The EU’s strategic projection in the Indo-Pacific

La proyección estratégica de la UE en el Indo-Pacífico

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Abstract: The Indo-Pacific is becoming the new geopolitical axis of the planet for multiple reasons, among which three stand out: security (with six nuclear powers in the area, some of them amidst clearly growing tensions), demography (with 64 percent of the world population) and economy (with 62 percent of world GDP). Since its founding, the European Union has been absent in the development of a strategy for the region, an absence that has recently ended with the publication of national strategies of three member states (France, Germany, and the Netherlands), as well such as the EU announcement of a future EU strategy for the region. This paradigm shift may mark the beginning not only of greater European cohesion in terms of strategic projection, but also of greater European geopolitical assertiveness in a post-COVID-19 world in the Indo-Pacific and other regions. This article will trace the birth and evolution of the Indo-Pacific concept, will identify the reasons for its geostrategic importance for the European Union, and will analyze both the three national strategies of France, Germany, and the Netherlands as well as the announced EU strategy for the region.

Keywords: Indo-Pacific, Europe, geopolitics, security, Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP).

Resumen: El Indo-Pacífico se está convirtiendo en el nuevo eje geopolítico del planeta por múltiples razones entre las que destacan tres: seguridad (con seis potencias nucleares en la zona, algunas de ellas entre claras tensiones crecientes), demografía (con el 64 por ciento de la población mundial) y economía (con el 62 por ciento del PIB mundial). Desde su fundación, la Unión Europea ha estado
ausente en el desarrollo de una estrategia para la región, una ausencia a la que se ha puesto fin recientemente con la publicación de estrategias nacionales de tres estados miembros (Francia, Alemania y Países Bajos), así como el anuncio de la UE de una futura estrategia comunitaria para la región. Este cambio de paradigma puede marcar el inicio no solamente de una mayor cohesión europea en materia de proyección estratégica, sino también de una mayor asertividad geopolítica europea en un mundo post-COVID-19. En este artículo se rastreará el nacimiento y la evolución del concepto del Indo-Pacifico, se identificarán las razones de su importancia geoestratégicas para la Unión Europea y se analizarán tanto las tres estrategias nacionales de Francia, Alemania y the Netherlands como la anunciada estrategia de la UE para la región.

**Palabras clave:** Indo-Pacífico, Europa, geopolítica, seguridad, Estrategia del Indo-Pacífico Libre y Abierto (FOIP).
I. Introduction

The Indo-Pacific has emerged in the 21st century as one of the geopolitical centers that will most powerfully determine the future of world politics. This may have been accelerated by the impact of COVID-19, which has temporarily interrupted the global supply chain, passenger transport, and globalizing forces that pointed to an increasingly globalized economy. This has led to a decrease in trade dependence on China, pushing the Western powers to devote greater attention to national production capacities and the importance of their predominance in black swan-like scenarios such as this one. This may have enhanced in Europe the need to have its own geopolitical strategy for Asia and the Indo-Pacific. This situation creates an incentive for Western powers, especially European nations, to adopt a greater geopolitical assertiveness in this new global axis. This led three European nations (France, Germany, and the Netherlands) to develop their own strategies for the region and the publication by the European Union of a draft document with the general lines of a future community strategy for this area. This article will analyze the evolution of the Indo-Pacific concept, its geostrategic importance for Europe, the different initiatives offered to date, and the possible future evolution of this European geopolitical projection in the region, as well as its impact on the world.

II. Emergence and evolution of the Indo-Pacific concept

The concept of the Indo-Pacific has evolved from the initial concept of Asia and, later, that of the Asia-Pacific. Asia, as a geopolitical term, responds to a purely geographical concept centered on China, a continental idea devoid of multilateral connotations on the political plane. This concept gave rise in the 1980s to the concept of Asia-Pacific, which was no longer a purely geographical term and incorporated an economic dimension. Likewise, the continental slope incorporated the maritime one and acquired multilateral connotations with the creation of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Forum in 1989, although it excluded India. Finally, in the first decade of the 21st century, this concept evolved to that of the Indo-

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Pacific, transforming its original meaning. To the economic dimension of Asia-Pacific, the security dimension was added, and the term became a maritime concept when describing all the nations bathed by these two oceans and marked the birth of the articulation of a new geopolitical axis of the planet. India was included in this concept and its formal crystallization was born with the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) between Japan, the US, Australia, and India.

However, even though the modern use of the Indo-Pacific as a geopolitical concept began in the 21st century, it is possible to trace the first references to this region at the end of the 19th century. It is in this period when the American naval historian and strategist Alfred Thayer Mahan predicted, “whoever dominates the Indian Ocean will dominate Asia and the fate of the world will be decided in its waters”2. In 1924, the German geographer and politician Karl Haushofer predicted the arrival of what he called “the Pacific Age”.3 In the 1980s, during the legendary meeting between Deng Xiaoping and Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, came the declaration by Deng Xiaoping indicating that only when China, India, and other neighboring nations cooperate, one could speak of a “century of Asia-Pacific”4. In the 21st century, in 2009, the US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger stated, “one of the most drastic global changes that would take place in this century would be the shift of the center of gravity of international relations from the Atlantic to the Indian Ocean and Pacific”5. We can find a common trend here: the seas and oceans are the vectors that allow powers to expand and project their hard or soft power beyond the limitations of their territorial scope. For example, the Mediterranean was not only the bridge of communication and trade of classic civilizations like Greece, Rome, and Phoenicians, but also a space for diplomatic competition and struggle for resources, influence, and expansion of colonies, as described by Thucydides in his Peloponnesian War.

Similarly, the Atlantic Ocean was also the battlefield of a strategic competition projected overseas since the 15th century by the whales (maritime European powers, in contrast with the elephants or land powers) towards America and West Africa. British geographer scholar Ian

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3 Karl Haushofer, Geopolitik des pazifischen ozeans (Berlin: Vowinckel, 1924).
4 Deng Xiaoping, Deng Xiaoping Wenxuan (Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping), Vol. 3 (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe (People’s Publishing House), 1993), 281.
Morris explained that the geopolitical possibilities of nations reach their maximum scope in the sea: the reason why Europe had become a global power since the 15th century and expanded its civilization throughout the planet was that Europe was a peninsula of peninsulas, and it offered easy access to the sea for any idea, product, military force and revolution that wanted to be exported and imported. The sea has been, hence, an accelerator of social evolution in those civilizations that had the strategic advantage of easy access to it. For this reason, the approach to the future evolution of global dynamics from a maritime perspective rather than a land-based one may be more practical when defining possible future scenarios. Therefore, perhaps it is more appropriate to speak of an Indo-Pacific era rather than a continental Asian century.

III. The incentives for a European strategy on Indo-Pacific

Three dimensions can make the Indo-Pacific become a global axis for the planet and, therefore, Europe has strong incentives to develop its own strategy for the region: security, economic, and demographic.

This region connects the three main economies of the planet (USA, China, and Japan). Together they represent more than 45 percent of world GDP. The fifth-largest economy in the world, India, also participates in this region with a potential for future growth capable of multiplying its size by 2.5 times in the next decade. In addition, there is a deep dependence among these economies that have continued to increase in recent years, interrupted only temporarily by the COVID-19 disruption of the global supply chain networks.

Encompassing all the Indo-Pacific nations, this region involves 38 countries, 44 percent of the world surface, 65 percent of the planet’s population (including the two most populated nations on the planet, India and China, with more than 2800 million people in the group) and 62 percent of world GDP. These statistics can help us put in perspective the real weight

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The region has on the dynamics of international relations and that its importance will continue to increase due to unavoidable demographic and economic factors.

Moreover, in terms of the geopolitical dimension, the Indo-Pacific, in its widest geographical expanse, encompasses five recognized nuclear powers: the US, Russia, China, India, and Pakistan. North Korea should be added to this list, except for operational doubts raised about its nuclear program. All the three generations of nuclear powers (original post-World War II states, the new regional powers in the 90s, and rogue states of the millennium) are present in this scenario.

This enormous diversity of nuclear-capable actors, each with a very different sphere of influence and political objectives, greatly increases the complexity of interactions in this region of the planet and raises the cost of any friction between them. In June 2020, twenty Indian soldiers died in a confrontation with Chinese troops in Ladakh, on the disputed border between these two nations. In November of the same year, five soldiers and ten civilians were killed in clashes between Indian and Pakistani troops. In addition, in December, Pakistan and China began joint Shaheen (“Eagle”) - IX military air exercises in Sindh province, intensifying pressure on India.

In the same way as the rest of the actors in the region, India has been compelled to adopt a more assertive attitude given the escalation of tensions in the area. This has included the launch of the informal strategic collaboration project between India, Japan, the USA, and Australia called the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue or simply QUAD. This initiative, which has been described as “Asian NATO”, was launched in 2007 but only had a few months of running in its first attempt before being paralyzed by three main factors. First, China held the Beijing Olympic Games and

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maximized its international projection through soft power and public diplomacy. Second, at the end of 2007, the coming to power of Yasuo Fukuda, Prime Minister of Japan, replacing Shinzo Abe, implied the beginning of a diplomatic rapprochement with Beijing and the adoption of more conciliatory measures during his brief mandate that barely lasted a few months. Third, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh joined in this trend and, on a visit to China in January 2008, declared that India-China relations were a priority. Most importantly, the QUAD did not take off because Australia was very wary of displeasing Beijing and withdrew from it.

However, the collaboration between the four QUAD nations continued in other formats, including in 2012 with the deployment of US Marines to Darwin, near the Lombok Strait, and most importantly, the Malabar naval military exercises, which originally began as a bilateral US-India collaboration in 1992. The 2020 edition of the Malabar exercises saw the participation of Australia, which has meant that it has been the first time in 13 years that all members of the QUAD group have participated in these military maneuvers together.

This security dimension of the QUAD led Japan to launch the idea of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) Strategy in 2016. Japan changed the usage of the term “strategy” into “vision” in 2018. This concept had initially germinated in the margins of Japanese and American political

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16 Japan, one of the members of the Quad group, has also maximized its global communicative projection employing the so-called Olympic diplomacy. Juan Luis López-Aranguren, “La diplomacia olímpica de Japón: De Tokio 1964 a Tokio 2021”, Mirai. Estudios Japoneses, 5, 2021, 67-76. Doi: https://dx.doi.org/10.5209/mira.74697


spheres, each with different nuances and interpretations until it impregnated much of the communicative and diplomatic interactions of both nations in the region. The US State Department formalized the concept in 2019 and since then, it has become popular worldwide, influencing other nations to incorporate the concept in their strategic policies.

This Indo-Pacific initiative is part of Japan’s need to encourage its assertiveness in security matters, a need that has also generated proposals to reform its intelligence services, improve the intelligence sharing with South Korea, adapt its legislation to its external security needs, and face new threats like terrorism.

The two key strategies of the FOIP are reflected in the term itself, indicating the intention to maintain this key region of the world as free and open. This first concept of freedom is understood in two different ways. In the first place, as the American security adviser Herbert R. McMaster explained, “freedom of navigation, overflight, rule of law, sovereignty, freedom from coercion and freedom of business and market”. This could also be taken to understand freedom as democratic nations. Indistinctly, one and the other interpretation are closely related.

The second concept of openness could also be interpreted in two different ways. In the first place, as an Indo-Pacific open to all the nations of the globe, without excluding anyone from its use or participation in the institutional construction of its political architecture. Second, as an Indo-Pacific open to expansion to new dimensions beyond just security and the economy, and inclusive of education, development, culture, environmental protection\(^{32}\), public health, and communication\(^{33}\) (a dimension in which Japan\(^{34}\) is considered a global superpower) leading to the enhancement of its competitiveness and innovation\(^{35}\) maintaining its cultural identity\(^{36}\).

This Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy, however, is still in a very early phase of the definition and each nation interprets it in its own way. As mentioned before, Japan\(^{37}\) changed its stance and began to describe the FOIP as a vision and not a strategy in 2018. This is believed to have been done to accommodate the concerns of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) who did not want to choose between the US and China\(^{38}\). The change also coincided with a period of warming of relations between China and Japan\(^{39}\). The US, for its part, displayed an erratic foreign policy during the Trump administration in which the start of a trade war with

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China was combined with speculation of a possible withdrawal of US troops from Okinawa. This would have left Japan in a very delicate position since Article 9 of its Constitution that denies the right to war and the possession of armed forces has not been modified (something that has been determined by both Japan’s foreign policy and its internal political dynamics). It is true that in 2014 a new and revolutionary constitutional interpretation of this article was made, expanding Japan’s room for maneuver in defending its territorial integrity and autonomy. However, the erratic announcements regarding collective security with the United States introduce a very high uncertainty factor, even if it was meant merely as a domestic political stunt aimed at taxpayers. This situation is aggravated due to the escalation of frictions with China over the Senkaku / Diaoyu islands.

Australia, for its part, has been reluctant longer than its allies to adopt a position that could provoke China, which has consequently delayed its full participation in these activities. However, as described above, its recent return to the Malabar Naval Exercises in 2020 marks a change in the Australian approach reflecting a move to a more assertive stance.

India, the country with the largest continental territorial dispute with China and the only country that has had a war with China in the second half of the twentieth century, has been found paradoxically limited in its power projection in the Indo-Pacific due to the need to concentrate resources on responding to continental threats. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi,

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who has been compared to Shinzo Abe in his views on this region, has been trying to change this, although other analysts have highlighted the important differences between the two. Modi’s strategy is not, in any case, an easy path: there are numerous internal and external risks and obstacles when it comes to adopting a more assertive attitude. Among them, we can highlight the serious internal economic and development challenges that India has to face, which may pose a serious risk of instability if it embarks on an external military escalation.

The Indo-Pacific future depends, therefore, on a large number of both domestic and international variables that are changing constantly and that should be analyzed carefully by policymakers. Therefore, it is not surprising that the first steps of this new collaboration of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy have been centered on projects creating infrastructure and support for development. For example, the construction of subway systems in many Indian cities like Delhi, Mumbai, and Chennai by Japanese companies and with French participation, which reinforces EU-Japan cooperation and generates a big incentive for the European Union to acknowledge the challenges in the security dimension if the EU wants to

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become a global supporter of global stability. From a diplomatic point of view, this collaboration was highlighted by the Japanese Ambassador to India, Kenji Hiramatsu, as the first step in future Japanese infrastructure development projects in India.

IV. The development of national and European strategies for Indo-Pacific

Despite the geopolitical importance of the Indo-Pacific, the European Union, as a supranational entity, did not announce a defined strategy for the Indo-Pacific until March 2021. Only three countries (France, Germany, and the Netherlands) have so far produced national official documents in which they develop a strategy on this area. The rest of the members of the European Union do not have any domestic strategy to date.

In this section, we will analyze these four European geopolitical approaches to the Indo-Pacific: the pioneering approach of France, the approach of Germany, and the approach of the Netherlands, and, finally, the announced future geopolitical strategy of the EU for the Indo-Pacific.

IV.I. The importance of security in the French approach

France has been the pioneer nation in Europe in offering a national approach to the Indo-Pacific, something it did in 2019 by publishing its strategic document entitled “France and Security in the Indo-Pacific”. It should be noted that, due to its overseas departments Mayotte and La Réunion, France is formally an Indo-Pacific nation. This was highlighted in its 2019 document where it indicated that 1.6 million French citizens lived in French overseas departments and territories, 200,000 French Nationals live in the Indo-Pacific states and the region encompassed 465,422 km² and

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93 percent of its Exclusive Economic Zone\textsuperscript{57,58}. In this way, France has become one of the pillars of Europe’s geopolitical projection in the Indo-Pacific\textsuperscript{59}.

Additionally, in a new strategic move in which it limits China’s international projection, France has declared India as its preferred partner in Asia\textsuperscript{60}, thus displacing the weight that China could have in this international architecture in general and in the European Union in particular. France’s approach focused on security, both in the face of traditional threats and in the face of new climatic threats, natural disasters, etc. This is evidenced by the fact that the institution that has produced this strategic document is the Ministry of Defense\textsuperscript{61}. France highlights the importance of the Indo-Pacific for Europe and itself and announces its commitment to this area of the planet with the following words in this strategic document\textsuperscript{62}:

“France pays particular attention to the Indo-Pacific region. Its stability is paramount for international security, as stated in the 2017 Defence and National Security Strategic Review. In the Indo-Pacific area, North Korea challenges the international community by conducting nuclear trials and ballistic missile tests, thereby breaching the resolutions of the United Nations Security Council. The military assertiveness of a growing number of established or emerging powers presents many challenges to multilateralism and increases the instability and unpredictability we are confronted with. Terrorism, which has severely struck Europe over the last few years, is reshaping and spreading to the Indo-Pacific. This worrying evolution requires a joint mobilisation of the international community.

The maritime domain remains an area of tensions due to the challenging behaviour of some States with regards to United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea and the persistence of acts of piracy. Finally, the effects of climate change and environmental degradations represent a major issue in the Indo-Pacific, and as far as in the Antarctic,

\textsuperscript{57} Ministère des Armées, France. \textit{France and Security in the Indo-Pacific}.


\textsuperscript{61} Ministère des Armées, France. \textit{France and Security in the Indo-Pacific}.

\textsuperscript{62} \textit{Ibidem}.
exacerbating security risks. These major challenges can only be overcome through cooperation.

Upholding stability in the Indo-Pacific, which is a source of overall prosperity thanks to its economic dynamism, demographic growth, and technological innovation, is essential. This has to be set within the framework of an international order based on dialogue and the respect of multilaterally set rules.”

The geopolitical importance of this region for France is reflected in the economic data that this document provides: France exported 66.44 billion euros to the Indo-Pacific in 2018, excluding defense equipment, which is equivalent to 34 percent of all exports outside the European Union and 14 percent in total. Similarly, France has imported 95.93 billion euros from the Indo-Pacific (also excluding defense equipment). To protect this area, France has deployed 7,000 military personnel throughout the Indo-Pacific, 2,900 in the Pacific Ocean, and 4,100 in the Indian Ocean. France has divided its military forces into five joint regional commands as follows:

Commander of the French Armed Forces in the South of the Indian Ocean (COMSUP FAZSOI), in New Caledonia (COMSUP FANC), in French Polynesia, and the Pacific Ocean (COMSUP FAPF / ALPACI), in the UAE and the Indian Ocean (FFEAU / ALINDIEN), and in Djibouti (FFDJ), where China opened its first Naval Base overseas in 2017 and it’s a vital bottleneck for EU’s economy since it allows access to the Red Sea.

Regarding the number of French nationals in overseas departments located in the Indo-Pacific, the document indicates that the most populated region is the one formed by the islands of Mayotte, Réunion, and Scattered Islands, with 1,100,000 inhabitants, followed by New Caledonia (282,000 pop.), French Polynesia (276,000 pop.), and the remaining regions with hardly any permanent population. Similarly, France has nationals in other Indo-Pacific nations: more than 30,000 in China and Australia (each); between 10,000 and 30,000 in Japan, Thailand, India, Bhutan, New Zealand, and Madagascar; between 3,000 and 10,000 in Vietnam, Cambodia, Malaysia, South Korea, the Philippines, Brunei, Indonesia, and East Timor; and less than 3,000 in the remaining countries. France also details the specific security risks in the Indo-Pacific:

“The 2017 French Strategic Review emphasises the rapid and intense evolution of the threats identified in the 2013 White Paper: terrorism, the

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63 Ibidem, 2.
64 Ibidem, 6.
65 Ibidem, 3.
66 Ibidem, 4.
worrying return of rivalry and power assertiveness, the weakening of the rule of law and multilateralism as well as the increase of unconventional challenges.

North Korea’s ballistic and nuclear programs do not only threaten Northeast Asian stability but also the international order and the non-proliferation regime. In the South China Sea, the large-scale land reclamation activities and the militarisation of contested archipelagos have changed the status quo and increased tensions. The potential consequences of this crisis have a global impact considering that one third of the world trade transits through this strategic region. Such a case highlights how multilateralism is questioned by assertive policies which are threatening the stability of the whole region.

Terrorism is another challenge. The end of Daech does not mean the end of this global threat due to Foreign Fighters returning home and the spread of terrorism to new regions such as South Asia and South-East Asia. Scientific and technological breakthroughs are bringing in new opportunities, but also new risks. There is little doubt that accessibility to deep underwater resources, the expansion of power projection and, in parallel, of anti-access / area denial capabilities, and the centrality of cyberspace and satellite equipment, are going to exacerbate rivalries between States in the Indo-Pacific.

Facing those challenges, France is developing a network of strategic partnerships in the Indo-Pacific with countries such as India, Australia, Japan, Malaysia, Singapore, New Zealand, Indonesia and Vietnam. To deal with those risks and tensions, France supports and wishes to contribute to the building of a regional security architecture.”

France also collaborates with the regional centers dedicated to the surveillance of maritime spaces and sea-lanes of communication of the Indo-Pacific. Three French officers contribute to these goals within the Information Fusion Center-Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) located in New Delhi; the Information Fusion Center of Singapore (IFC), and the Regional Center for the Fusion of Maritime Information (CRFIM) located in Madagascar.

Arms cooperation with Indo-Pacific nations also plays a vital role in the role that France plays in the security of this region67, India and France, for example, had arms trade worth 13,184 million euros in the period 2008-2017.

IV.II. The multilateralism in the German projection to Indo-Pacific

The second European country in developing a national strategy for the Indo-Pacific was Germany with a more multi-dimensional approach.

67 Ibidem, 17.
Germany published its new policy for the region on September 1, 2020, in a 70-page document titled “Policy guidelines for the Indo-Pacific”68. In it, Germany has emphasized the need for multilateralism when addressing the challenges in the Indo-Pacific, while urging North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to expand its agreements with Japan and South Korea. Likewise, it highlighted the need to support rules and not powers when defining the dynamics of this area, issuing a veiled warning to the Chinese negotiating strategy of relying on bilateralism for the expansion of its global influence69. This view has been condensed in the statements of the German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas stating,

“Our prosperity and our geopolitical influence in the coming decades will depend on how we work together with the countries of the Indo-Pacific region. That, more than anywhere else, is where the shape of the international rules-based order of tomorrow will be decided. We want to help shape that order - so that it is based on rules and international cooperation, not on the law of the strong”70.

Germany’s strategy is based on seven pillars71: 1) Strengthening multilateralism; 2) Tackling climate change and protecting the environment; 3) Strengthening peace, security, and stability; 4) Promoting human rights and the rule of law; 5) Strengthening rules-based, fair and sustainable free trade; 6) Rules-based networking and the digital transformation of regions and markets; 7) Bringing people together through culture, education, and science.

Germany seeks to achieve eight goals72: 1) Peace and security; 2) Diversifying and deepening relations; 3) Neither unipolar nor bipolar; 4) Open shipping routes; 5) Open markets and free trades; 6) Digital transformation and connectivity; 7) Protecting our planet; 8) Access to fact-based information. Germany relies on seven principles that guide its strategy in the

71 Ibidem, 5.
72 Ibidem, 9-10.
Indo-Pacific to achieve these goals\textsuperscript{73}: 1) Promote coordinated European action (based on the EU Global Strategy 2016); 2) Bet on multilateralism by strengthening economic, political, and security ties with Indo-Pacific nations; 3) Support an Indo-Pacific based on rules-based order; 4) Incorporate the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) of the United Nations to the actions carried out in the Indo-Pacific; 5) Defend Human Rights; 6) Promote the inclusiveness of all nations involved in the Indo-Pacific to strengthen peace, security, and stability in the region; 7) Promote partnerships between equals with Indo-Pacific nations in third countries to share global responsibilities.

IV.III. \textit{The economic dimension and Netherlands}

Finally, the Netherlands has been the third European nation to offer a national strategy for the Indo-Pacific in November 2020, also offering the shortest document (10 pages) and published only in Dutch at the source. In it, the Netherlands, like Germany, articulates its strategy based on eight dimensions of strategic interest\textsuperscript{74}: the defense of the international legal order, the promotion of democracy and human rights, security and stability, sustainable trade, safe passage, and maritime security, address the climate change, global healthcare and poverty reduction.

The Netherlands also highlights the integration of its strategy into coordinated action within the EU by stating\textsuperscript{75},

\begin{quote}
“The Netherlands would like to see the EU develop its own vision of the Indo-Pacific, aimed at promoting EU cooperation with the region on the basis of a distinctive EU agenda so as to protect and promote our own interests. At the same time, the Netherlands must consider how it can contribute itself to an EU agenda by strengthening its bilateral ties with the countries of the Indo-Pacific”.
\end{quote}

On the strategic alliances that the Netherlands advocates, the document states that they should prioritize like-minded nations such as Australia, Japan, New Zealand, South Korea, and India, as well as strategic colla-

\textsuperscript{73} \textit{Ibidem}, 11-12.


\textsuperscript{75} Government of the Netherlands, Netherlands, \textit{Indo-Pacific: Guidelines for strengthening Dutch and EU cooperation with partners in Asia}. 

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borations with ASEAN. Without explicitly mentioning China, the Netherlands is making its position on building a security architecture in the Indo-Pacific clear.

IV.IV. The EU’s geopolitical strategy for the Indo-Pacific

Finally, the European External Action Service (EEAS) of the European Union announced in March 2021 the need to develop a strategic European position on the Indo-Pacific, filling a hole in its global projection that contrasted with the assertiveness of other actors with whom it shares close political and strategic ties such as the US, Japan, India, and Australia. This commitment was materialized by the EU’s High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the European Commission, Josep Borrell, announcing: “From trade and investment, to connectivity, climate action and security, we have a big stake in the Indo-Pacific and should do our part to keep the regional order open and rules-based”. This declaration heralded the end of a long strategic absence in the EU taking an international position on the Indo-Pacific.

It has been suggested that one of the reasons for this European parsimony is China’s economic dent made in the heart of the EU through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The so-called “checkbook diplomacy”, a term used to refer to the Chinese BRI, could have been the main impediment to the fruition of serious community interest in developing some type of strategy in the region that could upset the Asian giant. Therefore, it is not surprising that the nations most critical of how China has landed in Europe, such as France and Germany, have also been the first to have developed their own national strategy. It must also be mentioned that, even though the European (and other) nations backing the FOIP take special care

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77 European External Action Service (EEAS), *The EU needs a strategic approach for the Indo-Pacific*.
not to officially present this initiative as a rival, threat, or alternative to the BRI, the geopolitical implications of these both models are clear.

Therefore, if one were to accept the view that the European Union is torn between a more pro-BRI stance and a more pro-Indo-Pacific one, one would find a clear disruptive line of an economic nature at the heart of the EU. The richest nations —France, Germany, and the Netherlands— have taken a pro-Indo-Pacific stance. The poorest nations (especially the ones in southern Europe still recovering from the 2008 crisis) have adopted a more pro-BRI stance). Therefore, the “checkbook diplomacy” plays a fundamental role not only in the geopolitical projection of European nations but also on the question of European cohesion and in its capacity to geopolitically coordinate itself.

This radical break in geopolitical terms within the EU itself represents a serious obstacle not only for European projection in the Indo-Pacific, but also for reaching future strategic agreements between European member partners. The commitments made with China may prevent the European nations that have signed them from supporting or giving approval to more assertive European positions regarding the Asian giant on human rights, state interventionism in markets with European participation, Chinese military expansionism at sea, or China’s treatment of ethnic minorities (such as the Uighurs) or political assertiveness (such as in Hong Kong).

These implications can also extend to other international areas that would be vital for the EU. An example of this would be the opening of the first Chinese military base abroad in Djibouti, which would allow China to project its military force in the Gulf of Aden, a vital geostrategic point through which is an important part of the supply of crude oil, products, and raw materials from the EU. Likewise, this could compromise the European position on the trade war between the US and China, the EU position on the clashes between China and Japan in the Senkaku / Diaoyu Islands, and the role of Europe in redefining a new balance of powers in a multipolar world.

For this reason, the European geopolitical division not only damages Europe’s role in this area of the planet but also compromises the EU’s own ability to operate in the future as a coordinated entity with one voice. This situation can be solved with the announced future EU strategy regarding the Indo-Pacific, allowing the EU not only to project its voice in this region of the planet, collaborating with democracies and free-market economies but also to consolidate itself internally as a more cohesive actor when making strategic decisions.
V. Conclusions

The Indo-Pacific is becoming the new geopolitical axis of the planet, which is a reason for Europe to abandon its long strategic absence in the region and develop its own strategies for it. This has been reflected in the development of the three national strategies to date, as well as in the announcement of future development of a European strategy. The three nations that have developed their own national strategies have been France in 2019 (focusing on security), Germany in 2020 (focusing on multilateralism), and the Netherlands also in 2020 (focusing on trade). These three strategies reveal the triple importance that the region has for the world in general and Europe in particular: security (with six recognized nuclear powers including France), economic (with 62 percent of world Gross Domestic Product (GDP), and demographic (with the 64 percent of the world’s population).

In March 2021 the future development of an EU strategic document for the Indo-Pacific was announced, ending a European absence and marking a turning point in the global projection of the European Union. This paradigm shift may mark a change in relations of the EU with China since the commitment to a European strategy in the Indo-Pacific would imply a displacement of the weight that China can play both in the region and in the relationship with the EU. The impact of COVID-19 may have accelerated this process by disrupting the global supply chain and, thus, reducing the European trade dependence with China, at least temporarily. It will take time to see if this historic event is accompanied by a greater European presence in the Indo-Pacific. In any case, although the guidelines in the EU document are still generic, it may mark the beginning of greater European cohesion and assertiveness not only in the Indo-Pacific but in many other geopolitical scenarios.

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