



## Joint Symposium

# Europe in the Indo-Pacific: Moving from Periphery to the Centre?

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by Heather Elizabeth Humphries and Shayna Robinson, EU Centre Interns

### Welcome Remarks

The joint symposium on “Europe in the Indo-Pacific: Moving from Periphery to the Centre?” kicked off with opening remarks from Institute of South Asian Studies Director Professor C Raja Mohan and Swedish Institute of International Affairs Research Fellow Dr Henrik Chetan Aspengren. Warmly welcoming participants to the symposium, Professor Mohan and Dr Aspengren outlined the burgeoning debate on the concept of an “Indo-Pacific” region and the role of Europe in this region.

Professor Mohan stressed that geography and geographical boundaries were not static, citing how conventional terms such as ‘Asia-Pacific’ and ‘Southeast Asia’ were relatively new post-war constructs. However, he was certain that the concept of Indo-Pacific is here to stay and hence would like this Symposium to explore if there is a shared European perspective with regards to the concept of the Indo-Pacific. The tendency to “outsource” security to the US has spawned debate on the role of Europe and regional powers in establishing security in our own regions. With reference to the recent Shangri La dialogue (SLD), there also seems to be a growing need for Europe to play a larger security role in the region.

Dr Aspengren followed by sharing the Swedish Institute of International Affairs’ ongoing research agenda on the Indo-Pacific as a region of interest. The Institute is trying to gather a network of Indo-Pacific analysts to explore the different narratives of Indo-Pacific and shift from the pure focus on contest and geopolitical rivalry to look at integration.

## **Session 1: Emerging European Perspectives on the Indo-Pacific**

The first panel discussion opened with keynote presentations by the panellists to outline the strategic interests of Europe in Asia, how the European Union (EU) and its member states can engage with the Indo-Pacific region and the challenges.

Dr Pascal Vennesson, Professor of Political Science at the S Rajaratnam School of International Studies in Nanyang Technological University, began his presentation on The Relevant Strategic Context for Europe-Asia Links and Options for Europe by contextualising the discussion in the broader geopolitical developments that speak to the strategic importance of Europe- Asia links. The first is the “new Cold War”, in which tensions in US-China relations have evolved and escalated in recent months. He added that if indeed we are in a new Cold war era, Europe (which refers not only to the European Union (EU) institutions but also the EU member states) would have to look into its options in light of the intensified strategic competition

Dr Vennesson proceeded to outline three potential options:

- Side with the US and contain China – a preferred option by the US
- Bandwagon with China – an option that some European countries may be tempted to pursue
- Maintain geopolitical equidistance and establish Europe’s own autonomy

While Europe could also choose to take no position or consider positions on an issue-by-issue basis, Dr Vennesson notes this would not be an easy trajectory to pursue.

Dr Vennesson also discussed the need for more European countries to articulate their position on Asia. Citing Frances’ Indo-Pacific strategy articulated during the SLD as a possible point of reference, he emphasised two key tenets underpinning the Indo-Pacific strategy: firstly, to be connected to a norms-based position (i.e. respecting sovereign equality, international rules) and secondly, address a growing need to come together on non-traditional security concerns such as environmental protection or humanitarian disaster relief and to connect it to a broader security grand strategy.

The second panelist in this session, Senior Analyst Mr Patryk Kugiel from the Polish Institute of International Affairs contested that the Indo-Pacific as a concept, did not exist in European consciousness. Still attached to the traditional term ‘Asia-Pacific’, the EU held no official position on the Indo-Pacific. He identified a possible structural barrier to an approach in the Indo-Pacific, in which the Pacific is seen by the EU as part of a different group from Asia, and operates along different legal frameworks. He cited the

example of the EU's long-standing engagement of the African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) countries as a grouping. Other challenges to articulating an official position include differing geographical constraints and priorities, the EU's lack of military presence in the Pacific Ocean, and a lack of coherence of EU policy vis-à-vis US-China power politics. However, he acknowledged that a number of recent EU documents speak to the increased focus on a security role in Asia.

Mr Kugiel added that the EU has a vital political, economic and strategic interest in the region along with shared common interests in global challenges (i.e. environmental protection, counter-terrorism and connectivity). While he was doubtful that the EU will be a hard security player, he emphasised the EU's immense competence in non-traditional security issues, and argued that the EU could tap on its strength as a normative and regulatory power by contributing its confidence-building measures in conflict management and building international standards. He concluded that the Indo-Pacific region is now too important a concept to be ignored by the EU, primarily in the area of managing great power competition and the region could be an important test for the EU to prove its capacity to bring peace.

Rounding up the presentations, Ambassador David Daly, head of the Southeast Asia division at the European External Action Service in the European Union, outlined the three principles underpinning the EU's approach to Asia-Pacific (and beyond). These are: upholding international law, maintaining open markets and establishing regional openness through partnerships. Ambassador Daly remarked that while the use of the term 'Indo-Pacific' or 'Asia-Pacific' varies across EU member states, the underlying EU principles are the same. Given the concept of an Indo-Pacific is subject to ongoing debate, Ambassador Daly reaffirmed the EU's commitment to fully participate in the debate.

The EU recognises that stability in Asia is linked to stability in Europe, and vice versa. Ambassador Daly highlighted primary security issues of concern to the EU: developments in the Korean Peninsula, the Rohingya crisis in Myanmar, the South China Sea, counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency efforts.

The EU's approach to security in Asia takes the form of both bilateral and multilateral cooperation. Bilateral efforts included tailored security partnerships with countries such as India, Indonesia, Japan, Vietnam and South Korea, military and civilian missions and conflict management support (i.e. Mindanao peace process). On the multilateral front, Ambassador Daly reaffirmed the EU's active engagement with ASEAN; co-chairing ASEAN meetings on maritime security, defence diplomacy and counter-terrorism.

Ambassador Daly also highlighted the importance of establishing trade relations with ASEAN. The primary vehicle of partnerships being Free-Trade Agreements (FTA).

Beyond the recently signed EU-Singapore FTA and EU-Vietnam FTA, Ambassador Daly spoke of an EU-ASEAN FTA in the pipeline. Another area of cooperation between Europe and Asia is in connectivity. The EU connectivity agenda broadly outlined the approach to connectivity as partnership-centric, sustainable and rule-based.

Following the three presentations, several questions were raised. A common theme in these questions revolved around the possibility of a single European voice in establishing a security role in the Indo-Pacific. Points were raised that certain European countries seemed ahead of the curve in engaging in Indo-Pacific, with reference to France and the United Kingdom. Ambassador Daly replied that in recent years, the EU has articulated single positions, especially on security issues, than in decades preceding it. While Mr Kugiel agreed that there was coherence in sensitive issues such as implementing sanctions on Russia, both he and Dr Vennesson expressed that the EU should strive for greater coherence on policy issues and positions pertaining to the Indo-Pacific.

Dr Vennesson also cautioned the EU against setting up a capability-expectation gap when establishing its security role in the region, saying it needed to carefully consider the signals it sent out diplomatically to the Asia-Pacific/Indo-Pacific region

A related concern was the viability of the EU as a hard security actor. Dr Vennesson spoke on the notion of 'hard security' being constantly evolving. He argued that the EU could contribute in domains such as cyber security, as opposed to looking at hard security as a homogenous and singular construct. Mr Kugiel added that the EU is not a hard security actor, however they could play a role by funding infrastructure projects in the Indo-Pacific and initiate dialogues on the Indo-Pacific with other major actors to avoid conflict escalation in the region.

## **Session 2: Europe and Indo-Pacific Connectivity**

The moderator Dr Amitendu Palit, senior research fellow and research lead on trade and economic policy at the Institute of South Asian Studies in NUS, kicked off the second session on Europe and Indo-Pacific Connectivity with a comment that the narrative on connectivity has mostly been centred on security and rivalry and posed a question: how might Europe re-shape the connectivity agenda?

Leaving the audience to ponder that over, the first presentation of the session was about the European Union's Vision and Strategy when it came to Connecting Asia and Europe by Dr Jivanta Schottli, Assistant Professor in Indian Politics at the School of Law and Government, Dublin City University and a visiting scholar at the Institute of South Asian Studies in NUS. Prior to analysing the [connectivity strategy document put out by the European Union](#) (EU) on 19 September 2018, Dr Schottli reaffirmed how important

Europe and Asia are for each other and provided an example of how Europe is the largest foreign investor in ASEAN.

When the EU's strategy for Connecting Europe and Asia was presented in September 2018, it was met with a mix of opinions. Some believed this to be the EU's direct response to China's Belt and Road Initiative while others, mainly proponents of the strategy, argue that this is connectivity done the 'right European way'.

Dr Schottli shared three of her main observations on the connectivity strategy document. Firstly, she thought that the relatively new strategy combined concrete political objectives with concrete economic goals with European values packaged in a "pragmatic fashion", rather than being a purely didactic document which seems to indicate a genuine interest in seeing this connectivity strategy being implemented.

Secondly, Dr Schottli observed that this document seemed to be a positioning of how to make the EU a more effective global player in the world stage. In discussing the soft aspects of connectivity, there is also an implication made about how rules and norms of the international order are going to play in this movement of goods, people and ideas between Europe and Asia, as evidenced by the language of sustainable connectivity that is used in the document. This language demonstrates the EU's commitment to the Paris agreement and to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. While Dr Schottli acknowledged that the document has been criticised as being 'thin', she preferred to label it as 'lean' and straightforward in offering a definition of connectivity, how to achieve it and most importantly, how to finance these connectivity measures in a way that makes the EU a more viable player in this realm.

Thirdly, Dr Schottli believed that this document also revealed the Realpolitik behind it. It states why Europe needs this initiative with Asia – first, to create a level playing field for its businesses and second, the need for the EU to step up its economic diplomacy. The United States was also the only non-Asian, non-European country mentioned in the document, which the speaker attributed to being a pragmatic realisation of the existence of the Indo-Pacific realm.

The second speaker, Dr Dhruva Jaishankar, a fellow at the Brookings Institute in India, provided a broader and informative mini-lecture on "Europe and Indo-Pacific Connectivity". He answered what connectivity is, what the Indo-Pacific is, and touched on Europe's objectives, strengths, challenges and limitations. Dr Jaishankar stated that the Indo-Pacific construct was driven by concerns about China's 'Going Out' policy as well as concerns about the existing regional order. The Belt and Road Initiative can be seen as a crystallisation of the 'Going Out' policy and since then, China's Belt and Road connectivity strategy had sparked concerns over the lack of transparency of government

decision-making, its non-market economic policies, territorial revisionism and an erosion of accepted international norms.

Since the Indian and Pacific Oceans are a “shared strategic space”, we have witnessed a proliferation of new institutions such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the revitalization of institutions such as BIMSTEC and the CP-TPP. New alliances are also being formed in Asia. One such alliance for instance is the US-Vietnam alliance as reflected in the sale of arms to Vietnam by the United States for the first time.

Dr Jaishankar then went on to elaborate why Indo-Pacific connectivity is important for Europe. He highlighted that Asia will face a massive sustainability connectivity shortfall in the next 10 years, and at the same time, competitions are intensifying from different players to present their Indo-Pacific vision tied to the various infrastructural and connectivity projects. Europe needs to get into the game to shape the normative underpinning of a free, open and inclusive Indo-Pacific.

Europe has a set of tools that could help in the realm of connectivity in the Indo-Pacific region. These tools include the various financing instruments available, the strong standards that has been established in several areas such as the EU-Japan standard for safe data transfer, and access to knowledge and scientific capability. On the flip side of the same coin contain some of Europe’s challenges to connectivity as well, mainly that of consolidating state or multilateral financing instruments, sensitising and coordinating with the private sector to ensure the fallacy of the emerging markets is eradicated and the lack of certain domain expertise.

The session rounded off with a vibrant Q-and-A session. On the Europe’s Connecting Asia Strategy, discussions centred on whether this is indeed Europe’s response to BRI or the Indo-Pacific vision of Japan or the US. Would the connectivity strategy also be perceived as the EU taking sides in the China-US rivalry. A member of the audience added that Europe’s connectivity is probably more a response to the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) connectivity agenda that has been pushed by China within the ASEM framework. Also raised was the role of private sectors in the whole connectivity agenda.

### **Session 3: Europe and the Asian Middle Powers**

Moderator Professor Gordon Flake from the University of Western Australia opened the panel discussing the trajectory of Asia in the coming years. While we saw the rise of China over the last 20 years, we are beginning to see the “southwestern shift” in the economic centre of gravity from Northeast Asia towards the South with the rise of India, Indonesia, Vietnam, etc. Professor Flake felt that a defining development to come was the rise of these “middle powers” but adding that he was not a fan of the term “middle powers” as it does not reflect the reality of the roles that can be played by such powers

as India, Japan and ASEAN, a sentiment shared by the panellists. With this, he laid the foundation for the presentations on Japan's and India's approach and vision of the Indo-Pacific idea, and their relations with Europe.

In the midst of growing US-China strategic competition in the Indo-Pacific region, Japan's inclusive, Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) vision aims to promote fundamental principles, strengthen regional connectivity and ensure peace and stability through increased capacity-building. It does so by 1) strengthening security partnerships in Indo-Pacific – re-affirming the importance and centrality of ASEAN; 2) avoiding actions construed as Chinese containment' 3) increasing cooperation with other partners such as the EU.

Professor Shutaro Sano from the National Defence Academy of Japan made the distinction between Japan's FOIP and the US FOIP, which was more centred on China and Russia – an extension of the existing US defence strategy. Professor Sano stressed the importance of Japan maintaining its own FOIP vision, one that was inclusive, non-security oriented and would not be perceived as containing China.

He proceeded to outline various ways in which Japan's FOIP vision could be realised – increasing partnerships in and beyond the Indo-Pacific region, multilateral security cooperation, cooperation on issues pertaining to outer-space and climate cooperation, among others. Reiterating Dr Vennesson's point on a capability-perception gap, he added that Japan also needs to acknowledge its own defence capability limitations in realising the FOIP.

Visiting Fellow from the Sasakawa Peace Foundation and non-resident scholar at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Ms Darshana Baruah, described the Indo-Pacific as a theatre of opportunities, especially in the domain of maritime. Geopolitical developments have given middle powers such as India, Japan, Australia more responsibility in shaping the new security architecture – one that avoids a bipolar or unipolar world. She added that there is also a growing role for Europe to articulate its Indo-Pacific vision.

Speaking of partnerships between France, Japan and Australia, Ms Baruah highlighted the common and shared security interests and the capacity constraints of operating as individual countries. Middle powers need to go beyond joint statements and implement practical considerations, and need to be more coordinated amongst themselves under an Indo-Pacific framework.

On areas in which India and Europe can collaborate in the region, Ms Baruah highlighted cooperation to enhance maritime domain awareness, joint fusion centres and the blue economy.

Beyond the maritime domain and Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR), Professor Sano added during the discussions and Q&A that Japan also seeks collaboration with the EU on navigation systems in outer space, citing Europe's global satellite system (Galileo) as complementary to ongoing navigation efforts in the Indo-Pacific. Ms Baruah added that connectivity and digital partnerships are also potential domains for cooperation between Asian middle powers and the EU.

Beyond partnerships, the additive elements that the EU brings to the region include capacity building and knowledge sharing, in addition to establishing international public good and strengthening threat perceptions.

Questions were also raised on existing frameworks of collaboration such as the Quad ("Quadrilateral Security Dialogue") and BRI ("Belt and Road Initiative") and whether a convergence of middle powers in the Indo-Pacific was viable when existing frameworks struggle to find commonality. Ms Baruah noted that differences exist in the purpose of Quad but middle powers do seek to find convergence. All countries share a common interest in managing relations with China and the US, the challenge would be to translate such convergence in thoughts into concrete actions.

#### **Session 4: Aligning the EU with ASEAN Security Forums**

The fourth session focused on whether and how the EU can align itself with the various existing ASEAN-led security architectures and forums. The first panelist was Dr Malcolm Cook, a senior fellow at the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute in Singapore, who asked "what can Europe bring to the table?" His speech also contained a well-weaved analogy, likening "Aligning the EU with ASEAN-led Security Forums" to fruits that are "High Hanging and Bitter" - in short difficult to achieve, and with the outcome not necessarily as satisfying.

As context for why he chose this analogy, Dr Cook highlighted that the history of forming alliances has always been complex and one only has to look to NATO for a testament to how the mere announcement of institutional alliance does not immediately result in expected institutional shifts.

The EU has been "coveting" for a seat in the East Asia Summit (EAS), the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting (ADMM) Plus and the ASEAN Expanded Maritime Forum. The EU and Canada are the only two ASEAN dialogue partners that have not been invited to these forums. Dr Cook looked at the [ASEAN Plus Eight Defence Cooperation](#) where ASEAN invites eight dialogue partners, which from the perspective of many Southeast Asian officials Dr Cook has spoken to, seems to be the best format to discuss particular issues of interest.

The reluctance to invite another Western power or bloc such as the EU to the table might come down to an issue of pairing and the bitter fruit in the region of Southeast Asia is the choice that has to be made between US and China. Both the US and Russia were invited for the first time to attend the ASEAN-hosted East Asia Summit in 2011. This was to avoid being seen as siding the US in response to Obama's announcement of a "pivot to Asia" in 2011. Hence, there seemed to an anxiety about who to invite to ensure a balance. If the EU or Canada were also to be invited, it risked being seen by China as "lop-sided" to the US advantage. The intensifying Sino-US rivalry, according to Dr Cook, would made it even more difficult for ASEAN to invite the EU into these regional architectures.

The second speaker, Dr Frederic Grare, is a non-resident senior fellow for the South Asia program at the Carnegie Centre for International Peace in France, who urged the EU to rethink the nature of the strategic problems facing Europe. In his talk titled "Defining New Grounds for Cooperation between the EU and ASEAN in the Indo-Pacific", he remarked that instead of publishing EU's position vis-a-vis the Indo-Pacific region, the EU should publish documentation that would show how much the EU and EU member states are already engaged in the region. EU and European powers' engagement efforts in the region should be placed at the centre around which other parties' positions orbit as opposed to attempting to strike a delicate balance between US and China or siding only with their traditional ally in the US. He added that it was "exasperating from a European perspective" that the EU is viewed as an external actor in the region when so much has been invested in security, foreign policy and development cooperation in the region. What the EU and its member states have invested is comparable to the American dollars that have been invested, and possibly way ahead compared to those of China.

Dr Grare went on to list some of the challenges posed by China on freedom of navigation, fishing and depleting of resources, etc, and this is not only in the South China Sea but also at the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean. Many of these issues are both traditional and non-traditional security issues. He said that the "demilitarisation of the security debate might be a condition for cooperation" and that "a lot remains to be done by the EU" in this regard.

During the Q-and-A session, the panellists were asked whether in thinking of cooperation between the EU and ASEAN, it has always to be based on formal institutions. There should be more pragmatic and flexible ways to engender concrete cooperation – perhaps more issues based and more geographic in nature.

## **Session 5: The Way Forward**

The final panel was moderated by Dr Yeo Lay Hwee, Director of the EU Centre in Singapore. She began by stressing that what has been discussed at this Symposium reflected the need for other actors, whether they are middle powers or regional entities like the EU to take charge of the Indo-Pacific region and not leave our collective fate to only major powers such as US and China.

Mr Antoine Levesques, a research fellow for South Asia at the International Institute for Strategic Studies, followed with a detailed stock-taking of the issues discussed across the four earlier panels. Critical themes that surfaced included agency versus systems, rule-making versus rule-taking, messaging and perceptions and resource scarcity and austerity. He also briefly summarised the key discussions on Indo-Pacific as a rising (and contested) concept. Mr Levesques concluded with key policy principles that were important in moving forward:

- Role of the EU in distributed network security
- Institutionalising cooperative habits
- Creating and preserving spaces to negotiate great power politics
- Knowledge sharing on existing efforts
- Outcome-based metrics and maximising available tools
- Better publication of EU activities in the region
- Focusing on the Indian Ocean as a space for diplomacy and experimentation

Dr Rani Mullen, a visiting senior research fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies in NUS, rounded up the presentations by emphasising the need for middle powers in Asia and beyond to consider their navigation of a new world order in a time of great geopolitical shifts. For her, the main takeaway from the Symposium was the need for greater EU involvement in the Indo-Pacific region, a move that would be in the interest of middle powers in the region and great powers alike.

The desire for greater EU involvement stemmed from a shared concern of shifting dynamics in a “new Cold War” and the mirroring of experience in Asia connectivity and prosperity with the EU story. She also highlighted the importance of strength in numbers and a need to better market existing efforts in the Indo-Pacific region, so as not to “cede the narrative” to other parties.

In bringing the Symposium to a close, Dr Yeo stressed that actors in and involved with the Indo-Pacific region needed to be proactive and move away from the binary 'us-or-them' mindset put forth by major powers such as the US and China. She is optimistic that the EU has become a far more active and autonomous security actor and that the EU has also become far more pragmatic and true to the "principled pragmatism" that was expounded on in the 2016 EU Global strategy. In the latest EU strategy on its relations with China, the latter has been labelled a "systemic rival" not a strategic rival. This suggests that the EU intends to compete and push back against China when it comes to the shaping of norms and principles in the world order. At the same time, EU also sees China a cooperative partner in many common challenges. She also suggested that the EU communicate better their activities in the region to bolster awareness and to build a greater, positive association between the EU and EU activities in the region, including the activities of EU member states.

Echoing comments made by Dr Cook and Professor Mohan, cooperation between ASEAN and the EU in the Indo-Pacific region need not only occur in or through formal institutions. Instead it should be multi-faceted, multi-layer and multi-dimensional. A flexible and pragmatic approach is necessary. Mr Levesques added that a coherent EU narrative would aid member states in identifying common concerns and interests for issue-based cooperation.