Pacific is an economic and strategic powerhouse amid choppy waters. Moreover, the regional geopolitical developments for primacy, from influence over states to resources, have accelerated power brokering. Although challenges in the Indo-Pacific are plenty and diverse, in particular, China's rise, its more assertive behavior, and its strategic competition with the United States have become the focus of an ongoing power dynamic. As a result, for the US and its allies and partners, including Australia and the EU, the China challenge has, in recent years, become a driving factor in building new strategies and policies for the Indo-Pacific region.

Notably, these geopolitical developments include not just the bitterly divisive trends (from autocratic/democratic states to Global North/South narratives) but the generally accepted shift to multipolarity. This is also due to the growing economic and political influence of emerging and middle powers like Australia, India, Japan, the Philippines, South Korea, and Vietnam. This changing reality is being increasingly acknowledged, including by European leaders like German Chancellor Olaf Scholz and the European Union (EU)'s Foreign Policy Chief Josep Borrell.<sup>2</sup>

Australia, too, and as one of the first, recognized the high-stakes changes taking place in the Indo-Pacific strategic landscape. For Australia, in a multipolar world, Australian security interests will be much more impacted by the complex network of global relationships, including between the US, its allies, and Indo-Pacific partners, as well as the greater coordination between the (to a good degree) like-minded China and Russia.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, as Australian Minister for Foreign Affairs Penny Wong states, "America is central to balancing a multipolar region," and for maintaining "strategic equilibrium."<sup>4</sup>

To navigate these currents effectively, the EU and Australia, alongside regional partners, must be on the same wavelength regarding, inter alia, shared interests in rules, values, and an open and liberal economic order. To facilitate such a process, this policy brief first

investigates the head and tailwinds that hinder regional progress and those that can engender constructive engagement. It then dives into how the two sides can work better together and with others to foster peace, stability, and prosperity in the region. Finally, it presents calls to action.

## What Makes the Indo-Pacific Tick

Peace, stability, and prosperity are interconnected variables, deriving from and adding to the existence of the other. For instance, without *peace*, businesses cannot operate, and trade routes get disrupted—everyone loses. A *stable* region with clear rules, respect for each other's red lines, and respect for international law encourages investment and growth. As a result, when economies thrive, people are more content, tensions ease, and everyone may *prosper*.

Nowhere is this symbiotic dynamic clearer than in the current theatre of world geopolitics and geo-economics, the Indo-Pacific: A world political fault line<sup>5</sup> with multiple flashpoints, an underdeveloped pan-Indo-Pacific/pan-Asian security order(s), and adjacent or near-adjacent nuclear powers, and where the call for peace, stability and prosperity is perhaps only overshadowed by the necessity for the same. While the region continues to prosper and further necessity and potential for growth are high, the underpinnings of peace and stability are currently frail as most of the region is in an era of (re-)ordering. Old economic and security arrangements are increasingly contested, with new arrangements competing or developing.

The importance of the Indo-Pacific region and the quest to maintain peace and stability in the face of rising security risks will be long term.<sup>6</sup> Briefly, it is the region where the chessboard of great-power rivalry is laid out presently, and it is an economically and industrially critical area via which more than half of the world's trade passes.<sup>7</sup> As a result, the region is vital to non-traditional and traditional security concerns, from major powers competing to access and control multiple maritime strategic chokepoints in the region to the Indo-Pacific (littorals) being a hotbed of climate change.

## *Headwinds*

Undoubtedly, the Indo-Pacific continues to face serious headwinds. There are simultaneous efforts to sustain and erode the region's current peace and stability. One of the primary reasons has been the concurrent decline of American geopolitical influence and the emergence of other powers, such as India, but particularly China, challenging the established US-led security order and architecture in the Asia-Pacific. China's increased economic, diplomatic, and military might in the last two decades and Chinese President Xi Jinping's seemingly personalistic ambitions in the previous decade have given it a new lease of power to pursue overseas interests. For example, China has not only economically coerced its neighbors (from Southeast Asia to East Asia) but also expanded its scope of "core interests," particularly in terms of territorial claims.<sup>8</sup> China's controversial claims, be it the new "standard map" featuring the ten-dash line or policies like the New Coast Guard Law, are threatening to change the status quo unilaterally.<sup>9</sup> As a result, multilateral governance in the region suffers.

Such competition, deriving from great power rivalry between the US and China and the latter's quest to secure itself 'maritime breathing space,' has translated into a larger battle, sometimes (inaccurately) depicted as a battle between democratic versus autocratic powers. More than this, the relative lack of teeth in regional/global multilateral organizations, including the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), has forced a rise in ad hoc unilateral mechanisms, which, while attractive and feasible on many counts, cannot ever replace the inclusivity, cooperation and norm-generation that multilaterals offer.<sup>10</sup> The new divides have been so disruptive that in 2022, for the first time since 2006, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) failed to tighten sanctions on the regime of North Korea.<sup>11</sup> Thus, there is little doubt that the Indo-Pacific is heading in the direction of a dangerous arms race fueled by an assortment of hot spots—East China Sea (ECS), Ladakh, North Korea, India-Pakistan, Iran-Israel, the Pacific Islands, South China Sea (SCS), and Taiwan, to name a few.<sup>12</sup>

On top of this, the nuclear landscape is witnessing heightened urgency. Almost all nations with nuclear

capabilities are either situated within the Indo-Pacific region or maintain a consistent military footprint in it. Any altercation here, regardless of its scale, risks nuclear implications.<sup>13</sup> The geographical proximity of these atomic powers is another added layer. The repercussions of an Indian potential (even if the potential is minute) two-front war with rivals China and Pakistan, all nuclear powers, in the highly fragile and under-institutionalized South Asia would be beyond catastrophic globally. Against such a scenario, it is imperative to uphold deterrence strategies against warfare, particularly nuclear conflicts, and safeguard the continuity of peace.

Concurrently, piracy, terrorism, cybercrime, and unfair economic and investment policies threaten trade and regional stability. For example, the US has long accused China of carrying out practices like forced technology transfer—that is, pressuring US companies to transfer technology for market access (also condemned strongly by Japan and the EU), which distort markets and disadvantage regional economies.<sup>14</sup> The US partners and allies, including the EU and Australia, that face Chinese coercion will need to figure out ways to combat these malpractices. It should be added that this is not a one-way street, as the US and the EU, gradually following suit, are also engaging in trade and investment restrictions that, according to China, ironically, are nationalistic, illiberal and potentially in breach of WTO commitments.<sup>15</sup>

Rising sea levels, extreme weather events, and resource scarcity pose existential threats for coastal states. Climate change and unsustainable practices endanger the region's and, indeed, the world's natural resources and stability. Here, inclusive cooperation is required, a tough task under the current divisive climate. Then there is the growing menace of disinformation, as countries need to fight hybrid warfare, which includes, among other grey-zone tactics, mis/disinformation and propaganda machinery that undermines regional trust and social order.

## *Tailwinds*

While multi-polar orders can be considered less stable, one of the Indo-Pacific's major strengths is facilitating

a potential global redistribution of power due to an abundance of more active “balancing” *middle* powers, which are rising in stature. Peace, stability, and prosperity of the region—an integral aspect of all the Indo-Pacific strategies, including that of Australia, the EU, and the US—are echoing the call for unity amongst “like-minded” powers.

In this context, minilaterals have led the way. Notably, the revival of the Quad (comprising Australia, India, Japan, and the US) has allowed these partners to work together across a range of domains to both deliver public goods, and support a region that is “free, open, inclusive, healthy, anchored by democratic values, and unconstrained by coercion.”<sup>16</sup> This is evidenced by the Quad’s slow, quiet acceptance in Southeast Asia. This economically China-dependent region does not favor exclusivity and actively and repeatedly promotes dialogue, inclusivity, and multilateralism.<sup>17</sup> The Quad strongly supports ASEAN centrality and unity and commits to universal values. ASEAN, in turn, has an Indo-Pacific Outlook that bodes well for reinvigorating multilateralism.

Moreover, such convergence allows for greater room for cross-pollination between minilaterals and multilaterals like ASEAN, which are crucial for promoting dialogue and cooperation for a more stable region. Besides, several major countries in the Indo-Pacific, including the middle powers of Australia, India, Japan, and South Korea, share democratic values and a commitment to the rules-based international order. This becomes an important criterion for a normative bloc/power like the EU to form strong partnerships amidst China and the US trespassing rules when their core interests are at stake.

At the same time, there is greater understanding or acknowledgment among regional states like Australia and perceived extra-regional powers like the EU about the need to focus on common challenges, particularly China, considering regional diversity and the need for inclusivity. They are aware that the growing push to choose sides amid the China-US rivalry and the realization of a scenario in which no one state dominates

and no state is dominated has heightened the need for regional states to look for balancing major powers.

## Teaming Up for a Better Surf: EU & Australia

While the EU’s engagement with ASEAN, India, and Japan, among others, has grown over the past decade, the EU’s relationship with Australia holds imperative bearing for its strategic calculus in the region. Besides the apparent convergence of the two sides as Western US allies, the EU, with its economic muscle, technological prowess, and diplomatic clout, and Australia, with its strategic location, excellent regional knowledge, and strong regional ties, are a powerful team.

Individual and vital EU member states like France recognize the same, as shown in the renewal of Paris’ ties with Canberra after the AUKUS announcement.<sup>18</sup> As concerns about France’s apparent closeness to China recently have raised eyebrows, the convergence between the two sides over the Indo-Pacific construct and both sides’ insistence on the need for regional strategic balancing should bring the two closer. However, experts have also noted the “risks and sensitivities” for Australia in navigating the complexities of the semi-autonomous French territories in the Pacific.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, Australia and Germany have been working on boosting trade and investment, climate action and clean energy, and defense and security cooperation. In the words of Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, the two sides have “never been closer.”<sup>20</sup>

Indeed, China has become a central area of concern and interest. The EU and Australia share the diplomatic challenge of balancing their need for China economically against their security concerns. Both countries had a largely unchanged position on China until 2019, when economics governed ties without factoring in security concerns, especially those of the region.<sup>21</sup>

The events leading up to and during the COVID-19 pandemic (from the calls for an investigation into the origins of the pandemic to China’s supply of substandard medical equipment), China’s unwillingness to condemn

Russia for the invasion of Ukraine, China's economic compulsion of both Australia and the EU, and China's military tactics in the SCS and Taiwan Strait have led to a souring of respective bilateral ties. However, even though China's relations with Australia and the EU continue to be strained, efforts are being made to lower the escalation.<sup>22</sup> The need not to view China, a vital trade partner and a partner for climate action, in strict binaries while recognizing China's coercive behavior is the current trend in Australian and European policymaking/strategic circles.

Notably, Australia and the EU decried China's "dangerous maneuvers" in the SCS against the Philippines in 2024. Although the Australian position is much more explicit in its support of the Philippines and calls out China's "pattern of deeply concerning behavior," this is the most direct the EU—which has shown either disunity or been divided on the SCS disputes—has been on this issue.<sup>23</sup>

For greater regional peace and stability, Australia, South Korea, and the EU must collaborate with regional partners, including ASEAN states, India, and Japan, for a more united, practical stand on critical strategic issues. As China is perceived as part of the problem, it is also automatically part of possible solutions, and exchange, dialogue, and exploring mutually agreeable ways forward with it are imperative, too.

Besides the China factor, five other key areas of convergence between the EU and Australia in the Indo-Pacific are:

- Rejuvenating the multilateral trading system, which currently prioritizes security over efficiency and is suffering from a partially defunct WTO; and, jointly providing developmental assistance in critical infrastructure and digital transformation in the Indo-Pacific via Global Gateway.
- Coalescing support for climate action, particularly in the vulnerable Pacific Islands where China's increasing influence is giving pause to Australia and the EU—yet, on the other hand, China's cooperation in tackling climate change and assisting these Islands with that can undoubtedly be beneficial.

- Exploring ways to increase the geopolitical resilience of ASEAN, a critical actor.
- Exploring ways in which the Indo-Pacific is better covered by media and awareness and knowledge of the region are better promoted in academia and the private sector.
- Enhancing maritime security in the region.

With the larger integrated nature of the Indo-Pacific and Euro-Atlantic space as the backdrop, maritime cooperation and climate action have emerged as key core areas of interest. The EU has successfully curbed piracy and provided a certain level of security and deterrence in the Western Indian Ocean for over a decade with Operation Atalanta.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, in recent years, Operation Atalanta, within the framework of the EU's Strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, has expanded its activities to include frequent joint maritime exercises with Indo-Pacific partners like India and Japan.<sup>25</sup>

Similarly, Australia's maritime exercises, like Noble Dingo with the US and Japan and Malabar with Japan, India and the US, have allowed capacity building in the Indian and Pacific Oceans with partner states.<sup>26</sup> Considering Australia's need to strengthen its presence in the western Indian Ocean and its contributions to the maritime capacity building program EUCAP Nestor in the Horn of Africa and Western Indian Ocean, a new strengthening of EU-Australia naval security cooperation in the current fragile security landscape is imperative.<sup>27</sup> Expanding the EU's Critical Maritime Routes in the Indian Ocean (Crimario; launched in 2015) to the Pacific should facilitate boosting the security partnership with Australia.<sup>28</sup>

## Calls to Action

The EU and Australia strongly advocate for international law and peaceful dispute resolution. They must champion these principles in the Indo-Pacific with more apparent stances (such as in the SCS) and develop better syntax with partners like ASEAN to strengthen the rules-based order so as to address violations *by anybody*—such solidarity-driven actions are essential.

The EU and Australia must also rely on each other's strengths to expand their roles as security enablers. Until now, Australia has neglected the Western Indian Ocean. At the same time, the EU has lacked strategic engagement in the Pacific Islands—sometimes called the “blind spot” of the EU's Indo-Pacific narrative.<sup>29</sup> As both are making efforts at re-engagement, the EU's existing presence in the Western Indian Ocean and Australia's focused outreach in the Pacific must be leveraged to expand their initiatives across the Indo-Pacific.

The EU and Australia can also help build regional capacity for maritime security, combating piracy, and promoting freedom of navigation. This aligns perfectly with Australia's strategic focus on the region and the EU's established naval presence. Australia and the EU are yet to form strategic complementarity in bilateral maritime exercises. It must become a priority considering the current geopolitical climate. A key collaboration area is also crisis management; the Australia-EU Framework Partnership Agreement (FPA) is intended to identify areas of greater security cooperation.<sup>30</sup> Lending civilian expertise to crisis response while investing in capacity building as a testament to third-country cooperation must not remain commitments on paper and be judiciously implemented.

Climate change and resource scarcity are major threats. The EU, a leader in green technology, must work with Australia to promote sustainable development in the region. No other region in the world than the Indo-Pacific can simultaneously naturally absorb carbon as much as this region while also housing three of its largest emitters: China, the US, and India. Although the EU already has initiatives like the Green-Blue Alliance with the Pacific Island nations and Just Energy Partnerships with ASEAN states, third-country cooperation with Australia may boost its efforts.

Cybercrime is another relevant area. With advanced cyber capabilities, the EU and Australia can partner to build regional cyber resilience and counter cyber threats, especially in the health sector.<sup>31</sup> While both countries have expansive cyber-security norms, collaborating in norm-setting for the Indo-Pacific and focusing on

providing cyber-safety training to countries may ensure a stable and just digital space. Combating disinformation is crucial. Working together on fact-checking initiatives and media literacy programs can help counter false narratives.

The EU and Australia strongly support international multilateral institutions like the UN and ASEAN. Working together to uphold these institutions and develop common approaches to regional challenges will amplify their voices. Observers have also noted the strengths of “collective bargaining and coalition building” for peace and security via the Quad in the UN.<sup>32</sup> In this context, a “Quad Plus EU” format could be explored to enhance Quad's multilateral aspects.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, to strengthen multilateralism, the EU-Australia partnership must work toward reforming Bretton Woods institutions, institutions long perceived to be dominated by the US and Europe. In a multipolar Asia where trust in US-led post-Second World War-era international bodies is at a nadir, China is tapping the sentiments of the Global South to promote an Asian security order based on cooperative rather than collective security.<sup>34</sup>

The EU and Australia can champion free trade agreements and work with regional partners to create a more level playing field for all. Indeed, the EU could better use economic tools to shape geopolitical outcomes.<sup>35</sup> In this regard, initiatives like the US-led Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF) should see convergence with the EU in the future, particularly in supply chain resilience.<sup>36</sup> The EU could, e.g., explore ways of working with Australia to reconcile supply chain resilience in critical sectors with market principles.

Furthermore, the EU must more proactively discuss ways to promote order and a strategic equilibrium in the region. Indeed, if the EU wants to be taken more seriously as a global geopolitical actor, its role and (perceived) effectiveness in the Indo-Pacific is *the* litmus test. For this, it needs to deepen cooperation with Australia, but also India, Japan, and ASEAN to build a united front for regional stability. Developing synergies of initiatives like the Global Gateway with local partners has been a good beginning, even if slow.

Finally, the EU must engage with the Indo-Pacific, considering the region's security interests and sensitivities, not push an EU vision of governance, development, or values. Engaging with regional partners with more tact and recognizing their diverse political systems, cultural and social values, and development priorities are vital. Australia can act as a bridge between the EU and key regional players, facilitating dialogue and understanding and exploring ways to contribute to Indo-Pacific order.

In all, the Indo-Pacific construct has allowed positive developments, including the contours of an emerging economic and security architecture among “like-minded” states and an enhanced level of solidarity against unilateral actions. This certainly augurs well for Australia and the EU and peace, stability, and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific, but collaborative efforts need further impetus.

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