

European Engagement in the Indo-Pacific: The Interplay between Institutional and State-Level Naval Diplomacy

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This article examines Europe's comprehensive Indo-Pacific strategy by investigating the interplay between the European Union's institutional diplomacy and French-led naval diplomacy in the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean.

MAIN ARGUMENT

China is attempting to expand its presence in the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean at the expense of the U.S. alliance system. Europe contributes to countering the China challenge with a division of labor between the EU and groupings of member states. The EU level provides institutional diplomacy and economic and security partnerships. At the member-state level, a French-led group of EU states provides naval diplomacy in the Indo-Pacific and signals transatlantic unity on core values and interests such as the freedom of navigation and strengthening democracies against authoritarian encroachments. European diplomacy draws on soft- and hard-power instruments in regions where until the mid-2010s it had a negligible footprint. The effort also involves building strategic networks at the institutional and state levels to enhance power-projection capabilities.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- Although Europe defends core liberal values shared with the U.S., it does so from an independent position that advances its own interests. That being said, U.S. and European differences of interests are predominantly operational and can be used to establish a division of labor to more effectively address challenges related to shared values such as freedom of navigation and democracy.
- European activism does not involve a united EU acting as a bloc with one voice on all issue areas. Europe's footprint in the Indo-Pacific begins at both the EU and state levels and uses soft- and hard-power instruments to advance common transatlantic objectives as well as specific European interests.
- Concerns about U.S. security guarantees are prompting European and Indo-Pacific states such as India, Japan, Australia, and the ASEAN countries to build cooperative links independent from the U.S. The reshuffling of alliance and partnership responsibilities may end up strengthening the U.S. alliance system by creating new strategic networks among partners.

The Indo-Pacific is at the center of U.S.-China strategic competition. The South China Sea and the Indian Ocean are prominent arenas for this interaction. In the South China Sea, the United States under the Trump administration has enhanced its freedom of navigation operations in response to China's land reclamations and militarization of the features it occupies. The United States routinely sails within twelve nautical miles of Chinese-occupied features to demonstrate its position that these areas are international waters. U.S. assertiveness, however, has not stopped China from reinforcing and expanding its presence. On the contrary, China has enhanced both patrols in the South China Sea and coercive behavior toward other claimant states such as the Philippines and Vietnam, while continuing to build artificial islands and deploy advanced military capabilities. In the Indian Ocean, China is also expanding its military strategic presence. In 2017, for example, China opened a naval base in Djibouti. In response, the United States has stepped up its ongoing military-strategic cooperation with India. The U.S. Navy makes port calls and conducts joint exercises that focus on closer interoperation. Tellingly, in 2018, Washington renamed U.S. Pacific Command as U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, and India was elevated to Strategic Trade Authorization-1 status on a par with U.S. NATO allies.

Does Europe have a role to play in this strategic competition, one utilizing economic and diplomatic means as well as multilateral institutional frameworks to advance national and regional objectives? This article argues that despite regional challenges such as Brexit, migration, and financial crises, Europe—through the actions of both the European Union and individual European states—does indeed make a difference to U.S.-China strategic competition. Its role involves demonstrating support for core values challenged by China that are shared with the United States and U.S. allies and strategic partners. Europe carries out this role, however, from an independent position that allows it to pursue its specific interests as well as common transatlantic interests in the Indo-Pacific. European activism does not involve a united EU acting as a bloc with one voice on all issue areas. The EU is far too fragmented to act with unity on Indo-Pacific issues. Europe is also marked by complex arrangements among institutions, member states, and affiliated states of the EU, with extensive institutional sovereignty on issues such as trade agreements as well as advisory capacity on issues such as security policy. And Indo-Pacific issues are not among the EU's most immediate concerns at a time when migration, the United Kingdom's presumptive exit from the EU, growing economic concerns in Italy, rising authoritarianism in Eastern Europe, and security challenges from Russia take priority.

Instead, this article will argue that in areas in which EU institutions have an advisory role toward member states, Europe has established a division of labor between EU institutions on the one side and groupings of member states and individual countries on the other. For example, because of internal EU divisions on how far to criticize China's behavior in the South China Sea, European institutions have issued general policy commitments that have been followed up by the participation of a growing number of EU states in freedom of navigation operations. This is a good example of the fact that Europe's comprehensive Indo-Pacific strategy consists of two main elements. One element is the institutional level of the EU, which designs general policies and implementation mechanisms, such as free trade agreements (FTAs), summit diplomacy, and recommendations for policy. A second element is groupings of EU countries that translate policy into practical implementation in ways that strengthen Europe's footprint by means such as military exercises, port calls, investment screening, and border control. At present, French-led naval diplomacy is a central and evolving European grouping that works in tandem with the EU on implementing an Indo-Pacific strategy to influence U.S.-China strategic competition and to promote European interests.

This article looks at the interplay between the policies of EU institutions and the naval diplomacy of EU member states in the Indo-Pacific to assess the growing independent role that Europe plays both in the region and in the U.S.-China strategic rivalry there. Compared with trade, this is a hard case: Europe is at its weakest in areas of foreign policy that involve traditional security issues and military power. In these areas, the EU is strictly an adviser to member states and has no institutional decision-making power. Moreover, significant internal differences of opinion prevail within the EU on the role that Europe should play in Indo-Pacific security. Nevertheless, this article argues that since 2016, Europe has had an unprecedented footprint in the Indo-Pacific. The article is organized as follows:

- ≈ pp. 133–34 briefly survey U.S.-China strategic competition in the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean.
- ≈ pp. 134–43 address the EU's role in the Indo-Pacific.
- ≈ pp. 144–56 investigate the naval diplomacy of EU member states, led by France, in the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean.
- ≈ pp. 156–59 conclude with a consideration of possibilities and limitations regarding transatlantic cooperation on managing the challenges posed by China in the Indo-Pacific.

U.S.-CHINA STRATEGIC COMPETITION IN THE INDO-PACIFIC: A CONTEST FOR POWER AND PRINCIPLES

The South China Sea and the Indian Ocean have become central arenas for U.S.-China rivalry since 2016 when bilateral relations began to be dominated by strategic competition. At the Shangri-La Dialogue in June 2016, U.S. secretary of defense Ashton Carter warned that China's expansive actions in the South China Sea were isolating it and that China could end up "erecting a Great Wall of self-isolation."¹ The response of Chinese admiral Sun Jianguo was that some countries "do not conform to the agreeable approach" and instead take unfair advantage, stating that the United States is "openly flaunting its military force in the South China Sea" and "pulling in help from cliques to support their allies in antagonizing China."² The exchanges clarified, if there had been any doubt, that U.S.-China relations in the Indo-Pacific would be dominated by strategic competition and conflict over alternative visions of world order. This development was reinforced in the United States' 2017 National Security Strategy with the Trump administration's pronouncement of China as a revisionist power that seeks to "displace the United States in the Indo-Pacific region, expand the reaches of its state-driven economic model, and reorder the region in its favor."³ In the 2018 U.S. National Defense Strategy, China was explicitly labeled a "strategic competitor."⁴

U.S.-China interaction in the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean testifies to a comprehensive strategic competition relying on military, economic, diplomatic, and political means as China seeks gradually to replace the United States as the dominant regional power.⁵ In the South China Sea, China has a decades-long maritime presence to defend its sovereignty claims coupled with deepening political and economic links to the littoral states in Southeast Asia. This presence has expanded as China's

¹ Ashton Carter, "Meeting Asia's Complex Security Challenges" (speech at the Shangri-La Dialogue, Singapore, June 4, 2016).

² Sun Jianguo, "The Challenges of Conflict Resolution" (speech at the Shangri-La Dialogue, Singapore, June 4, 2016).

³ White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, D.C., December 2017), 25 ~ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>.

⁴ U.S. Department of Defense, "Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Sharpening the American Military's Competitive Edge," January 2018, 1 ~ <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>.

⁵ Ja Ian Chong, "Shifting Winds in Southeast Asia: Chinese Prominence and the Future of the Regional Order," in *Strategic Asia 2019: China's Expanding Strategic Ambitions*, ed. Ashley J. Tellis, Alison Szalwinski, and Michael Willis (Seattle: National Bureau of Asian Research, 2019), 142-73; and David Brewster, "The Red Flag Follows Trade: China's Future as an Indian Ocean Power," in *ibid.*, 174-209.

interests have grown, pressuring the incumbent United States to enhance its comprehensive engagement in Southeast Asia. In the Indian Ocean, apart from its long-standing continental presence in Pakistan and Myanmar, China is a relative newcomer. Beijing's expanding activities there follow the pattern it employs in other regions far from China's shore—engaging economically and then rolling out the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The economic presence then gradually expands into political influence and military assistance. Military deployment comes last and thus far remains experimental in the Indian Ocean. However, China's extensive access to infrastructure such as ports, railways, and waterways means that it is building the infrastructure to potentially establish a substantial future military presence.

The U.S. response has been to upgrade and expand both its regional military presence and its cooperation with allies and strategic partners to prepare for future military challenges from China. U.S.-China confrontations in the South China Sea are already hot, raising the risk of escalation from recurring incidents. In the Indian Ocean, the United States is attempting to deter China from a similar military expansion that would allow the same pattern of military incidents and rising levels of tension to unfold. In the following section, this article addresses the kind of role that the EU can play in the U.S.-China rivalry in the Indo-Pacific.

THE EU'S INSTITUTIONAL DIPLOMACY IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

From Crisis to Strength: The Revitalization of European Diplomacy

Traditionally, the EU has played a minor role in the politics and security agendas of the Indo-Pacific countries. Relations with partners such as Australia, the member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Japan, and India have concentrated on areas in which the EU is a heavyweight—trade and human rights dialogues, encompassing substantial cooperation on economic, commercial, and development issues. Security and political cooperation have been included in a broader agenda since the turn of the century. However, the EU's budget for 2014–20 facilitates a more substantial EU footprint because it includes financial means to tackle global challenges and translate the EU's strategic interests into concrete measures through initiatives such as the Partnership Instrument. This initiative funds

activities that carry forward EU agendas with its partners, enabling the EU to help shape global change and promote its core values.⁶

At the same time, the EU has faced unprecedented challenges from both within and without. Complications from Brexit, growing populism, and migration have tested the organization's strength. Meanwhile, the United States has opened trade disputes with the EU, reawakened the potential for nuclear arms racing by withdrawing from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, and raised concerns regarding Europe's financial commitment to NATO. At the same time, China is expanding its influence in the region through BRI and high-tech partnerships.

Surprisingly, however, recent challenges have made the EU stronger in some ways. On traditional core issues such as trade, EU institutions play a key role in devising common policies for the member states that cannot be bypassed without severe repercussions. Brexit has driven that point home. The UK cannot just strike a deal with Germany following the Brexit referendum. Instead, it is facing a united front of 27 member states in managing its presumptive departure from the union. As a result, even as the UK looks set to proceed with its exit, it is also likely to pursue close relations with the EU. This will be necessary if it wants to continue to have a global footprint, not just on traditional issues of trade and human rights but also on political and security issues. According to secretary-general of the Council of the European Union, Jeppe Tranholm-Mikkelsen, individual member states cannot exercise sovereignty as they used to; in this world, it is either joint exercise of sovereignty or nothing.⁷

New initiatives and partnerships are emerging that allow Europe to contribute in new ways and areas in the Indo-Pacific. In issue areas that used to be national-level security concerns, the EU is providing instruments. For example, investment screening has become an EU-level issue due to Chinese investment practices that are considered security threats, raising problems of protecting assets such as intellectual property and data.⁸

The EU supports the continued preeminence of the U.S. alliance system in the Indo-Pacific. As stated by Secretary-General Tranholm-Mikkelsen, the EU's inclination is to "align as closely as possible with the United States" since

⁶ "What We Do," European Commission Service for Foreign Policy Instruments \approx https://ec.europa.eu/fpi/what-we-do_en.

⁷ Thomas J. Duysterberg et al., "Caught in the Crossfire: Balancing EU Relations with the U.S. and China" (discussion at the Hudson Institute, Washington, D.C., April 16, 2017) \approx <https://www.hudson.org/events/1677-caught-in-the-crossfire-balancing-eu-relations-with-the-u-s-and-china42019>.

⁸ European Commission, "EU-China—A Strategic Outlook," March 12, 2019, 2–11 \approx https://ec.europa.eu/commission/news/eu-china-strategic-outlook-2019-mar-12_en.

“the transatlantic bond is very deeply rooted in history, in democratic values, and in alliance.”⁹ However, the EU is also currently confronted with a United States that is focused on its own interests and a China that employs unfair trade practices. Taking into account this reality, the EU is no longer shying away from using leverage to pursue its interests in its relations with the United States, China, and other states in Asia.¹⁰ The key instruments of leverage that the EU can rely on pertain to trade, which is an area where the EU carries a lot of weight in relation to the United States and China. On trade issues, even large member states implement the common position if the other member states agree to it. For example, despite France’s insistence that there should not be EU-U.S. trade negotiations as long as the United States refuses to commit to key environmental targets, France is part of the EU mandate and cannot alone block it or change its contents.¹¹

The EU’s leverage in the Indo-Pacific is less visible than that of the United States or China because the EU’s presence is nuanced, relying on a comprehensive range of instruments that underpin the contributions of member states.¹² Leverage on trade is combined with contributions to building security and military capacity through instruments such as FTAs, humanitarian cooperation, and the establishment of security partnerships that allow the EU to discuss best practices and exchange information with partner countries.

The EU’s Indo-Pacific Diplomacy

China’s growing regional role and Washington’s recent focus on U.S. national interests rather than alliance interests have encouraged the EU to maintain and strengthen a broad array of connections with Asian countries and multilateral institutions. This effort was reflected in European Council president Donald Tusk’s remark in May 2018 that the EU had to be “prepared to act alone” without the United States.¹³ The EU has adopted an equally independent approach to China. The European Commission’s report “EU-China—A Strategic Outlook” indicates that the EU seeks reciprocal conditions in its economic relations with China. This involves addressing

⁹ Jeppe Tranholm-Mikkelsen (remarks at the Hudson Institute, Washington, D.C., April 16, 2017).

¹⁰ Duesterberg et al., “Caught in the Crossfire: Balancing EU Relations with the U.S. and China.”

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Mehreen Khan, “EU’s Tusk: ‘With Friends Like Trump, Who Needs Enemies?’” *Financial Times*, May 16, 2018. ~ <https://www.ft.com/content/c3002464-5907-11e8-b8b2-d6ceb45fa9d0>.

the distortive effects of foreign state ownership and financing in the EU's internal market, filling existing gaps in EU law. In addition, the EU is seeking a common approach to the security of 5G networks to safeguard against potential security implications for critical digital infrastructure as well as to implement screening mechanisms that will detect and raise awareness of foreign investment risks in critical assets, technologies, and infrastructure.¹⁴ The strategy is in line with the Trump administration's call for reciprocity in economic relations with China. However, the EU's intention to cooperate with Beijing on other issues such as climate change and the implementation of the EU's Strategy on Connecting Europe and Asia defines a platform for EU-China relations that is distinct from U.S. policy.

The independent policy line was reflected in the April 2019 EU-China summit statement. The agreement was a *fait accompli* readily accepted by Beijing, which was keen on a joint statement due to its conflicts on trade and market economic regulation with the United States.¹⁵ In the joint statement, the EU and China declared that they “firmly support the rules-based multilateral trading system with the WTO [World Trade Organization] at its core, fight against unilateralism and protectionism, and commit to complying with WTO rules. The two sides reaffirm their joint commitment to co-operate on WTO reform,” including “strengthening the rules on industrial subsidies.”¹⁶ The statement testifies to the EU's determination to require China to meet its agreements and behave in keeping with the international regimes to which it has signed on, aligning with the U.S. stance on Chinese economic practices. However, the EU also subscribes to working with China on WTO reform, emphasizing that Europe considers multilateral institutions fundamental and that accommodating these institutions to be more inclusive of China while maintaining liberal values is a key EU priority. This position parts company with Washington's preference for negotiating bilateral agreements with Beijing outside existing global institutional frameworks.

The EU has managed to carve out an independent position for Europe vis-à-vis the United States and China in trade and industrial policy, which influences the behavior of the two great powers toward Europe. On security issues pertaining to the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean, it is much harder to detect the EU's influence.

¹⁴ European Commission, “EU-China—A Strategic Outlook,” 2–11.

¹⁵ Duesterberg et al., “Caught in the Crossfire: Balancing EU Relations with the U.S. and China.”

¹⁶ European Council, “EU-China Summit Joint Statement,” April 9, 2019 ~ <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/39020/euchina-joint-statement-9april2019.pdf>.

The EU's South China Sea Diplomacy

In the South China Sea, the EU is aligned with the U.S. concern of protecting the freedom of the high seas and airspace. In June 2012 the EU issued guidelines on its foreign and security policy in East Asia. Therein, it urged all claimants in the South China Sea to seek peaceful and cooperative solutions in accordance with international law, particularly the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), while also encouraging all parties to clarify the basis for their claims. In addition, the EU stated that it promotes a rules-based international system and the principle of freedom of navigation. The EU pointed to the risk of tensions having a negative impact on trade and investment as well as energy security.¹⁷

The EU Maritime Security Strategy, published in 2014, lists the rule of law and freedom of navigation as strategic maritime interests.¹⁸ The EU's action plan for the maritime strategy includes promoting the dispute settlement mechanisms of UNCLOS, implementing binding decisions of the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea, and establishing mechanisms for maritime confidence-building measures.¹⁹ The EU's 2016 global strategy for foreign and security policy, *Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe*, remains at the level of generalities. It reiterates that the EU will uphold freedom of navigation; stand firm in its respect for international law, including UNCLOS and its arbitration procedures; and encourage the peaceful settlement of maritime disputes. The strategy states that the EU will help build maritime capacities and support an ASEAN-led regional security architecture.²⁰

In July 2016, a tribunal in The Hague established to arbitrate the Sino-Philippine disputes in the South China Sea ruled that China's claim to historic rights to resources within the nine-dash line is incompatible with UNCLOS.²¹ The EU's response statement on the award reflected

¹⁷ European Council, *Guidelines on the EU's Foreign and Security Policy in East Asia*, no. 11492/12, June 15, 2012 ~ http://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/asia/docs/guidelines_eu_foreign_sec_pol_east_asia_en.pdf.

¹⁸ European Commission, *European Union Maritime Security Strategy: Responding Together to Global Challenges—A Guide for Stakeholders* (Brussels, December 16, 2014) ~ https://ec.europa.eu/maritimeaffairs/sites/maritimeaffairs/files/leaflet-european-union-maritime-security-strategy_en.pdf.

¹⁹ European Council, *European Union Maritime Security Strategy—Action Plan* (Brussels, December 16, 2014), par. 1.6 ~ <https://ec.europa.eu/maritimeaffairs/sites/maritimeaffairs/files/docs/body.20141216-action-plan-en.pdf>.

²⁰ European Union, *Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe—A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy* (Brussels, June 2016), 38 ~ http://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/top_stories/pdf/eugs_review_web.pdf.

²¹ Permanent Court of Arbitration, *The South China Sea Arbitration Award of 12 July 2016*, Case no. 2013-19, 84-92.

deep internal divisions in Europe. The EU stated that it was committed to maintaining the legal order of the seas and oceans and that all sides should resolve disputes through peaceful means by clarifying and pursuing their claims in accordance with international law. It additionally stated support for a swift conclusion to talks on a code of conduct for the South China Sea. This watered-down statement reflects that while the UK, Germany, and France wanted to clarify that China must uphold international law as it seeks a bigger global role, countries such as Hungary and Greece, which want to attract Chinese investment, are unwilling to criticize China so directly. Moreover, countries such as Croatia and Slovenia have their own maritime disputes and worried about setting precedents by coming out too strongly in favor of The Hague's award.²² Because of such internal divisions on how much to criticize China's behavior, the EU's role in this case has stopped at the level of general policy and has been followed up by the activities of a growing number of member states that are coordinating and cooperating on manifesting a European presence in the South China Sea.

The EU's Indian Ocean Diplomacy

In the Indian Ocean, the EU does not have a common policy position but does have initiatives that provide platforms for the activities of its member states. The Indian Ocean is included in the European Union Naval Force (EU NAVFOR) Somalia–Operation Atalanta, the EU's first naval force program, which was established in 2008 and extended until 2020. It is tasked with protecting vulnerable shipping vessels by deterring, preventing, and repressing piracy and armed robbery at sea; monitoring fishing activities off the coast of Somalia; and supporting EU missions and international organizations working to strengthen maritime security and capacity in the region. EU NAVFOR's area of operations covers the Southern Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden, and a large part of the Indian Ocean, including the Seychelles, Mauritius, and Comoros.²³ The program gives a defense aspect to the EU's Indian Ocean policies that makes it easier to establish links with strategic partners such as India that go beyond the institutional level and involve member states.

Unlike the United States, the EU shares India's perspective that the Indo-Pacific is linked to Africa and the Middle East. This geopolitical

²² Robin Emmott, "EU's Statement on South China Sea Reflects Divisions," Reuters, July 15, 2016 ~ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-southchinasea-ruling-eu-idUSKCN0ZV1TS>.

²³ EU NAVFOR, "Mission" ~ <https://eunavfor.eu/mission>.

perspective is not only pertinent in the mandate of the EU's naval operations; it was also indicated by the first joint EU–Arab League summit that took place in Egypt in February 2019. The Arab League includes 22 member states in and around North Africa, the Horn of Africa, and the Arabian Peninsula. Due to the United States' pro-Israeli policies after World War II coupled with the Arab League's unwillingness to recognize Israel, Washington and the Arab League are not on good terms with each other. Relations have worsened under the Trump administration due to the United States' recognition of Israel's annexation of the Golan Heights and of Jerusalem as Israel's capital. In the face of U.S. negligence, the EU established the summit with the Arab League to create a platform for countering growing regional Russian and Chinese influence. And on some key political issues, the EU sides with the Arab League rather than with the United States. For example, the 2019 summit declaration reaffirms their common positions on the Middle East peace process, including on the status of Jerusalem and on the illegality under international law of Israeli settlements in the occupied Palestinian territories. However, the main thrust of the declaration is to initiate cooperation on terrorism, radicalization, and organized crime.²⁴ Such cooperation allows the EU to use its presence in East Africa and the Middle East as a basis for gradually expanding toward the Indian Ocean as its foreign and security policies in the Indo-Pacific become more substantial.

The EU's Partnership Diplomacy

As a result of the elusive EU footprint on security and defense issues in the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean, the institution's role in these areas is to provide leverage founded in trade relations and dialogue platforms by means of partnership agreements with key states and entities. These can provide a basis for EU member states to take concrete initiatives on regional security and defense issues.

A more self-reliant attitude in alliance relations with Washington has encouraged Europe to seek closer relations with Asian states and entities that are considered compatible with European liberal economic and political values. Some of these partners partake in security and military cooperation with groupings of EU member states in the Indo-Pacific. Japan, ASEAN, India, and Australia have become central partners cooperating with the EU on providing platforms for member states to pursue initiatives that create

²⁴ "Sharm El-Sheikh Summit Declaration," Voltaire Network, February 25, 2019, available at <https://www.voltairenet.org/article205373.html>.

a substantial independent, European footprint in the security and military realms in the Indo-Pacific. These partnerships have grown out of strong bilateral trade relations.

Japan. The EU and Japan finalized an economic partnership agreement in December 2017 that entered into force in 2019, sending a powerful signal against protectionism at a time when Washington is renegotiating trade agreements with Tokyo and U.S.-EU trade talks have stalled. The EU sees FTAs as instruments to uphold a rules-based liberal order at a time when the United States has opted out of multilateral trade agreements, as seen in the United States' decision to pull out of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) in January 2017. Japan kept the TPP alive, creating a trade pact among eleven Pacific Rim nations called the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) that went into force on December 30, 2018.

On February 1, 2019, the EU-Japan Strategic Partnership Agreement provisionally entered into force—the first bilateral framework agreement between the two entities.²⁵ It provides a structure for enhanced political cooperation and joint action on issues of common interest in bilateral relations as well as regional and global challenges. Although the EU and Japan already had strong economic ties, the agreement demonstrates that the EU considers Japan a key actor in ensuring the long-term preservation of a global political order based on liberal economic, democratic, and human rights principles.

On security issues, the EU and Japan have somewhat different threat perceptions. Japan hedges against the China threat and maintains close links with the United States, despite disagreements on issues such as trade and the threat from Russia.²⁶ The EU sees China as a partner as well as a rival and is willing to establish closer cooperation with Beijing on issues such as trade and multilateral institutional reform. On military issues, cooperation with Japan is modest due to the EU's lack of institutional military capabilities. In areas of shared geopolitical concern, such as the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea, cooperation will likely mainly take the form of dialogue on areas of joint action and then providing channels for member state action.²⁷

²⁵ European Commission, "Joint Proposal for a Council Decision," April 27, 2018 ~ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/GA/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52018JC0010>.

²⁶ Thomas Diez and Jun Tsubouchi, "Regional Security," in *EU-Japan Security Cooperation: Trends and Prospects*, ed. Emil J. Kirchner and Han Dorussen (London: Routledge, 2019), 20–36.

²⁷ Hiroyasu Akutsu and Simon Duke, "EU-Japan Military Relations," in *ibid.*, 37–55.

ASEAN. The EU and ASEAN have long-standing relations based on their shared positions as regional institutions with significant influence over the economic and security policies of their member states. The EU and ASEAN are negotiating FTAs, hoping to profit from the EU's position as ASEAN's second-largest trade partner after China (while ASEAN is the EU's third-largest trade partner). In October 2018, the EU and Singapore signed a landmark FTA that is seen as a path to a wider agreement with ASEAN.²⁸ The EU's preference for addressing ASEAN is another manifestation of Europe's preference for multilateral institutions as the basis for international cooperation. Long-standing EU-ASEAN relations, which were formally established in 1972, have translated into considerable EU capacity building in ASEAN. Between 1996 and 2013, the EU supplied almost 200 million euros for economic integration. The budget for 2014 to 2020 provides approximately the same amount for economic integration in addition to 2 billion euros for poverty reduction and connectivity. Cooperation on security issues remains scant beyond the level of dialogue.²⁹ However, accession in 2012 to ASEAN's peace treaty (the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation) and participation in the joint EU-ASEAN High-Level Dialogue on Maritime Security Cooperation provide a platform for EU member states to take action on issues of common concern, such as freedom of navigation and the rule of law in the South China Sea.

India. Since 2004, the EU has had a strategic partnership with India based on their common democratic values. In 2019, Brussels and New Delhi began discussing common security interests in the Indian Ocean. As the world's largest trading bloc and as a global security provider, the EU regards maritime security as a high priority. In November 2018, the EU published a strategy on India, including a significant defense component with maritime security as a focus area.³⁰ This was a relatively easy step for the EU to undertake because of the EU NAVFOR program.³¹ Joint cooperation includes Indian naval escorts for humanitarian aid deliveries from the EU, collaboration on fighting piracy, and efforts to strengthen the links between EU member states'

²⁸ Zakir Hussain, "Singapore, European Union Sign Landmark Free Trade, Partnership Agreements," *Straits Times*, October 20, 2018 ~ <https://www.straitstimes.com/world/europe/singapore-eu-sign-landmark-free-trade-partnership-agreements>.

²⁹ "Background Paper" (prepared for the EU-ASEAN Strategic Thinkers Forum, Brussels, February 27–28, 2018).

³⁰ "EU-India Factsheet: A New Strategy on India," Delegation of the European Union to India and Bhutan, November 20, 2018 ~ https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/india/4010/eu-india-factsheet-new-eu-strategy-india_en.

³¹ EU NAVFOR, "Mission."

naval forces and India's navy.³² The expansion of European cooperation with India is in line with U.S. rapprochement toward the country, but the emphasis on multilateralism, humanitarian aid, and piracy as means of strengthening relations is different.

Australia. The EU and Australia share a history of close U.S. alliance relations and a commitment to liberal economic and political values. However, only since 2017 has the relationship begun to develop toward more substantial cooperation. In June 2018 the EU began negotiating an FTA with Australia. The EU is Australia's second-largest trade partner, and was Australia's largest source of FDI in 2017. Moreover, both share a commitment to common global normative frameworks, including the rule of law and free and open markets.³³ In August 2017, the EU and Australia signed a framework agreement that committed the parties to dialogues on security issues, providing the basis for security cooperation.³⁴

The EU's embrace of the Asian members of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue—the informal strategic dialogue between the United States, Japan, Australia, and India—and its enhanced cooperation with ASEAN complement U.S. efforts to expand relations with Indo-Pacific democratic and market economy states. However, the EU-level efforts arise from prioritizing multilateral institutional cooperation and comprehensive FTAs. This differs from more recent U.S. priorities of negotiating bilaterally and establishing ad hoc frameworks. This difference is not necessarily a drawback—it could be utilized as a division of labor by focusing on the complementarity of efforts that are carried out with the same common fundamental objectives.

In the next section, this article investigates French-led naval diplomacy in the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean—a central and evolving grouping that is working in tandem with institutional diplomacy on implementing Europe's Indo-Pacific strategy and establishing an independent European influence in the region.

³² "EU and India to Strengthen Defence and Security Cooperation," Delegation of the European Union to India and Bhutan, January 25, 2019 ~ https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/india/57118/european-union-naval-forces-port-visit-mumbai_en.

³³ "Australia-European Union Free Trade Agreement," Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Australia), June 18, 2019 ~ <https://dfat.gov.au/trade/agreements/negotiations/aeufta/Pages/default.aspx>.

³⁴ European Union and Australia, "Framework Agreement between the European Union and Its Member States, of the One Part, and Australia, of the Other Part," available at <https://dfat.gov.au/geo/europe/european-union/Documents/european-union-australia-framework-agreement.pdf>.

FRENCH-LED EUROPEAN NAVAL DIPLOMACY IN
THE SOUTH CHINA SEA AND THE INDIAN OCEAN

The Role of the Resident Indo-Pacific Powers, France and the UK

France has been the driving force in European naval diplomacy in recent years, and the UK has been France's principal partner. France and the UK both historically have had a significant strategic presence in the Indo-Pacific. France's expansion and establishment of protectorates into what is now Vietnam resulted in war in the 1880s with China, which had held suzerainty over Tonkin and Annam until the French seized control.³⁵ Thus, France became responsible for defending Vietnamese territorial claims in the South China Sea. It formally annexed the Spratly Island group in 1930, igniting the first diplomatic debacle over the Spratly Islands with the UK, which also had possessions in the area. Britain issued reports on seafaring missions in the South China Sea as early as the eighteenth century, and beginning in the 1930s conducted secret surveys allegedly in preparation for possible seaplane operations in wartime.³⁶ In 1939, Japan declared ownership of the Paracel and Spratly Islands to control shipping lanes and facilitate invasion of maritime Southeast Asia. Japan held on to the island groups until 1945 when the Allied powers forced it to cede control, leaving them as fishermen's havens. This unclear status opened the door to the subsequent competing claims.³⁷

Similarly, French and British colonial history was intertwined in the Indian Ocean. As once great colonial powers, they each administered a range of islands and territories with varying legal statuses and levels of autonomy. Both considered the regions of East Africa and the Middle East to be strategically connected to colonial India. In an age of naval power, France and Britain considered a base in India necessary to hold on to possessions in the Middle East and East Africa. Like Britain, France established a network of colonies across the Indian subcontinent, the Indian Ocean, and Africa. It established the island colony La Réunion in the Indian Ocean in 1664, and La Réunion played an important role as a staging post for France's naval expeditions and colonization of Indo-China.³⁸ The island of Mayotte was purchased by France in 1841 from a local sultan and is still ruled by France today. Britain's conquest

³⁵ Marwyn Samuels, *Contest for the South China Sea* (New York: Methuen, 1982), 45–46.

³⁶ David Hancox and Victor Prescott, *Secret Hydrographic Surveys in the Spratly Islands* (Kuala Lumpur: Malaysian Institute of Maritime Affairs, 1997), 31–45.

³⁷ Samuels, *Contest for the South China Sea*.

³⁸ Ian H. Magedera, "Arrested Development: The Shape of 'French India' after the Treaties of Paris of 1763 and 1814," *Interventions* 12, no. 3 (2010): 331–43.

of Mauritius from France in 1810 included the seven atolls of the Chagos Archipelago. In 1965, the archipelago was split from Mauritius under the name of the British Indian Ocean Territory. Diego Garcia, at 27 square kilometers, is the largest island in the Chagos Archipelago that remains under British rule and is home to a joint UK-U.S. military base.

The region's colonial history means that France and the UK have a long strategic presence in the Indo-Pacific. Their overseas possessions also invest them with significant regional economic interests. Due to their numerous overseas departments and territories, France has the largest, and Britain the fifth-largest, exclusive economic zone (EEZ) in the world, giving them rights to marine resource exploration and use in these zones.³⁹ French possessions in the Indian Ocean, including its Antarctic island possessions, account for almost 30% of France's total EEZ.⁴⁰ Strategic and economic interests thus facilitate active French and British security and defense interests in the region.

In the Indian Ocean, France has stationed around 1,650 troops on its main territorial possessions, La Réunion, Mayotte, and Îles Éparses (which since 2005 have been administered from La Réunion). La Réunion is home to France's largest overseas base, and the French Navy maintains a monitoring and information fusion center on the island. The EU supplies funds for research and development of the island. La Réunion and Mayotte sit near key maritime chokepoints to the Mozambique Channel and the western Indian Ocean.⁴¹ The UK has a small permanent garrison, Naval Party 1002, on the Indian Ocean island of Diego Garcia, which administers the British Indian Ocean Territory. Diego Garcia gives access to key chokepoints such as the Straits of Hormuz and Malacca. Nearly equidistant from Australia, India, the Arabian Peninsula, and Africa's east coast, it hosts naval support and airbase facilities that are leased to the United States with continual British access.⁴² In the South China Sea, France and the UK have a smaller presence. The UK has a garrison of one battalion made up of the Royal Gurkha Rifles and No. 7 Flight Army Air Corps in Brunei, as well as a navy repair and logistics support

³⁹ "Countries with the Largest Exclusive Economic Zones," World Atlas, June 29, 2018 ~ <https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/countries-with-the-largest-exclusive-economic-zones.html>.

⁴⁰ "Areas of France's Maritime Spaces of Sovereignty and Jurisdiction," French National Port of Maritime Limits, May 9, 2019 ~ <https://maritimelimits.gouv.fr/resources/areas-frances-maritime-spaces-sovereignty-and-jurisdiction>.

⁴¹ Darshana M. Baruah, "Sister Islands in the Indian Ocean Region: Linking the Andaman and Nicobar Islands to La Réunion," War on the Rocks, March 20, 2019 ~ <https://warontherocks.com/2019/03/sister-islands-in-the-indian-ocean-region-linking-the-andaman-and-nicobar-islands-to-la-reunion>.

⁴² David Axe, "Diego Garcia: Why This Base Is about to Get Much More Important to the U.S. Military," *National Interest*, February 26, 2019 ~ <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/diego-garcia-why-base-about-get-much-more-important-us-military-45682>.

facility in Singapore in support of its Five Power Defence Arrangements with Australia, New Zealand, Malaysia, and Singapore. This colonial history and contemporary strategic presence of France and the UK in the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean explains their contemporary partnership in designing a European naval presence in the Indian Ocean.

Naval Diplomacy in the South China Sea

Since 2014, French naval vessels have regularly patrolled the South China Sea and made port calls in regional states.⁴³ In a keynote speech at the annual Shangri-La Dialogue in 2016, then French minister of defense Jean-Yves Le Drian stated that the situation in maritime Asia directly affects the EU and its interest in the freedom of maritime traffic. Therefore, Le Drian called for European navies to coordinate to ensure a “presence as regular and visible as possible” in the Indo-Pacific.⁴⁴ British secretary of state for defense Michael Fallon supported this by emphasizing that the UK is increasingly operating in combined formations and has tested its combined joint expeditionary force with France.⁴⁵

France has vowed to play a leading role in forging a new axis of democracies in the Indo-Pacific aimed at providing a counterbalance to China’s growing power and influence. Naval diplomacy plays a key role in these efforts. Following Le Drian’s call for coordinated European maritime efforts, in 2016 France deployed a frigate to sail through the South China Sea with U.S. and European personnel on board, including sailors from Denmark, Italy, and Germany. From 2017, the UK joined the French Navy’s Jeanne d’Arc naval training and patrol task force in the Indo-Pacific with military assets such as helicopters and marines. In addition, in 2018 the UK deployed two frigates to South and Northeast Asia and the South Pacific as well as an amphibious warship that conducted freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea. Naval diplomacy with contributions from several European countries, including France, the UK, Italy, and Germany, allows Europe to get around internal disagreements on how far to go in practice in challenging China. Groupings of EU member states that take action allow Europe to

⁴³ Erik Brattberg, Philippe Le Corre, and Etienne Soula, “Can France and the UK Pivot to the Pacific?” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, July 5, 2018 ~ <https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/07/05/can-france-and-uk-pivot-to-pacific-pub-76732>.

⁴⁴ Jean-Yves Le Drian, “The Challenges of Conflict Resolution” (speech at the Shangri-La Dialogue, Singapore, June 5, 2016).

⁴⁵ Michael Fallon, “Making Defence Policy in Uncertain Times” (speech at the Shangri-La Dialogue, Singapore, June 4, 2016).

demonstrate support for core values shared with the United States and its allies from an independent position.

European states have to date refrained from sailing within twelve nautical miles of disputed features in the area. Thus, Europe has avoided challenging the Chinese presence in an area full of international legal gray zones to make sure that it stays in line with international law. The status of many features in the South China Sea is unclear, as witnessed by decades of debate about whether various features constitute islands with twelve nautical miles of surrounding territorial seas. Features with territorial seas allow for innocent passage, which is passage not prejudicial to the peace, good order, or security at sea (but not in the air) of the coastal state without the coastal state's prior permission. However, it is not clear if innocent passage applies to warships.⁴⁶ The July 2016 award of the arbitral tribunal on the China-Philippines disputes in the South China Sea is widely considered an unusually restrictive application of international law. In particular, the statement that none of the features in the South China Sea under consideration constitute islands, including Itu Aba with an area of 110 acres, was considered potentially damaging to the claims of numerous countries if allowed to set a precedent.⁴⁷ Such fears are not confined to European states; the United States and Japan have similar concerns. As a result, very little reference has been made to the award, and it is unlikely to define the future status of features even in the South China Sea. Since the legal status of the South China Sea features remains unclear, staying outside the twelve-nautical-mile zone ensures that European ships are in line with widely recognized interpretations of international law. This contrasts with the U.S. Navy, which routinely conducts non-innocent passage within twelve nautical miles of Chinese-occupied features.

In 2017, France conducted a freedom of navigation operation in the South and East China Seas with five naval vessels, a transit in the Taiwan Strait, and a port call in Shanghai to demonstrate that the actions were not directed against China. A 2018 operation, with two French naval vessels as the core of operations, began in Australia and omitted a port call in China. The French-led tour ended in Vietnam, which has maritime disputes with China that have several times resulted in incidents involving the use of force. The British amphibious warship HMS *Albion* was involved in a standoff with the Chinese navy near the Paracel Islands. A Chinese warship tailed the *Albion*

⁴⁶ Helmut Tuerk, "The Legal Regime of Maritime Areas and the Waning Freedom of the Seas" (paper presented at the workshop "Maritime Issues and UNCLOS," Vietnam, June 4–5, 2015, 4).

⁴⁷ Author's interview, European Department of Defence and Ministry of Foreign Affairs, July 2016.

from a distance of two hundred meters while Chinese jets flew low over the warship, requesting that the ship leave because it infringed on Chinese sovereignty.⁴⁸ In 2019 the air defense destroyer *Forbin*, which formed part of the French-led carrier group deployed in the Indian Ocean, proceeded through the South China Sea to Vietnam. Again, the passage made the point that the South China Sea is considered international waters without directly challenging China's presence.⁴⁹ The decisions not to make port calls in China, however, reflect growing European dissatisfaction with China's continued militarization in the South China Sea and plans to negotiate a code of conduct for the area without including third countries such as European states. This exclusivity constitutes a potential challenge to the European and U.S. view that the South China Sea is international waters. The bilateral process between China and ASEAN on developing a code of conduct contributes to fears that a prospective code will include restrictions on the free movement of military vessels and aircraft.

European operations in support of freedom of navigation in the China Seas have also involved the use of the Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea (CUES) that was agreed on at the Western Pacific Naval Symposium in 2014. The code introduces tools to reduce the risk of minor incidents leading to greater escalation between states. In April 2017, during the French-led operations supporting of freedom of navigation in the South China Sea, the European navy vessels and helicopters used CUES to avoid incidents when they encountered the Chinese South Sea Fleet that escorted them. It was clear that the Chinese navy officers understood CUES, but they did not use CUES to communicate.⁵⁰ After the French frigate left the South China Sea and passed through the Taiwan Strait escorted by the Chinese and Taiwanese navies on either side, it tested CUES in the East China Sea. China's East Sea Fleet did not respond and appeared to have no understanding of CUES. In contrast to Western signatories, China has been slow adopt CUES.

The possible reasons for the lack of response from the East Sea Fleet are numerous. But the Chinese navy's limited use of CUES indicates that in the short term CUES is not likely to be employed in the event of real incidents. European countries' insistence on using CUES serves as a reminder to Beijing that China has signed on to CUES and will be expected to use it in unplanned encounters to manifest that it is committed to peace and stability.

⁴⁸ "British Navy's HMS Albion Warned over South China Sea 'Provocation,'" BBC, September 6, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-45433153>.

⁴⁹ Author's interviews with officers from the French carrier group during deployment, May 2019.

⁵⁰ Author's interview with an officer on board the French Navy vessel, October 2017.

Naval Diplomacy in the Indian Ocean

French leadership. Despite its historically semiautonomous position in the transatlantic alliance due to its skepticism toward reliance on U.S. security guarantees, France has replaced the UK as the United States' main European defense partner.⁵¹ The UK has gone to great lengths to demonstrate that Brexit will not influence its overseas military presence—for example, by promising to send its new aircraft carrier HMS *Queen Elizabeth* to the Indo-Pacific in 2020.⁵² However, the chaotic and long-winded presumptive departure from the EU is bringing considerable economic costs and foreign policy challenges that prevent the UK from providing leadership to European contributions to Indo-Pacific security. Although then secretary of state for defense Penny Mordaunt claimed in June 2019 that the Royal Navy had maintained an almost unbroken presence in the Indo-Pacific during the previous twelve months,⁵³ the UK's contribution to the 2019 French-led European deployment was significantly less than in the previous two years. Apart from one integrated staff group on board the aircraft carrier, the UK sent just one support ship and was only part of the Mediterranean deployment.

France's semiautonomous stance during the Cold War means that it has developed a wide range of conventional and strategic capabilities to ensure it could fight wars on its own and provide its own deterrence. France's multidimensional capabilities, autonomous mindset, and readiness to fight make it an ideal U.S. partner at a time when Washington is transferring responsibilities for maintaining peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific to partners and allies and looking for partners willing to adopt independent hard-power responses to China's growing presence. In addition, France's territorial possessions, economic investments, and permanent military presence make it an Indo-Pacific power, and invest it with inherent interests in working with regional neighbors on preventing Chinese dominance. Moreover, France is the third-largest arms exporter in the world. Exercises with potential buyers such as Australia and Egypt showcase the value of French fighter aircraft, submarines, destroyers, and missiles.⁵⁴ Although arms

⁵¹ Aleksander Lust, "The Foreign Policy of France: Continuity and Change," in *Europe and America: The End of the Transatlantic Relationship?* ed. Federiga Bindi (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2019), 36–43.

⁵² Penny Mordaunt (speech at the Shangri-La Dialogue, June 1, 2019) \approx <https://www.iiss.org/events/shangri-la-dialogue/shangri-la-dialogue-2019>.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Pieter D. Wezeman et al., "Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2018," Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, Fact Sheet, March 2019, 2–5 \approx <https://www.sipri.org/publications/2019/sipri-fact-sheets/trends-international-arms-transfers-2018>.

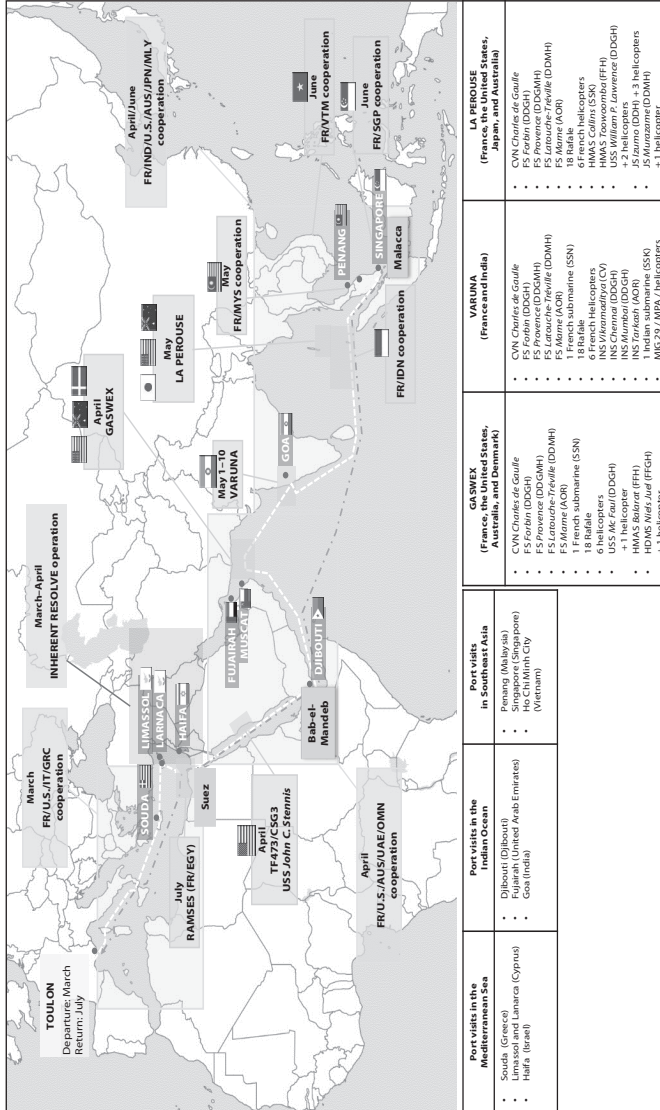
sales make France a competitor to U.S., Asian, and European partners, they also give Paris an incentive to be militarily engaged in the Indo-Pacific.

France's attempt to build a genuine European force is a decade-long process because it requires finance, fortitude, and common deployments to integrate the forces into one coherent force, and regional deployments to enable forces to take into account environmental conditions to which they are not accustomed. The cost of long-range deployments is high, making it challenging to convince domestic constituencies of the added value to operational security in Asia. However, the tendency in Washington and Beijing to try to force states to choose sides is pushing European countries to become more self-reliant, seeking to work together to build strong capabilities that can operate independently from those of the United States.

*The Clemenceau mission.*⁵⁵ In 2019, European Indo-Pacific naval diplomacy centered on the Indian Ocean. The capabilities that formed part of the operations were much larger than in previous years, as seen in the four-month Clemenceau mission (**Figure 1**). The mission began in March 2019, with France deploying the aircraft carrier *Charles de Gaulle* as well as an air-defense destroyer, an antisubmarine destroyer, a multimission destroyer fitted for antisubmarine warfare, a replenishment ship, and a submarine. A carrier group constitutes the most muscular expression of power-projection capabilities far from national shores. The carrier group mission encompassed a multinational and rotating cast of allied ships from the UK, Portugal, Denmark, Italy, Australia, and the United States. The carrier group sailed from Toulon in France to the eastern Mediterranean Sea, then sailed via the Suez Canal to Bab-el-Mandeb, Yemen, and the Horn of Africa, then across the Indian Ocean and via the Malacca Strait to Singapore. Two French destroyers led the group, followed by one antisubmarine destroyer sent to exercise with Malaysia in Penang on the Indian Ocean side, and one air-defense destroyer that sailed through the South China Sea to make a port call in Vietnam. During the deployment, the carrier group participated in maritime exercises with the U.S., Indian, Australian, and Japanese navies on the way to Singapore and with Egypt on the return to France. The group also made port calls in Greece, Cyprus, Israel, Djibouti, the United Arab Emirates, India, and Singapore. In addition, it engaged in diplomatic exchanges with Oman and Indonesia.

⁵⁵ The information on the 2019 Clemenceau mission is based on the author's deployment with the carrier group from May 6 to June 2, 2019.

FIGURE 1
Clemenceau Mission—Deployment of France’s Carrier Strike Group TF 473, 2019



By connecting the Indian Ocean to the Middle East and East Africa, the Clemenceau mission complemented EU institutional diplomacy. France and the United States constituted the backbone of the mission. The United States had two liaison officers integrated into the carrier group from Toulon to Singapore who participated in all the joint exercises. The tour involved several bilateral U.S.-French exercises, including antisubmarine warfare with some of the most advanced U.S. vessels such as the nuclear submarine *Hawaii*. During the multilateral exercises, the United States and France formed the coordinating and preparatory backbone. A datalink between France and the United States allowed the two militaries to communicate seamlessly and even see the same screenshots from different ships during an exercise. This level of intelligence sharing only takes place between very close allies and demonstrates the close integration of French and U.S. forces.

European contributions. In the 2019 deployment, the UK, Portugal, Italy, and Denmark formed part of the carrier group port calls in the Mediterranean. Together with France and a U.S. guided-missile destroyer, the UK and Denmark participated in Operation Inherent Resolve in the eastern Mediterranean, the military campaign against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). The carrier group assisted the coalition with air surveillance, intervention, and situational assessments. Such military cooperation contributes to the interoperability and effectiveness of the participating navies. The Danish frigate proceeded as part of the carrier group through the Red Sea and the northern Indian Ocean, gaining additional operational experience by working as part of an integrated force in unfamiliar geographic environments. Together with Australia and the United States, Denmark participated in the Gulf Anti-Submarine Warfare Exercise. Familiarizing navies with environmental conditions is key to successful military operations.

Although, besides a UK liaison officer, France was the only remaining European representative in the carrier group between Goa and Singapore, the exercises of the UK and Denmark with Indo-Pacific navies were preparation for them to make larger contributions in the future. Germany's announcement in June 2019 that it is considering sending a warship through the Taiwan Strait to join France and the United States in challenging Chinese sovereignty claims to what these states regard as an international waterway demonstrates that the long-term trend is greater European military presence in the Indo-Pacific.⁵⁶ Since 2016, when France only received contributions

⁵⁶ John Vinocur, "Germany's Military Maneuvers," Politico, June 5, 2019 ~> <https://www.politico.eu/article/germanys-military-maneuvers>.

from the UK, European participation in Indo-Pacific naval diplomacy has shown a slow but consistent upward trend in willingness to contribute to the French-led efforts to counterbalance China.

Indo-Pacific partners. While working on building a European force that deploys further east each year, France is also establishing defense cooperation with Asian partners that are key EU partner countries to build a platform for greater European contributions to Indo-Pacific security. In May 2019 the Varuna exercises between the French and Indian navies off the Karwar and Goa coasts constituted the seventeenth such annual event. It marked the first time that India and France both sent aircraft carriers to the exercises, signaling that they are preparing to jointly project power in the Indian Ocean to counter a growing Chinese naval presence. The cooperation encompassed antisubmarine warfare, air-to-air warfare, and air defense exercises, sometimes with Indian and French officers on the same teams. India and France signed a strategic pact in March 2018, opening up their naval bases to each other's warships across the Indian Ocean two years after New Delhi signed a similar deal with Washington and one year after signing one with Singapore.⁵⁷ As a result, France has access to a string of naval bases from Djibouti, Abu Dhabi, the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, La Réunion, and Mayotte to Singapore and the South China Sea.

Given that the *Charles de Gaulle* had not been east of India since 2002, its trip to Southeast Asia was quite instructional. Subsequently, the French carrier group participated in the exercise La Perouse together with the United States, Japan, and Australia off the coast of Indonesia at the entrance to the Strait of Malacca, which leads into the South China Sea. It was the first combined naval drill between the four countries. The United States participated with its guided-missile destroyer, which came and left throughout the deployment from Toulon to Indonesia. Japan sent its helicopter carrier *Izumo*, and Australia contributed a frigate and a submarine. In 2019, France agreed with Japan and Australia to share common supplies such as food, fuel, and ammunition, an agreement that Japan already had with the United States and Australia and is currently negotiating with India.⁵⁸ France and Australia are also working together on building the Barracuda-class attack submarine,

⁵⁷ Rob Edens, "India Crafts Its Own 'String of Pearls' to Rival China's Naval Jewels in the Indian Ocean," *South China Morning Post*, March 23, 2018.

⁵⁸ Junnosuke Kobara, "Japan to Share Defense Supplies with France and Canada," *Nikkei Asian Review*, January 21, 2019 ~ <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Japan-to-share-defense-supplies-with-France-and-Canada>; and "Australia, France Sign Agreements on Military Cooperation, Cyberwar," SBSNews, May 2, 2018 ~ <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/australia-france-sign-agreements-on-military-cooperation-cyberwar>.

of which Australia has purchased twelve. In France the submarine will be nuclear-powered and in Australia it will be conventionally powered.⁵⁹ The antisubmarine, air-defense, and air-to-air exercises carried out in La Perouse constituted a formidable show of force between key U.S. allies from three different regions: Europe, East Asia, and the South Pacific. In combination with India and other European allies, these U.S. security partners cover a vast area from the Mediterranean Sea through the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean, the South China Sea, and the South Pacific. The underlying agenda is to counterbalance growing Chinese power-projection capabilities.

This joint strategic perspective was underlined by the fact that the French-led tour ended in Singapore. Singapore is considered a potential candidate to spearhead an eventual trilateral maritime partnership between India, Japan, and ASEAN because it is strategically located off the Malacca Strait and heavily dependent on freedom of navigation for its national survival and prosperity.⁶⁰ Singapore is similarly a partner with which the EU has agreed to work closely on economic and security issues due to its balanced close relations with both the United States and China as well as the European perception of Singapore as a bridgehead to wider cooperation with ASEAN.

France presented the joint exercises with the United States, Japan, and Australia as bilateral with each force. This attempt at playing down the strategic significance of its integration with Indo-Pacific partners reflects that France does not want to be seen as ganging up with the United States against China. France's reluctance to present itself as part of a united front can be explained by its agenda to build a European military force. The EU and some individual European countries, including Germany, Italy, and France itself, are distancing themselves from U.S. pressures to adopt Washington's confrontational stance toward China. As seen in the Indo-Pacific context, France walks a tightrope between working with the United States and its partners to create a European defense footprint and sticking to the European policy of maintaining cordial relations with China.

An independent position. The 2019 tour included the passage of a French warship, the frigate *Vendémiaire*, through the Taiwan Strait. Although it was a stand-alone French operation, prior and future European tours through the

⁵⁹ Christina Mackenzie, "France and Australia Are Working on the Same Sub, but They'll Be Powered Differently," *Defense News*, July 12, 2019 ≈ <https://www.defensenews.com/industry/techwatch/2019/07/12/france-and-australia-are-working-on-the-same-sub-but-theyll-be-powered-differently>.

⁶⁰ Satoru Nagao and Koh Swee Lean Collin, "Toward a Japan-Singapore-India Maritime Partnership," *Japan Times*, February 16, 2016 ≈ <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2016/02/16/commentary/japan-commentary/toward-japan-singapore-india-maritime-partnership/#.XMij0WhJGUk>.

South China Sea have included transiting the Taiwan Strait. The operation not only signals that Europe is a first mover in supporting recurring U.S. transits to demonstrate that the Taiwan Strait is international waters, but it also demonstrates that Beijing is taking notice and responding. As a consequence of the French transit, China disinvited France from a 70th anniversary naval parade in Qingdao. Although France did not plan to attend the parade, the Chinese maneuver singled out the country for diplomatic punishment. French transits of the Taiwan Strait have opened the door for other European countries, such as Germany, to consider similar operations.⁶¹ Such operations reflect a general hardening of positions in Europe vis-à-vis Chinese encroachments on the rules of the post-World War II liberal political and economic order and a willingness to not only issue diplomatic protests but also take action to defend these rules.

On the return trip, the French carrier group exercised with Egypt (without the United States, where military cooperation with Egypt has come under domestic fire). The Ramses 2019 exercise was an opportunity for France to showcase arms such as fighter aircraft and cruise missiles, areas where France competes with the United States. Since 2014, Egypt has been by far the largest recipient of French arms, followed by India, which purchases a wide range of equipment such as Rafale fighters, Mistral helicopter carriers, frigates, and missiles from France.⁶²

Although exercising with the Egyptian Navy serves French interests in promoting arms sales, the interaction also complements EU efforts to strengthen security cooperation with the Arab League as well as with Asian countries that share Europe's interest in diversifying their partnerships so as to minimize their dependence on the United States and China. Doing so reflects a shared European vision of a strategically integrated East Africa, Middle East, and Indian Ocean. Including Egypt in this vision is intended to keep down swiftly growing Chinese and Russian influence in North and East Africa. It also helps integrate France's military foothold in Africa and the western Indian Ocean. France's Djibouti naval base of Héron, to which the carrier group also paid a visit on the return leg of the mission, is connected to its military presence in Mayotte, La Réunion, and the Îles Éparses, which are used to control the Mozambique Channel, Madagascar, and Comoros.

⁶¹ Idrees Ali and Phil Stewart, "Exclusive: In Rare Move, French Warship Passes through Taiwan Strait," Reuters, April 25, 2019 ~ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-taiwan-france-warship-china/exclusive-in-rare-move-french-warship-passes-through-taiwan-strait-idUSKCN1S10Q7>.

⁶² Wezeman et al., "Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2018."

The French-led naval diplomacy in the Indo-Pacific is not merely signaling to China dissatisfaction with its violation of the rules and institutions of the liberal economic, political, and security order. It is also a strategic effort to translate EU policies into practical efforts that position France, and in the long run Europe, alongside the United States and U.S. Asian allies in countering China's growing military presence across the Indo-Pacific. These capacity-building, interoperability, and power-projection efforts across the Mediterranean Sea, the Indian Ocean, the South China Sea, and the Far East do not merely demonstrate rhetorically that France and Europe are partners of the U.S. alliance system. They position France and Europe strategically in the Indo-Pacific as partners that help defend common values and interests. However, as the bilateral exercises with Egypt and the integration of Europe's and France's strategic presence in the Middle East, East Africa, and the Indian Ocean demonstrate, this occurs from a position that puts European interests and world views front and center.

CONCLUSION: TOWARD EUROPEAN AND TRANSATLANTIC COOPERATION IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

The South China Sea and the Indian Ocean have become principal arenas for U.S.-China strategic competition as China seeks to replace the United States as the dominant power in the Indo-Pacific. Europe, both the EU and collaborating member states, influences U.S.-China strategic competition, demonstrating support for core liberal values shared with the United States, but from an independent position that allows Europe to account for its specific interests and world views. This active role is found even on issues in which Europe was largely absent until the mid-2010s because of internal disagreements, such as Indo-Pacific security. In these areas, Europe has worked out a division of labor, whereby the EU designs general policies and establishes political and institutional links, and these are translated into initiatives on the ground by individual states and groupings of member states.

In the South China Sea, the EU's institutional diplomacy is turned into political practice by French-led naval diplomacy that complements U.S. operations but avoids legal gray zones. This originates from the EU's desire to act on its calls for preserving a rules-based order but also to stay within the widely recognized interpretations of UNCLOS.

In the Indian Ocean, the EU's institutional diplomacy seeks to strengthen links between the Middle East and East Africa by widening and deepening economic and security cooperation with key regional institutions and

countries around the ocean such as the Arab League, ASEAN, and the Quad countries. These efforts are supplemented by French-led naval diplomacy that complements U.S. and Quad activities to deter China from militarization of the Indian Ocean and aligns with the Indian policy of establishing a strategic network of allied and partner military bases across the Middle East, East Africa, and the Indian Ocean. This network is intended to boost the combined capabilities of liberal states in Europe and Asia, allowing these states to project power in the Indo-Pacific so China is met with a coordinated strategic response. This coordination encompasses countries such as Egypt, which may not share all the values of the post-World War II liberal order but does share interest in cooperating with its core liberal states. At the early stage of these efforts, the focus is on using military exercises and diplomacy to increase interoperability and effectiveness. The next stage is to undertake joint military operations in areas such as surveillance and antipiracy to test the strength of cooperation in practice.

With France in the lead, Europe is becoming a true player and a transatlantic partner in the Indo-Pacific not just in words but in deeds. Although at present France is arguably the only country providing the glue that binds EU policies with Indo-Pacific defense cooperation, it is slowly but surely integrating other European countries into its naval diplomacy. Brexit has driven home the point that if Europe wants to maintain global influence and promote its own interests, it must exercise joint sovereignty, especially vis-à-vis the United States and China. This development ensures that countries that are traditionally reluctant to prioritize European military cooperation, like Denmark and even Germany, are increasingly partnering with French efforts. As the United States distances itself from its historical role as protector of European security, this tendency will only grow stronger. European countries have few alternatives but to assist each other in protecting their security and defending their global interests. And that includes an increasingly active role in the Indo-Pacific—the main arena for challenging the post-World War II liberal world order.

The fundamental objectives of U.S. and European efforts are the same, namely to counter Chinese influence where it is considered detrimental to fundamental liberal economic and political principles. Differences arise, but these are mainly differences over the instruments to be used to counter Chinese influence. Europe's choice not to sail warships within twelve nautical miles of Chinese-occupied features in the South China Sea reflects its concern to maintain the UN's central role in the management of world order. By contrast, the United States is not a signatory state to UNCLOS

and puts more emphasis on preserving access for warships and military aircraft to secure its maritime-based alliance system. In the Indian Ocean, Europe's engagement of the Arab League does not sit well with the United States' pro-Israel stance. However, China's economic and political influence via the Arab League is considerable, and Europe is better placed to counter this development. This is just one of many examples of how different U.S. and European preferences can be turned into an advantage instead of another reason to quarrel.

European security policies in the Indo-Pacific demonstrate an increasing willingness to meet Chinese encroachments on the liberal world order with hard-power responses. These responses, however, will be designed to protect Europe- and country-specific interests as well as common transatlantic objectives. Undoubtedly, France like other countries engaged in military diplomacy, uses a show of capabilities to advance its arms sales, just as the United States does. However, these adjacent interests are in a sense welcome inasmuch as they form part of the reason that Europe can afford to develop a strategic footprint in the Indo-Pacific.

Europe's activism raises the question of whether its diplomacy is effective. It is certainly a far cry from the perception that Europe is merely issuing diplomatic niceties and reprimands. Both the EU and European states are now actively contributing to countering the China challenge by using a wide range of economic, political, and military instruments. The effort cannot be dismissed as a few ships engaged in mere signaling efforts. There is a clear strategic aspect to both the EU's political and economic agreements across the Indo-Pacific and the defense networks that are established on the ground by France and other EU member states. China's willingness to compromise on some European interests such as WTO reform, coupled with retaliation such as the interception of British warships in 2018 and the disinvitation of France to a naval parade in the face of challenges, indicates that even if Europe alone cannot deter China from militarizing neighboring seas, its operations do not go unnoticed in Beijing. Perhaps most importantly, European engagement has led to a considerable strengthening of ties with like-minded Asian states that welcome an increasingly activist European contribution to managing a rising China. Mutually supportive concerted actions help pressure China as the odd one out that is upsetting peace and stability by not respecting the views of the international community.

Europe's institutional and naval diplomacy in the Indo-Pacific is a good example of effective influence on U.S.-China strategic competition. It positions Europe as an ally of the United States that supports core Western values but

from an independent position, one that is partly founded in fears of U.S. abandonment as differing interests create ripples in transatlantic relations. Concerns about U.S. security guarantees are prompting European and Indo-Pacific states such as India, Japan, Australia, and the ASEAN members to build cooperative links independent from the United States. The reshuffling of alliance and partnership responsibilities and affiliations may in fact end up strengthening the U.S. alliance system by creating strategic networks among partners that did not exist before and by allowing for divisions of labor between the United States and its allies. The positives about Europe's activism in the Indo-Pacific seem far greater than the negatives. Europe's comprehensive coordinated diplomacy deserves to be pursued across a wide range of security issues. 