

EU India Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific Region

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The COVID-19 pandemic has not only heralded faster transformation of international dynamics and but also impacted how EU and India Envision, Engage and Enhance (E3) bilateral cooperation in the face of growing geopolitical impulses.

Changing Geopolitical Configuration and relevance to the EU-India strategic Partnership

The Roadmap to 2025 adopted at the 15th EU-India Summit 2020 speaks to these hybrid challenges and signals the maturing of the Strategic Partnership that acknowledges each other's interests to building new strategic convergence. This is a new age partnership that expands the framework of engagement beyond trade which, remains the cornerstone and embraces a growing role for foreign and security policy in response to the geopolitical and geoeconomic power shifts happening around the world and especially the rise of China. The shift in the EU- India relations from a transactional equation to building a convergence underscores the strengthening of the political dimension that is increasingly based on mutual threat perception and benefits.

In the two decades since the start of the Summit meetings between EU and India, the Roadmap to 2025 highlights the political priorities that seek to reshape the engagement. In this context, the Indo-Pacific Region (IPR) clearly is the new theatre of action that is witnessing a growing geoeconomic, geopolitical and geomilitary competition. Seldom used two decades back, the label of the IPR has transformed the maritime landscape fusing two different ocean systems into a single strategic continuum. While trade, energy, communication flows along with security connections has created complex interdependence in the world's busiest maritime arena, it is the balance sheet of power in the IPR that has undergone dramatic transformation. A rising China's political vision through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to connect Europe and Asia together has not only produced a growing cleavage within the EU, but under the impact of the pandemic, has led to a reset in Europe's Asia policy with its China first approach. An assertive political influence that challenges liberal values and economic infusion that has created indebtedness in partner countries underpins Chinese tactical and naval expansion that announces its strategic ambition to straddle the entire region and gain entry into the Indian Ocean (IO). This has translated into strategic competition and increasing geopolitical contestation as regional and external powers seek to manage and offset a rising China in the IPR.

EU India and the Changing Power Equations in the Indo-Pacific Region

The EU-India Strategic Partnership Roadmap to 2025 foregrounds maritime cooperation which emphatically underlines that the perception barrier has been breached on both sides and offers the opportunity to enhance cooperation on foreign policy and security issues. The growing Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) within India and the EU along with the policy and operational evidence suggest that geopolitical assessment is shaping their response to the

aggressive Chinese build up of critical infrastructure, political influence and economic investment between the South China Sea to the coast of Africa.

India's own maritime policies strengthened by the Maritime Security Strategyⁱ, the SAGAR (Security and Growth for all in the Region)ⁱⁱ initiative for the Indian Ocean saw New Delhi launch Mission Sagar to deliver Covid-19 related assistance in the region. The EU has also been a maritime security provider and through its Maritime Security Strategy (EUMSS)ⁱⁱⁱ addresses the global maritime domain. As India seeks to leverage its geography by building partnerships with the countries of the region and other external actors, the QUAD – (US, Japan, Australia, and India) showcases New Delhi jettisoning its apprehensions for such engagement and redefining how the assets of hard and soft power can be augmented through partnership. In fact members of the QUAD along with UK and France have agreed to the 2018 Indian proposal to send Naval officers to the Information Fusion Centre- Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR). It is in India and the EU's interest to enhance the interaction on maritime domain to keep the sea lines of communication open and secure. The EU has been active in anti-piracy operations off the coast of Somalia (2008) and the IO through Operation Atalanta (2010). In 2019 Brussels has also begun developing a "coordinated maritime presence" concept to leverage MS naval assets in critical areas^{iv}. The EU's engagement in the IPR is also augmented with Member State (MS) policies and capacities such as the long standing French naval engagement and its own 2019 IPR strategy. A clear and unambiguous statement of Europe's pivot to the region has come through the German Indo-Pacific Strategy launched on 2 September 2020. MS policies are force multiplier and add to the total EU presence, capability and capacity in the IPR. The French and German IPR strategy in quick succession reveals the recalibration at the European level about China's changing geopolitical and economic ambition in the region.

The Indian Government creation of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) in the foreign ministry in 2016, followed by PM Modi's 2018 Shangri-La speech outlining the vision of the IPR to the recently created Oceania division in the foreign ministry on 29 September 2020 signal New Delhi's strong policy shift and adaptation to changing geopolitical interests, reorganisation of geoeconomic and political engagement and the intention to build operational capacity in light of the growing Chinese footprint in South Asia and the IOR. The last months have clearly shown the new Indian determination to enhance its political, diplomatic and security profile in the IPR. As India seeks to expand capability and operations in the IPR, it is through partnerships that it seeks augmentation, and importantly ensuring an open and secure maritime domain. More recently, PM Modi called to diversify the global supply chains beyond dependence on one country. Undoubtedly, setting realistic achievable goals time bound in delivery strengthens the EU-India partnership.

Policy Recommendation for EU India Cooperation in the IPR

Partnerships are the key to address diverse challenges and build communities of likeminded groups that also endorse similar political values, because this enables to build trust and work towards interest convergence in the IPR.

1. In the foreseeable future, EU and India need a multi- pronged IPR maritime strategy that converts the values convergence into measurable political, economic and security deliverables.
2. Maritime multilateralism and mainstreaming it should be one policy area for the EU and India within the framework of the Roadmap 2025. Strengthening a liberal value

based maritime order that is committed to openness and access to all is the mainstay of the IPR.

3. Enhancing and building robust maritime cooperation and engagement can be brought about by interfacing the Indian National Maritime Domain Awareness (NDMA) project and IFC-IOR with the Common Information Sharing Environment (CISE) for the EU maritime domain. Such exchanges will add to a greater pool of information sharing, complementarities and enhance strategic cooperation.
4. The EU should examine the possibility to send a representative to the IFC-IOR. Both should scale up the security dialogues and appoint defense attaches in their respective embassies.
5. Given that the IPR has numerous sub- theatres and actors, it is strongly recommended that EU and India look at a scaled up engagement in operationalising the maritime partnership.
7. Both sides should schedule annual maritime dialogues within the MDA framework that offers a comprehensive and multi-stakeholder platform. Adopting a multi-sectoral approach representing political, economic and security dimensions will enable a holistic and comprehensive approach to the IPR.
8. The EU, MS and India should look at co-branding multilateral efforts and initiatives in the IPR that brings visibility, augments capacity building.
9. Regular Naval exercise between EU MS and India build knowledge pool, create operational intra-operability and create a strong geopolitical signal and intentionality about keeping the IPR open and accessible.
10. India should join EU anti-piracy operations as that also add value to its political profile of securing sea lanes as public goods.
11. The EU has been addressing threats to the international sea lines of communication through the “Critical Maritime Routes (CMR)” programme in the IO as well. The focus areas of CRIMARIO II that looks at South Asia provides opportunity for greater collaboration that New Delhi should explore.

The above policy recommendations offer a robust list that cover policy, operational and capacity building measures between the EU and India such that they can Envision, Engage and Enhance (E3) the strategic bilateral cooperation in the Indo-Pacific Region.

ⁱ https://www.indiannavy.nic.in/sites/default/files/Indian_Maritime_Security_Strategy_Document_25Jan16.pdf

ⁱⁱ Text of speech by PM Modi, March 12, 2015, <http://www.pib.gov.in/newsite/erelcontent.aspx?relid=116881>

ⁱⁱⁱ EU Maritime Security Strategy, https://ec.europa.eu/maritimeaffairs/policy/maritime-security_en

^{iv} <https://www.maritime-executive.com/article/eu-plans-pilot-case-maritime-security-mission-for-gulf-of-guinea>