

POLICY BRIEF

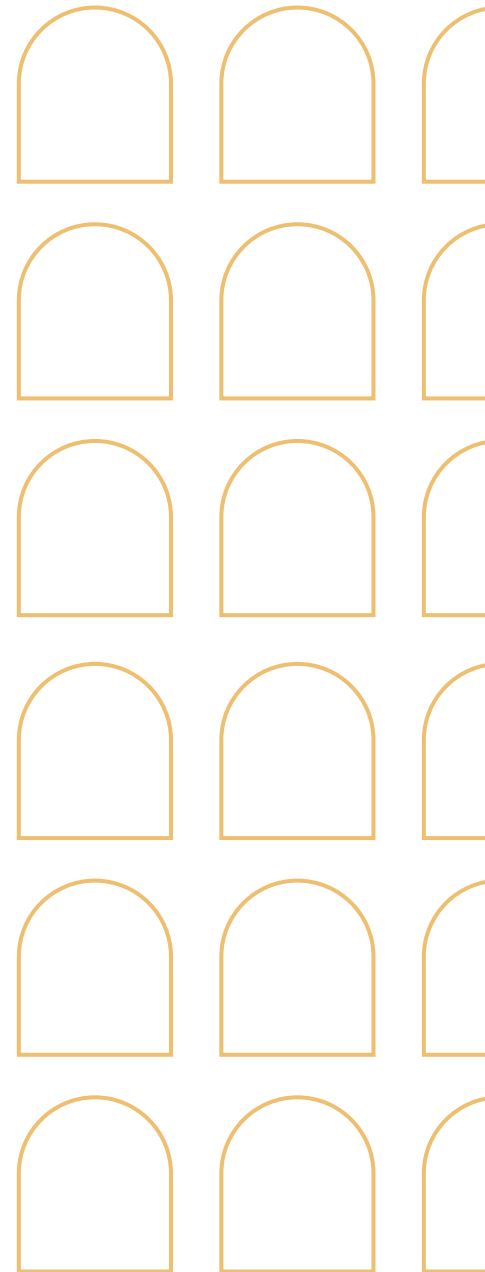
A China policy is not an Asia policy, but no Asia policy is without a China policy

The EU's Indo-Pacific Strategy and its strategic partnerships in Asia spell out areas of cooperation where the EU can contribute in deeds, not words, to remain a regional player in its own right and capabilities. Adding an Indo-Pacific leg to the Transatlantic one would strengthen both the EU and the US but needs reciprocal efforts and recognition. The EU approach strives to avoid binary choices for its members as well as partners in the US-China competition with the goal to foster stability. Pursuing its interests, the EU needs partners in the Indo-Pacific and has to devote the necessary means of its own liking to achieve them, also referred to as strategic autonomy.

1. Introduction

Well before the turn of the century, it was already clear that the 2000s would be an Asia century. The constant rise of China and its change from keeping its head down to competing with the US for regional or even global dominance has put it in the limelight, thereby erroneously becoming the sole centre of attention in Asia for some.

In this paper I advocate that a China policy is not an Asia policy, but no Asia policy is without a China policy, using the European Union's recently published Indo-Pacific Strategy (IP Strategy) as



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a reference point.¹ The working hypothesis is that there is genuine interest in having relations with 'Asia' or the 'Indo-Pacific' beyond China. While this is certainly true for the EU (e.g. the EEAS) and many of its member states, it does not apply to all of them, as a recent survey by the European Council for Foreign Relations (ECFR) reveals.²

As for the scope of the IP Strategy, "a vast region spanning from the east coast of Africa to the Pacific Island states," there appears to be a change of attitude. Although this is an enormous area there is no criticism that the IP is too large an area to be covered by one policy paper, a criticism often raised in the context of Asia strategies. Therefore, breaking the region down into east, west, southeast, northeast and central Asia has become common. The Asia-Pacific was the next enlargement of the Asia concept, and it has now even been superseded by the Indo-Pacific. At the end of the day, it is political will which determines which scope to choose and which policies to implement.

A strategy defines goals, prioritizes them, assigns instruments to pursue them and ideally has a built-in mechanism to check implementation. If we were to apply these criteria strictly to the 2021 IP Strategy it might not pass the test as there are too many 'priorities', not enough clearly defined instruments and no all-important financial commitments. However, it may well serve as a necessary rallying point for EU member states and institutions.

In announcing the IP Strategy, bad luck struck the EU again. When the Global Strategy³ was announced in 2016, Brexit took centre stage. Similarly, the announcement of the Australia-US-UK (AUSUK) pact made the IP Strategy look outdated the moment it was announced. A longstanding partner and ally, Australia obviously came to the conclusion that its national interest and security are better taken care of with the US and the UK than with France and the EU, although France and the EU would not have been the alternative. The EU cannot manage in the Indo-Pacific without the US, especially when it comes to hard security. Bypassing Japan and India does not make sense either.

In addition to historic ties, Australia felt closer to the former colonial power and the US. Furthermore, unlike Japan, India, South Korea, ASEAN and for the sake of completeness China, Australia lacks the status of a strategic partner of the EU.

A rather simplistic and superficial analysis of the IP Strategy shows that strategic partners get more mentions in the strategy than others: India 32, ASEAN 31, Japan 22, South Korea 14 and China 18, but it is graced with its own EU-policy paper,⁴ while Australia has 12 mentions and is slightly outperformed by Indonesia with 13.

2. What are the goals the EU wants to achieve with its IP Strategy?

Cooperating with like-minded partners to keep the Indo-Pacific free and open are the main goals. 'Open' means that it is not exclusive or binary, so not an anti-China concept. The EU sees a need to enhance its engagement with the Indo-Pacific economic and technological powerhouse, a need to address global issues like climate change and to respond to growing tensions as part of great power competition – all factors that affect not only regional but also global stability. As usual, the EU repeats its basic policy principles such as fostering a rules-based international order, a level playing field and an open and fair environment for trade and investment, tackling climate change and supporting connectivity with the EU.

Seven rather broad priority areas are identified for EU action:

1. Sustainable and inclusive prosperity;
2. A green transition;
3. Ocean governance;
4. Digital governance and partnerships;
5. Connectivity;
6. Security and defence;
7. Human security.

1 European Commission, High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, *Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council. The EU strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific*, Brussels, 16 September 2021 (hereafter quoted as *Joint Communication*).

2 Frédéric Grare & Manisha Reuter, *Moving closer: European views on the Indo-Pacific*, *European Council of Foreign Relations*, 13 September 2021.

3 European Union, *Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign And Security Policy*, June 2016.

4 European Union, High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, *Joint Communication To The European Parliament, The European Council And The Council: EU-China – A strategic outlook*, Strasbourg, 12 March 2019.

Taking a selective approach, this could result in the following main initiatives:

- **Trade:** The EU will work to finalize trade negotiations with Australia and New Zealand, seek a deal with India and strengthen stronger ties with countries with which it already has a trade deal such as South Korea, where an update is warranted. The EU will also pursue a trade and investment agreement with Taiwan, one of the bold announcements in the strategy. A future FTA with Australia needs a footnote now: if no face-saving solution is found, France can be expected to block progress for some time to come.

Regional arrangements like the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) need attention to ensure that they are trade-creating and not protectionist. They are also important in the competition for global standard-setting. It is significant that China applied to join the CPTPP in parallel with the agreement on the AUSUK. While this would make China participate in and influence both regional trade agreements, it also raises the stakes vis-à-vis Taiwan, which has also expressed interest in joining (as has the UK, for the sake of completeness).

The Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) was the economic pillar of President Obama's Pivot 1. Trump withdrew and I would expect President Biden to re-engage for strategic not economic reasons, as Democrats are rather reserved on FTAs.

- **Climate change:** The EU aims to help the transition to green energy in the Indo-Pacific region, making renewable hydrogen a priority.
- **Ocean governance:** Through a greater diplomatic presence, the EU aims to help uphold the United Nations Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), to prevent overfishing in the region, to offer expertise in protecting marine areas and weather forecasting, and to limit pollution of the seas.

- **The digital sphere:** The EU wants to start talks with Japan, South Korea and Singapore on deeper cooperation on data flows, data-based innovation and allowing more digital trade. It also wants to work more closely with India on emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence and fifth-generation mobile networks. To this end, digital diplomacy will be mainstreamed.
- **Infrastructure:** The EU wants to collaborate with Japan, India, Korea and Australia on transport links, particularly in the aviation and maritime sectors. Development banks and export agencies should link the EU to Asia more closely. Let me add that I am in favour of setting up a specific EU import-export bank, which would also strengthen the international role of the euro, an important step to gaining more strategic autonomy.

Recognising the larger context of the IP, in her State of the Union 2021 address President von der Leyen announced a broadening of the Connectivity Strategy to a comprehensive value-based 'Global Gateway' "to create links, not dependencies",⁵ thus a counter-project to China's Belt and Road infrastructure initiative (BRI). However, there is no financial package and no concrete commitments but only a list of potential sources.⁶ There is a need for a more offensive and strategic approach by the EU – trying to prevent states joining the BRI is a defensive measure but not a genuine strategic investment to enhance connectivity between Asia and Europe.

- **Security and defence:** The EU seeks closer maritime ties with Australia, New Zealand, Indonesia and Japan and promises more naval deployments to patrol trade routes like the SCS, which China claims. Adding military advisers, also known as defence attachés, to EU delegations in the region should open military-to-military communication lines. (Obviously, this promise was too late for Australia and would not have been concrete enough to keep it in the EU ambit.)
- **Health governance:** Key tasks are to support poorer countries in the Indo-Pacific to secure access to COVID-19 vaccines and establish

5 European Commission, *2021 State of the Union Address by President von der Leyen*, 15 September 2021 (https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH_21_4701).

6 «The implementation of the Strategy will be financed from a number of sources – including the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI) – Global Europe, – in accordance with its scope. The EU will maximize the impact of its budget by implementing guarantees and blended finance instruments supported by the European Fund for Sustainable Development "Plus" to ensure broad-based mobilization of 17 development finance, including from the private sector, in cooperation with European and international financial institutions». *Joint Communication*, pp. 16-17.

secure supply lines for medicines and medical equipment in order to reduce reliance on China.

This is a rather general overview of the strategy. The 18 pages provide a list and rebranding of present and future actions and initiatives where cooperation or actions by the member states are necessary.

This brings us back to the ECFR survey, which comes to the conclusion that “despite the Indo-Pacific’s growing economic and political importance, many member states are still largely uninterested in events there”. This is not only because of limited resources to bridge large distances and cover an enormous region but also goes right to the heart of the political debate: a solid majority of member states do not want the IP Strategy to be ‘anti-Chinese’. After all, for many China is one of the most important economic partners.

However, growing Chinese assertiveness, a wolf warrior attitude, mask diplomacy, human rights abuses, military activities in the South China Sea and threats to Taiwan after having broken the democracy movement in Hongkong and escalating tensions because of the AUKUS alliance could become game changers.

US policies are not helpful to win over European hearts. The Biden reconnecting and consulting honeymoon with the EU was short-lived, as Afghanistan and AUKUS demonstrated.

Endeavours to reach more ‘strategic autonomy’ for the EU will get more traction but will also lead to a rethink of the EU’s strategic positioning, from which the freshly announced IP Strategy will not be exempted. With the US in the chorus line, the UK pursuing Global Britain and a relative decline of the power of Europe in general (economic, trade, finance, demography...),⁷ refocussing and downsizing ambitions through a rigorous prioritization of the goals announced will become necessary.

The US Pivot.2 confirms that the EU will have to take the lead in its extended neighbourhood. Without digressing from the IP, let me add an important footnote. In this neighbourhood and eventually with a new division of labour with the US, the EU will need to further reflect on whether the Eurasian continent needs more attention. This would of course open another strand of reflection in which Russia plays an important role.

Tools to deal with the EU’s extended neighbourhood will be missing in the Indo-Pacific. This is

another confirmation that strategic choices are necessary. This should not result in a withdrawal of the EU from the Indo-Pacific region – this would be counterproductive. It would also deprive some countries of a hedging partner. As part of the focussing exercise the EU will have to concentrate its efforts on core priorities and essential partners. These are ultimately the strategic partners already mentioned: Japan, South Korea, India and ASEAN, while Australia and New Zealand remain important candidates for promotion. Australia might have lost this chance for some time!

3. A look at selected strategic partners

3.1. Multilateral

The EU could do more to instrumentalize the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM),⁸ which it founded a quarter of century ago with ASEAN. This would also help to maintain ASEAN centrality as an organising principle which is officially shared by all. However, there is a need for candid discussion – the ASEAN way helped to set up ASEAN but it is not good enough to make ASEAN an organising force in a geopolitical competition. The setting up of the East Asia Summit (EAS) was already a yellow card for ASEAN to strengthen its functioning. While ASEAN’s diversity in terms of political systems and states of development poses serious challenges, ASEAN will have to face them if it wants to continue playing a pivotal role in reality and not only in rhetoric. The often-quoted multilateral DNA of the EU makes it a congenial partner which also supports ASEAN capacity building – which should show concrete results. Keeping the EU out of the EAS and postponing the strategic partnership announcement because of a bilateral EU-Indonesia palm-oil problem were not encouraging signs. I will deal with the Quad below.

3.2. Selected strategic partners

India has re-engaged with the EU. The ‘Indo’ in the Indo-Pacific serves as a catalyst. The IP Strategy opens many doors for cooperation but implementing the pledges will not be easy. India is also hedging between China, where open conflict is always round the corner, and the US in a rather cyclical relationship. The human rights record of the Modi Administration is not impeccable, the country still has a domestic development gap to overcome and

7 William Bratton, ‘The end of European influence in Asia’, *Nikkei Asia*, 26 January 2021.

8 Michael Reiterer, *Asia and Europe: Do They Meet? Reflections on the Asia Europe Meeting (ASEM)*, Singapore: World Scientific/ASEF, 2002.

it might soon experience an end-of-era atmosphere which could lead to an auto-concentration or even transitional instability.

Having been posted to Japan and Korea, I will take a closer look at the potential role of these two strategic partners.

Japan has become a partner of choice for the EU since the signing of two important agreements (the Economic Partnership, the Strategic Partnership) and the first Connectivity partnership. Compared to earlier times, Japan is conducting a more active foreign policy (saving the TPP, revitalising the Quad), thereby to some extent filling a regional void created by the Trump administration. Pushing back on China, being vigilant on North Korea, reaching out to India and – as mentioned – dynamizing its relations with the EU have been marks of the stable Abe Administration. If PM Suga remains a bridge from Abe to a strong successor, Japan will remain a pillar in the Indo-Pacific. It has shaped this concept with its own Free and Open IP Strategy. A weakened Japan with revolving PMs would play into the hands of China.

The EU's IP Strategy puts emphasis in relation to Japan on the need

- for resilient and diversified value chains,
- to effectively implement trade agreements,
- to turn the first green alliance into a flagship project for the region.

As the EU's first connectivity partner, Japan shares responsibility with the EU to strengthen relations at the highest technical level. On the basis of adequacy recognition the EU and Japan will promote data protection regimes based on the principle of free and safe data flows. This should lead to a digital partnership agreement. Cooperation needs to be intensified to meet the new security challenge of cybersecurity. This is reflected in the implementation of the 'Enhancing Security Cooperation in and with Asia' project, in which Japan is one of the pilot partners. Formalising a crisis management framework agreement for international peace cooperation,⁹ which would allow Japan to participate in CSDP missions – as in the case of Korea – would add meat to the bones of security cooperation.

As for **Korea**, for ten years an EU strategic partner¹⁰ and a major producer of semiconductors, Korea is an essential partner to build more resilient value chains for the economic recovery and more strategic security. This is part of the EU's engagement with its Indo-Pacific partners to reinforce value chains by strengthening and diversifying trade relations and implementing the comprehensive FTA, which has just turned ten years old.

Korea has adopted a green deal inspired by that of the EU. Therefore Korea is a partner to work with to achieve a sustainable and equitable green transition through continued high-level dialogue.

Korea and the EU run a working group on illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing and could partner in supporting countries in the Indo-Pacific to reform their fishery management and control systems.

This year's adequacy decision in the context of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) by the EU will allow Korea to join the world's largest area of free and safe data flows, that between the EU and Japan set up in 2019.

A digital partnership agreement could follow, expanding the bilateral trade and investment relationship "by enhancing cooperation on and interoperability of standards for emerging technologies, such as Artificial Intelligence, based on democratic principles and fundamental rights, building more resilient technology supply chains, supporting values-based innovation and facilitating business opportunities for start-ups and SMEs ... They would complement ongoing negotiations on e-commerce within the World Trade Organization on specific issues that are relevant for the facilitation of digital trade".¹¹

In research and innovation, Korea – like other partners sharing common values – could become an associate member in the Horizon Europe programme, which offers the possibility of more systematic joint research and innovation opportunities.

Having expressed interest in the EU's Connectivity Strategy at an early stage, Korea could soon join the EU's first two 'Connectivity partners', Japan and India. With ASEAN, the EU agreed a joint ministerial declaration on connectivity in December 2020.

9 Philip Shetler-Jones, 'E.U. Turns to Japan as It Seeks to Enhance Security Cooperation in and with Asia', *Japan Forward*, 10 September 2021.

10 Michael Reiterer, 'The 10th Anniversary of the EU-Korea Strategic Partnership', VUB-IES Korea Chair Policy Brief, Issue 2020/09, July 2020.

11 *Joint Communication*, p. 10.

Since the 2016 ASEM Summit in Ulaanbaatar ASEM has adopted a comprehensive connectivity concept for its work program through the Asia Europe Meeting Pathfinders Group on Connectivity (APGC)¹².

As part of the above-mentioned Enhancing Security Cooperation in and with Asia project, the EU and Korea are engaged in cybersecurity, which provides a link with a digital data partnership.

4. Conclusions

The EU is rather unlucky in announcing major policies – in 2016 the Global Strategy was overshadowed by the Brexit vote and the recent IP Strategy by the escalating tensions between France and Australia and the US because of the cancellation of a multi-billion euro submarine deal. Nevertheless, a common EU approach to the IP following on the heels of French, German and Dutch strategies or concept notes is needed to serve as a rallying point for other member states (cf the ECFR study). Given the US's Pivot 2 to Asia, such a move by the EU is necessary to demonstrate to the region that it is not only on its radar but that there is a willingness to engage.

However, the EU will be judged by its deeds, not its words. This is in contrast to the general policy statements, of which the IP Strategy is rich. Otherwise, its credibility will be further reduced. Sweeping rhetoric reduces the EU to a paper tiger and is counterproductive.

Therefore, intensity of engagement will be the crucial point of the strategy. The EU will have to choose partners with whom cooperation is realistic, effective and relevant for the region.

Furthermore, a strategy without sufficient means, including financial ones, will not be effective. Given the vast territorial space of the IP and the tremendous needs in terms of infrastructure and capacity-building, a cautious and realistic approach is necessary. Building back better after the COVID-19 crisis and the enormous need for

investment to finance the necessary greening of economies worldwide to turn them into circular economies to avoid climate change becoming a climate catastrophe, these challenges necessitate a smart use of the finite resources available.

This also applies to the security sector. The EU understands itself as a security provider in terms of comprehensive security. This perception is not shared by its partners in the region, which are more focused on traditional hard security given the geopolitical tensions and many unresolved territorial issues. Demonstrations of weakness, in Afghanistan together with the US and NATO, and in the neighbourhood of North Africa and the Middle East, the situation in the Ukraine and Russia's annexation of the Crimean Peninsula add to this perception, as does the success of China in influencing some EU member states, thereby weakening common positions.

Furthermore, the risk perception is different in Europe, the US and the IP. The Strategic Compass¹³ which is under construction in the EU should remedy this situation, at least within the EU. In order to find common ground, there is also a need to discuss the level of analysis¹⁴ of (common) threats: it makes a big difference whether the individual is the main object of a risk analysis leading to human security (EU approach) or the state (Asian approach), focussing on sovereignty and national interest.

The Quad, born out of rescue and rebuilding after the Great Tsunami, was revitalized by Japan, certainly with China in mind although the China containment factor is denied by all the participants, albeit not very convincingly. Some regard this form of minilateralism to be the nucleus of an Asian NATO – I disagree – but there is certainly more to it than just functional cooperation to fight COVID-19. The EU's IP Strategy is not very consistent: while it advocates engagement with the Quad “on issues of common interest such as climate change, technology or vaccines”¹⁵ which are very global in nature, it also defines the Quad

12 See European Commission. ASEM Sustainable Connectivity Portal, <https://composite-indicators.jrc.ec.europa.eu/asem-sustainable-connectivity/>

13 Daniel Fiott, 'The EU's Strategic Compass for Security and Defence: What Type of Ambition is the Needle Pointing to?' CSDS Policy Brief No. 2, 2021.

14 Roberto Dominguez & Bjornar Sverdrup-Thygeson, 'The Role of External Powers in EU-Asia Security Relations', in Thomas Christiansen, Emil Kirchner & See Seng Tan (eds.), *The European Union's Security Relations with Asian Partners*, London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2021, p. 442.

15 *Joint Communication*, p. 4.

as “a quadrilateral security dialogue between Australia, India, Japan and the United States”.¹⁶ The EU’s position should be clear: such a mini-lateral set-up can serve specific purposes but it is not apt to turn into a sort of directorate of the Indo-Pacific, side-lining the EU and many others.

The second Quad Summit, for the first time in person at the White House, against the backdrop of the AUKUS alliance, reinforced the irritation of Europeans, and France in particular. In the joint statement by the Quad leaders (24 September 2021)¹⁷ the EU’s Indo-Pacific Strategy is welcomed and cooperation with the EU in the area of connectivity in the context of the G7 is singled out. The statement covers all the major issues at stake, in particular the pandemic, vaccine development and distribution, S&T cooperation, the climate crisis, critical and emerging technologies, cyber, space and security threats like Afghanistan. Notably absent is a reference to Taiwan or the Taiwan Straits, as part of an effort to present the Quad as an open and not China-containing platform. As practically all the problems are global in nature and therefore need global answers, effective cooperation in the relevant international fora with all interested partners, avoiding seclusion on ideological grounds, will be essential. Without becoming a beauty contest, the international dimension of the vaccine distribution by the Quad became rather self-congratulatory, while it was the European Union which kept exporting half of its vaccines.¹⁸

Although AUKUS took a lot of wind out of the EU’s Indo-Pacific sails, the strategy was necessary to provide a common framework to match US policy. Not surprisingly, given that Joe Biden served as vice president to President Barack Obama, the US is harking back to its Asian pivot policy. It regards the IP as the place where the future will happen, especially in times of competition, economical-

ly, technologically but also politically with China. President Xi wants China to play a leading role, with 2025 Made in China, 2035 Modern Socialism and the 2049 CCP centennial as markers.

While an angry reaction from Beijing to AUKUS was to be expected, frustrating France and the EU for a second time after the fiasco of Afghanistan was a mistake. It is playing into the hands of China, as cooperation in the Indo-Pacific is affected as well as the Transatlantic alliance. Had the Biden administration worked towards an alignment of the Transatlantic cooperation with the Pacific cooperation, as I argued with Ramon Pacheco in a policy brief,¹⁹ the focus on alliance and cooperation could have helped to avoid giving the impression of America First 2 in new clothes.

The EU and the US already have divergent views on how to deal with China – selective cooperation vs. all-out competition. Most countries in the IP prefer the EU approach. However, already in 2012 an attempt by the EU to improve its status in the Asia Pacific through enhanced cooperation with the US (‘Statement on the Asia-Pacific region’²⁰) failed because of diverging interests and different ways of conducting diplomacy.²¹ When HRVP Borrell met Secretary of State Blinken in October 2021 for damage control after AUKUS, they “agreed to launch EU-US consultations on the Indo-Pacific, with the aim to step up transatlantic cooperation and joint engagement in the region”²² – we had already proposed this in April 2021 when there was still honeymoon between the EU and the US²³.

The EU is aligning itself more and more toward Asian markets, which in turn impacts connectivity, supply and value chains, and the fourth industrial revolution with its emerging technologies. Failing to implement the goals eventually chosen or withdrawing from the Indo-Pacific would reduce the

16 *Ibid.*

17 ‘Joint Statement from Quad Leaders’, *The White House, Statements and Releases*, 24 September 2021.

18 «We were the only ones to share half of our vaccine production with the rest of the world. We delivered more than 700 million doses to the European people, and we delivered more than another 700 million doses to the rest of the world, to more than 130 countries». European Commission, *2021 State of the Union Address by President von der Leyen*.

19 Ramon Pacheco & Michael Reiterer, ‘The EU and the US in search of Common Ground: Extending the Transatlantic to an Indo-Pacific Partnership?’, *CSDS Policy Brief*, 4/2021.)

20 U.S. Department of State (Archived Content), *U.S.-EU Statement on the Asia-Pacific Region*, Media note, 12 July 2021.

21 Michael Reiterer, ‘EU-US engagement in the Asia Pacific’, in Yeo Lay Hwee & Barnard Turner (eds.), *Changing Tides and Changing Ties – Anchoring Asia-Europe Relations in Challenging Times*. Singapore: EU Centre, 2012; pp. 105-113.

22 EEAS, “United States: High Representative/Vice-President Josep Borrell met with Secretary of State Antony Blinken” 14 October 2021; https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage_en/105674/United%20States:%20High%20Representative/Vice-President%20Josep%20Borrell%20met%20with%20Secretary%20of%20State%20Antony%20Blinken

23 Pacheco & Reiterer; p.4.

EU politically and cause harm by falling behind in the essential areas outlined in the strategy.

In joining AUKUS, the UK found a means to give some meaning to 'Global Britain', while it remains to be seen whether this closer alignment with the US does not turn it into the follower as the junior partner, a risk also for Australia.

A lesson for the EU: the US shows little nostalgia for the Transatlantic relationship, which is seen more and more through the lens of US national interest, which has 'pivoted' a second time, this time more to the Indo-Pacific in its all-out competition with China. Contrary to the first Obama-pivot, this time the focus is more on security than economics. NATO will maintain its role, not least because of Russia, but the European partners will have to shoulder more responsibility – there have been enough 'wake-up calls' by now.

Flying the flag, whether French or German, with an invitation to other member states to join through a naval presence is mainly a symbolic act of naval diplomacy²⁴ to demonstrate willingness to uphold the rule of law ('lawfare'), awareness and interest, but not to change the military balance. The German frigate Hamburg sailed a cautious course in order not to provoke China, especially avoiding any resemblance to US freedom of navigation operations in the SCS. Nevertheless, China rejected a friendly (appeasing) port call, thereby expressing its disapproval of such manoeuvres and a European naval presence.

Common values do not necessarily lead to common perceptions and common actions – Australia and the US are convincing examples. The EU has recognized this in also concluding strategic partnerships with countries like China where common values are scarce. I distinguish between strategic partnerships of choice and those of necessity to reflect this divergence.²⁵

For this reason, I am also sceptical concerning all kinds of 'D' cooperation: global problems need global solutions; many regional problems need all the regional players to be on board. Binary approaches like solely value- or ideology-based cooperation create 'ins' and 'outs' which may be warranted in some cases but not as a general

policy line, especially when taking on global problems. Striving to strengthen or defend democracies, yes. There is a need to work for democracy, which will not be achieved by only working with democracies.

The EU's Asia policy should seek to bring alternatives that would offer partners in the Indo-Pacific region an additional strategic option to diversify, hedge and consequently take a stance against assertive Chinese behaviour and striving for dominance. Therefore, the EU needs an integral and diversified Asia policy well beyond China²⁶ and an accompanying narrative.

Foreign policy starts at home – this also applies to successful implementation of the Indo-Pacific Strategy in selecting areas and partners, a choice necessary given the previously mentioned sheer size of the Indo-Pacific. The EU's strategic partners in the IP are the natural partners. In addition, a mode of cooperation with the US still needs to be found to effectively link up partners and allies even if they do not see eye to eye in all instances. In EU-speak this is what 'strategic autonomy' is all about – not going alone but following EU priorities in a common framework.

24 «The EU will seek to conduct more joint exercises and port calls with Indo Pacific partners, including multilateral exercises, to fight piracy and protect freedom of navigation while reinforcing EU naval diplomacy in the region», *Joint Communication*, p. 13.

25 Michael Reiterer, 'The Role of «Strategic Partnerships» in the EU's Relations with Asia', in Thomas Christiansen, Emil Kirchner & Philomena Murray (eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of EU-Asia Relations*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013; pp.75-89.

26 Michael Reiterer, 'EU Security Policy After COVID: Walking the Talk or Losing Credibility', *CSDS Policy Brief*, 1/2021.

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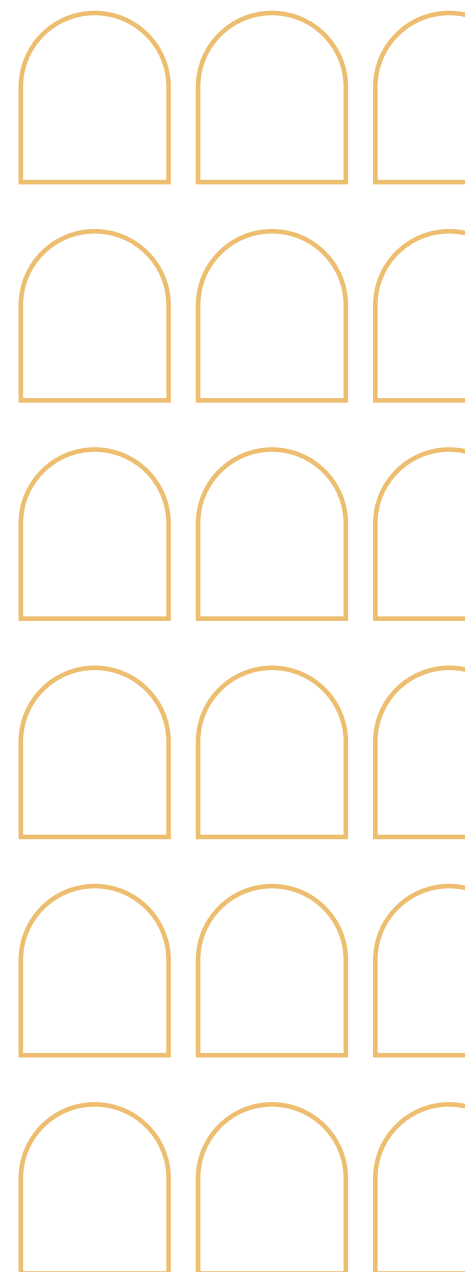
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