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The Case for Transatlantic Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific

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Summary

The evolving strategic dynamics in the Indo-Pacific are of paramount importance for the future of the rules-based international order. While the United States is redirecting strategic focus to the region as part of its Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy, Europe is also stepping up its role—leveraging a strong economic profile, long-standing bilateral ties, and active engagement in various regional multilateral forums. The European Union (EU) and its member states can make distinct contributions to an open, transparent, inclusive, and rules-based regional order, though not necessarily always in lockstep with Washington.

Though few European countries have formally acknowledged the new U.S. strategy, the concept's emphasis on rules-based order and multilateralism bears many similarities to the EU's own outlook. The EU and many of its member states are becoming more ambivalent about Chinese power and are seeking to counter certain problematic Chinese economic behaviors, and the Indo-Pacific offers opportunities for transatlantic cooperation, though U.S.-EU diplomatic relations under U.S. President Donald Trump are significantly strained. However, the U.S. administration's fixation on short-term transactional diplomacy, lack of commitment to multilateralism, and strong emphasis on Chinese containment are putting a damper on such collaboration with EU members.

Admittedly, Europe does not aspire to be a traditional hard power in Asia, lacks significant military capabilities in the region, and is reluctant to pick sides in the escalating U.S.-China competition. Only two European middle powers—France and the United Kingdom (UK)—can project serious military force in the region, as Europe has long underinvested in defense spending and needs to prioritize more immediate security threats. But Europe can amplify its political and security role in the Indo-Pacific by leveraging the growing Franco-British presence and better utilizing the EU's collective role. Key European countries have already expanded their security footprint in the Indo-Pacific through a more regular naval presence, bilateral and multilateral joint exercises, arms sales, and various other forms of defense cooperation. Europe's economic role is already considerable too, as the EU is a top trade and investment partner of most regional states.

Washington should welcome greater European involvement in the Indo-Pacific. A greater European presence in the region advances the U.S. objective of promoting a tighter regional security architecture with vital partners like Japan and India. Similarly, the EU's support for the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) can help foster a more multilateral, cooperative Asian security architecture. As for economic and trade policy, U.S. and EU interests in the region largely overlap but do diverge in significant ways. While both Europe and the United States are keen on increasing trade flows and addressing unfair Chinese economic practices, the EU's emphasis on free trade has allowed it to either complete trade agreements or launch new negotiations with regional partners like Australia, Japan, and Singapore.

Despite the limitations constraining the transatlantic diplomatic agenda, meaningful joint and/or complementary European and U.S. action in the Indo-Pacific remains achievable, particularly between France, the UK, and the United States, though other European countries and the EU could get involved too. While the EU is not likely to formally endorse the U.S. slogan of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific, Europeans can still meaningfully advance its objectives, which are overwhelmingly consistent with the EU's own interests and values. Washington should encourage this trend and simultaneously seek to do more to incorporate European players as key partners on the implementation of its own Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy.

Recommendations for Europe:

- Enhance Europe's strategic thinking on the Indo-Pacific
- Build a European consensus on China
- Invest in regional multilateralism
- Double down on nontraditional forms of security assistance
- Identify other ways to contribute to maritime security
- Leverage defense exports to the region
- Invest in regional connectivity

Recommendations for Washington:

- Enhance transatlantic strategic dialogue on the Indo-Pacific
- Keep political messaging in sync
- Clearly convey the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy to European partners
- Acknowledge the EU's unique complementary role in regional security affairs
- Avoid taking swipes at the EU
- Encourage greater European multilateral participation
- Boost direct transatlantic security cooperation where possible
- Discuss connectivity in the Indo-Pacific more
- Enhance dialogue on export controls and FDI screening

Introduction

Home to billions of people and a sizable share of global economic output, the Indo-Pacific is of paramount importance to the future of the rules-based international order.¹ While the region is a hothouse of commercial activity, it also faces profound strategic challenges, including North Korea's nuclear ambitions and tensions across the Taiwan Strait and in the South China Sea. One of the most striking trends in the Indo-Pacific is the evolving strategic balance between China and the United States, a trend that will have far-reaching consequences for many U.S. allies and partners, including those in Europe.

While its role in Asia often has been overlooked, Europe can make distinct contributions to an open, transparent, inclusive, and rules-based regional order, though not necessarily always in lockstep with Washington. Admittedly, Europe does not aspire to be a traditional hard power in Asia, lacks significant military capabilities in the region, and is reluctant to pick sides in the escalating U.S.-China competition. Yet key European countries are expanding their security footprint in the Indo-Pacific through a more regular naval presence, bilateral and multilateral joint exercises, arms sales, and various other forms of defense cooperation. Europe's economic role is already considerable too. For example, the European Union (EU) and China have one of the largest trading relationships in the world, and the EU is the biggest investor in many Asian countries.² The EU also serves as a rule-setter in the region, having recently completed a massive free trade agreement with Japan.

Europe's growing interests in the Indo-Pacific necessitate an upgraded strategy. There is ample room for transatlantic cooperation in the areas of diplomacy, security, and economics, though coordination must improve and limitations will remain. Despite diplomatic strains on other issues, European and U.S. positions on Asia policy are partially converging, particularly on the challenges posed by China's rise and the need to do more to defend the rules-based international order. Specifically, Brussels and member states' capitals can cultivate a greater political and diplomatic presence in the region, help lead maritime security and freedom of navigation efforts, and expand security assistance and capacity building.

Upgrading Europe's role in the Indo-Pacific and heightening U.S.-European cooperation there will require forethought and effort. Settling on a common transatlantic agenda for the region requires that simmering tensions among European countries on how to deal with China are addressed, as underscored, for instance, by the previous Italian government's March 2019 decision to endorse Beijing's push to fund overseas infrastructure through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Further, U.S. President Donald Trump and his administration must balance unilateralism with a greater measure of multilateralism, see Europe as more of a strategic partner, and refrain from protectionist tariffs and other counterproductive policies aimed at the EU.

The Limits of Trump's Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy

Previous U.S. administrations sought to encourage China's rise while hedging against its potentially destabilizing consequences. But Trump instead has treated China as an antagonistic competitor that seeks to undermine U.S. primacy, weaken U.S. ties to its regional allies, and dominate Eurasia if not more distant parts of the world.³ Both the 2017 U.S. National Security Strategy and the 2018 National Defense Strategy frame the defining, long-term strategic challenge confronting the United States as great power competition primarily with China (and to a lesser extent with other countries including Russia).⁴ This new U.S. approach posits that the previous policy of engagement with China has failed to encourage Beijing to act as a "responsible stakeholder."⁵ Over the past few years, U.S. perceptions of Beijing's intentions have clearly shifted, with a new bipartisan consensus in Washington on the need to do more to counterbalance the more troubling dimensions of China's rise.⁶

The Trump administration's vision of a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" encapsulates this strategic focus.⁷ Admittedly, it remains unclear whether Washington can allocate the resources needed to accomplish its objectives and coherently wed its strategic ambitions with the interests of other regional actors. The goal is to compete more vigorously with China across several domains both in the Indo-Pacific and beyond (though the two sides could work together on specific problems like the nonproliferation challenge posed by North Korea). Fundamentally, the administration's vision of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific is about safeguarding the sovereignty of other nations in the region, as reflected, for example, in Trump's September 2019 address to the United Nations (UN) General Assembly.⁸

Other key principles of the U.S. regional strategy include the peaceful resolution of disputes, free and reciprocal terms of trade and investment, and adherence to international rules and norms (such as freedom of navigation and territorial integrity).⁹ Several regional partners have already endorsed these principles and are developing their own national strategies to help advance them, though these national strategies are not necessarily identical to the U.S. Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy.

The U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy encompasses three dimensions: economics, governance, and security. These policies aim to create a mesh of intersecting partnerships among countries affected by and wary of China's rise, but they have been implemented unevenly so far. Ideally, this campaign would be conducted in concert with U.S. allies, but while Trump has made some cursory efforts to do so, the principal focus so far has been on unilateral actions against China on trade, technology access, and cyber theft.

In terms of execution on the messaging front, Washington has issued many erratic and contradictory statements and policies concerning the Indo-Pacific, and this is undermining U.S. credibility. Trump's ambiguous commitment to supporting U.S. allies, his hectoring approach to burden sharing, and his reluctance to clearly affirm the importance of the liberal international order further exacerbate the key challenge facing any Indo-Pacific strategy.¹⁰ That said, in a recent speech, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs David Stilwell provided some important clarifications on the U.S. approach to China. He stressed pluralism “rooted in the sovereign rights of states” as an organizing principle in the Indo-Pacific.¹¹

In the end, regional states want to avoid confrontation with China—the biggest trading partner for many of them—even as they seek to escape its domination by deepening ties with Washington. For example, Trump's hostility to international trade is especially noteworthy: pulling out of what was deemed one of the most important regional trade agreements, the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), undercut the United States' regional economic leadership. For now, the administration's mistakes are vexatious but not yet fatal because most regional actors still value the benefits of U.S. leadership despite the complications brought on by Trump. Ultimately, while the United States and Europe have ample reason to work together to protect their shared interests amid China's economic resurgence, thorny policy differences across the Atlantic continue to constrain and sometimes even undermine such cooperation.

Europe's Diplomatic Role

Diplomacy is central to Europe's contributions to a transatlantic agenda for Asia, given Europeans' track record of pragmatic engagement and commitment to multilateralism.¹² The concept of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific has garnered interest in European capitals. Although the EU institutions and most member states still prefer the Asia Pacific moniker, the inclusiveness of the widened Indo-Pacific regional framework and its strong emphasis on rules-based order closely mirror the EU's own outlook (despite the lack of consensus on its geographical boundaries). Moreover, many Europeans intuitively understand the merits of emphasizing the Indian Ocean more, given how important the Gulf of Aden is to European trade flows.

Yet many Europeans still have reservations about the concept mainly due to the Trump administration's strong emphasis on countering China. While generally sympathetic to the concept's underlying principles, many in Europe lack confidence in the administration's foreign policy, misgivings rooted in several serious policy disagreements and Trump's apparent hostility toward the

EU and multilateralism.¹³ Most European actors are also wary of endorsing the Indo-Pacific concept outright for fear of antagonizing Beijing. For now, most of Europe prefers to wait and see how things develop. Even so, certain member states have been more forward-leaning than others. France, in particular, views the Indo-Pacific construct as central to its own view of the region and role therein (this may be, at least in part, because France maintains overseas territories in both the Indian and Pacific Oceans).¹⁴ Some other European countries and EU officials have also started to occasionally refer to the Indo-Pacific in policy statements and official documents, signaling greater awareness of and receptiveness to the new regional construct.¹⁵

In the meantime, the EU, its member states, and the post-Brexit United Kingdom (UK) all can help promote a Free and Open Indo-Pacific even without formally endorsing the concept. For starters, Europe must recognize that it will remain a relatively minor strategic actor in Asia. Only two European middle powers—France and the UK—can project serious military force in the region, as Europe has long underinvested in defense spending and needs to prioritize more immediate security threats. Notwithstanding these obvious limitations, Europe can amplify its political and security role in the Indo-Pacific by leveraging the Franco-British presence and utilizing the EU's collective role, though the latter might be complicated by Brexit.

Taken together, the EU and its member states maintain a robust diplomatic presence throughout the Indo-Pacific, leveraging a strong economic profile, long-standing bilateral ties, and active engagement in various regional multilateral forums. Unsurprisingly, France and the UK, *inter alia*, maintain the most extensive network of bilateral and multilateral relationships, but other countries such as Germany are also relevant.

French Engagement in the Indo-Pacific

The Indo-Pacific is crucial for French diplomacy and the country's vision of a stable multipolar order.¹⁶ The top French priorities in the region are protecting its overseas territories (New Caledonia and French Polynesia in the Pacific Ocean and La Réunion in the Indian Ocean), its extensive exclusive economic zone, and the over 1.6 million overseas French citizens who reside in the region.¹⁷ France is also keen on increasing defense exports, curbing nuclear proliferation and terrorism, maintaining maritime security and critical trade links, and upholding the rules-based international order.

Under former president François Hollande, France tried to upgrade its security partnerships with regional players such as Australia, India, and Japan and develop new bilateral arrangements with Indonesia, Malaysia, New Zealand, the Philippines, Singapore, and Vietnam.¹⁸ President Emmanuel Macron has intensified these efforts, focusing especially on Australia, India, and Japan, rendering

France by far the most deeply connected European country in the Indo-Pacific today.¹⁹ Growing bilateral ties between France and India are especially noteworthy. The leaders of the two countries meet annually for a bilateral summit.²⁰ At the most recent one held in Paris in August 2019, Macron invited Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to attend the G7 summit in the French city of Biarritz, where the two countries agreed on joint roadmaps on cybersecurity and digital technology.²¹ Their cooperative agenda spans a host of issues including civil nuclear power, energy policy and climate change, maritime security, and outer space.²² France and India also have a regular maritime security dialogue, the most recent iteration of which took place in New Delhi in November 2019.

Paris and New Delhi also boast a strong partnership in the defense sector. In March 2018, the two countries signed a joint cooperative vision for the Indian Ocean and a separate bilateral logistical cooperation agreement allowing for mutual access to military installations.²³ In addition, France has expanded its defense exports to India, including a \$8.8 billion deal in 2016 to supply thirty-six Rafale fighter jets, the first of which were delivered in October 2019.²⁴ Based on an earlier \$3 billion deal, six Scorpène diesel-electric attack submarines are being built in India under a technology transfer agreement. On the personnel front, France has a liaison officer assigned to the Indian Navy's Information Fusion Center for the Indian Ocean region.²⁵ In November 2019, the chief of staff of the French Navy, Admiral Christophe Prazuck, suggested that France and India were also discussing the possibility of conducting joint naval patrols in the Indian Ocean in 2020.²⁶

France also cooperates significantly with Japan so as to diversify the former's range of security partnerships. Paris and Tokyo already have a two-plus-two ministerial security dialogue involving their foreign and defense ministers, and they also recently finalized a bilateral acquisition and cross-servicing agreement. France and Japan have recently discussed conducting joint naval exercises and launching a new dialogue on maritime cooperation.²⁷

Ties between France and Australia have grown closer in recent years, too, in part because they have similar objectives in the South Pacific. For one thing, France and Australia (along with New Zealand) share a responsibility for conducting disaster relief operations in the Pacific Ocean under the so-called FRANZ Arrangement.²⁸ In March 2017, Paris and Canberra signed a joint statement that involves long-term strategic cooperation in the Indo-Pacific.²⁹ During Macron's visit to Australia in May 2018, he also touted the idea of a "Paris-Delhi-Canberra axis," a regional security triangle designed to uphold the rules-based order and regularly convene the countries' respective defense and foreign ministers.³⁰ More recently, in Sydney, Prazuck said he hoped that Australian warships would escort the French aircraft carrier the Charles de Gaulle when she sails in the Indian Ocean.³¹ Moreover, France and Australia have enjoyed a strong industrial relationship since 2016, when the French company Naval Group (formerly called DCNS) won a \$40 billion contract to supply Australia with twelve new submarines.³²

In addition to cultivating bilateral ties, French ministers and senior diplomats participate in several multilateral regional forums. France is an active founding member—along with Australia, New Zealand, and the United States—of the bilingual, twenty-six-nation Pacific Community, a scientific and technical organization. Paris is also a dialogue partner, attendee, or member of a host of other organizations, including the Indian Ocean Rim Association, the South Pacific Defense Ministers Meeting, the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium, the Western Pacific Naval Symposium, and the Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environmental Program.

France's commitment to multilateralism in Asia even extends beyond these activities. The country coordinates on maritime security in the Southwest Pacific with Australia, New Zealand, and the United States as part of the Quadrilateral Defense Coordination Group. And, as a permanent member of the UN Security Council and a nuclear power, France shares responsibilities for managing the nuclear crisis on the Korean Peninsula and plays an active role on sanctions policy in both the UN and the EU. Moreover, Paris has expressed interest in attending the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Defense Ministers' Meeting-Plus.

UK Engagement in the Indo-Pacific

Similarly, as Europe's other major military power, the UK is active in Asia to protect its national interests, promote trade and broker arms sales, project global influence and naval power, help ensure freedom of navigation, and uphold the rules-based international order.³³ London has sought to increase its economic, diplomatic, and military presence in the Indo-Pacific in recent years. In part, this approach is a consequence of Brexit and the country's need to forge new trade links in the region and elsewhere and make up for lost geopolitical relevance. Notably, the UK has emphasized expanding trade and foreign direct investment (FDI) with China, a position that could create friction with the Trump administration. For instance, in July 2019, Prime Minister Boris Johnson declared himself "enthusiastic about the Belt and Road."³⁴

The UK's regional security presence is a product of bases, partnerships, and naval deployments and joint exercises. Prominent British regional partners include Australia, India, and Japan as well as smaller Commonwealth countries such as Brunei, Malaysia, New Zealand, and Singapore.

The UK's long-standing military and cultural ties with Australia are instructive. London and Canberra signed an updated treaty on security cooperation in 2017.³⁵ The two countries' foreign and defense ministers also meet for annual deliberations. Moreover, both countries participate in the Five Eyes intelligence-sharing alliance (along with Canada, New Zealand, and the United States) and in a

separate nonbinding defense pact called the Five Power Defense Arrangements (with Malaysia, New Zealand, and Singapore).³⁶ Meanwhile, a British defense firm, BAE Systems, also won a \$26 billion contract in 2018 to supply the Royal Australian Navy with nine antisubmarine frigates.³⁷

British cooperation with Japan runs especially deep as well. The 2015 Strategic Defense and Security Review refers to Japan as the UK's "closest security partner in Asia."³⁸ In August 2017, former prime minister Theresa May and Prime Minister Shinzo Abe signed a five-page document outlining several concrete areas for strengthened security cooperation.³⁹ The UK and Japan maintain a regular two-plus-two dialogue between their defense and foreign ministers, and in December 2017, they pledged to step up joint military exercises in the region.⁴⁰ Royal Navy ships enforcing UN sanctions off the coast of North Korea have docking rights in Japanese harbors. The Royal Navy has also signed a trilateral defense agreement with the U.S. and Japanese navies to hold more exercises and combined patrols. Similarly, in October 2016, the UK's Royal Air Force and the Japan Air Self-Defense Force held their first-ever joint aerial combat drill in Japan, and two years later, the British Army and the Japan Ground Self-Defense Force held a joint military exercise.⁴¹

Meanwhile, cooperation between the UK and India is growing but remains challenging. The two countries signed a strategic partnership in 2004, which led to an upgraded partnership on the security front in November 2015, and they have discussed further boosting maritime security cooperation.⁴² Like the French Navy, the UK Royal Navy is planning to assign an officer to the Indian Navy's Information Fusion Center for the Indian Ocean region.⁴³ Despite these signs of limited progress, the two countries face difficulties regarding previous colonial ties and the issue of visas for Indian workers in the UK.

In addition to bilateral relationships, the UK is also part of some of the same multilateral dialogues as France, including the Indian Ocean Rim Association, the Western Pacific Naval Symposium, and the South Pacific Defense Ministers Meeting, as well as others like the Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery Against Ships in Asia (ReCAAP).

Despite the UK's good intentions, however, Brexit has damaged the country's credibility and hamstrung its desire to boost its presence in Asia. Although London launched a post-Brexit strategy called Global Britain to redirect military, economic, and diplomatic attention to the region, the UK's ability to follow through while the Brexit debate rages on is debatable.⁴⁴ For example, talk of establishing a reinforced British military base in the region remain speculative.⁴⁵

Other European Diplomatic Relationships

Besides France and the UK, other European states naturally also maintain diplomatic relationships across the Indo-Pacific. Taken together, EU member states have fostered over forty strategic partnerships in the region and participate in over sixty bilateral dialogues.⁴⁶ Many European countries engage in regular security dialogues and defense partnerships with countries like Australia, India, Indonesia, Japan, Singapore, South Korea, and even China. Several are also active in some of the aforementioned regional multilateral bodies, including the ASEAN Regional Forum (which EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Federica Mogherini attended in 2019), as well as others like the Indian Ocean Rim Association, the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium, the Western Pacific Naval Symposium, and ReCAAP. Many of them participate in other multilateral forums and gatherings, too, such as the Asia Pacific Intelligence Chiefs Conference, the Shangri-La Dialogue, the Raisina Dialogue, and the Tokyo Defense Forum. Taken together, the EU's delegations and its member states' many embassies—many of which host defense attachés and military advisers—give Europe an extensive diplomatic network throughout the Indo-Pacific.⁴⁷

Germany, for example, wields considerable economic clout and close diplomatic ties, though little in terms of military power. In particular, German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Abe have reinforced bilateral ties given their shared commitment to free trade and the rules-based international order.⁴⁸ German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas has also touted an “alliance of multilateralists” with Japan and other middle powers to serve as a counterweight to growing great-power competition between China and Russia and the United States.⁴⁹ This pointed implicit critique of the Trump administration prompts the question of whether U.S. and EU diplomacy may be starting to diverge not just on means but also on ends.

Germany has pursued other avenues of regional diplomacy as well, such as strengthened ties with India.⁵⁰ The two countries have had a strategic partnership since 2001 and a defense cooperation agreement since 2006. During Merkel's November 2019 visit to New Delhi, the two sides agreed to strengthen strategic cooperation on trade in agricultural goods, security, cybersecurity, and artificial intelligence.⁵¹ Given Germany's strong dependence on trade flows with Asia, Berlin understandably prioritizes maritime security in the Indian Ocean. Though Germany lacks sizable naval capabilities like France and the UK, it regularly participates in regional maritime exercises and counterpiracy operations in the Indian Ocean; it also is part of the Indian Ocean Rim Association and the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium. Beyond these diplomatic activities, German firms export arms to various Asian countries.

The European Union's Role as a Bloc

Though most EU members prefer to cultivate bilateral ties, the union collectively also wields significant economic influence and normative power, and it remains strongly committed to multilateralism. Notably, the bloc takes common positions on a wide variety of regional foreign policy issues—be it sanctions on North Korea, the Rohingya humanitarian crisis, or the peaceful settlement of territorial disputes in the South China Sea.⁵² That said, common EU statements on many issues of principle such as freedom of navigation in the South China Sea, human rights, freedom of speech in Hong Kong, or relations with Taiwan sometimes are weakened due to Chinese pressure on individual member states.

Brussels is capable of contributing on security affairs too. The EU's preventive diplomacy in the region includes assistance given during Myanmar's democratic transition from military rule, the Nepali civil war, the independence crisis in East Timor, the Mindanao peace process in the Philippines, and stabilization efforts in the Indonesian province of Aceh.⁵³ Since 2011–2012, the EU has attempted to buttress its diplomatic role in Asia and broaden its regional engagement beyond China.⁵⁴ The EU's 2016 Global Strategy reflected these ambitions in stating that Brussels will strive to make “greater practical contributions to Asian security” and “expand . . . partnerships, including on security” with countries like Indonesia, Japan, and South Korea.⁵⁵

The EU's relationship with Japan has progressed the most, amid signs of divergence with the incumbent U.S. administration. Months before launching a landmark free trade agreement in February 2019, Brussels and Tokyo signed a strategic partnership agreement in July 2018 to promote shared values such as human rights and the rule of law by cooperating more on issues like crisis management, peacebuilding, and development policy.⁵⁶ In September 2019, the EU and Japan also signed a partnership agreement to cooperate on connectivity. The Trump administration's disruptive foreign policy and protectionism have driven the two middle powers to forge stronger ties. Japan sees the EU as a stable bedrock and supporter of multilateralism, especially as U.S.-Chinese competition is heating up and the rules-based international order is declining.

The EU also has reinforced ties with other regional actors, including Australia and India. A 2017 framework agreement led to a new EU-Australia Joint Committee that convened first in November 2018 and again in June 2019.⁵⁷ The two partners discussed cooperation on issues like cybersecurity threats, foreign interference, counterterrorism, and crisis management. Similarly, the EU has

expressed interest in deepening relations with India, a sentiment echoed in a 2017 joint statement and a 2018 EU strategy document that envisions India playing a “key role in the current multipolar world.”⁵⁸ That said, progress on European diplomacy with India remains more uneven.

Besides its bilateral relationships with Indo-Pacific states, the EU also staunchly supports a stronger regional security architecture in conjunction with ASEAN, with which it agreed to establish a strategic partnership in January 2019.⁵⁹ The EU and ASEAN maintain regular ministerial dialogues and cooperation frameworks spanning a host of topics, including security issues, regional integration, economic cooperation and connectivity, and cybersecurity.⁶⁰ To help facilitate security cooperation, the EU Delegation to ASEAN hosts counterterrorism experts and military advisers.⁶¹

Over the past decade, the EU has engaged more with other regional multilateral bodies as well. It is a member of the ASEAN Regional Forum (where it has co-chaired a meeting on maritime security). The EU also is keen to join the ASEAN Defense Ministers’ Meeting-Plus and wants to gain observer status at the East Asia Summit. (In the latter case, although some members of the summit are hesitant to let the EU join, the union did participate as a guest in 2017.) The EU also wants to strengthen cooperation with the Indian Ocean Rim Association. Meanwhile, both France and the UK would like to attend the ASEAN Defense Ministers’ Meeting-Plus in their national capacities.

Another unique vehicle for Europe’s engagement with Asia is the biannual Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM); the most recent gathering was in Brussels in October 2018 and convened more than fifty European and Asian countries as well as the EU and ASEAN.⁶² In addition to biannual summits, ASEM runs a permanent secretariat and the Singapore-based Asia-Europe Foundation, which aims to strengthen ties between the two regions and explores opportunities for cooperation and development.

Given the rising economic and political importance of Asia, Europe has strived in recent years to cultivate and strengthen its ties with regional partners. Overall, Europe’s political and diplomatic role in the Indo-Pacific should not be discounted. Both the EU and its member states have extensive regional ties and participate in regional multilateral bodies and institutions.

Europe’s Security Role

As vital as diplomatic engagement is, security concerns in the Indo-Pacific remain a pressing consideration. European policymakers are becoming more aware of the security challenges a rising China poses both in Europe’s neighborhood and in the Indo-Pacific. Many Europeans believe growing tensions between China and its neighbors and the United States, including Beijing’s military

ambitions and assertiveness in the South China Sea, are undermining the rules-based international order and imperiling the vital sea lines of communication on which European economies depend. Other top regional security issues for European strategists are nuclear proliferation on the Korean Peninsula and transboundary challenges such as terrorism, piracy, illegal fishing, and organized crime.

Official European foreign policy documents reflect the heightened relevance of strategic developments in Asia. For instance, the EU's 2016 Global Strategy acknowledges that "security tensions in Asia are rising" and notes that "there is a direct connection between European prosperity and Asian security."⁶³ Europe contributes to security in the Indo-Pacific by maintaining a military presence and bases, participating in maritime security operations and exercises, forging defense partnerships with regional powers, offering capacity building and security assistance, and providing defense exports. Of these priorities, defending freedom of navigation and offering security assistance and capacity building loom especially large.

Maritime Security and Freedom of Navigation

Maritime security and freedom of navigation in the Indo-Pacific matter to Europe because the region is important for maintaining global trade flows and the rules-based international order.⁶⁴ While the EU (like the United States) does not pick sides in the South China Sea territorial disputes, EU leaders share U.S. concerns about China's territorial claims and assertive posture. Brussels supports the peaceful settlement of maritime disputes in accordance with international law and the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), as well as regional confidence-building efforts. And the EU has backed a code of conduct and the ruling of the arbitration tribunal in The Hague (though some EU members have disagreed internally).⁶⁵

Because the EU does not always speak uniformly on foreign policy matters concerning China, statements by groups of member states can be especially important. For example, the four European G7 members (France, Germany, Italy, and the UK) have supported strong phrasing on the South China Sea in G7 readouts, including the one from June 2017.⁶⁶ More recently in August 2019, the so-called E3 group of Berlin, London, and Paris jointly warned that the situation in the South China Sea "could lead to insecurity and instability."⁶⁷ This type of coordination will likely become even more important for positioning Europe as a central global actor after Brexit occurs.

Beyond diplomatic statements, France, the UK, and some other EU members also contribute directly to maritime security and freedom of navigation in the region. France's level of activity is especially notable. With around 7,000 military personnel stationed across the Indo-Pacific, France's military ambitions in the region have evolved considerably since around 2012.⁶⁸ Former French

defense minister Jean-Yves Le Drian gave a seminal speech at the 2016 Shangri-La Dialogue, calling for a “regular and visible” European presence in the South China Sea.⁶⁹ Le Drian’s successor, Defense Minister Florence Parly, reiterated France’s commitment again at the Shangri-La Dialogue in 2018 and 2019.⁷⁰ French naval ships have sailed through those waters on several occasions, and France carried out five operations in the region in 2017. Similarly, in May 2018, two French vessels, including the assault ship Dixmude, sailed around the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea.⁷¹ Likewise, in April 2019, a French naval frigate sailed through the Taiwan Strait, drawing a sharp Chinese rebuke (even though the maneuver was not at all unusual).⁷²

The French Navy has been active in other ways too. Since 2017, it has held Mission Jeanne d’Arc, an annual naval training and patrol task force in the region, the latter of which includes a Mistral-class helicopter carrier and a Courbet frigate.⁷³ Both British and U.S. participants have joined these exercises. In addition, France also has allocated ships in the Indian Ocean under the Bois Belleau 100 mission alongside the U.S. Navy.⁷⁴ In February 2019, two frigates, a nuclear attack submarine, and an oil tanker were billed to join the country’s Charles de Gaulle aircraft carrier in a strike group.⁷⁵

A few months later, in May 2019, the aircraft carrier joined French destroyers, nuclear attack submarines, and Rafale M naval aircraft in the seventeenth rendition of the annual Varuna maritime exercise with India in the Indian Ocean. That same month, France sent its naval group, including the Charles de Gaulle aircraft carrier, to the first combined naval drills in Asia ever conducted jointly with Australia, Japan, and the United States. France also hosts and regularly participates in other bilateral and multilateral exercises in the region. At the 2019 Shangri-La Dialogue, Parly pledged that France would continue to sail “more than twice a year in the South China Sea.”⁷⁶ Macron recently announced France’s intention to order six new patrol boats which, among other things, would help protect French waters in the South Pacific and the Indian Ocean.⁷⁷

While arguably somewhat less involved than France, the UK also deploys naval forces and participates in military exercises in the Indo-Pacific. UK forces are stationed in Brunei, at a small naval logistics facility in Singapore, and at a new (as of April 2018) permanent British naval base in Bahrain staffed by some 500 troops.⁷⁸ On the British-controlled island Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean, the U.S. Navy also maintains a small military base (though a recent UN court ruling threatens to jeopardize this outpost).⁷⁹ British ships regularly participate in sanctions enforcement against North Korea by conducting maritime patrols off the Korean Peninsula.⁸⁰ Since 2009, Royal Navy ships also have joined the EU’s Operation Atalanta antipiracy mission off the Horn of Africa, a mission that was headquartered in Northwood, the UK, until 2019.

The UK has joined numerous other naval drills and exercises in the Indo-Pacific too. After an isolated deployment in 2013, the UK has consistently deployed ships to the region since 2018 for bilateral and trilateral operations. For instance, in July 2018, British ships joined a French Navy task group for a freedom of navigation exercise in the South China Sea.⁸¹ The HMS *Albion*, a British amphibious warship, then conducted a September 2018 freedom of navigation mission near the Paracel Islands.⁸² Similarly, in January 2019, the HMS *Argyll* conducted a drill in the South China Sea with the U.S. Navy and participated in Exercise Bersama Lima 2018 with the navies of Australia, New Zealand, Malaysia, and Singapore.⁸³ In February 2019, the HMS *Montrose* conducted a joint training drill with the U.S. Navy in the South China Sea before participating in a trilateral antisubmarine exercise together with the U.S. Navy and Japan Self-Defense Forces in March 2019.⁸⁴ In December 2019, the HMS *Enterprise* survey vessel sailed through the Taiwan Strait as the Royal Navy continued to step up its presence in the Indo-Pacific.⁸⁵

The Royal Navy has held other joint exercises with Japan and the United States as well. Recently, former British defense secretary Gavin Williamson stated that the UK would deploy the new HMS *Queen Elizabeth* aircraft carrier and its accompanying battle group in the Pacific by 2021, including to the South China Sea. He also mentioned plans to send a littoral strike group to the Indo-Pacific, though the status of this forthcoming deployment remains unclear.⁸⁶ In the past two years, France and the UK have begun coordinating more in the region and have even spoken of deploying a combined carrier strike group, though no concrete plans to do so have yet materialized.⁸⁷

Their expanding presence in the Indo-Pacific could encourage other European countries to get more involved and further amplify Europe's overall efforts. For example, Dutch and German uniformed officers have already participated in French-led naval operations.⁸⁸ The German government has also deliberated internally over whether to more actively contribute to similar freedom of navigation exercises in the South China Sea in 2020, but Berlin has not yet made any such announcements.⁸⁹ Meanwhile, Denmark, the Netherlands, and Portugal are all expected to take part in planned French-led naval operations in the Pacific. In addition, the Netherlands has pledged to send a ship to join a British carrier group to be deployed in the area.⁹⁰ Moreover, other European countries like Denmark, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, and Norway regularly partake in the U.S.-led, biannual Rim of the Pacific (or RIMPAC) exercises. Other European states have contributed to the ASEAN International Fleet Review maritime exercise.

Numerous European countries—including Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, and the UK—have also contributed to Combined Task Force 150, a U.S.-led coalition based in Bahrain to secure the coast off the Horn of Africa in the Western Indian Ocean.

The French-led European Intervention Initiative, which has thirteen European members (including the UK), has recently established a working group devoted to the Indian Ocean so members can share information on regional security issues.⁹¹

Even if European countries rarely conduct full-fledged freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea, their symbolically vital presence nonetheless complements U.S.-led freedom of navigation efforts and lends international support and legitimacy to such efforts. What is more, given their more low-key profile in the region, European-led maritime missions might, in theory, more easily induce other Asian partners to join than U.S.-led operations can.

While the EU itself does not participate in freedom of navigation exercises in the South China Sea, EU naval forces have patrolled the Western Indian Ocean for over a decade through Operation Atalanta. Other partners like New Zealand and South Korea also have contributed to this operation.⁹² The mission has helped the EU strengthen military ties with and conduct outreach to other regional players such as India, Japan, and even China (by escorting ships making deliveries for the UN World Food Program). For example, Operation Atalanta and the Indian Navy have delivered humanitarian aid to Somalia and joined maritime domain awareness efforts in the Western Indian Ocean. Brussels and New Delhi are discussing other ways to bolster maritime cooperation, such as a recent port visit by the EU Naval Force to Mumbai.⁹³ During the summer of 2019, in response to the tensions between the United States and Iran surrounding the Strait of Hormuz, EU leaders also discussed further upgrading the EU's maritime security responsibilities, though no new such mechanisms have been established yet.⁹⁴

Security Assistance and Capacity Building

The EU is also involved in limited forms of security assistance and capacity building in the Indo-Pacific. While the EU has pledged to “scale up” its security role in Asia and has expressed strong interest in regional maritime security, Brussels's role will probably remain limited.⁹⁵ Most likely, Europe will continue to be confined largely to low-key capacity building, training, technical assistance, and confidence-building measures.

In that spirit, in May 2018, the foreign ministers of EU member states endorsed a plan to increase coordination between EU institutions and member states operating in Asia in key priority areas.⁹⁶ Under existing financial arrangements, the EU has already launched plans for heightened cooperation with five pilot countries: India, Indonesia, Japan, South Korea, and Vietnam in the areas of counterterrorism, cybersecurity, maritime security, and crisis management.⁹⁷ Additional funding has been proposed to cover policy dialogue and support, cooperation and capacity building, and

public diplomacy.⁹⁸ Regional partners, including Australia, New Zealand, South Korea, and Vietnam, have also already signed framework agreements with the EU to contribute to future EU crisis management operations.

Meanwhile, the EU has held meetings between the chair of the EU Military Committee and regional counterparts and assigned security officials to delegations in the Indo-Pacific.⁹⁹ A current proposal would expand this initial investment under the upcoming EU budget for 2021 to 2027. While a fairly modest effort, the EU's regional partners have indicated that they would like to deepen security cooperation with the EU.

Brussels also values fostering ties with regional multilateral venues. Well-established EU support for ASEAN covers sensitive issues such as maritime security, cybersecurity, and violent extremism.¹⁰⁰ For example, Brussels and ASEAN maintain a regular, high-level cooperative dialogue on maritime security covering law enforcement at sea, maritime connectivity, marine environmental cooperation and joint development of natural resources, and conflict prevention.¹⁰¹ The EU also helps the ASEAN Coordinating Center for Humanitarian Assistance handle disaster management among ASEAN members, although internal divisions with ASEAN do constrain the extent of this security cooperation.¹⁰²

Individual European states also provide various forms of security assistance to regional partners. For instance, the UK Royal Navy supports regional maritime domain awareness initiatives in the Indian Ocean, supports policy training for the Jakarta Center for Law Enforcement Cooperation, and provides assistance to the Regional Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief Coordination Center in Singapore.¹⁰³ Similarly, the Dutch Ministry of Defense's Peacekeeping Center has regular exchanges with China, Malaysia, and Vietnam, while multiple Southeast Asian states participate in the Netherlands Defense Orientation Course.¹⁰⁴

Some EU members have gotten involved with multilateral organizations too. Denmark, the Netherlands, Norway, and the UK all participate in the antipiracy efforts of ReCAAP, and France has recently applied to become a member.¹⁰⁵ The EU and many of its member states regularly provide humanitarian assistance and relief missions during disasters in the region, such as after the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami, the 2010 Fukushima tsunami in Japan, and the 2014 typhoon in the Philippines.

Though modest, these forms of EU assistance can foster local goodwill for Europe and help Brussels strengthen ties with Asian nations. While the EU's more low-key security contributions in the Indo-Pacific may be limited, they still add value and arguably complement more hard power—

oriented U.S.-led efforts (though the U.S. government admittedly also provides extensive capacity building and humanitarian assistance).¹⁰⁶ As Washington doubles down on strategic competition with Beijing, the EU wants to present itself as a more neutral, values-driven partner. Europe's soft-power posture may be attractive to some regional states in Asia that are wary of choosing sides in the emerging U.S.-China competition.

That said, certain complications and uncertainties remain. Most regional states in the Indo-Pacific still do not perceive the EU as a strategically relevant player.¹⁰⁷ Consequently, some are skeptical of the EU's nontraditional approach.¹⁰⁸ Moreover, the EU's views of China have hardened in certain respects, especially on the economic front. Hardening European sentiments about China could reshape how Indo-Pacific states perceive the EU as a potential partner. The fallout from Brexit also could impact the EU's perceived foreign policy clout among regional players in Asia.

Europe's Economic Role

While Brussels sometimes struggles to pursue a coherent, common foreign policy, the EU wields considerable clout as the world's largest economic bloc. EU trade in goods with Asia totaled 1.5 trillion euros in 2018.¹⁰⁹ Europe is also a major source of FDI in Asia. With the Trump-led United States departing from its traditional embrace of free trade, Europe stands to gain regional credibility and influence by presenting itself as a firm promoter of free and open trade. At the same time, the EU increasingly shares many interests with the United States on addressing unfair Chinese trade practices and economic behavior, even if the two sides' preferred remedies vary greatly. Two main dimensions of Europe's economic role in Asia are trade and infrastructure connectivity.

Promoting Trade

Brussels continues to promote free and open trade by opposing protectionism and reaching new trade deals with like-minded regional partners. At the same time, the serious challenges facing the multilateral economic system have driven the EU to do more on the trade front. Moreover, the economic nationalism of the Trump administration has paradoxically provided the EU with new opportunities to present itself as an attractive partner to like-minded countries in Asia by staunchly defending open trade and opposing protectionism.

The results of Europe's proactive trade policy speak volumes: since 2011, the EU has secured free trade agreements with Japan, Singapore, and Vietnam on top of the one it already had with South Korea. Taken together, these agreements allow the EU to expand its leadership role on global trade

and export its preferred trade rules and standards. The ambitious EU-Japan free trade agreement is especially striking because the two markets jointly account for roughly one-quarter of the global economy and will be one of the world's largest free trade areas.¹¹⁰ When the United States withdrew from the TPP and imposed tariffs on imports of steel and aluminum (and potentially cars) for national security reasons, it became even more pressing for Japan to complete a trade deal with the EU.

Other trade deals may be on the horizon. The EU is still in talks with Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand (with an eye toward a future EU-ASEAN bloc-to-bloc deal), and the union also recently initiated trade negotiations with Australia and New Zealand. Meanwhile, EU-India trade talks are proving more difficult given New Delhi's aversion to deeper free trade agreements (though there are recent signals that talks may restart again).¹¹¹

The EU's changing regional trade role also stems from its more critical attitude toward China. While most European capitals in the past have viewed China in mainly neutral commercial terms, Brussels has grown more frustrated with Beijing's perceived inability to curb intellectual property theft and forced technology transfers, cut back on subsidies for state-run firms, or deliver reciprocal market access for European companies. Further, the EU has bristled at the sharply increasing rate at which Chinese investors have sought to acquire European strategic assets and critical infrastructure over the past decade.

Europe's shifting stance on China's economic behavior is already having tangible effects. Several European states, including France and Germany, have tightened their national rules for inbound Chinese investment and advocated for a more coordinated EU approach to Chinese strategic investments in European technological assets and infrastructure. In early 2017, France, Germany, and Italy wrote to the president of the European Commission at the time, Jean-Claude Juncker, asking him to explore ways to protect European interests on this front.¹¹²

After two years of negotiations, the EU agreed to establish a screening mechanism for foreign investments in April 2019, a remarkably fast turnaround for such an initiative.¹¹³ Granted, the new EU framework imposes no binding requirements or limitations on FDI in Europe and will not be fully activated until late 2020. Still, the measure could improve coordination between EU member states and the European Commission, and it could help countries with their own national screening mechanisms. The new legislation marks a clear shift in the EU's free trade policy and highlights Europe's growing determination to support a more level playing field vis-à-vis China.

Along the same lines, in March 2019, the European Commission and the European External Action Service (EEAS) jointly labeled China “an economic competitor in . . . pursuit of technological leadership” and a “systemic rival,” even accusing Beijing of “promoting alternative models of governance.”¹¹⁴ This co-written document proposed ten priorities for balancing the EU’s relationship with China. At the most recent EU-China summit in Brussels in April 2019, EU officials successfully pushed their Chinese counterparts to sign a joint statement that endorsed many of the EU’s key demands for reforms related to industrial subsidies.¹¹⁵ In November 2019, the EU managed to get China to commit to an agreement to protect European geographical indications.¹¹⁶

The implementation of these commitments will help determine whether the EU takes further steps to hold China accountable. Key tests will be the EU-China summit in Beijing in April 2020 and the summit with China and the national leaders of the union’s twenty-eight (twenty-seven after Brexit occurs) member states organized by the German presidency of the European Council for September 2020 in Leipzig. In addition to trade defense modernization and investment screening, figuring out how to ensure reciprocity in public procurement will likely be another major sticking point.

Notably, several of these efforts predate the Trump administration, which has encouraged Europeans to impose stricter conditions on investment screening with respect to China. Germany and several other countries have sought to update and tighten existing national legislation for FDI screening over the past two years.¹¹⁷ For example, the German government decided to block a Chinese attempt to acquire the German chip equipment manufacturer AIXTRON in 2016, after the U.S. government’s investment-screening body, the Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States (CFIUS), reached a similar decision.

Improving Connectivity

Besides trade, China’s role in global connectivity and infrastructure investment is also noteworthy for the EU.¹¹⁸ Many in Europe have mixed feelings about China’s push to invest in overseas infrastructure through the BRI.¹¹⁹ Several European governments are admittedly attracted by Chinese offers of infrastructure financing. Amid the austerity measures that followed the 2007–2008 financial crisis, several Eastern, Central, and Southern European countries have turned to China for infusions of capital. Yet concerns remain.

The EU has grown cautious and apprehensive about Beijing’s intentions and how some BRI projects are being implemented. Common European concerns about the BRI include a perceived lack of respect for labor rights, environmental protections, and human rights; insufficient transparency and

open procurement procedures; and fears of unsustainable debt burdens, especially in the Balkans where most countries are struggling economically.¹²⁰ Finally, Europe is wary of the BRI's geopolitical ramifications and efforts by Beijing to cultivate ties with individual European capitals that could undermine European unity. China is pursuing inroads through annual summits with countries in Central and Eastern Europe under the aegis of the so-called 16+1 framework.¹²¹

Maintaining EU unity on the BRI is highly challenging. About half of the EU's member states—including Greece, Hungary, Italy, and Portugal—have broken ranks and signed on to cooperate with the BRI.¹²² Several European leaders attended the second BRI Forum in Beijing in April 2019 to Beijing's great satisfaction. At the same time, the EU also released a significant new September 2018 strategy for connecting Europe and Asia and cogently responding to the BRI.¹²³ This document explores how to improve energy links and digital and transport connectivity throughout Asia. Europe's goal is to establish norms and rules for connectivity projects, with a strong emphasis on sustainability and respect for the rules-based international system. To this end, the EU would seek to allocate as much as 60 billion euros in common EU funding for connectivity projects in Eurasia.¹²⁴ On the personnel front, the EU has appointed the first-ever ambassador-at-large for connectivity in the EEAS.

But it remains to be seen whether the EU can partner with like-minded countries, implement regional and country-specific strategies, communicate its plans effectively to recipient states, and allocate sufficient long-term funding. In a landmark development, the EU and Japan signed a September 2019 deal to coordinate on transport, energy, and digital infrastructure projects linking Europe and Asia based on “sustainability, quality infrastructure and a level playing field.”¹²⁵ As Abe put it at the event in Brussels announcing the deal, Europe and Japan can “build sustainable, rules-based connectivity from the Indo-Pacific to the Western Balkans and Africa.”¹²⁶ Europe is also contemplating similar connectivity agreements with other potential Asian partners.

Unlike the United States' stance, the EU's position on the BRI is to engage with China rather than try to isolate it. Many Europeans believe the BRI could be hugely positive as long as it adheres to EU market rules, meets international requirements and standards, and complements EU policies and projects. Brussels, therefore, is not seeking to derail the BRI but rather to explore possible synergies on a case-by-case basis. That said, while the EU's connectivity strategy is not intended to be in direct opposition to China's plans, it is certainly a response to the BRI and reflects growing European concerns about the Chinese initiative.

The Prospects for Transatlantic Cooperation

The United States largely welcomes growing European ambitions and relevance in Asia as a foundation for increased transatlantic cooperation. Though few European countries have formally acknowledged the U.S. strategy for a Free and Open Indo-Pacific, the concept's emphasis on rules-based order and multilateralism does resonate with U.S. partners in Europe. This is even more true as the EU and many of its member states have become more ambivalent about Chinese power and sought to counter certain problematic Chinese behaviors. Europe has expressed interest in working more closely with Washington on addressing these shared concerns, but so far to little avail.

Europeans are receptive to cooperating with the United States in ways that emphasize multilateralism and the rules-based order, but the U.S. administration's fixation on transactional diplomacy or Chinese containment constrains such collaboration. Despite these obvious limitations, there are areas where the United States could work more closely with its European allies and partners on security and economic policy coordination in the Indo-Pacific.

Transatlantic Security Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific

Europe has the potential to contribute to regional security in the Indo-Pacific and has displayed a conditional openness to stronger policy coordination. Though new channels for transatlantic discussions about China and the Indo-Pacific are materializing, the U.S.-EU strategic relationship still lacks regular venues for discussing these and other foreign policy and security issues.¹²⁷ For such strategic discussions to be fruitful, the Trump administration should abandon euroskepticism. While U.S. officials have sent some signals of a transatlantic reset, European trust in the Trump administration remains low.¹²⁸

Though transatlantic ties are strained, there is room for meaningful, complementary (though not necessarily *joint*) action in the Indo-Pacific, particularly among France, the UK, and the United States, though other European countries and the EU could get involved too. Washington should welcome greater European involvement in the region. From Washington's perspective, having European partners take on a bigger security role in the Indo-Pacific can help demonstrate international support for freedom of navigation and a rules-based regional order.

Freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea are an important example of the difference that transatlantic cooperation can make. The greater frequency and larger nature of French and British-led operations in recent years, though generally not as far-reaching as U.S.-led operations, still send a strong message to Beijing and encourage other countries to get involved.¹²⁹ This includes

other European countries and Southeast Asian states that may otherwise fear that China would deem such shows of support too provocative. Moreover, a greater European presence in the Indo-Pacific also advances the U.S. objective of promoting a tighter regional security architecture with vital partners like Japan. Similarly, the EU's support for ASEAN can help foster a more multilateral, cooperative Asian security architecture.

Other potential areas for greater U.S.-European cooperation in the Indo-Pacific include human rights, cross-strait relations, the protests in Hong Kong, and North Korea's nuclear weapons program. The United States and the EU could enhance dialogue on human rights and good governance in the region—areas in which the EU is especially well suited to play a leading role. But the Trump administration's limited interest in these issues will constrain transatlantic collaboration, as Europeans hardly view the incumbent U.S. government as a credible partner on human rights. The EU and the United States are approaching human rights differently as Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's remarks about "unalienable rights" imply, a stance that many European countries fear will infringe on reproductive rights and the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) communities.¹³⁰ The EU has more regional credibility to effectively engage on these issues.

Taiwan and Hong Kong also offer opportunities for coordinated U.S. and European action. Given that the United States and the EU share an interest in supporting Taiwan as a free and democratic society, they should explore whether a designated U.S.-EU coordination mechanism could advance civil society engagement and promote Taiwan's participation in multilateral forums.¹³¹ Such efforts will be especially critical as the island prepares for major presidential and parliamentary elections in January 2020. On Hong Kong, there has been little direct U.S.-EU coordination to date on joint statements condemning violence, whereas the EU and Canada have issued a joint statement on the city's ongoing protests.¹³²

U.S.-European cooperation on North Korea has more hurdles to overcome. European capitals increasingly recognize that Pyongyang poses not merely a proliferation risk but also a potential threat to international security and even to the security of Europe itself.¹³³ And European officials have conferred with their U.S. counterparts on the North Korean nuclear program and sought reassurances from the Trump administration regarding its approach. But, unlike during the negotiations on the Iran nuclear deal when the EU as well as France, Germany, and the UK were actively involved, it is hard to see what diplomatic role, if any, the EU can play on North Korea given the circumstances. (That said, some EU member states such as Sweden continue to help facilitate talks through its Pyongyang diplomatic mission.)¹³⁴ Moreover, transatlantic disagreements over the Iran nuclear deal and the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty also illustrate why more U.S.-European dialogue on nonproliferation and arms control is needed.

Ultimately, the prospects for transatlantic security cooperation in the Indo-Pacific are limited given that European mistrust for the Trump administration's foreign policy is widespread and several U.S. policies have undermined transatlantic relations. And though Europe shares U.S. concerns about how Chinese authoritarianism could imperil the rules-based order, most Europeans do not subscribe to Washington's embrace of great power competition with Beijing. The U.S. government should explain where it sees its relationship with China going, clarify what role multilateralism with European partners might play, and rectify counterproductive policies that are harming the EU.

Transatlantic Economic Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific

As for economic and trade policy, U.S. and EU interests in the region largely overlap but do diverge in significant ways. While both Europe and the United States are keen on increasing trade flows and addressing unfair Chinese economic practices, the EU is emphasizing free trade, whereas the Trump administration seems more interested in securing U.S. strategic advantages.

The EU's hardening views on China provide an opportunity for deeper transatlantic cooperation, although Brussels and Washington have their own trade disagreements to work through. U.S.-EU trade talks were not completed during the presidency of Barack Obama, but the two sides still could create new global standards and norms for trade and investment. Negotiations resumed and progressed somewhat after the July 2018 summit between Trump and Juncker, but lingering disagreements and the administration's looming threat to impose auto tariffs threaten to derail things again.¹³⁵ Even worse, Trump has repeatedly rebuffed the idea of joining hands with Europe on addressing shared economic concerns about China and even suggested on several occasions that the EU is "worse" than China on trade.¹³⁶

This U.S.-European impasse is unfortunate because Americans and Europeans largely want the same things from China on trade and investment.¹³⁷ Both Washington and Brussels are demanding more reciprocal access to the Chinese market for Western companies, more robust efforts to prevent intellectual property theft and forced technology transfers, and fewer distortive state subsidies and other benefits for Chinese state-owned firms. The lion's share of Chinese FDI in the EU is injected by state-owned enterprises, although some Chinese private companies (often with state lending) are also participating.

The United States and the EU are each negotiating bilateral agreements with China to set rules for foreign investment. During their latest annual summit in April 2019, European and Chinese leaders committed to stepping up negotiations to reach an agreement by 2020. New European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen is expected to push hard on this issue, as is Germany during its

upcoming presidency of the Council of the European Union in the second half of 2020. The investment screening mechanism the EU unveiled in early 2019 could be a starting point for more regular transatlantic sharing of information and best practices.¹³⁸ The relevant experience of the U.S. counterpart body, CFIUS, could provide valuable lessons for European member states seeking to enhance its own regulatory frameworks. Washington and Brussels should also confer on related issues such as intellectual property protection, technology transfers, and export controls.

But for such cooperation to be effective, Washington must rediscover the value of multilateral institutions, while continuing to rigorously advocate necessary reforms and greater reciprocity. Trilateral U.S.-EU-Japan talks on how to reform the World Trade Organization (WTO) are crucial and should be a higher priority, but this would require Washington to abandon its intransigent opposition to the WTO appellate body and threats to withhold funding from the institution.

Moreover, the United States should consider how its own rhetoric and policies toward the EU have undermined transatlantic cooperation on China and provided openings for Beijing in Europe. The Trump administration's negative attitude toward the EU and strong preference for bilateral dealings with individual member states is ultimately shortsighted and counterproductive. Washington needs to be more aware that most countries in Europe are keen to maintain a balanced economic relationship with China and will be reluctant to choose between the two should the Trump administration push for economic decoupling. In the telecommunications sector, the case of Chinese manufacturer Huawei and its push for 5G in Europe suggests that U.S. diplomatic pressure that is too heavy-handed risks backfiring and may reinforce skepticism in Europe about Washington's intentions toward China.¹³⁹

Yet, policy differences notwithstanding, there is significant potential for greater transatlantic cooperation on connectivity in the Indo-Pacific. In particular, the United States and the EU should team up to better coordinate efforts to offer alternative forms of financing for large-scale infrastructure projects, as well as to establish and popularize related rules and best practices. To this end, the U.S. government should invite the EU to join initiatives on connectivity with Australia and Japan, such as the Blue Dot Network.¹⁴⁰ That said, the disconnect between Washington's outright dismissal of the BRI and the EU's more pragmatic conditional embrace of it remains a major impediment to transatlantic cooperation on this frontier.¹⁴¹

Even so, the EU and the United States should pursue complementary though not necessarily joint approaches to economic connectivity. It is unrealistic to think that the BRI can be stopped, as many countries throughout Eurasia have a legitimate need for infrastructure investment. While none can compete with China in terms of the sheer scale of investment, U.S. and European actors may have

an edge on soft connectivity projects related to digital and telecommunications networks and corresponding governance standards. Despite their differing approaches, the EU and the United States share common objectives to rally around, while leaving each partner free to determine which methods to use in pursuit of those goals.

While difficult, transatlantic cooperation on connectivity in Eurasia is worthwhile. It could help Western countries be more competitive and attractive partners to regional states in the Indo-Pacific or even incentivize Chinese lenders to be more accountable and transparent. A good example of this is the establishment of the China-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). Although a Chinese-backed institution, the bank is significantly more transparent and open than the BRI and counts several EU countries among its members. Three of its five vice presidents are European nationals.¹⁴² Western countries should also do more to support political systems in the Indo-Pacific and elsewhere that respect the rule of law, so as to shore up these countries' domestic abilities to withstand destabilizing forms of Chinese political influence and negotiate better deals with Beijing.

Tangible Ways to Deepen Transatlantic Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific

The EU, its member states, and the post-Brexit UK all have strong reasons to deepen regional engagement even more. Despite the limitations constraining the transatlantic diplomatic agenda, meaningful joint and/or complementary European and U.S. action in the Indo-Pacific remains achievable. There are some steps Europeans can take on their own to improve their outlook in the region and increase potential synergies with U.S. policymakers, and there are also a host of measures that the two sides can pursue in concert.

Strengthening Europe's Presence in the Indo-Pacific

There is much Europeans can do to improve their standing in the Indo-Pacific. The EU should explicitly single out the importance of the region for the future of the rules-based international order. Though the EU need not formally endorse the U.S. slogan of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific, Europeans can still meaningfully advance its objectives, which are overwhelmingly consistent with the EU's own interests and values. Specifically, European policymakers and bureaucrats of all stripes should:

Enhance Europe's strategic thinking on the Indo-Pacific: European policymakers must demonstrate a firm grasp of strategic developments in the region, their long-term relevance for the international order, and Europe's role in shaping a stable Indo-Pacific order. Despite being a bit short

on details, the 2016 European Global Strategy marked a welcome step in the right direction, stressing the EU's intention to make "greater practical contributions to Asian security" and forge stronger regional partnerships.¹⁴³ A March 2019 strategic document elucidated the EU's strategy toward China, but a wider, holistic regional outlook is still needed.¹⁴⁴

The EEAS should consider developing a new regional strategy for the Indo-Pacific, as it already has for Central Asia.¹⁴⁵ Since the Indo-Pacific framework is likely to remain controversial in the EU, adopting parallel strategies for the Pacific Ocean and for the Indian Ocean might be a more attractive option. In such documents, the new EU leadership led by High Representative Josep Borrell should identify its core interests and objectives in these respective subregions, outline which principles of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific Europe endorses, clarify that it does not seek to contain China, and describe how it will help promote a rules-based regional order. Ideally such a strategic exercise would also help forge stronger consensus among EU members. Though most EU member states do not necessarily share France's security interests in Asia, Paris especially should actively engage with other interested EU capitals to share its own experience with adopting an Indo-Pacific strategy.

Build a European consensus on China: The EEAS's March 2019 document on a joint China policy for Europe marked a firm shift in the EU's views, naming China an "economic competitor" and "systemic rival."¹⁴⁶ Europeans must continue to forge a consensus on China, lest Beijing succeed in dividing EU members. In the past, the EU has struggled with unity, as seen when Greece and Hungary opposed a strong common EU statement in 2016 on the South China Sea or Chinese human rights violations.

Several European countries, including the Netherlands and Sweden, are revising or developing China and Asia strategies in light of recent strategic developments.¹⁴⁷ Brussels should leverage these policy discussions to instill a sense of European common purpose. While the EU will and should remain a neutral player in Asia, it should firmly uphold international law and a rules-based regional order on issues like the applicability of UNCLOS in the South China Sea, Taiwan and cross-strait relations, and human rights and the rule of law in places like Hong Kong and Xinjiang.

Invest in regional multilateralism: Europe does not want the Indo-Pacific to become polarized between the United States and its partners on the one hand and China on the other. Given its small strategic role in the region and limited ability to reduce the growing U.S.-China rivalry, Europe should invest more in regional cooperative platforms and multinational governance structures. Primary among these platforms is ASEAN, for which the EU's own integration experience could be instructive. In addition to strengthening bilateral, trilateral, and minilateral relationships with like-minded partners such as Australia, India, and Japan, Europeans should further strengthen ties

with other countries like Indonesia, Singapore, and Vietnam. These types of relationships can provide regional partners more space to maneuver and more hedging options as great power competition increases. They can take the form of bilateral arrangements between the EU or individual member states and individual Indo-Pacific partners, or they can be trilateral discussions such as the evolving France-India-Australia dialogue.

Double down on nontraditional forms of security assistance: The EU should scale up its security assistance in Asia with more funding under the next multiannual EU budget. Some of Europe's regional partners—many of whom are uncomfortable with growing U.S.-China competition in the region—would welcome greater European involvement. EU institutions and member states should also coordinate their policies more on regional issues like maritime security, counterterrorism, cybersecurity, nonproliferation, peacekeeping, and hybrid threats.

Identify other ways to contribute to maritime security: France and the UK should continue to lead Europe on maritime security and freedom of navigation operations in the Indo-Pacific, especially around the South China Sea. In the same spirit, Paris and London should bolster cooperation with each other (possibly as part of a combined task group deployment) and encourage other EU members to contribute. By supporting and participating in French or British-led missions, other EU states can send a political signal or make Paris or London less exposed to potential Chinese diplomatic retaliation.

If contributing to a freedom of navigation operation in the South China Sea is too confrontational for some European militaries, they could consider other forms of participation such as joining French or British warships en route to their destination. Moreover, including ASEAN countries—who might be hesitant about operating alongside the United States—in Europe-led regional operations and exercises would also help integrate the regional security order more deeply. However, it is important that Europe's actions in the region not be directed against China but rather aimed at upholding the rules-based regional order and supporting the sovereignty of regional partners to resist Chinese pressure.

In fact, Europe's greatest added value on regional maritime security may not primarily take the form of freedom of navigation in the South China Sea but rather involve addressing emerging challenges such as illegal fishing. Similarly, Europeans ought to get more involved with training and maritime security duties on issues for which Europe has unique expertise to offer, such as conflict prevention and sustainable resource management.

Leverage defense exports to the region: The fact that Europe is a major exporter of arms to Asia gives European countries significant strategic influence in the region. A strong defense sector

relationship gives Europe influence and relevance in Asia that it otherwise would lack because of its relatively small military presence. These relationships could help Europe foster closer bilateral military-to-military partnerships with key Asian states, but this also requires doing more to coordinate on a common EU arms export policy.¹⁴⁸

Invest in regional connectivity: There is untapped potential for Europe to deepen cooperation with regional partners on connectivity, like the EU and Japan have already done. Similar agreements could be explored with other like-minded regional partners such as Australia, Singapore, and South Korea. Focusing on connectivity would allow the EU to become a more attractive economic partner and a more strategic player in the region. European investment in regional infrastructure should be complemented with more capacity building and governance support, especially for countries in Southeast Asia.

A crucial test for the EU's regional credibility will be whether the next multiannual financial framework actually allocates the roughly 60 billion euros that EU officials have said is needed to implement the EU's new connectivity strategy in Asia.¹⁴⁹ Following through would demonstrate the EU's viability as a regional partner for high-standard connectivity projects and help reinforce the European Commission's desire to be a more consequential geopolitical actor. Admittedly, some EU member states would rather prioritize spending on infrastructure projects in Europe. Proponents of greater European investments in Asia will need to balance these competing priorities and convince skeptics that shoring up the rules-based international order is imperative to Europe's collective future success.

Bolstering Transatlantic Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific

More transatlantic cooperation in the Indo-Pacific is possible with some obvious limitations and caveats. The United States should recognize that Europe can be a key partner in the region, even if the two sides are not always in lockstep. Washington should recognize that too much heavy-handedness and unilateralism toward China is likely to ostracize key U.S. partners, such as the EU and Japan, who are more in favor of rules, institutions, and multilateralism. Specifically, the United States and Europe should work to:

Enhance strategic dialogue: While the United States and the EU frequently discuss China and Asia at the working level, the transatlantic agenda lacks regular, institutionalized high-level dialogues, summits, and planning for monitoring regional developments, sharing information, and coordinating policy. It is unlikely that another U.S.-EU summit will be held before 2021 with the new EU leadership only just in place and the United States poised to enter an election year, but it is never too early to start laying the groundwork for future cooperation.

The Indo-Pacific must become a regular agenda item in official U.S.-European meetings. Among other things, it would be helpful if the two sides could agree on a common definition of what the Indo-Pacific denotes and what elements a more common strategy should include. Besides official dialogues, track 1.5 dialogues organized by think tanks can also help foster transatlantic strategic conversations on the Indo-Pacific.¹⁵⁰

Keep political messaging in sync: The United States and the EU need not always speak with one voice, but it would be beneficial for them to show a united front when possible. For example, on issues like Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea, North Korea's nuclear tests, Chinese pressure against Taiwan, the treatment of ethnic Uyghurs in Xinjiang, and freedom of speech for the people of Hong Kong, Washington and European capitals can coordinate on diplomatic statements, sanctions policy, and UN Security Council resolutions. The two sides might wish to revisit and update the joint EEAS–State Department statement on Asia from 2012, which, at the time, provided a constructive, pragmatic vision for transatlantic cooperation.¹⁵¹ If the Brexit negotiations end up leading to the UK leaving the EU, it will be crucial to establish new U.S.-UK-EU formats to discuss these issues as well.

Clearly convey U.S. strategy to European partners: The U.S. government should actively involve its European allies as it further develops and implements its Indo-Pacific strategy. Europeans still remember how the Obama administration presented its rebalance to Asia to U.S. partners, including those across the Atlantic, as a *fait accompli*. Rather than trying to rally uniform European support, Washington should work with its European partners to frame what a common vision for the region would look like and how it should be pursued.

But first the Trump administration must clarify whether it expects Europe to be a partner or merely a follower. Europeans are wary of being seen as seeking to contain China's rise. If the United States can provide suitable assurances, that would help get Europeans on board for a more joint Indo-Pacific agenda, though differences will remain.

Acknowledge the EU's unique complementary role: The EU's political neutrality in Asia and strong commitment to multilateralism are invaluable assets for promoting a Free and Open Indo-Pacific. For example, even though the United States has not signed on to UNCLOS, having European members of the UN Security Council do more to defend and apply it in the South China Sea is a positive step.¹⁵² The EU also could initiate conversations with like-minded Asian states about introducing an agreement like the Helsinki Accords to reduce tensions between Asian neighbors and establish nonbinding principles for guiding relations between them.

Europeans can also engage Asian partners on issues on which the United States is absent or has less credibility, such as climate change and human rights, or carry out capacity building and security assistance measures that complement U.S. efforts. Finally, European countries such as France and the UK could take the lead on maritime operations in geographical areas where the United States is likely less engaged such as the Western Indian Ocean.

Avoid taking swipes at the EU: Washington and Brussels must be on the same page policywise for cooperation to really take hold. On the trade front, the United States and the EU must resolve their own disagreements before they can effectively address shared concerns about unfair Chinese behavior. The key for Washington is to maintain strong and healthy relationships with allies and partners in Europe and Asia, jointly work to set high global standards for economic conduct, and seek to reform multilateral bodies like the WTO, rather than trying to unilaterally impose tariffs on allies and rivals alike. On a related note, most Europeans dismiss the notion of economic decoupling from China as highly unpopular and unrealistic, preferring instead to keep deep economic ties with China while doing more to safeguard vital European interests.

Similarly, the Trump administration's broader criticism of Europe does more harm than good. Singling out Europe as an economic competitor or a foe does not foster goodwill or a spirit of cooperation, nor does supporting a hard Brexit, siding with populist nationalist governments across the continent, or taking other steps to undermine the European project. In particular, the U.S. government should abstain from lending political support to Europe's populist governments, especially since several countries with such leaders (such as Hungary) tend to be the most China-friendly. Moreover, Washington should encourage deeper EU cooperation on areas such as foreign investment screening, export controls, and shared 5G risk assessments.

Encourage greater European multilateral participation: Washington should urge both the EU and individual European countries to be more strongly involved in regional forums such as the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting-Plus (and its associated expert working groups) and the East Asia Summit. Additionally, it would be worthwhile to bring France and the UK into the still evolving Quad cooperative framework between Australia, India, Japan, and the United States as well as other regional frameworks and joint exercises promoting military interoperability. Trilateral meetings in which the United States and key regional partners such as Australia and Japan meet with key European partners, like France and the UK, should also be expanded. Trilateral U.S.-UK-Japan maritime cooperation could also serve as a model for other trilateral formats—such as a U.S.-France-India arrangement.¹⁵³

Similarly, Washington should encourage its European allies to deepen bilateral ties with U.S. allies and partners like India and Japan in the Indo-Pacific so as to preserve freedom of navigation and invest in capacity building to combat piracy, illegal fishing, and organized crime. Finally, the several European states that are members of the AIIB can help shape the organization from within to ensure that it complies with international norms and principles.

Boost direct transatlantic security cooperation: Despite their differences, the United States and Europe can strengthen direct transatlantic cooperation on certain security issues in the Indo-Pacific. These areas include maritime security and freedom of navigation, sanctions enforcement, capacity building and training, regional security integration, nonproliferation, countering political influence and disinformation campaigns, energy policy, and cybersecurity.

At the very least, Europe and the United States should share information about their respective military-to-military engagement with the People's Liberation Army of China; coordinate the provision of defense equipment and services to regional partners; cooperate on enforcing sanctions and countering illegal fishing and trafficking; and deconflict and increase mutual understanding of each other's wider activities in the region.

In addition, Washington and its European partners could look into conducting more joint patrols and exercises, as well as partnering more on capacity building with respect to the South China Sea. Such cooperation has happened before. The French and British militaries joined the U.S. Navy for drills near the coast of Guam in 2017, and in May 2019, Australian, French, Japanese, and U.S. forces held a combined naval exercise in the Bay of Bengal. European participation in joint operations and the involvement of European military assets (such as bases and logistical support) helps convey that there is a broad coalition of countries that are willing to cooperate in the region.

Discuss connectivity in the Indo-Pacific more: Because Europe and the United States are both keen to invest more in regional infrastructure and connectivity, the opportunity is ripe for enhancing transatlantic dialogue and cooperation. In particular, the EU's connectivity strategy and U.S. efforts, such as the BUILD Act and the Blue Dot Network, could offer potential synergies and room for collaboration.

One goal should be to have a dedicated U.S.-EU connectivity partnership in place by the next G7 meeting in the United States in June 2020. The two sides should also discuss how to best leverage development financing and private sector investment for strategic priorities in the Indo-Pacific; whether a regional division of labor between the two sides makes sense; and how to align digital, infrastructure, and energy standards (though the United States' exit from the Paris climate change accord complicates these discussions).

Enhance dialogue on export controls and FDI screening: Both Europe and the United States are ratcheting up legislation and regulations pertaining to investment screening and export controls involving China, a potential impetus for deeper transatlantic coordination. The United States’ experience with CFIUS could provide valuable lessons for European countries seeking to develop or update national legislation. The European Commission and the U.S. Treasury and Commerce Departments should seek to share information about particular transactions, coordinate on exploring which sensitive technologies to protect (including so-called “white lists” and “black lists”), and engage jointly with third parties such as Japan. Finally, the United States’ experience with restricting exports based on broader foreign policy concerns could be informative for European practitioners too—like the October 2019 U.S. decision to restrict exports to twenty-eight Chinese entities accused of helping repress human rights in Xinjiang.¹⁵⁴

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Notes

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