

“The EU doesn’t stop at the water’s edge”: EU-India and the Indo-Pacific

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Part 1: Identification of the problem and relevance to the EU-India strategic partnership (449/450 words)

The EU is heavily dependent on maritime shipping: 90% of its external and 40% of internal trade is seaborne.² For its part, India is also completely reliant on sea lines of communication (SLOC), with some 90% of trade by volume and 70% by value passing through the maritime space.³ The stability and security of the Indo-Pacific are therefore of vital importance and both have sought to reinforce a common vision of regional and global maritime challenges by maintaining freedom of navigation (FoN) and secure lines of communication through inclusive and rules-based global governance. What also unites these (sometimes awkward) partners is concerns over China, which has been flexing its economic and military muscles across the Indo-Pacific in recent years.

After years of being viewed solely or primarily as an economic power, it is increasingly accepted in Indian policy circles that the EU is indeed a security actor in its own right. This is particularly the case *vis-à-vis* maritime security (MARSEC) issues: from the Mediterranean to the Gulf of Aden, and recently with the launch of the Coordinated Maritime Presence (CMP) concept in the Gulf of Guinea, the Union has steadily strengthened its footprint and role as a global security provider in its maritime areas of interest.⁴ As Indian Ambassador to the EU Santosh Jha said recently: “The relationship between the EU and India cannot just stand on one leg. It will be stronger if it stands on both legs: economic and geopolitical.”⁵ Yet despite significant (relative) progress in bilateral relations in recent years and repeated pledges that the EU-India relationship is indeed ‘strategic’, systematic security cooperation has to date, regrettably, been somewhat underwhelming.

EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/Vice-President of the Commission (HR/VP) Josep Borrell noted in his personal blog last year that: ‘We live in a permanent ‘battle of narratives’ about the issues that determine our future. We have to understand these different positions if we want to look for a common ground.’⁶ This paper proposes that combatting piracy in the broader Indo-Pacific could be an avenue for finding this ‘common ground’ and establishing the EU as a credible player in the region. Safety at sea (SAS) issues, search and rescue (SAR) operations, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR), safety at life at sea (SOLAS) initiatives and efforts to combat illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing (IUU), as well as sustainable economic growth linked to the blue economy, cannot be effective if international rules are not adhered to. Furthermore, enhanced EU-India naval and maritime cooperation should be part of a broader

¹ The author would like to thank Dr Gareth Price, Chatham House, and Dr Eva Pejsova, Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB), for their input when drafting the paper.

² Eva Pejsova, “The EU as a Maritime Security Provider”, *EUISS Brief*, December, 2019, https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/Brief%2013%20Maritime_0.pdf.

³ MP Muralidharan, “The Economic and Strategic importance of Sea in Modern Indian Context”, *Indian Defence Review*, February 28, 2019, <http://www.indiandefencereview.com/spotlights/economic-and-strategic-importance-of-sea-in-modern-indian-context/>.

⁴ Council of the European Union, Council Conclusions, 5387/21, January 25, 2021, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/48054/st05387-en21.pdf>.

⁵ Barbara Moens, “Beijing’s rise rekindles EU-India romance”, *Politico*, January 21, 2021, <https://www.politico.eu.cdn.ampproject.org/c/s/www.politico.eu/article/china-rise-eu-india-trade-deal/amp/>.

⁶ European External Action Service (EEAS), “A Window on the World Blog by HR/VP Josep Borrell”, October, 2020, https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/77199/window-world-personal-blog-hrvp-josep-borrell_en.

commitment to multilateralism; one that will not simply aim to 'contain' China, but bolster the agency of all relevant parties in the Indo-Pacific.

Part 2: Critical analysis of the issue (550/550 words)

The foundations for cooperation in MARSEC are already in place, including the 2018 Council Conclusions on the revision of the European Union Maritime Security Strategy (EUMSS) Action Plan and the 'Roadmap to 2025' endorsed at the last EU-India Summit.⁷ With a number of EU countries maintaining a national presence in the region (the French and Dutch navies are particularly active), there is a therefore a natural incentive for a member-state-led push in this direction, too.⁸

The Union has made strides in MARSEC over the last year:⁹ in June 2020, it launched CRIMARIO II, building on previous (and now extended) initiatives based in the Western Indian Ocean to sure up SLOC in South-East Asia. As part of a broader investment in its Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), the EU has also developed specific MARSEC capabilities.¹⁰ For India, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (or 'Quad') is a useful tool for New Delhi to bolster its defence ties, showcase its military prowess and improve its growing (if sometimes erratic) relationship with the US.¹¹ While the Quad has seen a renewed commitment from its members and large-scale drills (most recently during India's yearly Malabar naval exercises in November 2020), it should be viewed as a 'compact bloc, rather than a sprawling multilateral organisation', the latter being the environment in which the EU is often more comfortable operating.¹² Indeed, 'if the Indo-Pacific acquires an ambiguous narrative, or there are hints of a defence alliance, [...], caution from the EU [...] is likely expected.'¹³ Thus, as an outside actor, the EU is best placed to cooperate with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), while maintaining its established collaboration with Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and expanding its ties with India. ASEAN also nations also constitute one of India's top foreign policy priorities; both the Act East and

⁷ The item 'Foreign Policy and Security Cooperation' appears at the top of the document, with point 7 calling for the strategic partners to 'establish a maritime security dialogue replacing the counter-piracy dialogue and explore opportunities for further maritime cooperation.' For more, see: EEAS, "EU-India Strategic Partnership: A Roadmap to 2025," July 15, 2020, https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/eu-india_strategic_partnership_a_roadmap_to_2025_0.pdf.

⁸ In addition, the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) is a cooperative MARSEC initiative in which Germany Italy, the Netherlands and Spain are observers. For more, see: MP Muralidharan, "Maritime Dimensions of India's Foreign Policy", *Indian Defence Review*, November 16, 2020, <http://www.indiandefencereview.com/spotlights/maritime-dimensions-of-indias-foreign-policy/>.

⁹ The HR/VP has made clear that 'ensuring a safe maritime environment is a global public good that needs international cooperation to fend off the increasing challenges related to geo-strategic rivalries, piracy and organised crime.' For more, see: European External Action Service (EEAS), "Why the EU needs to be a global maritime security provider", January 27, 2021, https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage_en/92123/Why%20the%20EU%20needs%20to%20be%20a%20global%20maritime%20security%20provider.

¹⁰ For more, see: European Defence Agency (EDA), "Maritime Surveillance (MARSUR)", [https://www.eda.europa.eu/what-we-do/activities/activities-search/maritime-surveillance-\(marsur\)](https://www.eda.europa.eu/what-we-do/activities/activities-search/maritime-surveillance-(marsur)).

¹¹ In a symbolic gesture, the US renamed its Pacific Command to the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command in 2018. For more, see: Indrees Ali, "In symbolic nod to India, U.S. Pacific Command changes name", *Reuters*, May 30, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-defense-india/in-symbolic-nod-to-india-us-pacific-command-changes-name-idUSKCN11V2Q2>.

¹² Banyan, "An Indo-Pacific club builds heft", *The Economist*, November 21, 2020, <https://www.economist.com/asia/2020/11/19/an-indo-pacific-club-builds-heft>.

¹³ Giulia Iuppa, "An "Indo-Pacific" Outlook for the European Union", European Institute for Asian Studies, October, 2020, <http://www.eias.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/IPO-Briefing-Paper.pdf>.

Neighbourhood First policies pursued by the Indian government under Prime Minister Modi are linked to the body or its members.

In 1945, Indian diplomat KM Panikkar popularised the adage ‘whoever controls the Indian Ocean has India at its mercy’.¹⁴ This preoccupation with maritime freedom has continued to this day, with the Indian Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) General Bipin Rawat claiming recently that the Quad should be used to ensure FoN ‘Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPS) in the Indian Ocean and beyond.’¹⁵ While the much-touted Chinese ‘String of Pearls’ encircling India is not quite as strategic as some had feared, there is indeed cause for concern in allowing a non-democratic state to potentially dominate SLOC, particularly given its disregard for the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).¹⁶ Anti-piracy provides common ground for cooperation with India (and ASEAN) without overtly challenging Beijing. Piracy still represents a significant threat (see Figures 1 and 2 below) and a total of 97 incidents were reported in Asia in 2020: an increase of 17%, compared to 2019.¹⁷ The phenomenon is also likely to be exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic: piracy is a lucrative source of income for those who lack economic prospects and ‘ASEAN states and concerned stakeholders in the region must face the uncomfortable fact that increased crime in South-East Asian seas is inevitable.’¹⁸ Counter-piracy may also be a way of circumventing India’s traditional reluctance to bind itself to formal alliances and respect its desire for strategic autonomy.

¹⁴ Alexander Davis, Jonathan Balls, “The Indian Ocean Region in the 21st Century: geopolitical, economic, and environmental ties, *Australia India Institute*, 2020, <https://www.aii.unimelb.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/INDIAN-OCEAN-REPORT.pdf>.

¹⁵ Dinakar Peri, “Quad should ensure Freedom of Navigation in Indian Ocean: Gen. Rawat”, September 03, 2020, *The Hindu*, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/quad-should-ensure-freedom-of-navigation-in-indian-ocean-gen-rawat/article32517321.ece>.

¹⁶ It is true that China’s rise is currently producing a Beijing-centric order, a fact that EU member states recognised but the Union itself has been slow (or unwilling in the eyes of its detractors) to coordinate on.

¹⁷ Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia (ReCAAP), “Piracy and Armed Robbery Against Ships in Asia Annual Report”, December, 2020, [https://www.recaap.org/resources/ck/files/reports/annual/ReCAAP%20ISC%20Annual%20Report%202020%20v1\(1\).pdf](https://www.recaap.org/resources/ck/files/reports/annual/ReCAAP%20ISC%20Annual%20Report%202020%20v1(1).pdf).

¹⁸ Drake Long, “COVID-19 Could Spark a New Era of Piracy in Southeast Asia”, *The Diplomat*, May 13, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/05/covid-19-could-spark-a-new-era-of-piracy-in-southeast-asia/>.

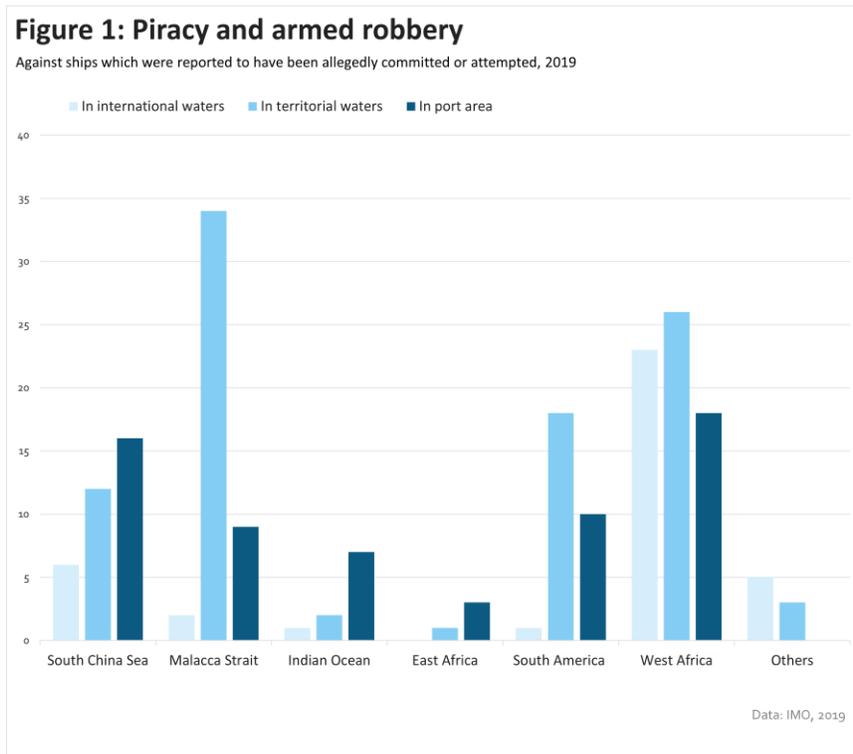
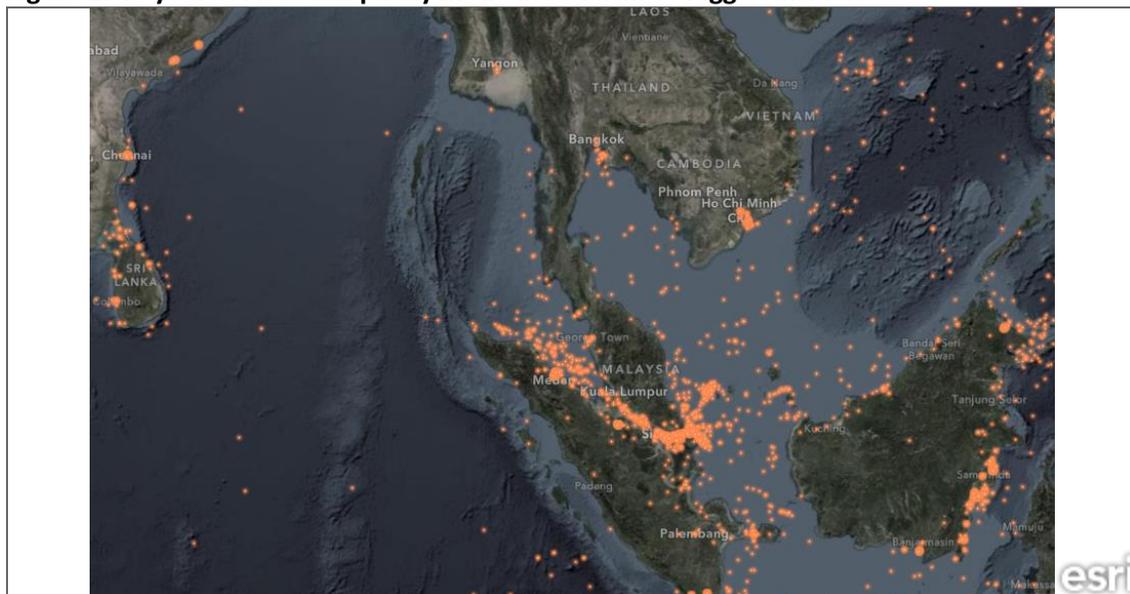


Figure 2: 40 years of nautical piracy in the Indo-Pacific – logged incidences



Data source: aggregations and incidents of 40 years of piracy, sourced from the US National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency's (NAG) Anti-Shipping Activity Messages (ASAM) database.¹⁹ Map by John Nelson, Adventures In Mapping, 2020.

¹⁹ The US NGA keeps a record of all reported piracy incidents, available as a searchable/filterable database called ASAM. The organisation states that 'ASAM include the locations and descriptive accounts of specific hostile acts against ships and mariners.'

Part 3: Policy Recommendations (700/700 words max)

For the EU:

- 1) **Use counter-piracy as a way into the region as a security provider.** Building on past successes (and the momentum generated by the CMP programme), the Union has a wealth of experience, as well as the capacity to fully engage in the field. The EU should therefore aim to join the Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia (ReCAAP); the organisation brings together the countries of the Quad, ASEAN nations, as well as EU member states such as the Netherlands, Denmark, and Germany is set to join. It also presents a more flexible format for interested member states which lack blue water capabilities. It provides a forum to engage with India (a founding member) on security matters and be active in the region without alienating China (which is also a member). There is also precedent *vis-à-vis* international organisations: ReCAAP has signed agreements with the likes of the International Maritime Organisation (IMO).
- 2) **Develop a coherent strategic communications plan for the Indo-Pacific.** The Union sometimes suffers from an asymmetry of perspectives, despite a clear common cause. Strategic communication (Stratcomms) efforts are therefore required to communicate EU effectively to international partners (maritime domain awareness (MDA) works particularly well for the EU). The lack of an Indo-Pacific strategy has hitherto also sent the wrong signal, though that is to soon be rectified. The EU needs to reflect on what narrative to build – and sustain – so as to win over sceptics in the region. This requires developing Stratcomms toolkits for regional countries which also include non-traditional security matters so as to encourage Indo-Pacific nations to engage with the EU as a whole rather than individual member states.
- 3) **Shelve any plans to involve itself in the Quad – at least for the time being.** Keeping in mind that the Quad is a military alliance principally concerned with national navies, the Union, for all its positive ambition, lacks the cohesion, capabilities and interest to join such a body. This will also require some delicate balancing on the European side: it must actively engage with the four partners to avoid accusations of representing a new Non-Aligned Movement (NAM).²⁰ At the same time, the Union should also avoid steps that may be perceived as a purely anti-China manoeuvre. Even within the Quad itself, alliance building is not without controversy, and joining a pre-existing defence initiative is not necessarily in Europe's interest nor its traditional *modus operandi*. Instead, and in line with its commitment to multilateral solutions, the EU should seek out broader fora.²¹
- 4) **Engage on security with ASEAN – while not neglecting other bodies.** The EU's strong ties with ASEAN naturally lend themselves to build further security ties and ASEAN-led processes and regional mechanisms hold promise.²² The ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM+)

²⁰ Amandeep Gill, "Europe is the new NAM", *Observer Research Foundation*, January 6, 2021, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/europe-is-the-new-nam/>.

²¹ To this end, the EU's 'Strategic Compass' initiative should also provide further guidance and opportunity on how to engage with the counties of the Quad and on what issues in the future. For more information on how the EU perceives threats, see: Daniel Fiott, "Uncharted Territory? Towards a Common Threat Analysis and a Strategic Compass for EU Security and Defence", *EUISS Brief*, July, 2020, <https://www.iss.europa.eu/content/uncharted-territory-towards-common-threat-analysis-and-strategic-compass-eu-security-and>.

²² On 1 December 2020, the EU finally elevated its relationship with ASEAN to a 'Strategic Partnership' and the HR/VP was subsequently hosted at the ASEAN Defence Ministerial meeting (the MARSEC dialogue with India was also upgraded that month). For more, see: Stefania Benaglia, "How can the EU navigate the Indo-Pacific?", *Centre for European Policy Studies*, January 28, 2021, <https://www.ceps.eu/how-can-the-eu-navigate-the-indo-pacific/>.

Experts Working Groups (particularly the one on military medicine) also provide opportunities for further engagement, also with India. Elsewhere, from safety issues regarding oil and gas infrastructure to port security initiative infrastructure and environmental disasters (disaster involving the Japanese vessel MV Wakashio showed), problems of accountability exist in the Indo-Pacific despite the existing laws in place. Accordingly, the EU should make use of the 2021 French presidency of the Indian Ocean Commission (IOC) to increase its visibility, while continuing to attempt to achieve observer status IORA to tackle broader issues.

For India:

- 1) **Look beyond immediate neighbourhood and expand EU-related diplomatic corps.** A permanent post to liaise with the EU Military Committee (EUMC) could be a possibility while more broadly, a dedicated Ambassador to the EU (rather than the current setup of one post to cover the mission to the EU, as well as the nations of Belgium and Luxembourg) could help develop deeper ties and focus. Indian policymakers should also closely monitor the interests of the rotating Presidency of the EU Council: for instance, the official agenda of the current Portuguese Presidency of the Council of the EU (running until the end of June 2021) reveals a specific interest in the maritime domain and the outermost regions (ORs) of the Union, including those in the Indo-Pacific.²³

Ultimately, beyond shared values, though undeniably important, it is shared hard interests which will eventually underpin any common approach.

²³ European Parliament, “The Portuguese Presidency of the Council of the European Union”, January 27, 2021, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2014_2019/plmrep/COMMITTEES/SEDE/DV/2021/01-27/programme-for-the-portuguese-presidency_EN.pdf.

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