

Europe in the Indo-Pacific: A Case for More Coordination with Quad Countries

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Discussions on the geopolitical dynamics in the Indo-Pacific often leave Europe out. It is seen to be too far away geographically and lacking military capacities and capabilities to contribute to security in the region. Countries like France and the United Kingdom, with their historical and territorial connections to it, are seen as exceptions to the rule. However, attitudes in Europe toward the Indo-Pacific are changing fast.

China's broadening global ambitions mean that many challenges faced by Europe today are not so different from those faced by the likes of Australia, India, and Japan. Many policymakers in Europe admit that dynamics in the Indo-Pacific will have a direct impact on the continent's prosperity and security. Hence, there are many areas—such as safeguarding maritime routes that carry European exports, combating influence operations, and providing sustainable options for regional connectivity—where European countries have already begun working together either bilaterally or in multilateral frameworks with partners sharing the same concerns and agenda in the region, and in particular with the “Quad” countries (Australia, India, Japan, and the United States). This brief explores areas where Europe can cooperate more with these four countries for greater engagement in the Indo-Pacific.

The Changing Balance of Power in the Indo-Pacific

The impact of China's rise is being felt across the Indo-Pacific through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) investments and the simultaneously increasing footprint of the People's Liberation Army navy. Its ambitious strategy in the region is perceived by many there as confrontational and designed to challenge international rules and norms, whether in the South China Sea or the Himalayas. Through their respective Indo-Pacific strategies, the "Quad" countries (Australia, India, Japan, and the United States) have sought to increase cooperation and coordination among themselves to preserve a "free and open" region. Their focus remains on strengthening regional institutions, promoting free trade, underscoring the equal sovereignty of countries, providing viable alternatives to BRI investments, and building the legal and technical capacity of states to withstand coercion from China. While each has a slightly different take on the concept of the Indo-Pacific as a region, they agree on the central need to strengthen a multipolar order in Asia and to preserve international norms and rules.

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European countries too are increasingly cognizant of the impact of China, not only on the balance of power in Asia but also on their continent. All of China's "belts" and "roads" lead to Europe, as a result of which Chinese investments there, particularly in strategic sectors and critical infrastructure, are under intense scrutiny. Policymakers fear the emergence of debt traps in smaller European countries and those in Europe's neighborhood. Influence operations and the spread of disinformation through China's reach

in European academia and political circles are also a critical issue. Many of these challenges are similar to those being faced by the Quad countries.

Even though neither the EU nor many European countries have an Indo-Pacific strategy per se, the debate in Europe is aligning with that in the Quad countries. The EU's changed line is evident in its characterization of China as a "systemic rival and economic competitor."¹ Several member states—such as Belgium, the Netherlands, and Sweden—have published or are in the process of developing new China strategies, and have an all-of-government approach to deal with the challenge the country poses. Even more importantly, this change is also visible in European policies toward Asia. France has a clearly articulated Indo-Pacific strategy that aims to support a "stable, multipolar order" in a region that is not dominated by any one country.² Germany's new defense minister, Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, recently highlighted that China's rise in power politics and its influence now extends beyond its immediate neighbors. She added that Germany's partners in the Indo-Pacific "would like to see a clear sign of solidarity [from it] in support of applicable international law, inviolable territory, and free shipping routes."³

The EU's new strategy on India argues that developments in Asia will have a direct impact on European security and prosperity. It also identifies India as a "crucial pillar in a multipolar Asia" and in many ways as a regional counterweight to China. Similarly, the EU's pathbreaking connectivity partnership with Japan signed in September signals its interest in being a player in this field in Asia, joining others in a bid to provide sustainable alternatives to BRI. And, finally, the EU is investing money and resources in greater security cooperation with Asia

1 European Commission, [EU-China – A Strategic Outlook](#), March 12, 2019.

2 Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, France, [The Indo-Pacific Region: A Priority for France](#), August 2019.

3 Ministry of Defense, Germany, [Speech by Federal Minister of Defence at the Bundeswehr University Munich](#), July 11, 2019.

to preserve regional stability, particularly in the maritime domain.⁴ Taken together, these strategies are the building blocks of a European approach to the Indo-Pacific and create opportunities for greater cooperation with the Quad countries.

Building Europe-Quad Cooperation

There are four critical areas in which European and Quad countries can pursue cooperation bilaterally and within multilateral frameworks. These are regional connectivity, maritime security, combating influence operations, and 5G infrastructures.

Providing Alternatives for Regional Connectivity

As strategic competition over infrastructure intensifies, the EU and the Quad countries have begun to step up their efforts to coordinate, increase investments, and set standards for sustainable and quality projects in the Indo-Pacific.

While many associate infrastructure investments in Asia with the BRI, “connectivity” is not a Chinese invention. For example, Japan has been for decades the top source for infrastructure investments in Southeast Asia and ranks ahead of China in terms of reputation, local impact, engagement, and transparency.⁵ India and Japan are carrying out joint infrastructure projects in South Asia and Africa. In January Australia announced \$25 million for building regional economic connectivity through its new South Asia Regional Infrastructure Connectivity initiative. It also has various programs in place with the Pacific islands. The U.S. Development Finance Corporation has pledged to provide \$60 billion to create more partnership opportunities in the Indo-Pacific. On the sidelines of the summit of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) this year, Australia, Japan, and the United States announced the creation of the

trilateral Blue Dot Network, an initiative bringing together governments, the private sector, and civil society to promote high-quality and trusted standards for global infrastructure development. The network will evaluate and certify infrastructure projects in order to make sure investments are transparent and sustainable.

The EU’s connectivity strategy published last year also aims to provide an alternative narrative to the BRI. It stresses that investments should be sustainable, transparent, and based on a level playing field so recipient countries do not struggle with debt burdens and “white elephant” projects. Under the strategy, the EU signed its first connectivity partnership with Japan in September, as part of which Japan will also invest in Europe. This is a concrete example of how European and Asian countries can work together, not only in the Indo-Pacific but also in Europe’s own neighborhood, which has seen many BRI investments and related problems of lack of fiscal and environmental sustainability, as well as of transparency in contracts and tenders.

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These are important initiatives, but even with these efforts the Indo-Pacific region is still meeting only half of what is needed annually in infrastructure investments to maintain growth. As more investments are needed, it will be important for European and Quad countries to work together to fill in gaps and ensure that the BRI is not the only game in town. They need to mobilize private funds better in order to meet needs in the region. They also need to prioritize strategic projects and regions for investment. Conversations around these questions are already

4 European Commission, [EU Asia Security Factsheet](#), October 17, 2019.

5 Panos Mourdoukoutas, “[Japan, not China, is the biggest investor in Southeast Asia’s infrastructure](#),” *Forbes*, June 26, 2019.

happening in Europe as policymakers figure out how to operationalize the EU connectivity strategy better and get European companies on board.

Strengthening Maritime Security Cooperation

Increasing competition in the maritime domain is the key factor motivating many countries' Indo-Pacific strategies. The security of sea lanes is emerging as an important topic in European policy circles as well. Six of the EU's top ten trading partners are in the Asia-Pacific, and the majority of EU exports transit through the sea lanes of the Indian and Pacific Oceans. The Quad countries see a role for European countries in strengthening maritime security, particularly in the Indian Ocean, where China's growing political, economic, and military footprint have raised concerns among European countries and their partners in the region alike. Given that the Indian Ocean has replaced the Atlantic as the world's busiest waterway, securing it is critical and will require better burden-sharing between all partners. With Operation Atalanta off the Horn of Africa and several other programs on maritime-domain awareness, the EU is an important security actor in the western Indian Ocean. There is plenty of scope for greater European engagement, particularly with India, in securing the eastern Indian Ocean as well.

The Quad countries see a role for European countries in strengthening maritime security, particularly in the Indian Ocean.

While there is growing concern over China's aggressive actions in the South China Sea, there is often a lack of consensus as to what the proper response should be. While Europe has a limited role to play in the freedom-of-navigation operations in the region for the time being, due to capacity and other constraints, it can still play a role in the region. Particularly in technical and legal capacity

building of countries in Southeast Asia, to help them withstand pressures from China. The EU and member states like the Netherlands already have several capacity-building programs in place with the ASEAN countries. These initiatives can be scaled up and implemented in partnership with the Quad countries, which are also working on addressing these issues in Southeast Asia.

Developing Strategies against Influence Operations

Chinese influence operations, which are often conducted through coercion and the spread of disinformation, are a growing problem in countries in the Indo-Pacific like Australia, New Zealand, and the United States, but also even in Europe. Reports of targeted propaganda campaigns based on disinformation led by the Chinese party state and affiliated organizations, attempts at coopting influencers in the media, academia, and government, as well as elected officials, and attempts at silencing alternative narratives often through coercive tactics are rife in many European capitals from Prague⁶ to Berlin⁷ to London.⁸

While awareness of these influence operations in European and Quad countries is steadily growing, few have made substantive efforts to combat them because the Chinese actors and organizations running these operations are often not well known, and their operating techniques not well understood. Information sharing between European and Quad countries, particularly those like Australia that are trying to develop policy responses to tackle foreign interference, is absolutely critical. The media can also play a key role in combating malign influence and

6 Kahn, Michael et al., "[Czech-Chinese ties hit new bumps as university shuts center](#)," Reuters, November 13, 2019.

7 Didi Kirsten Tatlow, "[Mapping China-in-Germany](#)," Sinopsis, October 2, 2019.

8 Patrick Wintour, "['Alarming' Chinese meddling at UK universities exposed in report](#)," The Guardian, November 5, 2019.

countering disinformation and must be included in these exchanges.

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Competition over 5G Infrastructures

Another issue where European and Quad countries should talk to each other is 5G infrastructures. As several countries in the Indo-Pacific and Europe are in the middle of making their 5G network decisions, coordination and sharing best practices could be critical and have long-term impact. Many policymakers are simply not aware of the threats and vulnerabilities associated with 5G and with Chinese suppliers like Huawei and ZTE. In many countries, the issue is framed as a technical rather than a security question. Here too cross-pollinating the debate in Europe with that in the Quad countries could help to generate a better understanding of 5G technology, which is becoming a tool of strategic competition. While countries like Australia have excluded problematic

vendors from their 5G networks, others like India and many in Europe are still trying to figure out how best to balance security and economic interests. Given their similar concerns and that European vendors like Ericsson and Nokia play a crucial role in this debate, European and Quad countries would benefit from much closer coordination and exchange.

Conclusion

Challenges in the Indo-Pacific are not limited to the region alone. Europe faces similar dilemmas. In addition, dynamics in the Indo-Pacific have a direct impact on Europe's prosperity and security. Even though the EU might not have an Indo-Pacific strategy, it is certainly beginning to position itself as an actor in the region. As a result, there are many potential policy areas that require greater coordination and exchange between Europe and the Quad countries as well as greater transatlantic coordination. This is particularly the case on newer challenges for which there are no existing policy templates – such as combating influence operations or 5G technology. The areas highlighted here are starting points where coordination between Europe and the Quad countries, as well as with other partners in the Indo-Pacific, can be scaled up.

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About the Author

Garima Mohan is a fellow in the Asia Program of The German Marshall Fund of the United States.

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