

Zsuzsa Anna Ferenczy, Ph.D.

Europe and India in the Indo-Pacific: Time to Work Towards a Common Vision

The EU in Asia – fragmented and distant

Passive and disengaged. This has been the perception of the EU that countries in Asia, including India, have held for decades. Considering the economic, political and security implications of China's rise in the region, India has lamented Brussels' lack of engagement, just as Delhi has witnessed the EU mature into a global player seeking a bigger role while promoting international norms. With a new geopolitical reality unfolding, including China hardening its foreign policy stance, perceptions inside the EU have started to converge on the need to act more like an integration model with a clear vision on Asia, and more broadly the Indo-Pacific, a geopolitical construct that is here to stay.¹

With the acceleration of the shift in the global distribution of power, China's assertiveness being the most significant manifestation of this shift, the EU's approach to the Indo-Pacific has become all the more relevant, and **timely to assess**. The Indian Ocean has replaced the Atlantic Ocean as the most strategically significant trade corridor, and Europe remains an important stakeholder. More than 35 percent of all European exports go to the Asia-Pacific with a majority transiting through the sea lanes of the Indian and Pacific Oceans.² While some member states, namely France and Germany have developed their own visions, the EU, as a whole, has not embraced **the concept of Indo-Pacific**, indicative of its internal fragmentation. India has officially embraced the concept, in its own way.³

While it is not new, the notion captures the essence of the new regional reality. With COVID-19 and its implications concerning global supply chains, there is an urgent need for Europe to adjust. For now, **the EU remains unequipped to act like a global power in the Indo-Pacific**. There are at least three reasons. One, the EU's **inherent structural constraints**; the EU's common foreign policy remains common in name only. Two, the EU's approach to Asia is overwhelmingly **China-centric**, overshadowing its partnership with India. Three, the EU's lack of effective **communication** on what it wants in/from the Indo-Pacific has led to failed expectations of what it can actually achieve in the region.

The state of affairs – a critical analysis

The EU is an international organization of 27 sovereign countries in charge of their own foreign policies. While reform efforts haven't been absent, a truly common foreign policy remains work

¹ C. Raja Mohan, Raja Mandala: Securing the Littoral, 5 June 2018, Carnegie India, <https://carnegieindia.org/2018/06/05/raja-mandala-securing-littoral-pub-76526>

² Garima Mohan, A European Approach to the Indo-Pacific? GPPi, December 2019.

³ C. Raja Mohan, Delhi's strategy for Indo-Pacific needs to recognise the importance of the continent, The Indian Express, 2 July 2019, <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/re-imagining-india-and-africa-policy-narendra-modi-government-5809769/>

in progress.⁴ It's the commitment of the 27 to cooperate towards *legally non-binding objectives* that constitutes the *common* policy. The main stumbling block remains the predominance of national interests. While Ursula von der Leyen's Commission envisages a more "geopolitical role", the EU's **fragmentation** and member states' lack of political will have led to contradictory visions, limiting a consistent common foreign policy.⁵

While India considers the EU a key partner in establishing itself as a regional leader, bilateral trade talks have languished, and human rights remain one of the most controversial issues.⁶ A **deficit of understanding** is affecting both sides and the EU remains burdened by intra-European competition.⁷ India has upheld its own expectations regarding for example market access, and has failed some of Europe's expectations concerning intellectual property rights and freedom of expression, to mention a few.⁸ While both India and the EU have played their role in stalling relations, it is in both of their interests to work towards a common approach on the Indo-Pacific.

The EU does not have an Indo-Pacific strategy. Internal deliberations on regional dynamics and their impact on Europe are missing.⁹ The EU remains focused on China, fearing Beijing is seeking to translate its presence in Europe into political influence.¹⁰ Brussels recently labeled China, its "strategic partner", a "systemic rival".¹¹ At the same time, the EU appears less concerned by what China's rise entails for India's security as it seeks to become a maritime security provider in the wake of China's naval buildup in the region.¹² Addressing the China challenge must continue. Yet, getting tougher on China doesn't equal being strategic. The EU must better integrate India in its regional assessment.

In its latest Communication on India, the Commission reconfirmed the EU and India are natural partners.¹³ To upgrade, the agreement on international norms is key, but not sufficient; besides, much more work is required for the two sides to truly converge in this regard. The EU and India must strengthen common understanding and pursue their common interests jointly. With China, convergence on norms remains absent. Views between India and China also diverge on the Indo-Pacific; Chinese scholars believe the Indo-Pacific strategy is intended to hedge against China's foreign policy and reshape alliances to respond to its rise.¹⁴ Prime-minister Modi

⁴ Stefan Lehne, Is There Hope for EU Foreign Policy? 05.12.2017, Carnegie Europe,

<https://carnegieeurope.eu/2017/12/05/is-there-hope-for-eu-foreign-policy-pub-74909>

⁵ European Commission, Political Guidelines for the Next European Commission 2019-2024,

⁶ Stefania Benaglia, EU-India: A renewed strategic partnership or business as usual? 8.11.2019, Centre for European Policy Studies, <https://www.ceps.eu/eu-india-a-renewed-strategic-partnership-or-business-as-usual/>

⁷ Tara Varma, Macron's passage to India: a missed opportunity for Europe, European Council on Foreign Relations, 16.03.2018,

https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_macrons_passage_to_india_a_missed_opportunity_for_europe

⁸ European Parliament, Motion for Resolution on EU political relations with India, 28.6.2017,

https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-8-2017-0242_EN.html

⁹ Garima Mohan, A European Approach to the Indo-Pacific? GPPi, December 2019.

¹⁰ Thorsten Benner, Jan Gaspers, Mareike Ohlberg, Lucrezia Poggetti, Kristin Shi-Kupfer, Authoritarian Advance. Responding to China's Growing Political Influence in Europe. GPPi February 2018,

¹¹ European Commission, EU-China – A strategic outlook, 12.3.2019, <https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/communication-eu-china-a-strategic-outlook.pdf>

¹² Aditi Malhotra, India Sees a New Regional Role for Its Navy, 10.06.2016. Foreign Policy,

<https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/06/10/india-sees-a-new-regional-role-for-its-navy/>

¹³ European Commission, Elements for an EU strategy on India, 20.11.2018,

https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/jc_elements_for_an_eu_strategy_on_india_-_final_adopted.pdf

¹⁴ Dingding Chen, The Indo-Pacific Strategy: A Background Analysis, 4.6.2018, ISPI,

<https://www.ispionline.it/it/publicazione/indo-pacific-strategy-background-analysis-20714>

however stressed the Indo-Pacific “stands for a free, open, inclusive region, which embraces us all in a common pursuit of progress and prosperity.”¹⁵

The way forward – recommendations for Brussels and Delhi

EU rhetoric has long stressed that China will shape Asia’s future. The EU should now internalize its own Communication: “India will deeply impact the development of Asia and the world”.¹⁶ The EU needs an inclusive approach to the region that accommodates its own fragmentation with China’s rise and India’s regional role. COVID-19 has unleashed a global health crisis that Europe and India can turn into an opportunity for more connectivity in the reconfiguration of global supply chains. Europe is not immune from regional disruptions. The pandemic is forcing Europe to reconsider its dependence on China. The EU and India should therefore strengthen cooperation by including best practices from democracies that successfully handled the crisis.

First, Brussels and Delhi should support the meaningful inclusion of Taiwan’s success story in handling the pandemic in their exchanges on all levels, as the most effective model to contain the pandemic globally. Relations with Taiwan remain politically sensitive. Yet, cooperation in public health is the sovereign right, and responsibility of each country, contributing to the well-being of their people and economy. Both the EU and India balance relations with China between Washington and Beijing. But they would both benefit from Taiwan’s expertise. They also have similar approaches to the Indo-Pacific. Modi’s inclusive interpretation – balancing, yet inclusive – is compatible with the EU’s balancing approach, navigating member states’ divergence on China.

Second, Brussels must integrate India’s perceptions of regional dynamics in developing its own vision on the Indo-Pacific, to help address the knowledge deficit in member states and improve common understanding. Therefore, the EU and India should set up a targeted 12-month exchange, entitled “The EU and India, working together for a free, open and inclusive Indo-Pacific”, involving academia, think tanks and representatives from across EU member states and India. The EEAS, the EU Delegation in Delhi with the Indian Foreign Ministry should ensure the financial and operational support for the conferences, seminars to be organized during the exchange, with a strong youth and communication component. The aim would be to turn the Indo-Pacific into a core pillar of EU-India relations, identify concrete ways to pursue common regional interests, including the embrace of Taiwan’s expertise in their cooperation. The exchange would help both sides, as well as Taiwan, to converge in their Indo-Pacific visions along the principles of rule of law, democracy and human rights.

By including all EU member states, the exchange would also help manage the EU’s internal fragmentation. The rotating Council Presidency (Portugal and Slovenia in 2021) and the “geopolitical” Commission (DG Education, DG COMM) should support the exchange. Disseminating the knowledge of the 12 months across the EU and India will strengthen common understanding. For the youth component, Klaipėda (Lithuania), the European Youth Capital in 2021 could hold the patronage and sponsor an essay competition.¹⁷ Investing in EU- and India-branding means investing in the future of an open, free, inclusive Indo-Pacific, and peace and security for all.

¹⁵ C. Raja Mohan, Raja Mandala: Securing the Littoral, 5 June 2018, Carnegie India.

¹⁶ European Commission, Elements for an EU strategy on India, 20.11.2018.

¹⁷ European Youth Forum: <https://www.youthforum.org/european-youth-capital-winner-klaipeda-2021>