

THE EU'S INDO-PACIFIC STRATEGY: A MULTIPLE AND COMPREHENSIVE REGIONAL COOPERATION AGENDA

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April 19, 2021, the European Council adopted the EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific which stated significant interests of the EU in the Indo-Pacific region. The reaffirmation of European concern and responsibility for this region demonstrates the fact that the center of the world economy has already shifted to the Indo-Pacific, followed by intensification of geopolitical competition in this area as well as great pressure in the field of trade, supply chain, technology, politics which will not only threaten regional security and stability but also lead to negative spillover effects.

In view of the sequentially launched India-Pacific strategic documents from France, Germany, the Netherlands since 2019, the introduction of EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific should come as no surprise and undoubtedly, China serves as an important factor in the whole picture. From here, two questions are put forward: Is the European version of the Indo-Pacific strategy a strategic follow to the United States or an independent strategic consideration? How should China evaluate this move and respond?

Proposed by German officer and political geographer Karl Haushofer in the 1920s, the concept of Indo-Pacific comprises the areas along the Pacific and Indian Oceans and it has been adopted by the United States with brand-new geopolitical and strategic meaning in order to replace the “Asia-Pacific” which seems unsuited to its current strategic considerations---the strategic competition with China. US Indo-Pacific Strategy is dominated by its own security and that of regional allies under the banner of value, the core of which is to counterbalance China by reinforcing alliance and strengthening the cooperation with other Indo-Pacific countries, particularly with India, Japan, Australia by calling upon “uphold the rules and values that underpin a free and open Indo-Pacific”, a version that emphasize rules-based regional order with the US leadership. On values the EU's Indo-Pacific Strategy is compatible with the US version, yet EU has attached great importance to “rules-based international order” showing that the fundamental purpose is to promote European ability as a global actor. This varies greatly from the strategic goal of United States in the region.

From a cautious onlooker to a participant in Indo-Pacific affairs, the EU has witnessed a gradual process in understanding and accepting the term of Indo-Pacific. The EU has always been highlighting its unique role as a normative power. In recent years it has generated varying degrees

of concern over the Indo-Pacific Strategy led by US, Japan, India and Australia as well as China's Belt and Road initiative. As the competition between China and the United States intensifies, the EU believes that this will not only weaken its position in international affairs, but also will eventually endanger its interests in the Indo-Pacific region. As a normative power it believes it has a unique role to play: the neutral image in security and the good relationships with relevant regional powers enable EU to become an indispensable factor in maintaining regional balance and stability.

The layout of the EU's Indo-Pacific strategy is mainly divided into two parts, the overall planning and specific policy of major countries. General policy and implementation mechanism such as free trade agreement and summit diplomacy are brought under a plan at the EU level while member states are expected to demonstrate the policy executive ability through diplomatic dialogue, military exercise and port visit whereby the EU may have heightened presence and greater influence in the Indo-Pacific region.

Specifically, this version of the Indo-Pacific strategy can be constructed through the following ways. The first one relies on current regional institutional frameworks and bilateral multilateral platforms such as Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM), ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and South Asian Association Regional Cooperation (SAARC) in the interests of political influence. At present, the EU serves as the observer of SAARC, a staunch supporter of ASEM and ARF, meanwhile, remaining a close relationship with The Indian Ocean Rim-Association for Regional Cooperation (IOR-ARC). These diversified channels of communication and mechanisms are playing an increasingly important role in exchange and cooperation between Brussel and relevant countries. At the bilateral level, Europe places a high value on close policy coordination and interaction with major Indo-Pacific countries, especially China, India, Japan and Australia.

Secondly, advancing its presence in key regional agreements including Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) and Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) to ensure a strategic position in trade, to preserve and improve the existing multilateral trading system and open markets, and to create a level playing field. The EU has long devoted tremendous amount of effort to conducting FTA negotiations with concerned economies. Concretely speaking, the signing of free trade agreements with Singapore, Vietnam, South Korea and other countries has been completed as the negotiations with ASEAN, Australia and New Zealand are under way. Brussel also seeks for profound achievements in China-EU Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI) which will contribute to a favorable economic position for Europeans in the region.

Thirdly, deepening cooperation in the field of security so as to strengthen the military presence in Indo-Pacific area on account of European countries' vital interests in counter-terrorism, cyber security, arms control as well as security of maritime and aviation routes. Considering the fact that France is the only EU country that deploys substantial military in this region, it has a stronger



demand for defense and it is more inclined to establish defense cooperation system along with Japan, India, Australia and other countries. Moreover, the EU has already occupied a significant share of the Indo-Pacific weapon market through commercial arms sales, the growing arms race in the region may boost arms exports of the EU and increase its impacts in security and defense.

Fourthly, Indo-Pacific strategy of the EU lists a wide range of areas of cooperation including connectivity, ocean governance, research and technology, health, climate change, disaster reduction, ecological protection apart from the above-mentioned constructions in the fields of multilateral cooperation, economy and defense. In general, this strategy covers substantial content and topics that indicates a comprehensive and ambitious goal of the EU in Indo-Pacific region. If value issue is left aside, there has been a convergence between the EU and China in terms of concerned areas of cooperation and of multilateralism. Different from the American version, the EU's Indo-Pacific strategy follows the principle of long-term engagement, consisting with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals while emphasizing the importance of international law and conventions. Moreover, it covers the western Indian Ocean region, that is, the East Coast of Africa to which Europe has traditionally been closely linked.

For policymakers, the content of a concept is more crucial for analysis than the concept itself. Under the banner of the Indo-Pacific strategy, different countries set their own Indo-Pacific agendas according to their interests as well as policy environment. Therefore, it is quite a challenging task for the US to unify policies and behaviors of its allies even they share with a similar value framework. Despite balancing China is an important strategic goal of Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), the four countries have been different in concrete issues on how to interact with China. The Indo-Pacific strategies in European countries also varies in outlook. The pluralistic reality of Indo-Pacific Strategy has blurred the strategic direction and weakened influence of the US version.

Regarding the multiple Indo-Pacific strategies it is necessary to treat them with peace of mind, carefully study and analyze the Indo-Pacific strategies of different countries, and find common ground in responsibilities and interests with China. To conclude, if Indo-Pacific strategy could be evaluated from the level of regional development rather than a narrow focus that of security, it will be of positive significance to deepen the regional cooperation agenda and to develop constructive regional partnerships.