

The EU's evolving security strategy in the Indo-Pacific: a neo-liberal institutional perspective

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Abstract: The European Union (EU) has long been perceived as a normative power. Despite that, its role as a security actor remains disputed. However, Russia's war against Ukraine and rising US–China rivalry has pushed the EU to reorient its global security posture. This article examines the EU's evolving security role in the Indo-Pacific region and addresses two questions: What kind of proactive security role does the EU hope to play in the Indo-Pacific? How does the intensifying U.S.-China rivalry shape the EU's security recalibration toward the Indo-Pacific region? This research argues that the war in Ukraine and US-China rivalry have accelerated the EU's shift from an economic-normative actor toward a more security-oriented actor in Indo-Pacific. Methodologically, it employs a qualitative study where the EU's strategic documents, official statements, and secondary literature are analysed. The findings show that the EU seeks to balance normative commitments with pragmatic security engagement, working with regional partners while avoiding bipolarity. The study contributes to debates on the EU's emerging security identity and its role in the evolving Indo-Pacific order.

Keywords: European Union, security, Indo-Pacific, normative power, security actor

Introduction

The Indo-Pacific region is a vibrant and varied economic powerhouse, serving as a vital stakeholder in the global economy. While a home to 60% of the world's population and contributing nearly half of global GDP (European External Action Service [EEAS], 2021), the Indo-Pacific represents a unique geopolitical position largely shaped by the increasing rivalry between the United States and China (Center for Strategic and International Studies [CSIS], 2023). The significance of the region extends beyond geography and economics as it influences both regional dynamics and the broader global order. Yet, despite its vitality, the Indo-Pacific faces complex geopolitical rivalries that threaten to undermine the current Liberal International Order (LIO).

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The reason behind the emergence of the Indo-Pacific strategy is due to China's growing assertiveness and gravitational shift of the global geopolitics. As a result of that, the US-led LIO is confronted with the Asian status quo in Indo-Pacific (Chan, 2021). Traditional terminologies such as 'East Asia' and 'Asia-Pacific' have been sidelined in favour of 'Indo-Pacific'. Existing regional identity such as pan-Asian solidarity, economic interdependence, and shared prosperity, or the regional institutional mechanism such as ASEAN Plus Three (APT) process and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) are being strategically shifted toward the Indo-Pacific debate (Fitriani, 2017).

Even though EU member states have long maintained bilateral and postcolonial ties with countries in the Indo-Pacific, the European Union only formally articulated its position in 2016 with the publication of the European Union Global Strategy (EUGS) (Smith, 2017). The EUGS articulates the need to strengthen partnerships across the Indo-Pacific (then Asia Pacific region) to address shared humanitarian, economic, and security challenges. It emphasises respect for international law, the promotion of human rights and democratic values, counterterrorism cooperation, freedom of navigation, and economic connectivity. As an outcome of the reorientation that the EU made in its global posture since 2019, the EU has signed free trade agreements or economic partnerships with Japan, Singapore, South Korea, and New Zealand, while also negotiating with Australia and India (Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific [ESCAP], 2020).

However, until the late 2010s, the EU largely avoided the Indo-Pacific debate. Without explicitly naming it, the EU eventually went as far as identifying China as a potential threat to European values and pledged a 'push back' if necessary (Brown, 2021). This marked a bold departure for the traditionally cautionary approach that the EU has. On the other hand, the EU's broader strategy seeks to maintain distance from direct U.S.-China competition by prioritising dialogue and cooperation with all partners, including China. In this sense, the EU's approach largely resembles the similar stance that ASEAN's Outlook on the Indo-Pacific which offers an inclusive counterbalance to the more exclusive Free and Open Indo-Pacific vision (Estaban & Armanini, 2021). Unlike the Cold War era, most states are in a situation where they must find a way to balance security concerns with deep economic ties to China. China became the top trading partner of 120 countries by 2023, through its global trade integration, investment, finance, and business networks (Green, 2023).

The EU's perspective on China slightly differs from Asian states. While Asian states often frame the rise of China in terms of national security threat, the EU views it primarily as a normative challenge. Concerns focus on governance, international rules and norms, human rights, and trade practices, rather than immediate military threats (Rogelja & Tsimonis, 2020). However, following Russia's war against Ukraine, where North Korean soldiers found fighting on behalf of Russia, China's help to maintain the Russian economy by buying oil and gas, and supply of high-end drone by Iran, the EU has shifted its thought process to realise the security

connectivity between the EU and the Indo-Pacific. It now seeks to play a more active security role in the Indo-Pacific, recognising that the security of its Eastern border and the Indo-Pacific are interconnected.

This research, therefore, explores two central questions:

1. What kind of pro-active security role does the EU hope to play in the Indo-Pacific?
2. How does the intensifying U.S.-China rivalry shape the EU's security recalibration toward the Indo-Pacific region?

The study is highly relevant since it looks at how the EU's security position in the Indo-Pacific is shifting, considering the growing intensity in the rivalry between the US and China, as well as changes in global geopolitics. The study employs Neoliberal institutionalism, which is used as a theoretical approach to illustrate how the EU strikes a balance between strategic participation and normative obligations, especially in the context of the conflict in Ukraine. The study provides important indication on how the EU changed from being a passive economic actor to an active geopolitical power that aims to maintain the integrity of the rule-based order and regional stability. The study also provides insights to academics, strategic planners, and politicians regarding the EU's position and possible impact in Indo-Pacific, which is crucial to international trade, security, and governance.

An analysis of the EU's approach toward the Indo-Pacific region between 2010-2024 is performed. The period from 2010 to 2024 was selected due to the fact that it encompasses the full timeline regarding the development of the EU's involvement in the Indo-Pacific region. While the EU continued to refer to the region as Asia-Pacific, the Indo-Pacific concept gained popularity throughout the world in the early 2010s. This study will demonstrate how the EU progressively embraced the broader framing of Indo-Pacific by following developments throughout this time. The formal Indo-Pacific Strategy of the EU from 2021 marked a turning point, and one can see the implementation taking place between 2022 and 2024. Thus, this time frame emphasises the shift from concepts to early practice and policy.

Methodologically, to reflect the complexity of the Indo-Pacific discussion and the EU's changing role in the region, this study uses a qualitative research design. The EUGS, ASEAN's Outlook on the Indo-Pacific, national Indo-Pacific strategies from major EU and non-EU actors, speeches, press releases, and statements from EU institutions and Indo-Pacific governments are among the primary sources it uses. Similarly, these are supplemented by reports from high-end think tanks like CSIS and the European Council on Foreign Relations. Likewise, books, policy assessments, and peer-reviewed journal papers are used as secondary sources. Statistics on trade flows to project the economic interconnectedness, provided by international institutions such as the World Bank, IMF, and UN ESCAP. The study also integrates both authors' observations from their participation in the conferences, seminars, and public discussions and also includes the media coverage. In a crux, the

research embeds a deep understanding of the normative and security aspects of the EU's engagement in the Indo-Pacific by triangulating these sources.

1. Theoretical framework

Theoretically, this paper builds its argumentations on Neo-Liberal Institutionalism, which emphasises the role of international institutions in fostering cooperation (Axelrod & Keohane, 1985; Haas, 2018; Keohane, 1984; 1989; Keohane & Nye, 2000; Lipson, 1984; Milner, 1997). The major argument found within the Neo-Liberal Institutionalism is that the institutions function as mediators by creating forums for dialogue and fostering cooperation through shared interests. Viewing states as rational actors (like most IR theories do), they are understood to prioritise absolute gains rather than relative ones. In this context, institutions play a pivotal role in shaping policy preferences and guiding state behaviour (Acemoglu et al., 2005).

The famous realist John Mearsheimer's influential essay *The False Promise of International Institutions* (1994) challenged liberal institutionalism, arguing institutions had little impact on state behaviour. Keohane and Martin (1995) countered that by stressing institutions matters and that there is a need to identify conditions under which they enable cooperation. They also argued institutionalism could rival realism by clarifying collaboration requirements.

Neo-liberal institutionalists diverge from classical liberals as they incorporate key neo-realist assumptions. This phenomena in IR are often coined as the 'neo-neo' discussions. They acknowledge that states operate as unitary, rational actors, pursuing interests within an international system, but stress that it is shaped by institutions. Hence, they acknowledge anarchy as a structural condition and recognise that concerns over relative gains complicate cooperation (Maczynska & Pysz, 2015). Contrasting assumptions of neo-realism, neo-liberal intuitionists believe that institutions do not only reflect but also influence state interests and policies (Chruściel, 2014). For the neo-liberal institutionalism cooperation, norms and institutions remain central phenomena, where absolute gains serve as the key incentive.

Additionally, Neoliberals argue that institutions maintain the cooperation even if the initial interests or objectives fade over time. For instance, institutions reduce the motivation to cheat, the mechanism of control and balance becomes stable, the information dissemination system becomes smooth and, if necessary, penalties become easier to enforce (Hellmann & Wolf, 1993). Thus, states highly value institutions as they support them despite opportunity costs, hence overcoming barriers to cooperation.

Researchers specialised on European Union affairs have extensively analysed these benefits of the institutional mechanisms for any states' international relations. Matlary (2018) noted that the EU relies on incentive-based policy widely rejecting the relevance of force. The EU's approach toward Hungary and Poland serves here as the perfect example of the incentive-based policy. Europe's regional cooperation

limits its global military projection, making deterrence difficult (Polyakova et al., 2023). Echoing Hobbes, Kawakami (2022) adds that neo-institutional orders are geopolitical, aligning economic regulation with alliances, while also conceptualising institutional entry and exit.

Jervis (1999) identifies three institutional mechanisms:

- *Standard Tools* (binding agreements, alliances) — Neoliberals argue realists cannot explain their durability.
- *Innovative Tools* — underutilised mechanisms with untapped cooperative potential (Haas, 2018).
- *Preference-Changing Tools* — institutions alter preferences, reducing incentives for conflict even if self-help systems persist.

Thus, Neoliberal institutionalism explains EU actions in the Indo-Pacific better. First, the EU is a unique actor, with advanced integration but no uniform foreign policy. Second, the Indo-Pacific lacks multilateral security institutions, relying on ‘hub and spokes’ arrangements, bilateral and mini-lateral agreements, ASEAN forums, and APEC dialogues. Third, emerging and middle powers prioritise economic growth over systemic change. Fourth, U.S. involvement shapes regional order. Fifth, China and the war in Ukraine have linked Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific security, reinforcing the indivisibility of the liberal order. Sixth, security remains state-driven in both regions. These factors confirm the relevance of neoliberal institutionalism.

2. Tracing of evolution of the EU’s perceptions and positioning toward the Indo-Pacific: from passive to active actor

The European Union’s 2021 strategy toward the Indo-Pacific marks a significant departure from its earlier approaches to the Asia-Pacific and, more broadly, the Asian continent. It reflects the gradual evolution of the EU policy toward the region in this context. The emergence of the EU’s ‘Indo-Pacific’ strategy is an outcome of two main factors: first, the Union’s longstanding interest in the Asia-Pacific region and the wider call for policy adaption based on the changing geopolitical dynamics, and second, the rise of China, which poses challenges to the existing LIO in the region. The paper has identified five distinct phases in the development of the EU’s Indo-Pacific approach.

Table 1. Evolution of the EU’s Indo-Pacific Strategy

SN	Time Frame	Evolution
1	2010-2013	a period where the main emphasis was on economic issues
2	2013-2017	a period in which, on the one hand, the EU was aware of the growing challenge posed by China

3	2018-2020	the period when, for the first time, the EU documents on China and its Belt and Road Initiative project were perceived as a challenge for the EU
4	2020/21-2021	The new EU strategy for the Indo-Pacific region. A developing strategic rivalry between China and the United States has resulted from China's increasing military assertiveness, particularly in the South China Sea
5	Post Feb-2022	Re-coupling in the security sphere of the EU, the Euro-Atlantic area and the Indo-Pacific

Sources: Authors' representation.

The first phase is between 2010 and 2013, where the EU approach toward the region was guided by the economic issues highlighting the necessity of cooperation. The economic dimension triumphed, accompanied by a willingness in terms of cooperation with China. During the Cold War, Europe was often regarded as the pacifier for the US (Joffe, 1984), and this role continued into the 21st century as the rise of China threatened America's position in Asia and the Pacific. The EU maintained its cooperation with China, and economic ties flourished during this period (Godement, 2010). At the same time, however, there was a phenomenon of decoupling in the security sphere between the EU and the Indo-Pacific region. The EU did not approach this region through the prism of its security strategy, and interdependence in this area was not emphasised.

Secondly, from 2013 to 2017, the EU became increasingly aware of the growing challenge posed by China. Yet, most EU countries and the Union itself continued to emphasise the importance of economic relations with. This approach dominated official documents and strategies, with China not identified as a threat and the Asia-Pacific region viewed primarily in economic terms (European Parliament, 2021). At the same time, the EU began to perceive Asia in a broader context, beyond economic relations. This shift was highlighted by the European Union Global Strategy, which increasingly emphasised the interdependencies between the liberal international order globally, in Europe, and in the Indo-Pacific.

Thirdly, between 2018 and 2020, EU documents identified China and its Belt and Road Initiative as a challenge for the first time. This was reflected in the Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the Council, and other institutions in September 2018 (Brattberg, 2018). Meanwhile, France, Germany, and the Netherlands adopted national strategies for the Indo-Pacific region (The Ministry of Armed Forces, 2019; Ministerie van Algemene Zaken, 2021; Ulatowski, 2022). However, EU Member States failed to agree on a common strategy. Not wishing to be placed unequivocally on the US side in the US-China rivalry, the EU avoided using the term 'Indo-Pacific' in official documents (Mohan, 2020). In relation to China, EU and Member State documents emphasised cooperation with all Asia-Pacific countries, while highlighting economic ties rather than confronting China's assertive policies (Heiduk & Wacker, 2020). Anti-China rhetoric and the subtle

policy adoption to choose bilateral relations, instead of multilateral, with Indo-Pacific allies also made the EU hesitant to formulate a more explicit strategy, fearing its instrumentalization in the escalating US-China dispute.

Fourthly, in 2020/21–2021, The EU introduced its official strategy for the Indo-Pacific region. This came in the backdrop of intensifying strategic rivalry between China and the United States. The rivalry is driven by China's growing military assertiveness, particularly in the South China Sea, which challenges the existing order in the region. The United States revived the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) with Australia, India, and Japan (Aryal & Nair, 2025), while simultaneously pressuring the EU to take a more active geopolitical role (Stahl, 2021). As a result, the EU sought to build enduring alliances and preserve the region's openness by expanding its involvement. The main takeaway of the EU's Indo-Pacific strategy of 2021 was that it aims to address new dynamics threatening regional stability through the intense cooperation with likeminded partners from the Indo-Pacific (European Commission, 2021a). On the other hand, this also highlighted the EU's economic vulnerabilities to both conventional and unconventional threats emerging from the Indo-Pacific region. The EU's commitment was formalised with the 2021 Indo-Pacific strategy and reinforced in later documents such as the Economic Security Strategy and Strategic Compass (Sicilia & Emily, 2024).

Finally, after 24 February 2022, Russia's aggression against Ukraine triggered a re-coupling of the security sphere between the EU, the Euro-Atlantic area, and the Indo-Pacific. The reactions of Global South countries, including those in the Indo-Pacific, alongside China's policy toward Moscow and Russia's ties with the DPRK, demonstrated that European security could not be separated from developments in the Indo-Pacific. These events underscored the importance of the region in the broader competition to maintain the liberal international order.

3. New EU Strategy towards the Indo-Pacific: beyond economics, towards geopolitics

While navigating through the EU's new approach to the Indo-Pacific region, there are four determinants that can be identified. Firstly, the EU's use of the term Indo-Pacific signals its alignment with the like-minded liberal democracies from the region. Aryal and Nair (2025) highlighted the differences in the objectives, understandings and limitations among the major powers of the Indo-Pacific. By highlighting the EU's realisation of the conceptual difference of Indo-Pacific Cunningham (2022) also confirms the argument made by Aryal and Nair. The Indo-Pacific Strategy of the EU, point out the Indo-Pacific's strategic values and exert its possible role in it. The strategy centres around the defence of LIO through withholding the global norms and partnerships with likeminded democratic states such as India, Australia, the Republic of Korea, and the USA. Notably, the EU

acknowledges the Quad dialogue for the first time, signalling openness to collaborate in non-traditional security threats like climate change. This approach reflects the EU's ambition to anchor itself within a like-minded partner in the security sphere while strongly holding its normative influence.

Secondly, China is identified as a challenger to the norms and the values that the EU believes in. Although not explicitly labelled as the sole or comprehensive challenger in the document, the EU's strategy nonetheless frames Chinese activities as a threat to the normative belief that the EU holds. However, cooperation with China is not excluded. The Strategy is framed as an inclusive one while the EU clearly positions liberal democratic order as an alternative to emerging China's model (Astarita, 2023). Putting bigger stress on maritime law, the Indo-Pacific Strategy of the EU marked international law as the foundation of common goods and regional stability (Tchakarova, 2023). This stance projects the EU's concerns about China's assertiveness in the South China Sea and its broader challenge to international norms. Indirectly referring to China, Ursula von der Leyen's 2021 State of the Union speech described the Indo-Pacific strategy as a 'milestone' that acknowledges both the region's importance and the risks posed by autocratic regimes. She warned against the EU's dependence on Chinese-owned infrastructure. She explained that 'it does not make sense for the EU to build a perfect road between a Chinese-owned copper mine and a Chinese-owned harbour' (European Commission, 2021b). So, from the EU perspective, the dialogue with China remains possible while it aims to counterbalance China's influence by reinforcing liberal norms and strategic autonomy.

Thirdly, the Strategy moves beyond earlier economy-oriented frameworks. Previous EU approaches to states from this region focused heavily on trade and infrastructure, but the Indo-Pacific Strategy integrates geopolitical and security dimensions (Pugliese, 2023). Defence is among the seven priorities in the EU's Indo-Pacific strategy, which signals the intention to play a bigger role in regional security. Increment of joint military exercises reflects this shift, showing that, along with the economically dominant relational aspect, the EU is also motivated to shape strategic outcomes in the region. Russia's war against Ukraine further proves the challenges to global norms and increasing divergent viewpoint coming from the Indo-Pacific region to the global norms. On the other hand, the Indo-Pacific major actors pay attention to the EU's response and acknowledge that the geopolitical disruptions in the European region affect international order. Carson (2025) added that the consequences of Russia's war against Ukraine extend beyond possible outcomes in Ukraine and will be reshaping the LIO. For the EU, this justifies the need to interlink the security factor into its Indo-Pacific strategic, ensuring resistance against both regional and global challenges.

Fourthly, the Indo-Pacific strategy is multidimensional in nature. Beside the economy and security, it identifies seven priority areas, which are: sustainable and inclusive prosperity, green transition, ocean governance, digital governance and

partnerships, connectivity, security and defence, and human security. The intervention of the strategy reflects the EU's intentions to have a holistic approach to global engagement. Keeping the COVID-19 and the exposure that the EU has to the vulnerabilities in the global supply chain, trade and economic concerns remain a central part of the strategy. At the same time, while safeguarding the existing norms and values, the EU also intends to create a normative standard in digital and economic governance, working with likeminded partners from the Indo-Pacific region (Kironska et al., 2023). This determination highlights the EU's duality of being a pragmatic actor addressing newly emerging economic challenges and long-term normative standards setter. The multidimensional nature of the Strategy also exhibits the EU's recognition that security, prosperity, and sustainability are interconnected. Thus, Ocean governance links environmental protection with strategic stability, while digital governance addresses both economic competitiveness and democratic resilience. Bringing these priorities together, the EU positions itself as a comprehensive partner in the Indo-Pacific, capable of contributing across multiple domains.

4. Evolution of New Indo-Pacific Strategy, the Challenges and Opportunities for the EU

There are three key opportunities that can be grouped while analysing the EU's Indo-Pacific Strategy document. The first can be described as an 'Alignment with the Global Political Direction.' Due to its overseas territories, in the EU, only France has a physical presence in the Indo-Pacific. Thus, it was initially challenging to engage other EU states in regional developments of the Indo-Pacific or to highlight their implications for the EU's security environment (Abbondanza & Wilkins, 2024). Aligning more with the EU's strategic outlook on the emergence of China, the Global Gateway initiatives and the Strategic Compass, the Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific were designed to reinforce the EU's emerging role as more than an economic and normative power (Michalski & Charles, 2024). Since the release of the Strategy, questions regarding its implementation and tangible outcomes have emerged. The sources of such questions are based on the pre-occupation of the EU in Russia's invasion of Ukraine. On the contrary, strengthening the EU's role and responsibilities in the Indo-Pacific is integral to positioning it within a broader global strategy. This alignment is both symbolic and practical, which signals the EU's determination to act as a global rather than merely regional player in a security sphere. The EU has recognised the new development taking place in the Indo-Pacific regions, such as maritime disputes, technological competition and shifting alliance, all with direct implications in the EU's interest. Russia's war against Ukraine has emphasised the interlinkages between regional securities. This calls for the EU not to overlook the geopolitical development taking place in a distant region. There, the

Indo-Pacific Strategy represents an intentional effort of the EU to embed itself within the wider geopolitical hotspot of the twenty-first century.

Second, cooperation in the security and defence sectors with likeminded partners. In the last decade, the EU policies have dived to find the loopholes in their role in the global affairs. The publication of the Global Strategy of 2016 is a response to the loopholes and the shortcomings identified. The language in this strategy reflects the *realpolitik* and stresses on the 'principled pragmatism' in the EU's foreign policy that embeds capacity-building in partners states (European Union, 2016). The von der Leyen Commission has stressed the need to improve crisis-response capabilities and strengthen security without relying entirely on civilian or normative principles. The increasing discussion on the more pro-active defence vis-à-vis war in Ukraine is another example. Since assuming office in 2019, the Commission President has advanced the idea of a 'Geopolitical Commission,' featuring the EU's ambition to act as a strategic player in global affairs (Håkansson, 2024). During the visit of Philippines in July 2023, President Leyen highlighted the importance of the Indo-Pacific when it comes to the threats presented by authoritarian leaders and the increasingly unstable geopolitical environment. She emphasised the correlation of the EU and Indo-Pacific security, mentioning 'security in Europe and security in the Indo-Pacific is indivisible. Challenges to the rule-based order in our interconnected world affect all of us' (VoA, 2024). These statements highlight the recognition of the EU that it cannot separate its security interest from developments in the Indo-Pacific, thus the cooperation in defence and crisis management with likeminded Indo-Pacific partners is critical. By boosting its security presence through naval deployments, joint exercises, and strategic dialogues, the EU have an opportunity to strengthen its credibility as a global security actor. It also demonstrates its willingness to take the responsibilities further than its immediate neighbourhood.

Third, pre-existing idea of economic cooperation and resilience. For the EU, economic interests remain the core driver of engagement in the Indo-Pacific region. The EU and the Indo-Pacific account for one of the largest bilateral trades. In 2021, the EU imported goods worth €844 billion from the Indo-Pacific states, while exporting €583 billion (Eurostat, 2022). About 90% of the EU's foreign trade is conducted through maritime routes. The significant share of the whole maritime trade passes through the chokepoints located in the Indo-Pacific region, such as the Malacca Strait and the South China Sea. Approximately 40% of the EU's international trade transits the volatile South China Sea alone (Kebler, 2024). Therefore, the Indo-Pacific region is strategically important to the EU's economy, which relies heavily on uninterrupted trade routes and supply chain. Looking beyond the trade and commerce, the region is a hotspot for the futuristic technological innovation, diversification of supply chain and green transition initiatives. The EU is motivated by increasing the resilience against the possible disruption in the supply chain, by promoting the sustainable development and by reducing the dependency

on one partner for goods and services. The expansion of economic cooperation with other major actors of the Indo-Pacific also gives the EU the leverage to further its values, such as fair competition, environmental standards and data protection. It also helps the EU to safeguard the competitiveness of its industries.

On the other hand, three major challenges emerge when it comes to the EU's security re-orientation toward the Indo-Pacific region. First and by far the most important among these challenges is the divergent interest and understanding of the Indo-Pacific among EU member states. The EU cannot effectively protect the collective interests in the Indo-Pacific region without adopting a unified Indo-Pacific strategy to address the key challenges emerging in the area. However, the EU's member states' perspectives contrast the EU's Indo-Pacific strategy on several crucial subjects (Brinza et al., 2024). These divergences are more visible when it comes to their approaches to China. For some countries like Germany, economic interests have historically driven their relationship with China. But recent shifts reflect a more cautious stance that emphasises de-risking alongside economic potential (Plociennik & Paulina, 2023). Other states, particularly in Central Europe, prioritise democracy and human rights. Meanwhile, many Baltic and Central European nations' views align with the US, as the alignment ensures Washington's continued commitment to European security (Lafebvre, 2024). Such differences impair the EU's ability to act cohesively, as national priorities often outweigh collective strategy.

Second, the EU faces the challenge of balancing relations between the United States and China in the Indo-Pacific. Many states among Indo-Pacific nations are increasingly concerned about the increasing US-China rivalry, with some warning of a potential new Cold War. Washington has adopted a cautious approach in countering Chinese influence in the Indo-Pacific, the region which will remain central on supporting the US's global leadership (Brazinsky, 2023). Yet, Indo-Pacific states are cautious of being subjected to constant pressure from superpowers to navigate competing interests. The U.S. trade policy has long aimed to prevent China from surpassing it as the world's leading technological power, particularly in fields such as Artificial Intelligence (AI) and green transition. Washington has urged the EU to pursue a similar course, while the Union itself has grown increasingly concerned about its economic dependence on exports from specific regions (He & Li, 2020). In April 2023, the European Parliament called for coherence and cohesion in China policy, and EU leaders revisited the issue during the European Council meeting of June 29–30, 2023.

5. The EU's institutionalisation attempts in the Indo-Pacific: case studies

This paper highlights three case studies to demonstrate the EU's evolving role and increasing security partnership in the Indo-Pacific region. The first case study is the EU–Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) partnership. The EU's

role in the Indo-Pacific has been reinforced by its closer ties with ASEAN (Kugiel, 2021). The EU views Indo-Pacific as a security challenge and opportunity to exert EU's global role. The EU also acknowledges the rapid economic growth (knowns as Asian Tigers) and the ASEAN's 'central role' in regional affairs (Wnukowski, 2022). The EU has deepened collaboration utilising initiatives such as the EU–ASEAN Summit in 2022, the Samoa Agreement with Pacific countries in 2023. Also, the ASEAN's recognition of the EU as a strategic partner in 2020 reciprocates with the argument of the EU's deepening relations with the ASEAN (Borrell, 2024). The key element in this cooperation is security partnership, with navies from the EU states participating in the regional military drills. Likewise, the EU participated in the Operation Atalanta near the Horn of Africa with likeminded partners from the Indo-Pacific region. All these development projects that the EU is not only interested in being an economic and diplomatic actor but also in contributing to the broader security architecture of the Indo-Pacific.

The second case study is about the increasing amount of the joint military exercises in the region, that signal the EU's willingness to be present in the military spheres beyond the immediate neighbourhood. After the EU–US high-Level consultations on the Indo-Pacific on December 2022, the United States and the EU conducted a coordinated naval exercise dedicated to freedom of navigation. This joint exercise involved the US *Paul Hamilton*, the Italian ship *Carlo Bergamini*, and the Spanish ship *Reina Sofia* from Operation Atalanta (EEAS, 2023). These exercises were not just symbolic but represented a genuine effort to improve coordination in a military operation between European and American forces in the Indo-Pacific. Similarly, the air forces of France, Germany, and Spain deployed significant assets to Indo-Pacific drills in January 2024, including Eurofighters, Tornado jets, Rafale fighters, Airbus A400M Atlas transport aircraft, and A330 MRTT refuelling aircraft (Bundeswehr, 2024; Da Costa, 2024). Such deployments underline the EU's commitment to freedom of navigation and solidarity with Indo-Pacific partners. These military deployments also send soft messages to regional actors, including China, that the EU intends to uplift its defence game if it comes to defend the principle of international law and contribution to the stability of the region.

The third case study is that of the EU's increasing partnership with India. The partnership has become more and more important in the context of the EU's Indo-Pacific strategy. India, along with Japan, is flagged as a key connectivity partner in the EU Strategy (Tchakarova et al., 2023). Likewise, individual member states from the EU have also regarded India as a strategically important partner. Germany and the Netherlands highlight cooperation with India in areas such as multilateralism, trade, and climate change, while the Czech Republic and France regard India as a strategic partner. France has outlined the separate bilateral cooperation with India in the Indo-Pacific as they have bilaterally bigger cooperation in the defence sector. There is a discrepancy regarding India's status as the 'like-minded' partner. For instance, the Netherlands does not explicitly mention India as a likeminded partner

but acknowledges its role as the strategic partner (Vashisht, 2022). Along with the strategic location, India's expanding economic and military capabilities make it a natural partner for the EU in addressing regional challenges. The EU's engagement with India reflects a broader recognition that partnerships with democratic states are essential for sustaining a rule-based order in the Indo-Pacific. By deepening ties with India, the EU aims to softly counterbalance China's influence and ensure that the region remains open and stable to cooperation. On the other hand, the partnership with the EU also serves as the evasive balancing for India vis-à-vis China.

When it comes to the challenges that the EU encounters, cooperation with the United States and China reflects divided perspectives. Academia has underlined the risks posed by China's 'stated ambitions and coercive policies' as a challenge to the EU's values (Seaman et al., 2022). In response to China's human rights violations, the EU has imposed sanctions and strengthened the investment screening mechanism. On the other hand, transatlantic cooperation has proceeded through the Trade and Technology Council (TTC), which also serves as a forum for dialogue regarding China and emerging new security challenges (Aktoudianakis et al., 2021). The concerns about being drawn into an emerging Cold War along the USA occur particularly in France and Germany. President Macron has expressed his unwillingness to fully align with the U.S. policy on China, which is more confrontational (Ross, 2023). For instance, in 2021 tensions between France and Australia were heightened by the so-called AUKUS submarine deal, which indirectly undermined France's national interest implicating on its Indo-Pacific strategy (Staunton & Day, 2023). It illustrates the complexity of transatlantic cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, where shared interests coexist though sometimes overshadowed by national interests.

Despite these institutional efforts made in the past, there is a call for significant improvement in the EU's Indo-Pacific security approach. This study would like to present three recommendations. First, the EU should be heading toward fostering greater uniformity among member states to have a strategy toward the U.S.-China rivalry. As explained on many occasions in the previous sections, major actors such as France, Germany, and the Netherlands maintain autonomy in term of their Indo-Pacific strategies, which automatically limits coherence. The EU's limited capabilities on alliance-building underlines the significance of prioritising collaboration, capability enhancement, and resource coordination among member states with a substantially larger stake in the Indo-Pacific. The EU risks presenting it as a fragmented entity which may undermine the credibility and effectiveness in the Indo-Pacific region. To achieve strategic cohesion, the EU will have to ensure regular dialogue among member states, paired with a willingness to compromise and prioritise the collective objective over national interests.

Second, the EU should expand direct security engagement with like-minded partners from Indo-Pacific regions. The EU is often perceived as an extra-regional actor with limited influence beyond the European continent. The same perception is

resistant by the war in Ukraine and the limited role that the EU has. Thus, mere participation in forums such as the Shangri-La Dialogue or Raisina Dialogue has not been sufficient to dismiss this emerging viewpoint. To counter perceptions of EU inwardness, when it comes to the strategic role, the EU must increase the strategic outreach to Indo-Pacific partners and show commitment to the Indo-Pacific security architecture. This requires persuasion of the initiatives that fully demonstrate the EU's willingness to maintain the regional stability of the Indo-Pacific. The EU can enhance its credibility and ensure its position secured in the region by cultivating wider and stronger partnerships with countries such as Japan, South Korea, Australia, and India.

Third, the EU must develop a more independent security approach toward the Indo-Pacific region. The US remains a crucial ally for the EU but the difference in the interest and viewpoint toward the changing geopolitical scenario of the region calls for bigger autonomy in the EU security posture. Continued reliance on NATO constrains the EU's capacity for independent action, even as emerging threats such as terrorism, cyberwarfare, and hybrid warfare demand the development of a stronger European defence identity. Since Russia's war against Ukraine, public opinion increasingly supports this shift, with many surveys indicating growing endorsement of a more autonomous European defence policy. However, the independence does not refer to abandonment of transatlantic ties but it rather suggests complementing it with distinct EU value embedded defence posture. The EU can position itself as the more autonomous and credible actor in the Indo-Pacific region by taking such step that ensures its wider position in the regional security architecture.

Finally, the EU should embrace Mini lateral dialogues and promote the networked approach of the security cooperation in the Indo-Pacific. These would not only expand its relations with likeminded states in terms of security cooperation but also, they should create a network of such partnerships. The initiatives with Japan can serve as the pilot mechanism. A recently proposed 'Transatlantic+' framework, bringing together NATO, the EU, and Indo-Pacific allies, would facilitate policy coordination, best-practice sharing, and knowledge exchange. This kind of initiatives facilitate the EU's intention to cultivate adaptive partnerships capable to respond in the newly emerging security environment of the Indo-Pacific region.

Conclusions

The analysis on the EU's approach toward the Indo-Pacific region above led to two separate clusters of conclusion: empirical and interpretive. Both conclusions contribute to the deeper understanding of the EU's evolving strategic re-orientation toward the Indo-Pacific region. All the empirical evidence presented above confirms the determination that the EU must play a more proactive role in the Indo-Pacific region as it understands the strategic importance of the Indo-Pacific. However, the

paper also notes the discrepancies related to how that role will be played. Without no doubt, the release of the official Indo-Pacific Strategy in 2021 represents a prominent moment as it signals the EU's intention to act as a core actor of the Indo-Pacific region. The central part of the strategy consists of the intentional cooperation with likeminded partners from the region to advance the core normative beliefs that the EU has, such as the democracy, international law and human rights. The primary goal that the EU has in the Indo-Pacific is to position itself as the independent actor that can protect its own interest while strengthening the existing security order led by the USA. This ambition came under scrutiny due to the preoccupation with the war in Ukraine, which requires the undivided political, economic and military support. Even with such challenges, the EU has prioritised the Indo-Pacific engagements clearly exhibited in its maritime security plan and in the Indo-Pacific strategy. On the other hand, although there is a demerit of coordination on having many individual member states' Indo-Pacific strategy, states with bigger maritime capabilities like France, Italy and Germany have increased their presence in the Indo-Pacific to protect its economic interest. Likewise, EU states like France and European states like Britain also have a physical naval presence in the Pacific waters which reflects the tangible commitment. On top of it, states like the Czech Republic, Poland and some Baltic States, while also articulating the Indo-Pacific strategy, leave the impression of a bigger crave for an engagement in the region.

The EU's engagement in the Indo-Pacific region is not just confined to the fulfilment of the existing economic and emerging security goals but also aligns with the EU's global aspiration. The EU considers itself as the promoter/protector of the norms and values within the LIO. As a result of that, the EU is not motivated to make amends on the normative order; however, the EU is also aware of the USA's hegemony in the security order and its potentiality to destabilise the Indo-Pacific region. The signing of economic and political partnerships with likeminded states of the Indo-Pacific is thus the attempt of the EU to maintain the LIO. Similarly, the EU is also contributing to the general understanding of the security in the region, which is predominantly occupied by military concerns, by bringing in the aspect of economic security, environment protection and human security to shift the focus from the intensifying bipolarity in the region. Yet, many challenges remain for the EU. Internal misunderstanding between member states, the problematic balancing attempt between the USA and China, and the image of the EU as the extra-regional entity, all obscure the ambition of the EU and should be taken into consideration while moving ahead with the implementation of the Indo-Pacific strategy.

The second conclusion is more interpretive in nature as it aims to analyse the EU's actions through theoretical lens. The paper used the Neoliberal Institutionalism as the theoretical approach. The EU relies heavily on the cooperation facilitated through institutions and norms. The EU's distinct character to prefer multilateralism over bilateralism makes the Neoliberal Institutionalism the perfect fitting theoretical approach. However, the intensifying rivalry between the USA and China, and the

implication it has on the regional order implies that the Neoliberal Institutionalism is not enough. Thus, the institutional balancing as the complimentary theoretical approach should be brought in to capture the holistic approach of the EU in the Indo-Pacific. The institutional balancing puts stress on external and internal balancing. In this context, external balancing refers to the signing of agreements, institutional capacity building and establishment of the consultation mechanism with other states, whereas internal balancing refers more to the expansion of one's own capabilities. The Indo-Pacific strategy of the EU covers both aspects. Firstly, the EU has incorporated the definition of the region in the many strategic documents of the commission. And secondly, the EU has increased the number of partnership agreements, initiatives and the partnerships with the states from the Indo-Pacific region to demonstrate the external balancing in action. The institutional balancing also focuses on how external balancing can strengthen internal balancing. The post-2022 initiatives of the EU saw the action followed by the adaptation of the Indo-Pacific strategy. Another assumption of the institutional balancing is the relationship between distribution of power and economic interdependence. The relations of the EU with Australia, China and India perfectly explains how the level of economic interdependence induced political behaviours. More expanded assumption of the institutional balancing is the cost-benefit calculation which drives the state's strategic behaviour. It mentions 'the greater the perception of interdependence, the more costly military balancing becomes'. This excellently explains the reluctance that the EU has to a direct confrontation with China, rather preferring to increase the interdependence with the other major powers of the Indo-Pacific. Also, the institutional balancing shades light on the importance of norms and rule building as the aspect that constrains behaviour, which strongly resonates in the EU's approach toward the Indo-Pacific, which does not prefer the exclusive bloc formation but to promote the inclusive institutional balancing.

The combination between neoliberal institutionalism and institutional balancing helps explain the EU perception and implementation of the Indo-Pacific strategy. The EU perceives the Indo-Pacific as a crucial component of the LIO, not just the region they should engage with. As a result, the EU's strategy and approaches relate to the broader ambition of maintaining the rule-based order within the LIO. Engagement with likeminded partners projects this vision. Most importantly, the EU is not motivated by the construction of the regional order to counterbalance China. Rather, the EU aims to promote inclusivity, cooperation and the rule-based value system explicitly to avoid the China-USA rivalry trap. This adaptation separates the EU from the exclusive balancing which strongholds the blocks to stand firmly against the rivals (China in this case). But the EU prefers to focus more on soft power instruments and norms, building to provide the alternative to China's vision in the region, without escalating the situation. The EU's activities in the Indo-Pacific region clearly indicate that the region is politically constructed within its global outlook. The EU also sees the value in the working mechanism with

likeminded partners like Australia, India and Japan in a flexible and issue-based modality rather than the rigid blocs formation. This approach is due to the sensible realisation that block politics will marginalise the EU's position in the region.

Nevertheless, the EU's Indo-Pacific strategy is the fine balance between ambition and caution. Empirical data shows that the EU is expanding its footprint in the region despite the unfavourable internal and external conditions. And theoretically, the combination of Neoliberal Institutionalism and institutional balancing rightly explains the EU's reliance on institutions, norm building and interdependence. The goal of the EU in the Indo-Pacific region is to shape and strengthen democratic, liberal and non-confrontational order in the region to contribute to global stability. By promoting the idea of Indo-Pacific as a space for cooperation rather than confrontation, the EU pursues the idea of positioning itself as the global actor to avoid the marginalisation which can be caused by the US-China rivalry. The empirical and interpretive conclusion highlights the Indo-Pacific as the testing ground for the EU's broader vision for international order.

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