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The South China Sea and Indo-Pacific in an Era of “Multipolar” Competition: A More Targeted EU Response?

Zachary Paikin, Gilang Kembara, Andrew Mantong and Steven Blockmans*

Abstract

A longstanding territorial dispute between claimants in the South China Sea now finds itself nested within a new imagined “Indo-Pacific” region, which itself has become a key theatre in a deepening great power conflict. The EU is geographically distant and a relative newcomer to the strategic terrain in these two regions, yet it cannot afford to ignore them given their crucial economic and geopolitical importance. While the EU’s ability to reduce the constraints on its freedom of manoeuvre is limited, the Union should nonetheless gradually nurture its strategic autonomy by carving out a delineated hard security role in the South China Sea while maintaining a degree of distance from the US approach towards China and the Indo-Pacific.

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Introduction

Although the issue has garnered added salience since China started to adopt a more assertive foreign policy in the early 2010s, tensions in the South China Sea (SCS) have been ongoing for decades. The dispute lies between several Southeast Asian states and China over a semi-enclosed sea that has never been properly demarcated following the decolonisation era of the mid-twentieth century, all the way to the present day. This has led to a semi-lawless situation where claimant states race one another to occupy whatever feature is available on the sea, prompting an unhealthy competition and, at times, stymieing cooperation between them. Rival claims in the SCS centre on disputed archipelagos such as the Spratly Islands, Paracel Islands and Scarborough Shoal, with China's "nine-dash" line across the sea outlining Beijing's extensive maritime claims.

Claimant states have made efforts to defuse tensions, build trust and mitigate the dispute through negotiations. Such efforts have been primarily led by the Southeast Asian regional grouping – the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) – and China. However, despite numerous rounds of negotiations and instances of cooperation, tensions in the SCS continue to flare up into the present day, raising the risk of escalation if they remain unaddressed.

The SCS issue has at times been categorised as a theatre of great power competition, creating an added layer of complexity. Due to declining relations with China, the United States has sought to partner with Japan, Australia and others to launch an "Indo-Pacific vision", growing the contested terrain from a marginal sea to a vast space comprising two oceans – albeit one in which the SCS remains arguably at the core, due to key chokepoints such as the Taiwan and (especially) Malacca Straits.

When it comes to the place of the European Union in this fledgling contest, interviews conducted for this paper highlight a lingering perception that the EU is regularly pulled away by the multiple crises closer to home which have unfolded over the past fifteen years. These include the Eurozone debt crisis, the Arab uprisings and ensuing refugee/migrant crisis, Brexit, the US withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal, the Covid-19 pandemic and Russia's aggression against Ukraine.



Nonetheless, throughout this time, EU-China economic relations have continued to deepen.¹ But with the advent of mounting geopolitical competition, the Hong Kong protests and mounting criticism of China's human rights record in Xinjiang, discussions among Europe's political class have moved towards a realisation that the EU cannot continue to do business as usual with China.² This explains the EU's belated pivot towards investing in relations with other regional partners such as the Southeast Asian states.

Against this backdrop, the EU faces the strategic choice of whether (and how) to invest in developing its regional presence and mitigating the impact of multipolar competition, as well as other, related constraints, in *two* contested regions rather than just one. This raises the possibility that the strategic imperatives of a "geopolitical" EU in one of these theatres may differ from those in the other.

This paper will chart the EU's foreign and security policy (EUFSP) in the region before analysing the factors constraining the EU's ability to increase its influence. It will then outline several ways in which the EU might mitigate the impact of these constraints. Part of this will involve defining what "mitigation" means in the context of the SCS and Indo-Pacific regions for the EU, given factors such as Europe's considerable distance from the core of the theatre in question.

1. The EU's role in the region

1.1 The EU's role across time

Although European empires had a colonial presence in the Indian and Pacific Oceans for centuries, the role of the EU as a strategic actor in the SCS and Indo-Pacific regions is relatively recent. This is due in particular to the relatively short history of EUFSP in general and the regions' distance from the European continent in comparison with other theatres. France is the only EU member state with

¹ Kandy Wong, "China-EU Trade: Commercial Ties 'Hard to Break' Despite Disagreement over Ukraine War", in *South China Morning Post*, 16 April 2022.

² See for example Mikko Huotari and Sébastien Jean, "No Business as Usual with China", in *Politico*, 29 July 2022, <https://www.politico.eu/?p=2178208>.

territory still situated in the Indo-Pacific, which in the past has made it difficult for all member states to have an equal appreciation of the region's importance. Things are changing, however. Arguably the most important factor that has prompted the EU to pay greater attention to the SCS is the full-blown deterioration of Sino-American relations and the subsequent growth in the securitisation of regional dynamics.

During the George W. Bush Administration (2001–9), then Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick underlined the importance of China becoming a “responsible stakeholder” in the international order.³ After 2011, the declared “pivot to Asia” by the Barack Obama Administration (2009–17) signalled the potential for a more competitive approach to US relations with Beijing. China responded to this new dynamic with an “extensive land reclamation” campaign in the SCS between 2013 and 2015 in the Spratly Island chain,⁴ effectively locking in a degree of geopolitical competition into the Sino-American relationship by rendering it more difficult for the United States to retain its regional primacy through command of the seas. The Donald Trump Administration (2017–21) completed the conceptual shift away from “responsible stakeholder”, labelling China a “rival power” in its 2017 National Security Strategy and launching a trade war against Beijing the subsequent year.⁵ The Joe Biden Administration (2021–) has given Sino-American rivalry a sharper edge than its predecessor due to its insistence on human rights and its readiness to use alliances and partnerships to help keep Beijing at bay.⁶ It is against the backdrop of this recently crystallised explicit great power competition that views of China have hardened in Europe, prompting the EU gradually to take an interest in security dynamics in the SCS and the wider Indo-Pacific region.

The recentness of the EU according a leading place to the security aspect of the SCS disputes can be seen in the EU's own statements. Without mentioning the SCS

³ Thomas J. Christensen, *The China Challenge. Shaping the Choices of a Rising Power*, New York/London, W.W. Norton, 2015, p. 116.

⁴ Ben Dolven, Caitlin Campbell, Ronald O'Rourke, “China Primer: South China Sea Disputes”, in *CRS In Focus*, 19 December 2022, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF10607>.

⁵ “Trump: Russia and China ‘Rival Powers’ in New Security Plan”, in *BBC News*, 18 December 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-42401170>.

⁶ White House, *National Security Strategy*, October 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf>.

and taking position on sovereignty issues, the 15 July 2016 statement by then EU's High Representative (HR) for foreign and security policy Federica Mogherini on the award rendered in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) arbitral tribunal ruling between the Philippines and China reiterated earlier calls upon the parties concerned to address their disputes through peaceful means in accordance with international law.⁷ Likewise, an August 2019 statement by the European External Action service (EEAS), the EU's diplomatic corps, refers merely to "[u]nilateral actions" in the South China Sea, without specifically attributing blame, calling on "all parties in the region to exercise self-restraint".⁸ This is despite the European Council's rolling endorsement of the EU-China Strategic Outlook of March 2019, prepared in close hold by the Secretaries General of the Commission and the EEAS, which does not mince its words:

China's maritime claims in the South China Sea and the refusal to accept the binding arbitration rulings issued under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea affect the international legal order and make it harder to resolve tensions affecting sea-lanes of communication vital to the EU's economic interests.⁹

Despite the change in rhetoric, most famously encapsulated in the EU's labelling of China in 2019 as being "simultaneously, in different policy areas, a cooperation partner [...], a negotiating partner [...], an economic competitor [...] and a systemic rival [...]",¹⁰ the EU and China later that same year jointly held the first-ever EU-China Experts' Seminar on Maritime Security in Hainan. On that occasion, the EU delegation's website highlighted Beijing's support for the EU's anti-piracy operation Atalanta in the Indo-Pacific.¹¹ Even as late as the June 2020 EU-China summit, Council President Charles Michel's public remarks mentioned merely

⁷ Council of the European Union, *Declaration by the High Representative on behalf of the EU on the Award Rendered in the Arbitration between the Republic of the Philippines and the People's Republic of China*, 15 July 2016, <https://europa.eu/!Mr37Fn>.

⁸ European External Action Service (EEAS), *Statement by the Spokesperson on Recent Developments in the South China Sea*, 28 August 2019, <https://www.eeas.europa.eu/node/66749>.

⁹ European Commission, *EU-China – A Strategic Outlook* (JOIN/2019/5), 12 March 2019, p. 3-4, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/en/TXT/?uri=celex:52019JC0005>.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

¹¹ EU Delegation to the People's Republic of China, *First EU-China Maritime Security Seminar Held in Hainan*, 31 October 2019, <https://www.eeas.europa.eu/node/69690>.

that the summit offered an “opportunity to stress the importance of the security of maritime transport”, noting that the “question of the South China Sea is of course important from the strategic point of view for the security of transport” in relatively generic language.¹²

In September 2020, following an EU-China leaders’ meeting, Michel was more specific, calling on China “to refrain from unilateral actions in the South China Sea, to respect international law, and avoid escalations”.¹³ However, even then the joint press release by Michel, Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and German Chancellor Angela Merkel merely noted that “the EU referred to the escalating tensions in the South China Sea, urging for self-restraint and a peaceful resolution of disputes in accordance with international law”,¹⁴ pointing to the fact that not all member states were keen on a confrontational approach.

European perceptions of the Indo-Pacific’s growing importance have been largely driven by the rise of China’s assertiveness, Beijing’s techno-ideological rivalry with Washington, and the tensions this generates with respect to supply chains. The latter is also a consequence of China’s territorial drift in the South China Sea, through which roughly 40 per cent of the EU’s foreign trade passes.¹⁵ Against this backdrop, the EU launched its Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific in September 2021.¹⁶ It aligns the strategic viewpoint of the 27-member bloc to increase their engagement with the Indo-Pacific region, by building partnerships that reinforce the “rules-based international order”, address global challenges and ensure a sustainable economic recovery for long-term prosperity. The EU’s Indo-Pacific strategy came amidst the earlier publication of similar Indo-Pacific

¹² European Council, *Remarks by President Charles Michel after the 22nd EU-China Summit*, 22 June 2020, <https://europa.eu/!pd43yn>.

¹³ European Council, *Remarks by President Charles Michel after the EU-China Leaders’ Meeting via Video Conference*, 14 September 2020, <https://europa.eu/!XX78Qt>.

¹⁴ European Commission, *EU-China Leaders’ Meeting: Upholding EU Values and Interests at the Highest Level*, 14 September 2020, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_20_1648.

¹⁵ See EEAS, *The EU Approach to the Indo-Pacific: Speech by High Representative/Vice-President Josep Borrell at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), Jakarta*, 3 June 2021, <https://www.eeas.europa.eu/node/99501>.

¹⁶ European Commission and EEAS, *The EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific* (JOIN/2021/24), 16 September 2021, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/en/TXT/?uri=celex:52021JC0024>.

strategies by France, Netherlands and Germany.¹⁷ While planning to expand its regional profile more generally, the EU has also specifically begun to discuss the possibility of engaging in common exercises in the South China Sea.¹⁸ Thus, by intensifying existing cooperation with Indo-Pacific partners, the EU hopes to strengthen its strategic reach as well as secure the resilience of its supply chains.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has reinforced this trend, further prompting the EU to step up its defence strategy in the region.¹⁹

The EU and its member states are increasingly veering into the realm of hard power in the region. For example, the EU has sought to offer access to the Indo-Pacific Regional Information Sharing (IORIS) web-based platform to allow Indo-Pacific countries' navies and coastguards to conduct real-time communications.²⁰ For its part, France has vowed to increase its military presence by sending warships to the South China Sea surroundings and conducting air exercises.²¹ In 2019, the French aircraft carrier *Charles de Gaulle* was deployed to travel through the Indian Ocean to Singapore,²² while the warship *Vendemiaire* passed through Taiwan Strait.²³ France was involved in a joint naval exercise with the United States, Australia and Japan in the Bay of Bengal²⁴ and with India in an air combat drill.²⁵ In 2021, it

¹⁷ For an analysis of these member states' Indo-Pacific strategies and their feeding into the EU's eventual Indo-Pacific strategy, see Mario Esteban and Ugo Armanini, "European Indo-Pacific Strategies: Convergent Thinking and Shared Limitations", in *Elcano Royal Institute Analyses (ARI)*, No. 30/2021 (10 March 2021), <https://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/en/analyses/european-indo-pacific-strategies-convergent-thinking-and-shared-limitations>.

¹⁸ Dian Septiari, "EU Wants to Have Maritime Presence in South China Sea", in *The Jakarta Post*, 10 June 2021.

¹⁹ Eva Corlett and Dominique Catton, "EU to Step Up Indo-Pacific Defence Presence over China Fears and Ukraine Example", in *The Guardian*, 18 May 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/p/yengf>.

²⁰ Raissa Robles, "South China Sea: EU Offers Encrypted Tool to Fight Maritime Security Threats in Indo-Pacific", in *South China Morning Post*, 1 March 2022.

²¹ AFP, "France Challenges Beijing in South China Sea", in *The Straits Times*, 12 June 2018, <https://www.straitstimes.com/world/europe/france-challenges-beijing-in-south-china-sea>.

²² AFP, "France's Charles de Gaulle Aircraft Carrier Sets Off for Asia", in *France 24*, 5 March 2019, <https://www.france24.com/en/20190305-frances-charles-de-gaulle-aircraft-carrier-sets-off-asia>.

²³ Idrees Ali and Phil Stewart, "Exclusive: In Rare Move, French Warship Passes through Taiwan Strait", in *Reuters*, 25 April 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-taiwan-france-warship-china-exclusive-idUSKCN1S10Q7>.

²⁴ Steven Stashwick, "French, US, Australian, Japanese Warships Drill in Bay of Bengal", in *The Diplomat*, 20 May 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/05/french-us-australian-japanese-warships-drill-in-bay-of-bengal>.

²⁵ Franz-Stefan Gady, "India, France Hold Large Naval Warfare Exercise Involving 2 Aircraft

conducted a nuclear-propelled attack submarine and warship patrol in the region to underscore freedom of navigation in international waterways.²⁶ Germany's launch of its Indo-Pacific Strategy has been accompanied by a growing military presence in the SCS, too. In 2021, the German frigate *Bayern* sailed into the South China Sea, marking the first German warship presence in the region in twenty years.²⁷ At the same time, the Netherlands has sent their HNLMS *Evertsen* to the British Carrier Strike Group 21 (CSG21) voyage to the South China Sea.²⁸

Expert and official interviews conducted for this paper suggest that the EU's newfound interest in reinforcing its engagement with Indo-Pacific countries is welcomed by many – if not most – regional actors. But importantly, they consistently challenge the view that the EU can or should play a role similar to that of the United States. While Washington aspires to be one of the region's leading term setters, its absence from the most significant regional economic blocs, especially the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) which it signed under Obama but left under Trump, illustrates how its primary form of regional engagement has been to deepen defence cooperation with Indo-Pacific countries. By contrast, the EU's appeal stems from its status as a normative actor, which is not without staying power. One might go so far as to argue that focusing on normative power, rather than on the deployment of defence assets, represents the best fashion for the EU to appear as an alternative development partner and provide a counterbalance to China's economic incentives.²⁹ How reflective of reality these conceptions are, however, remains in question.

Trade and investment, including in social development such as poverty eradication and welfare, and democracy promotion are some of the traditional paths of the

Carriers", in *The Diplomat*, 1 May 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/05/india-france-hold-large-naval-warfare-exercise-involving-2-aircraft-carriers>.

²⁶ "French Nuclear Submarine Patrolled in South China Sea - Navy", in *Reuters*, 9 February 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/southchina-sea-france-submarine-idUSL1N2KF1J7>.

²⁷ "First German Warship in Almost Two Decades Enters South China Sea", in *Reuters*, 15 December 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/first-german-warship-almost-two-decades-enters-south-china-sea-2021-12-15>.

²⁸ William R. Hawkins, "NATO Navies Send Strategic Signals in the Indo-Pacific", in *U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings*, Vol. 148, No. 8 (August 2022), <https://www.usni.org/node/58518>.

²⁹ For example, see Daniel Gros, "America's Inward Turn on Trade", in *Project Syndicate*, 12 December 2022, <https://prosyn.org/ovNSfBf>.

EU's international engagement. However, with great power tensions on the rise, pressure is mounting on the EU and its member states to adopt a more “geopolitical” approach.

1.2 Features of EU regional engagement

Given the natural synergies between the EU and ASEAN on “softer” issues, regional experts and officials interviewed for this paper find it peculiar when European (as opposed to American) rhetoric on the Indo-Pacific focuses on the need for a greater military presence and intensified defence talks. While these desires may be comprehensible on the part of the EU, interviews suggested that Southeast Asian states are skittish about the notion of more military vessels navigating in their backyard for fear of unintended consequences.

Nevertheless, the overall focus on maritime governance that the EU has presented within its Indo-Pacific strategy does find merit with Asian states looking to improve their maritime security capability.³⁰ Aside from having new hardware equipment, Southeast Asian countries require improved capacity to detect illegal activities in their waters, more staff and officers possessing skills and knowledge in maritime domain awareness, and increased endurance at sea.

In particular, the EU's maritime capacity-building initiative CRIMARIO has been a well-received and noteworthy project, especially since its expansion to CRIMARIO II which brings the initiative from the Gulf of Aden into Southeast Asia. This maritime domain awareness mission promises a softer approach in security cooperation in comparison with military exercises and other forms of defence cooperation.³¹ CRIMARIO's focus in enhancing information and crisis management, as well as strengthening inter-agency cooperation in maritime judicial matters, helps to tackle various non-traditional security issues that are also abundant in Southeast Asia, as well as in the South China Sea. Given the growing importance of maritime law enforcement agencies in a contested SCS, CRIMARIO's focus helps to align

³⁰ See, e.g., Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Free and Open Indo-Pacific*, 16 May 2022, https://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/page25e_000278.html.

³¹ For more on the mission's framework, see CRIMARIO website: *Rationale & Objectives*, <https://www.crimario.eu/en/?p=327>.

ASEAN countries in upholding the norms of globally recognised maritime law, even if it may be eclipsed by the US's newly announced Indo-Pacific Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA) initiative, which has the support of the “Quad” format comprising the United States, Australia, India and Japan.³² Ostensibly aimed at illegal fishing, the IPMDA will effectively track China's military and paramilitary assets at sea.³³ In a sign of how Beijing may interpret the move, an article in the Chinese Communist Party-aligned *Global Times* accuses the Quad-backed initiative of spurring the “militarization” of the region, illustrating how difficult it may have already become to attenuate the security perceptions of the region's leading powers.³⁴ The US approach to deterrence may indeed blunt the EU's attempts at charting a “third way” between the rivalling G2 powers in the region.

Yet in its attempts to increase its presence in the regional strategic equation, the EU appears to be making the mistake of speaking its own language over the language preferred by local actors, making complex terrain even more difficult to navigate. While EU statements concerning the region often focus on preserving the “rules-based international order”, Southeast Asian countries are ambivalent with this term, not least because there have been instances where Western countries violated the rules, with the 2003 Iraq war being but one example.³⁵ In their current application of this term to constrain their rivals, Western powers are often viewed in the Global South as not providing enough flexibility in their approach towards non-aligned countries, as the latter are effectively asked to choose between alleged proponents and opponents of this order. When given the choice, Southeast Asian states would prefer a vocabulary focused on the upholding of international law and local priorities. For the South China Sea this would mean: respecting the ASEAN-China Declaration of Conduct of 2002, which underlines the importance of freedom of

³² Fujita Mizumi, “America's Impatience Overrides Various Countries' Objections – Will the IPMDA Be Able to Prevent a Taiwan Crisis?” [in Japanese], in *Fuji News Network*, 26 May 2022, <https://www.fnn.jp/articles/-/365541>.

³³ See Giulio Pugliese, “The European Union's Security Intervention in the Indo-Pacific: Between Multilateralism and Mercantile Interests”, in *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, 19 September 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17502977.2022.2118425>.

³⁴ Hu Yuwei, Xiao Yan and Chen Yang, “GT Investigates: US Uses IPMDA to Stir Confrontation in South China Sea, while China Seeks Blue Economy Partnerships with ASEAN”, in *The Global Times*, 22 December 2022, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202212/1282448.shtml>.

³⁵ For more, see Peter Beinart, “The Vacuous Phrase at the Core of Biden's Foreign Policy”, in *The New York Times*, 22 June 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/22/opinion/biden-foreign-policy.html>.

overflight and navigation, self-restraint and peaceful settlement of disputes;³⁶ concluding the Code of Conduct negotiation to produce a more binding and less aspirational framework to reduce the risk of conflict in the SCS; and upholding the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea.³⁷ Tailoring EU goals to local priorities is key for the EU to sharpen its image as an independent and trustworthy actor and increase its capacity to contribute to the region's governance.

In the face of mounting great power competition in very recent years, the EU has sought to rebalance its relationship of cooperation with China with elements of competition and rivalry, even as its newly adopted Indo-Pacific strategy posits another vector through which to contribute to the counterbalancing of China's rise. In this context, how does multipolarity constrain EUFSP towards the region?

2. The impact of multipolarity and other constraining factors

2.1 Multipolar competition in practice

How has “multipolar competition”, namely the co-existence of multiple powers espousing fundamentally contrasting views of global and regional order – manifested itself in the SCS (and Indo-Pacific) region? And how does it interact with other structural and domestic factors that shape the context of EUFSP, such as regional fragmentation (here, the dysfunctionality of regional governance mechanisms) and intra-EU contestation (namely intra-EU divisions originating

³⁶ Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), *Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea*, 14 May 2012, <https://asean.org/?p=44827>.

³⁷ ASEAN members Singapore, Vietnam, Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines are currently negotiating a “code of conduct” aimed at regulating Chinese naval operations in waters in which China has conflicting territorial claims with some of ASEAN's members. In a joint statement with their Japanese counterparts, the French defence and foreign ministers said they will ensure that the negotiated code “complies with UNCLOS and does not call into question the rights and the interests of any third party in the South China Sea”. See French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, *Japon - 6e communiqué conjoint des ministres des Affaires étrangères et de la défense de la République française et du Japon (Visioconférence)* [Japan - the 6th joint statement by the Ministers of Foreign Affairs and Defence of France and Japan (videoconference)], 20 January 2022, <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/fr/dossiers-pays/japon/evenements/article/japon-6e-communique-conjoint-des-ministres-des-affaires-etrangees-et-de-la>.

from domestic incentives for EU governments not to invest in EUFSP)?³⁸

Engagements by great powers in and around the SCS in the second half of the twentieth century were comparatively low. During that time, Southeast Asian states had a goal to keep major powers out of the region. The effects of decolonisation and the Cold War led most Southeast Asian states to prioritise strategic autonomy against band-wagoning with either the United States or the Soviet Union.³⁹ However, with the end of the Cold War and the fall of the Soviet bloc, regional states increased their engagement with major powers through various initiatives, whether through ASEAN and other existing multilateral institutions, such as the ASEAN Regional Forum, ASEAN Plus Three (China, South Korea and Japan), ASEAN Plus Six (India, New Zealand and Australia) and its associated East Asia Summit (which now includes Russia and the United States), Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) and the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM). In the twenty-first century they began to face an increasingly coercive and powerful China that has vied for complete control of the SCS.

The approach of Southeast Asian states in this context has proceeded largely along a dual track.⁴⁰ By seeking closer ties with the United States and lately the EU, SCS claimant states have sought to improve their capacity to deter future Chinese encroachments. But at the same time, by continuing to engage with China, the claimants have hoped to prevent conflict. Therefore, some form of hedging has been the most popular approach for Southeast Asian states. Yet with the advent of the “Indo-Pacific” framing that has by-and-large replaced the “Asia-Pacific” one, the situation has devolved into a US/Western-Chinese competitive dynamic,

³⁸ On multipolar competition, see Assem Dandashly et al., “Multipolarity and EU Foreign and Security Policy: Divergent Approaches to Conflict and Crisis Response”, in *JOINT Research Papers*, No. 6 (December 2021), <https://www.jointproject.eu/?p=697>; on regional fragmentation, Agnès Levallois et al., “Regional Fragmentation and EU Foreign and Security Policy”, in *JOINT Research Papers*, No. 3 (November 2021), <https://www.jointproject.eu/?p=639>; on intra-EU contestation, Marianna Lovato et al., “The Internal Contestation of EU Foreign and Security Policy”, in *JOINT Research Papers*, No. 1 (September 2021), <https://www.jointproject.eu/?p=516>. For an analysis of the interplay between the three factors, see Riccardo Alcaro et al., “A Joined-Up Union, a Stronger Europe. A Conceptual Framework to Investigate EU Foreign and Security Policy in a Complex and Contested World”, in *JOINT Research Papers*, No. 8 (August 2022), <https://www.jointproject.eu/?p=969>.

³⁹ For more, see Kilian Spandler, *Regional Organizations in International Society. ASEAN, the EU and the Politics of Normative Arguing*, Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.

⁴⁰ For example, see Alfred Gerstl, *Hedging Strategies in Southeast Asia. ASEAN, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam and their Relations with China*, London/New York, Routledge, 2022.

putting pressure on Southeast Asian states to choose a side (without necessarily forming a full-fledged alliance).⁴¹

With a more coercive China in the South China Sea, as described below, and an interest mainly from the Western major powers to supply Southeast Asian states with Western products, more and more Southeast Asian States have now opted to increase military ties with the West. The US introduction of the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) in 2017 was also a major factor to deter several Southeast Asian states from procuring defence equipment from US rivals (Russia, and to an extent, China). CAATSA introduced "secondary" (that is, extraterritorial) sanctions on foreign companies engaging in commercial activities forbidden under US law.⁴² In exchange, the United States and its allies have been active in supplying equipment, such as naval vessels, helicopters and unmanned drones.⁴³ Southeast Asian states are finding it ever harder to continue maintaining their hedging strategy.

China's rise and the accompanying advent of a form of global multipolarity has had an impact both on the SCS and wider Indo-Pacific region and on the way in which the EU has crafted its approach towards it.

One area of increasing attention is China's improvement of maritime law enforcement capacity. Realising the risk of constantly operating warships in a disputed area, China has reformed its numerous maritime law enforcement structures into a single agency called the China Coast Guard.⁴⁴ China has thus increased its capacity to apprehend or act upon any actions conducted by external parties that it has deemed to be in breach of its laws. China Coast Guard vessels can often be observed harassing and coercing both civilian and foreign government vessels to leave China's claimed territorial waters in the SCS. The use of ships by

⁴¹ Jonathan Stromseth, "Don't Make Us Choose: Southeast Asia in the Throes of US-China Rivalry", in *Brookings Reports*, October 2019, <https://www.brookings.edu/?p=616635>.

⁴² For more, see David Hutt, "Why Southeast Asia Continues to Buy Russian Weapons", in *Deutsche Welle*, 4 May 2022, <https://www.dw.com/en/a-61364950>.

⁴³ For more on the volume of US arms exports, see Statista, *U.S. Arms Exports in 2021, by Country*, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/248552>.

⁴⁴ Website of the Japan's Ministry of Defense: *The Coast Guard Law of the People's Republic of China*, https://www.mod.go.jp/en/d_act/sec_env/ch_ocn/index.html.

the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) is restricted only in countering similar vessels, such as those used by the United States and its allies Australia, Japan, the UK and France in Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs). In addition, China employs paramilitary-like groups such as its Maritime Militia to support to the Coast Guard and to an extent the PLAN as well. These groups often disguise themselves as commercial fishermen, using fishing vessels that are equipped with improved communication devices and better hull protection for increased endurance out at sea.⁴⁵ In recent years, China has moved to construct the legal grounding necessary to empower its Coast Guard to “demolish other countries’ structures built on Chinese-claimed reefs, and to board and expel foreign vessels”.⁴⁶ This threatens the use of lethal force that may lead to more hostile situations in the disputed waters claimed by China.⁴⁷

To counter China's aggressive behaviour in the SCS, Southeast Asian states are developing their own coast guard agencies.⁴⁸ These agencies either have sole jurisdiction in maritime enforcement or complement the navy in apprehending illegal actions at sea. Vietnam, like China, has officially institutionalised its Maritime Militia organisation under its maritime security system.⁴⁹ Other countries, such as Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines have not institutionalised a maritime militia unit, but have oftentimes sought the support of their own fishermen and other civilian vessels to observe movements by external parties in their maritime territories.⁵⁰ Although Southeast Asian claimant states frequently clashed with China's Coast Guard vessels, there are numerous occurrences where Southeast

⁴⁵ Koki Sato, “China's Maritime Militia: A Legal Point of View”, in *Maritime Issues*, 12 March 2020, <http://www.maritimeissues.com/politics/maritime-militia-in-east-and-south-china-seas.html>.

⁴⁶ “A New Law Would Unshackle China's Coastguard, Far from Its Coast”, in *The Economist*, 3 December 2020, <https://www.economist.com/china/2020/12/03/a-new-law-would-unshackle-chinas-coastguard-far-from-its-coast>.

⁴⁷ Nguyen Thanh Trung, “How China's Coast Guard Law Has Changed the Regional Security Structure”, in *AMTI Updates*, 12 April 2021, <https://amti.csis.org/how-chinas-coast-guard-law-has-changed-the-regional-security-structure>.

⁴⁸ Prashanth Parameswaran, “Managing the Rise of Southeast Asia's Coast Guards”, in *Wilson Center Publications*, February 2019, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/managing-the-rise-southeast-asias-coast-guards>.

⁴⁹ For more, see “Vietnam Beefs Up Its Maritime Militia, Still Dwarfed by China's”, in *Radio Free Asia*, 21 February 2022, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/vietnam/maritime-militia-02212022081149.html>.

⁵⁰ For more, see Nguyen Hong Thao and Binh Ton-Nu Thanh, “Maritime Militias in the South China Sea”, in *NBR Commentaries*, 13 July 2019, <https://www.nbr.org/?p=47677>.

Asian coast guards and citizens have clashed with one another as well.⁵¹

Given the use of maritime law enforcement agencies and at times paramilitary groupings, the SCS disputes have been regarded as a grey zone conflict, where maritime militias may face off against a naval warship. Such asymmetry has caused concerns over whether the region may face an open conflict in which a variety of vessels loiter around the area. The situation is further exacerbated by the presence of external powers' naval warships conducting FONOPs, typically within proximity of China's naval assets or controlled features in the SCS. Although naval face-off between a US naval destroyer and a Chinese fishing vessel is rare, there have been multiple occurrences of US warships facing off with Chinese warships.⁵² In some cases, physical contact is only several inches away from happening, mainly attributed to deliberate Chinese attempts to scare off the Western warships. The same pattern can be observed in the region's airspace.⁵³

To an extent, China's hegemonic design in the SCS is not just a projected trend into the future but a new reality on the ground. Beijing has in many ways already accomplished what it set out to do, namely creating a new favourable status quo with de facto control over the Spratlys thanks to the construction of artificial islands. Given that Beijing's "nine-dash line" indicates that the SCS may fall within the category of what Beijing perceives as its core interests,⁵⁴ this new reality is likely irreversible (see Figure 1). Some analysts have for years predicted that the transformation of the SCS into a Chinese lake of sorts would eventually lead to Beijing being able to project power further afield, much as the US dominance of the Caribbean in the nineteenth century presaged Washington's rise to global

⁵¹ For example, see "Malaysian Coast Guards Kill Vietnamese Fisherman in South China Sea Clash", in *The Straits Times*, 17 August 2020, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/malaysia-coast-guard-kill-vietnamese-fisherman-in-s-china-sea-clash>.

⁵² For example, see "China Says It Warned Away U.S. Warship in South China Sea, U.S. Denies", in *Reuters*, 20 January 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/china-says-warned-away-us-warship-south-china-sea-2022-01-20>. Also see Catherine Wong, "US, Chinese Warships within Metres of Collision in South China Sea, Leaked Pictures Show", in *South China Morning Post*, 3 October 2018.

⁵³ For example, see Reuters, "Chinese Navy Jet Flies within 10ft of US Air Force Plane over South China Sea", in *The Guardian*, 30 December 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/p/n2ymx>.

⁵⁴ What does or does not constitute a Chinese core interest, as defined by Beijing, is a matter of evolution and debate. See Shi Jiangtao, "Decoding the Deliberate Ambiguity of China's Expanding Core Interests", in *South China Morning Post*, 17 August 2021.

great power status.⁵⁵ As such, the SCS issue has become engulfed in wider “Indo-Pacific” dynamics as great power tensions have worsened.

Figure 1 | South China Sea disputes



Source: “Not So Hard: British Scholar Proposes Fix for South China Sea Disputes”, in *Radio Free Asia*, 17 March 2022, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/china/southchinasea-dispute-03172022151441.html>.

This enlargement of the contested geographic space comes with opportunities and drawbacks, both for the EU and its regional partners. The expansion of the area of contestation has evidently posed a challenge for the preservation of the principle of ASEAN “centrality”, which places the organisation at the centre of its member states’ diplomatic outlook and regional governance,⁵⁶ even if the United States and EU have lent rhetorical support to the notion in their respective Indo-

⁵⁵ For example, see Robert D. Kaplan, *Asia’s Cauldron. The South China Sea and the End of a Stable Pacific*, New York, Random House, 2014.

⁵⁶ Aaron Connelly, “The Often-Overlooked Meaning of ‘ASEAN Centrality’”, in *IISS Analysis Blog*, 9 June 2022, <https://www.iiss.org/blogs/analysis/2022/06/the-often-overlooked-meaning-of-asean-centrality>.

Pacific strategies.⁵⁷ Nor is this the only factor inhibiting ASEAN from maximising its potential regional influence. China's rising power has split ASEAN members – some such as Cambodia and Laos are more China-friendly whereas others such as Vietnam are especially China-wary. This may be inevitable due to the realities of history, as Vietnam has a legacy of conflictual relations with China, and geography, given that not every ASEAN state has a littoral on the South China Sea.

Because the principle of ASEAN centrality is an important pillar of regional multilateralism thanks to bodies such as the ASEAN Regional Forum, the rise of the Indo-Pacific – a construct amid a growth in multipolarity – also affects the EU's vision for its preferred regional order. The region's wider geography does, however, offer the EU a clearer opportunity to present itself as a regional player, though with a caveat: while the western Indo-Pacific (which extends to the Horn of Africa) lies within the EU's (much) enlarged neighbourhood and has been a key area of European hard-power activity through missions such as the anti-piracy Operation Atalanta, the eastern Indo-Pacific (especially the South and East China Seas) is harder to operate in for the EU. Yet, it is in the eastern Indo-Pacific where the core great power dynamic between China and the United States plays out most acutely. The framing of this region as lying at the core of the battle to shape the future of the international order, rightly or wrongly, creates the image of an EU that is not a leading global actor in that it has little say there. This, in turn, can lead to policy incoherence as European voices litigate over how best to right the ship, with a lack of clarity over which facets of regional engagement the EU and its member states seek to prioritise. Further actions of the EU in the region, and in particular the SCS, may increasingly be subject to retaliation from Beijing through legal tactics (such as foreign investment screening or export controls).⁵⁸

With the United States embracing a form of zero-sum competition with China, countries in the region are facing pressure to choose between two superpowers. Efforts to resist this pressure may eventually be met by more coercive measures

⁵⁷ See Zachary Paikin et al., "The Rise of Mega-Regions: Eurasia, the Indo-Pacific, and the Transatlantic Alliance in a Reshaped World Order", in *CEPS In-depth Analysis*, No. 2022-05 (November 2022), <https://www.ceps.eu/?p=38396>.

⁵⁸ See Steven Blockmans, "Extraterritorial Sanctions with a Chinese Trademark. European Responses to Long-Arm Legal Tactics", in *CEPS Policy Insights*, No. 2021-01 (January 2021), <https://www.ceps.eu/?p=31956>.

on the part of Washington.⁵⁹ While Washington's efforts are aimed at shaping the rules and norms which will govern the region (and the globe) over future decades, there is in fact a risk that unrestrained competition leads to the erosion of rules-based interaction, threatening the EU's preferred engagement with the region, rooted in international law, regional governance mechanisms as well as trade arrangements. At the same time, beyond the region itself, the EU's increased dependence on the United States for managing security in Europe following Russia's invasion of Ukraine diminishes its ability to act as an independent player in the Indo-Pacific.

2.2 Implications and complicating factors

The trends sketched out above point to a common conclusion: the room for the EU to partner with regional actors to buttress a "third way" between the United States and China has shrunk considerably. A European approach centred on international law, inter-regional cooperation and trade contrasts with the more zero-sum and hard power-centric US strategy aimed at countering China's growing clout and preserving American regional primacy, to which the EU cannot really oppose any working alternative. The Europeans can only contribute to the US approach limitedly and in a complementary fashion, while seeking to press their old approach on the margins. Hence, the EU's role in a more competitive SCS where regional governance mechanisms struggle to function cannot but be a minor one.

As such, when it comes to determining the extent to which multipolarity constrains EUFSP in the region, much depends on what the EU can realistically hope to achieve in this mutated context. Open great power competition is a relatively new phenomenon in the SCS. Concerns over China's rise have existed in the expert community for some time, with historical parallels being drawn with the clashes experienced by previous hegemonic aspirants and established dominant powers.⁶⁰ That said, the core features of a seemingly more zero-sum competition

⁵⁹ Evan Feigenbaum, *The U.S. and the Indo-Pacific Region*, keynote speech at the 2022 East Asia Strategy Forum, 1-2 November 2022, <https://peacediplomacy.org/?p=13829>.

⁶⁰ See for example John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, Updated ed., New York/London, W.W. Norton, 2014; and Graham Allison, *Destined for War. Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?*, Boston/New York, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017.

between Washington and Beijing – a trade war, the deployment of the “Indo-Pacific” nomenclature, and a shift in focus away from transforming China into a responsible stakeholder to viewing it as a rival power – are recent. The combination of this fact with the EU’s geographic distance from the region and its modest potential for power projection makes the EU approach limited in terms of scope and ambition.

The landscape that the EU faces is further complicated by additional constraining factors and their intersection with the burgeoning multipolarity, outlined in Table 1 below. First is the complex nature of regional fragmentation in the SCS. This fragmentation is generally not as acute as in the Middle East or the Horn of Africa, for example, where states often find themselves internally fragmented. Yet fragmentation does affect the SCS insofar as regional governance structures struggle to address disputes and crises, even accounting for successful forms of economic integration such as the CPTPP and the China-led Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP).

Second, internal contestation persists within the EU when it comes to relations with both China and the wider Indo-Pacific. Different member states pay different levels of attention to the region and have different drivers shaping their regional priorities – from economic engagement to security affairs, to relations with the United States.⁶¹ Hardening attitudes towards China provide an example where EU views are consolidating around a common perspective, with elements of competition and rivalry increasingly becoming driving forces in the EU’s relations with Beijing in place of cooperation. However, differing viewpoints persist, with some suggesting the importance of avoiding a repeat of European “naivete” with China in the same way that interdependence with Russia was weaponised, while others being more wary of acting in haste, especially with the European economy already facing challenges in the wake of the energy decoupling from Russia.⁶² Efforts to preserve islands of trust with China have proven more fraught given the widely shared perception in the West that Beijing has sided with Moscow in

⁶¹ For more, see Frédéric Grare and Manisha Reuter, “Moving Closer: European Views of the Indo-Pacific”, in *ECFR Specials*, September 2021, <https://ecfr.eu/?p=76399>.

⁶² For more, see Sophia Besch and Liana Fix, “Don’t Let Zeitenwende Get Derailed”, in *War on the Rocks*, 21 November 2022, <https://warontherocks.com/?p=27889>.

its war on Ukraine. This illustrates how any efforts to reach out to China will face constraints associated with the dynamics of the Sino-American rivalry, including in the SCS.

Table 1 | Complex manifestation of constraining factors

EUFSP constraint	Complex manifestation	Challenges for the EU
<i>Multipolar competition</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · US-China rivalry in the SCS · Nested within multi-actor multipolarity at Indo-Pacific level · EU-China relations on non-SCS issues as separate dynamic 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Preserve a degree of strategic autonomy despite increased dependence on the US · Internalise potential contradictions between EU strategies in the SCS and the Indo-Pacific
<i>Regional fragmentation</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Absence of necessary capacity to defend territorial integrity · Process-driven rather than results-driven regional institutions · Regional economic integration 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Contribute to hard security issues while avoiding more militarised US approach · Focus on priorities of regional actors
<i>Intra-EU contestation</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Different levels of importance accorded to the region by member states · Different approaches to China rooted in different approaches to the United States 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Maintain momentum for Europeanisation of the policy file · Ensure limits to the hardening of European approach towards China

3. Mitigating strategies

3.1 Playing the geopolitical game

Strategy is ultimately about making choices: determining how to apportion limited resources, understanding the trade-offs involved, and developing a political consensus around a willingness to bear the costs associated with those trade-offs.

To an extent, the EU has made some progress on this front, both at the Union and member state levels. The publication of the EU’s Strategic Outlook on China and the Indo-Pacific Strategy are significant events, given the difficulty in securing support from the Commission, the EEAS and the member states for what are undoubtedly geopolitical documents. The Strategic Outlook on China set a precedent for the EU

in that it characterised a superpower as, inter alia, a “systemic rival”.⁶³ The ability to discriminate between friends and foes is an attribute of geopolitical actorness. The joint communication inspired the European Council to define its position ahead of the April 2019 EU-China Summit and has since then been the nominal frame for EU institutions and member states alike to strike a more coherent and assertive stance towards the communist-ruled juggernaut.⁶⁴ Similarly, according to a senior EEAS official interviewed for this paper, as recently as two years ago there was no agreement between the Commission and the EEAS on the need for a generalised Indo-Pacific Strategy. The rapidity of change is a testament to the EU’s ability to act (or perhaps react) in the face of changing geopolitical dynamics.

Progress is also substantial at the member state level. Roughly a decade ago, France was largely alone in pushing for greater EU involvement in the Indo-Pacific. Other EU countries such as Germany and the Netherlands have now also adopted their own Indo-Pacific strategies.⁶⁵ Perhaps illustrative of the success of the French Council presidency (1 January-30 June 2022) in Europeanising the issue, the Indo-Pacific region ranked among the priorities of the following Czech presidency as well.⁶⁶ Greater interest is also visible among the three Baltic countries, all of which have now left what was previously called the 17+1 grouping of Central and Eastern European countries with China. This move can partly be attributed to a desire for the EU to engage with China as 27 to maximise the bloc’s impact. However this is belied by Lithuania’s seemingly unilateral moves with respect to Taiwan.⁶⁷ This demonstrates the extent to which European security concerns with respect to

⁶³ European Commission, *EU-China – A Strategic Outlook*, cit.

⁶⁴ EEAS, EU-China Relations Factsheet, April 2022, <https://www.eeas.europa.eu/node/34728>.

⁶⁵ See German Federal Foreign Office, *One Year of the German Government Policy Guidelines on the Indo-Pacific Region: Taking Stock*, 13 September 2021, <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/2481700>. Also see Netherlands Government, *Indo-Pacific: Guidelines for Strengthening Dutch and EU Cooperation with Partners in Asia*, 13 November 2020, <https://www.government.nl/documents/publications/2020/11/13/indo-pacific-guidelines>.

⁶⁶ Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *The Government Has Approved Czechia’s Strategies for Engaging in Africa and for Cooperation with the Indo-Pacific*, 4 January 2023, https://www.mzv.cz/jnp/en/issues_and_press/press_releases/the_government_has_approved_czechia_s.html.

⁶⁷ In 2021, the Republic of China opened an embassy in Vilnius using the term “Taiwanese”, with Lithuania promising to open an office in Taipei. In retaliation, China stopped not only all imports from Lithuania but also goods containing Lithuanian parts, creating an issue for the European single market. For more detail, see Steven Blockmans, “Lithuania, China and EU Lawfare to Counter Economic Coercion: Breaking Bad?”, in *CEPS Policy Insights*, No. 2021-20 (December 2021), <https://www.ceps.eu/?p=34908>.



Russia, and the role that the United States plays in ensuring European security, help shape EU's approach towards China as well.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine offers certain opportunities for the EU in the SCS and Indo-Pacific regions, but also certain constraints which EU states will struggle to mitigate. On the one hand, the Ukraine war has increased the salience of the issue of respecting and defending the territorial integrity of states – an issue which lies at the core of the SCS disputes. While the dynamics of the Ukraine war undoubtedly differ from those in the SCS littoral dispute, a consistent EU approach centred on the importance of preserving territorial integrity may win plaudits in the SCS region and help to focus the scope of the EU's engagement there. In terms of building the foundations of a “geopolitical” EU, this may be an area where the consistent defence of international norms aligns well – rather than conflicts – with managing the dynamics of a securitised international environment.

If the Ukraine war, however, encourages the EU to adopt a framing of “democracy vs. authoritarianism” in its dealing with the rest of the world, then this would play less well in the Indo-Pacific where states not only wish not to choose between the West and China but also have largely been sitting on the fence with respect to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Such fence-sitting may appear morally questionable, but it may also have been indispensable to the success of the recent G20 summit in Bali, Indonesia, and therefore to securing the continued development needs of the Global South as well.

On the other hand, greater interest in the Indo-Pacific among member states may flow from dynamics which ultimately stand to undermine – or at least complicate – the EU's regional position. These include hardening attitudes towards China within the EU, as well as Washington's growing interest in the region amid its deepening rivalry with Beijing. While SCS littoral states may have territorial disputes with China, they also view Beijing as an important economic partner. At the same time, India's strategic rivalry with China suggests that the requirements for deepening EU-India ties may differ from those needed to enhance relations with most ASEAN member states. While the EU may have little choice but to deepen dialogue with the United States on the coordination of their respective Indo-Pacific strategies, especially in the wake of the Ukraine war and given how highly the region ranks as a US foreign policy priority, doing so may come at the expense of the EU's attempt



to be a partner for the region capable of buttressing the forces of non-alignment.

One additional dimension of thinking geopolitically will be an understanding that, in a multipolar world, the most viable way to address crises and conflicts may be to aim for competent management rather than an elusive resolution. In the case of the SCS, this manifests itself by way of the continued and deepening cooperation between China and ASEAN, even as the territorial disputes between them are continually managed. While there is wariness around the fact that China uses these bilateral management processes to peel ASEAN countries off against one another and thus enhance its regional dominance, ultimately it is up to ASEAN to determine the strength and unity of its approach towards Beijing. The EU naturally has a preference for the SCS dispute to be addressed in a multilateral format, but it should be careful not to side-line itself from regional dynamics through megaphone diplomacy and placing its own preferences over those of regional actors.

While a significant component of EU trade does pass through the Indo-Pacific, Europe's distance from the geographic core of the region indicates that European security is at stake to a lesser extent than it is in the case of Ukraine, for example, even though European prosperity is very much on the line. If this does indeed lend itself to a European strategy of navigating the geopolitical challenges of the region, then this will require a degree of malleability in the EU's relationship with China. According to a Chinese diplomat based in Europe, while Beijing's perspective on Washington's Indo-Pacific strategy is already formed given that it unambiguously targets China, the EU's Indo-Pacific strategy is still in formation even though the document itself has been published. If the "systemic rivalry" and "economic competition" elements of the EU's China label become unambiguously dominant over cooperation, then this stands to make it harder for the EU to carve out a clear niche in the wider region.

One example of a potentially misguided approach to dealing with a rising China concerns the EU's newly launched Global Gateway, a supposed response to China's Belt and Road Initiative which aims to "boost smart, clean and secure links in digital, energy and transport sectors and to strengthen health, education and

research systems across the world”.⁶⁸ Not only do questions still linger over the initiative’s disbursement of funds and how novel these funds are, but for many in Brussels it remains uncertain what this programme precisely is.⁶⁹ This represents an instance of attempting to compete with China simply for competition’s sake, when providing an alternative to China’s Belt and Road Initiative may not in fact be necessary. While elements of competition in EU-China relations will undoubtedly persist, this does not mean that Brussels must opt to compete with Beijing across most policy areas and in most geographic spaces. Even if China retains an incentive for now to distinguish its relations with the EU from those with the United States for the sake of peeling the former away from the latter, such an incentive may not last forever.

What, therefore, does mitigation of the impact on EU FSP of geopolitical competition in the SCS region, and the subsequent dysfunctionality of regional governance mechanisms, involve exactly? Rather than creating the impression in much of the Global South that the EU is primarily concerned with countering China, the EU should focus instead on emphasising the positive goods that it can deliver in those areas where it holds a comparative advantage. In other words, mitigating the impact of geopolitical competition in the SCS and the wider Indo-Pacific need not involve efforts to address every challenge to the EU’s freedom to manoeuvre across the board. Rather, resources should be allocated to privilege those areas in which EU interests are more significantly affected and where EU FSP has the greatest potential to have an impact, including on restoring some functionality to regional governance mechanisms.

There is a need for the EU to buttress not so much its own capabilities, but those of local states so that they are best equipped to match their diplomatic outreach to China with a sufficient degree of hard security assets. This should be coupled with efforts to preserve the ASEAN states’ desire for a regional policy focus on non-military issues such as connectivity, climate change, development, and the digital economy. The EU’s efforts to help local actors buttress their own capabilities must therefore also be carefully calibrated and deliberately delineated so as not to

⁶⁸ European Commission website: *Global Gateway*, <https://europa.eu/!fvN9yT>.

⁶⁹ Finbarr Bermingham and Jevans Nyabiage, “1 Year On, EU Alternative to China’s Belt and Road Fails to Deliver”, in *South China Morning Post*, 31 December 2022.

undermine the processes of integration that, while they may not conform to EU standards and may place a premium on process over results, nonetheless reflect the interests of many states in the region. The combined impact of these moves on mitigating the effects the US-China rivalry and the relative dysfunctionality of regional governance arrangements will be comparatively limited, but it would nonetheless make a contribution in that direction. Ultimately a bipolar military dynamic would remain the dominant feature of the SCS region.

The wider Indo-Pacific region, however, is another story. Here, mitigating the effects of the US-China rivalry and preserving a semblance of the status quo means *embracing* geopolitical competition – with India, Japan and others as players in this competition – rather than resisting it. Unlike in the SCS, where enhancing local actors' capabilities is key, in the wider Indo-Pacific the dynamic is concerned more with partnering with already capable states to help rewrite the rules of the broader game. This may not come easily to the EU given the implicit emphasis on upholding the *existing* rules-based international order. However, this term should be understood more as a framework for peaceful interstate relations rather than an immutable set of norms and institutions. Buttressing resilience in the international order requires, to a degree, embracing and adapting to changed circumstances.⁷⁰

Even if hard power is not the principal focus of the EU (although it is for France), forging coalitions still requires a degree of actorness that merely assisting other states does not. The latter option means placing the priorities of local actors above one's own preferences. The former requires a substantive effort to articulate and directly pursue one's *own* interests, albeit in partnership with others. In some respects, these two undertakings can be in conflict, with the EU's pursuit of its policy imperatives in the Indo-Pacific possibly endangering the "honest broker" image that it needs to project in the SCS.

3.2 Tools and priorities

In addition to the EU-ASEAN relationship, EU instruments for engaging states in the SCS include public diplomacy, people-to-people contacts, as well as bilateral

⁷⁰ See Trine Flockhart and Zachary Paikin (eds), *Rebooting Global International Society: Change, Contestation and Resilience*, Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 2022, p. 1-78.

relations with discussions ranging on security, economic links, digital connectivity, and cultural ties. In October, the EU and ASEAN signed the world's first interregional air transport agreement (CATA), replacing dozens of bilateral agreements in the process.⁷¹

The array of activity expands when taken against the backdrop of the wider Indo-Pacific region. Here, the EU boasts two partnership and cooperation agreements with Thailand and Malaysia, a recently concluded free trade agreement (FTA) with New Zealand and another with Australia due to be concluded in 2023, as well as the launch of free trade talks with Indonesia and the resumption of trade talks with India in June 2022. The EU also launched a digital partnership with Japan in May 2022 and has finalised similar partnerships with South Korea and Singapore, countries with which the EU already had enhanced FTAs.⁷² Other tools at the EU's disposal in the region include the EU Fund for Sustainable Development as well as Team Europe Initiatives (TEIs), which comprise coordinated action by EU institutions and individual member states. As an illustration, TEIs include the Green Initiative in South-East Asia centred on issues such as biodiversity, energy security, green cities and the circular economy, as well as the Green Blue Alliance for the Pacific focused on climate action and resilience and the sustainable management of fisheries.⁷³

In the realm of security, the EU is active in the Indo-Pacific along several vectors, most notably maritime security (CRIMARIO and Operation Atalanta), counterterrorism, and cybersecurity, with the latter of the three garnering particular interest from the EU's regional partners (according to one senior EEAS official). Yet despite this flurry of new activity, one Brussels-based scholar sees the EU's policy in the region as holding more continuity than change: the core foci remain maritime security, digital partnerships and free trade. At different times, some of these components may have been more emphasised than others, and today the novelty is that they are supposedly all packaged together in a comprehensive strategy. But in one form

⁷¹ ASEAN and European Union, *ASEAN and the EU Sign the World's First Bloc-to-bloc Air Transport Agreement - Joint Press Release*, 17 October 2022, <https://europa.eu/!YrhDJw>.

⁷² In the case of Japan, the EU also has a strategic partnership agreement.

⁷³ Capacity4dev website: *Team Europe Initiative and Joint Programming Tracker: Middle East, Asia and Pacific*, <https://europa.eu/capacity4dev/tei-jp-tracker/node/1807>.



or another, these forms of engagement have all existed for some time. As maritime security has jumped in importance given the need for securing open sea-lanes and rules-based trade in an era of multipolarity, there may be budding new ideas in the realm of maritime security. Yet, the EU's core and signature contribution on this front, Operation Atalanta operates in the western Indian Ocean and does not concern the SCS.

Consistency is an obvious asset in terms of increasing EU leverage. And while in previous decades environmental regulations and trade barrier removal were the more significant focus, today there is a greater desire among regional actors themselves to see the EU become more broadly involved in regional affairs. Interviews conducted for this paper among officials and experts in both Brussels and the region reveal that this is partly due to the image of the EU as a player that does not want to force local actors to choose between differing great power competitors, although this image may grow increasingly imperilled as discussed earlier.

That said, given the current power shift underway in the region and the centrality of the SCS within the Indo-Pacific region, questions nonetheless persist over whether the EU needs to up its game. Beyond maritime security, cybersecurity and counterterrorism, expert interviews conducted for this paper in several ASEAN capital cities suggest there is a desire as well for EU engagement in the realms of capacity building (as illustrated above), supplying defence equipment (as an alternative source), fishing rights, financial assistance to build coastguard ships, coastal development, protection of the marine environment, and combatting human trafficking and transnational crime.

Unlike in the case of Atalanta, the EU as a collective organisation will not be flying its flag in dissuasive or coercive military operations in the SCS.⁷⁴ Contrary to the United States, the EU does not possess military bases in the SCS and its adjacent theatres (French forces in Réunion, New Caledonia and French Polynesia, while located in the vast Indo-Pacific region, are quite distant from the SCS). The EU's inability to be a deterrent power further confirms that while there may be a security

⁷⁴ CRIMARIO's focus centres more on information exchange and analysis as well as strengthening cooperation in maritime surveillance and policing.

role for the EU to play in buttressing local actors' capabilities, the hard power role of EU countries is decidedly limited. They can partly make up for this structural weakness with sound diplomacy, which presupposes an ability to differentiate their approach depending on the extent to which geopolitical competition and regional governance fragmentation shape geographical contexts. As discussed above, the "rules" of EU engagement in the SCS – where ASEAN states are reluctant to antagonise China or the United States and are still investing in regional governance – cannot be the same in the wider Indo-Pacific, where geopolitical competition is more entrenched and pan-regional governance non-existent.

A main implication of the above is that the EU should de-link the Taiwan issue from the SCS disputes in its foreign policy pronouncements. Such a move would help delineate regional tensions where the EU is involved while also improving the EU's relations with ASEAN member states who wish to see such zero-sum tensions decrease. Interviewees for this paper largely agreed that Southeast Asian states do not exclusively see their SCS-related disputes as an extension of China-Taiwan issue, even if both issues may be strategically connected for Beijing and both also concern the question of freedom of navigation. The US Indo-Pacific strategy seeks to contain China's influence and coercive activities throughout the entire Indo-Pacific. As such, the United States links all probable regional flashpoints where China is involved, but ASEAN states seek to solve (or at least address) their disputes with China without linking them with other issues in the East China Sea.⁷⁵ This flows in part from ASEAN's strategic viewpoint, expressed in the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific, which does not side-line any actor but rather includes each country that seeks to play a role in the Indo-Pacific.⁷⁶

The recent EU-ASEAN Commemorative Summit, held in December 2022, also excluded Taiwan from its sixteen-page-long joint leaders' statement.⁷⁷ Subsequent statements of EU policy intent, produced by both HR Josep Borrell and after EU Council meetings, should underscore the limited scope of the EU's regional aims,

⁷⁵ Here, a precedent already exists in that issues concerning the Taiwan Strait are deliberately excluded from discussions at the ASEAN Regional Forum.

⁷⁶ ASEAN, *ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific*, Bangkok, 22 June 2019, <https://asean.org/?p=10911>.

⁷⁷ ASEAN and European Union, *EU-ASEAN Commemorative Summit: Joint Leaders' Statement*, 14 December 2022, <https://europa.eu/!N69vgX>.

making clear that the security-focused element of European engagement in the SCS will be limited to buttressing ASEAN members' resilience and territorial integrity as sovereign states and expressing a desire for careful diplomatic management of the Taiwan issue by all parties concerned.

Conclusion

As revealed by fieldwork interviews, much of the trust that Southeast Asian states hold in the EU flows from the perception that Brussels is a normative-oriented power that, unlike Washington, is not primarily concerned with containing China. Hence, the EU had best continue to listen to the region's priorities and resist the automatic reflex, so often on display amongst EU countries, to line up behind US goals. Greater alignment with the United States can bring security benefits for the EU across the wider Indo-Pacific region, but it could reduce the EU's ability to mitigate the impact of multipolar competition in the SCS specifically. While the pursuit of capacity building in the SCS and greater actorness in the Indo-Pacific are not entirely mutually exclusive, either one is unlikely to be maximised if both are pursued in tandem.

There is certainly no basis for the EU and ASEAN to band together and reshape the power balance of the SCS. Besides the – indeed, crucial – issue of capacity, there are limits to the ability of EU and especially ASEAN member states to coalesce around grand foreign policy cooperation designs. Beyond the differing interests and approaches that EU and ASEAN member states hold vis-à-vis China, interviews conducted for this paper in the region revealed how states have often gone out on their own to defend their own interests – for example, the Philippines failing to consult with fellow ASEAN states before internationalising its dispute with China, or Indonesia acknowledging that ASEAN offers just one platform through which to pursue its regional strategy.⁷⁸

Therefore, the realistic strategy across the board for the EU is likely to be a *de minimis* one. In the SCS, this would include a limited hard security role, but without

⁷⁸ Information gleaned from fieldwork interviews conducted by the authors.



the expectation that EU engagement or deeper EU-ASEAN relations stand to transform the region. In the Indo-Pacific, despite increased alignment with the United States, EU engagements should clearly delineate the scope of its hard security role and take care not to spread itself too thin or come across as one of several forces aiming to contain China's rise.

Given the EU's limited hard-security role in the SCS and longer-term aspirations of actorness in the Indo-Pacific, the most difficult task in buttressing the resilience of this strategy will involve preserving space, however small, for the EU to come across as an independent actor rather than an appendage of the United States. Yet given the desire of some EU member states not to upset the United States due to their overriding concern with Russian aggression, as well as hardening attitudes towards China overall, any aspiration to carve out a distinctly autonomous role would run not just against the herculean challenge of building capacities but against the much harder wall of political dissent inside the EU. Especially after Washington's high level of support for Ukraine in reaction to Russia's invasion – a crisis on the EU's doorstep – the United States will increasingly expect its European allies to return the favour when it comes to its own leading geopolitical preoccupation, the rise of China. In this context, member states should adopt a compromise approach, assuaging US security concerns over China's growing presence on the European continent while maintaining a degree of distance from Washington in the SCS and Indo-Pacific regions. Such a strategy would help mitigate the interplay between multipolar competition and internal contestation within the EU, while enabling the EU to address regional governance in the SCS from a non-competitive angle. The path towards limiting the impact of constraints on the effectiveness of EUFSP also includes *not* doing something rather than doing something.

Annex 1 | Anonymised list of interviews conducted in 2022

Dates	Location	Type of interviewees	Number of interviewees
23-26 August	Manila	Filipino scholars, policy experts and former government officials	5
29 August-2 September	Jakarta	Indonesian scholars, policy experts and former government officials	6
5-9 September	Kuala Lumpur	Malaysian and international scholars and policy experts	4
31 October-1 November	Jakarta	Current and former Indonesian government officials, Vietnamese government official, Australian policy experts, Chinese policy experts	9
2 November	Singapore	Policy experts	2
16 November	Brussels	EEAS officials	2
28-30 November	Brussels	Chinese diplomat, European scholar	2

Total number of interviewees: 30

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