The Quad: An emerging multilateral security framework of democracies in the Indo-Pacific region

SUMMARY

The Indo-Pacific region houses the largest share of global GDP, the world's busiest trade routes, largest population and most powerful militaries.

After having successfully worked side by side in coordinating the 2004 tsunami relief, in 2007 Australia, India, Japan and the US (the Quad, short for Quadrilateral Security Dialogue) held meetings with each other to discuss security-related issues, and their navies held a military exercise. Although the grouping ended its activities prematurely in 2008, China's growing assertiveness in the region prompted it to remain active in bilateral and trilateral cooperation on security issues. Meetings among senior officials resumed in November 2017 in Manila. In November 2020, the Quad navies held a major military exercise. The first Quad summit took place in March 2021.

The grouping has emphasised that its goal is to maintain the liberal rules-based international order, which China seeks to undermine through a revisionist challenge of the status quo. Its efforts are not focused on creating institutions or military alliances, but rather, on generating gradual convergence of cooperation on multiple issues, including Covid-19, climate change, critical and emerging technologies, counterterrorism, cybersecurity and disaster recovery. Establishing further cooperation with other like-minded countries in the region and co-existing with ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) are among the Quad's future challenges.

The EU is not a traditional security player in the Indo-Pacific; however, as the region is particularly relevant to its trade, it has a strong interest in avoiding disruption of the sea lanes. The Indo-Pacific could be an area of cooperation with the new US administration. France, Germany and the Netherlands have published strategies or guidelines for the Indo-Pacific region, which has stepped up expectations about the forthcoming strategy for the region by the EU as a whole.
Introduction

After a break of several years, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue among the US, Japan, India and Australia (the Quad), has recently been revived and is gradually gaining prominence as the coordinated response effort of democracies to the increasing assertiveness of authoritarian China in the Indo-Pacific region. In November 2017, senior foreign ministry officials from the four countries met on the margins of the ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) summit in Manila. The key points discussed with regard to the Indo-Pacific included making it free and open, taking joint action against terrorism, and promoting a rules-based system. Since then, they have held bimonthly meetings with an incrementally widening scope. As Firstpost senior editor, Sreemoy Talukdar, noted, ‘a framework that began with enhancing maritime security has now expanded to include cyber and critical technology, infrastructure, counterterrorism, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, connectivity, health security, Mekong regional cooperation, ASEAN-led regional architecture, among other areas’. In November 2020, the navies of the renewed Quad, together with Singapore, held the Malabar naval exercise. The first historic Quad summit took place in March 2021.

The origins: Quad 1.0

In the aftermath of the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami, the 21st century’s deadliest natural disaster, the US, together with Australia, India and Japan, led the international aid effort, coordinating their military forces to provide relief and paving the way for their further multilateral cooperation. Japan started work on developing the concept. In November 2006, its Foreign Minister, Asō Tarō, launched the idea of a sweeping arc of freedom and prosperity, stretching from north-east Asia to central Asia and the Caucasus, and then to Turkey, central and eastern Europe and the Baltic states, to encompass a host of countries embracing the principles of freedom, democracy, a market economy, the rule of law, and respect for human rights. In a speech before the Indian parliament in August 2007, Japanese Prime Minister, Abe Shinzō, spoke about the confluence of the two seas, a concept meant to serve as the basis for a broader Asia evolving into an open and transparent network spanning the entirety of the Pacific Ocean, including the US and Australia, and allowing people, goods, capital, and knowledge to circulate freely.

Indo-Pacific: An emerging geopolitical concept

The term 'Indo-Pacific' emerged in the diplomatic and security arena and became widely recognised as a geopolitical concept only in the past decade. However, the geographical borders of the combination between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean are not clearly set. According to Indian Navy Captain, Gurpreet Khurana, who was among the first to use it in an academic paper in 2007, the term has entered into common usage as being more adequate than 'Asia-Pacific', because it includes both the growing comprehensive power of China and the need to incorporate India into the region-wide security architecture.

Australia was the first country to use the 'Indo-Pacific' as a keyword in its 2012 strategic white paper on Australia in the Asian Century, and then again in its 2013 defence white paper. In February 2013, in his speech 'Japan is Back' at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Washington DC, Abe Shinzō used 'Indo-Pacific' together with 'Asia-Pacific' in his speech. A few months later the same venue hosted Jakarta's Foreign Minister, Marty Natalegawa, who gave the speech 'An Indonesian perspective of the Indo-Pacific'; a triangular strategic arrangement spanning two oceans, with Indonesia at its centre. In August 2016, in his speech at the Sixth Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD VI), held in in Kenya, Abe revealed Japan’s vision of the ‘confluence of the Pacific and Indian Oceans’ into peaceful seas governed by freedom and the rule of law. He did not use the term Indo-Pacific; however, the 2017 Diplomatic Bluebook noted that the prime minister had announced Japan’s Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy (FOIP) on that occasion.

The term appeared several times in the 2015 Indian maritime security strategy, Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s speech at the Shangri-La dialogue on June 2018 is considered Delhi’s official endorsement of the concept. An ‘open, stable, secure and prosperous Indo-Pacific Region’ was at the heart of Modi’s speech. In 2019, an Indo-Pacific division was created within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.
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Map 1 – The Indo-Pacific, as defined in strategies from France, Germany and the Netherlands

Tokyo, alarmed by the pace at which China’s defence expenditure had been growing, took the initiative to bring senior officials from the Quad countries together to discuss further cooperation for the first time in May 2007, on the verge of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) meeting in Manila – in an unpublicised event, so as not to trouble Beijing. A Japan Times commentary covering the event called it a ‘QUAD initiative’. In September 2007, the four Quad navies, together with Singapore’s, held military exercises in the Bay of Bengal, as part of Exercise Malabar. However, at that time, the four countries were not on the same page as regards the threats facing the region. A few weeks after the naval exercise, Abe stepped down as prime minister, and the momentum behind the idea for strategic coordination lost its drive. The leadership change in Australia and Canberra’s desire to come closer to Beijing are also cited as reasons for the premature end of the grouping’s activity in early 2008.

Rising tensions with China

In 2010, China became the largest economy in Asia, surpassing Japan. Since 2013, when Xi Jinping assumed China’s leadership, bilateral tensions between China and the Quad countries have increased.

US and China

The 2011 US pivot to Asia (aimed at shifting resources and priorities from the Middle East to the increasingly important Asia-Pacific region) and the US-led Trans-Pacific Partnership trade agreement, both launched under the Barack Obama administration, have been seen as moves to counter China’s growing power in the region. Washington has denounced the Chinese militarisation of the South China Sea; the latter has been navigated by the US navy under the Trump administration’s Free and Open Indo-Pacific Asia policy, provoking strains with China.

Beijing, on the other hand, did not comply with the 2016 independent arbitral tribunal’s ruling established under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which rejected its claims vis-à-vis the Philippines in the South China Sea. Tensions have risen regarding China’s treatment of Taiwan, human right abuses in Hong Kong and in Xinjiang, China’s North Korea policy, and issues related to the coronavirus pandemic. The US and China have engaged in several trade rows, with Washington accusing Beijing of keeping the yuan artificially low against the US dollar, and of committing intellectual property theft; it has been pressuring other countries not to adopt Huawei equipment – banned in the US – for their 5G networks. In its 2017 National Security Strategy, the US labelled China and Russia as ‘revisionist powers’ and expressed serious concern over Beijing’s intentions: ‘China expanded its power at the expense of the sovereignty of others. China gathers and exploits data on an unrivalled scale and spreads features of its authoritarian system, including corruption and the use of surveillance. It is building the most capable and well-funded military in the world, after our own. Its nuclear arsenal is growing and diversifying’.

Japan and China

Despite Abe’s efforts to normalise Sino-Japanese relations, the Japan Coast Guard has had to respond to an increasing number of Chinese Coast Guard incursions in the Tokyo-administered Senkaku/Diaoyu islands in the East China Sea (which have been claimed by Beijing). Japanese fighter jets scramble against airspace violations by Chinese military aircraft more than twice a day. Tokyo, wary of Beijing’s naval aspirations, has had to keep increasing its defence budget, build new military bases and plan on enhancing its security hardware (which may include new missile defence warships, more capable missiles and unmanned fighter jets). In July 2014, the Japanese Cabinet reinterpreted Article 9 of the Constitution to allow Self-Defence Forces to come to the aid of any ally under attack. China has sustained its rhetoric about Japan’s aggression during from the times of World War II; the Japanese public has a highly unfavourable view of China (86 % according to a Pew Research Center survey among 14 countries released in October 2020). Chinese fishing boats have been swarming into the fishing grounds of the Japanese economic exclusive zone.
Australia and China

Japan expressed the highest unfavourable view of China compared to the rest of the respondents in the above-mentioned survey, while Australia made a spectacular twirl in its opinion, which had been positive until a few years before. In 2018, Australia adopted a package of laws preventing foreign interference in politics and other domestic affairs, as well as espionage. The move followed reports about alleged Chinese attempts to influence democratic processes and other actions. Australia was the first western power to ban the Chinese Huawei and ZTE from its 5G network. Canberra also asked for an international inquiry into the origins of the coronavirus pandemic and Beijing's early handling of it. All these moves have triggered a furious backlash from China, which has retaliated by blocking imports of Australian goods. The tension has escalated further following a Chinese government spokesperson's Twitter post depicting a doctored image of an Australian soldier committing war crimes.¹

India and China

Despite Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's engagement with China, major challenges have kept looming before bilateral relations. India is the only Quad country sharing a land border with China (2,600 km). The 2017 Doklam standoff and the bloody Galway Valley clash in June 2020 have heightened tensions in the Himalayan section of the two countries' land border, which China is militarising in order to change the status quo along the Line of Actual Control (LAC). The two incidents have also prompted concerns about a real risk of military conflict. In addition, Beijing does not recognise Delhi's sovereignty over the north-eastern state of Arunachal Pradesh. This adds to India's feeling of being trapped inside a growing ring of Chinese power and influence, including through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in the Indian Ocean and the Himalayan neighbourhood, regions that Delhi has traditionally considered its sphere of hegemony. Chinese ties with Pakistan, India's most antagonistic neighbour, have grown stronger in recent years, including through the construction of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, which crosses Islamabad-administered Kashmir, a region claimed by India.

Quad 2.0

China's aggressive assertiveness in the past decade has increased the Quad countries' awareness of the threat it poses: Beijing spends on its military more than all of its Indo-Pacific neighbours combined. In 2012, right before coming back as Japan's prime minister, Abe called for a democratic security diamond, a sort of a Quad remake.

The way towards Quad 2.0 passed through its breakup. The Quad countries were active in bilateral and trilateral cooperation (analysts use the term minilateralism) on security-related issues. Japan and Australia have both had a military alliance with the US for a long time. Since 2006, the US, Japan and Australia have held a trilateral strategic dialogue (TSD); in 2014 they had their first trilateral summit; in July 2018 they announced a trilateral partnership in infrastructure projects in the Indo-Pacific. In December 2018, the US, Japan and India held their first trilateral summit. In 2015, Australia, India and Japan held their first trilateral dialogue.

An early example of a military exercise carried out by the grouping is the annual US-India Malabar naval exercise, first held in 1992, which Japan joined permanently in 2015. India and Australia, strategic partners since 2009, have significantly improved their security cooperation, also thanks to their 2014 framework for security cooperation, with maritime cooperation developing through the biennial AUSINDEX exercise. Since 2017, they have held 2+2 foreign and defence secretaries dialogues, which they decided to upgrade to the level of ministers in 2020.

Japan has also joined the Australia-US military exercises, such as the biennial Talisman Saber (since 2015) and the annual Southern Jackaroo (since 2013). In recent years, Japan and India (alongside France) have joined Pitch Black, the biennial Australia-hosted multinational air power exercise, in which the US was the first foreign participant back in 1983.
Tokyo and Delhi have been 'global and strategic partners' since 2006. In 2008, they adopted a joint declaration on security cooperation, and then an action plan to advance security cooperation in 2009. The first India-Japan maritime bilateral exercise JIMEX took place in 2012 and the fourth (latest) in September 2020. The two countries developed a strong relationship, especially during the second half of the past decade. In November 2016, they signed a civil nuclear agreement. Their defence forces have been holding bilateral exercises (Dharma Guardian and Shinyuu Maitri) since 2018. The first 2+2 foreign and defence ministerial meeting took place in November 2019. In September 2020, the two countries concluded an acquisition and cross-servicing agreement (ACSA), allowing their armed forces to exchange supplies and services on a reciprocal basis. Japan has also strengthened bilateral security cooperation with Australia.

Figure 1 – Ongoing cooperation among the Quad countries

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Source: EPRS.

The table indicates ongoing cooperation among the Quad countries, with symbols denoting the level and type of cooperation (bilateral, trilateral, or quadrilateral) and the nature of agreements or exercises (summit/dialogue, agreement/partnership, or aerial/ naval/military exercise). The figure illustrates the cooperative activities within the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue framework.
The US declared India a major defence partner (MDP) in June 2016, opening the door to Indian procurement of sensitive defence technologies. In August 2016, the two countries signed a logistics exchange memorandum of agreement (LEMOA), allowing Washington to transfer secure communications and data equipment to Delhi and to offer real-time data-sharing with the Indian military over secure channels. Through the signing of a basic exchange and cooperation agreement (BECA) in October 2020, the partners completed a trio of major pacts for deep military cooperation.

Meanwhile, Washington has acknowledged the growing relevance of the Indo-Pacific as a geopolitical concept (see box). In a speech made in November 2017 in Da Nang (Vietnam), former US President Trump outlined the above-mentioned vision of a ‘free and open Indo-Pacific’. The US national security strategy, published in December 2017, contained several references to the Indo-Pacific. In February 2018, the US adopted the strategic framework for the Indo-Pacific, aimed at maintaining US strategic primacy in the region and ‘preventing China from establishing new, illiberal spheres of influence’. The framework, a secret document due to be held secret until 2042, was unexpectedly declassified in January 2021, in the last days of the Trump administration. It explicitly mentions the Quad among the US alliances and partnerships, stating the ‘aim to create a quadrilateral security framework with India, Japan, Australia, and the United States as the principal hubs’. It also suggests aligning the US Indo-Pacific strategy with the strategies of Australia, India and Japan, as well as deepening trilateral cooperation with Japan and Australia. In May 2018, the Command in charge of the region was renamed INDOPACOMM (Indo-Pacific Command). The US vision of the Indo-Pacific was further explained in a November 2019 report.

In spite of the emphasis on the Indo-Pacific, in January 2017 Trump decided to pull out of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), a trade deal between east and west Pacific countries (among them Japan and Australia), which had been a crucial element of Obama’s ‘pivot to Asia’ policy. The remaining 11 countries decided to carry on without Washington and, in March 2018, concluded a comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-pacific partnership (CPTPP). Analysts expect US President Joe Biden’s administration to announce its intention to join the CPTPP. In November 2020, 15 Asia-Pacific countries signed a regional comprehensive economic partnership (RCEP), a trade deal accounting for almost a third of global GDP.

The regularity of the Quad countries’ bilateral exercises and the conclusion of agreements seeking to upgrade their cooperation and build trust among their militaries, promote interoperability and lay the foundation of stronger political ties, created the right circumstances for launching the ‘Quad 2.0’. In October 2017, then US Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson, and then Japanese Foreign Minister, Kōno Tarō, proposed to give the grouping a second chance. Foreign ministry senior officials met in Manila in November 2017, and have held bimonthly meetings since then. Foreign ministers meet annually: the third QUAD ministerial meeting took place in February 2021.

Outlook

The Quad as a basis for new alliances in the Indo-Pacific?

In March 2020, senior officials from the Quad countries held a videoconference initiated by the US side on the response to the coronavirus pandemic. The meeting included three additional Indo-Pacific countries: New Zealand, South Korea and Vietnam, and was expected to continue on a weekly basis. The ambition of the seven countries was to join their efforts in helping to get the global economy back on track, to trade and share technologies with each other, and to facilitate the movement of people between each other. Analysts have named this group a potential ‘Quad plus’. However, it is premature to count these three additional countries as keen to be included in a grouping that aims to contain China (though the Quad is rather wary of making direct references to Beijing), be it for reasons of geopolitics (South Korea, Vietnam), defence policy (Vietnam) or
economic dependence (New Zealand, South Korea, see Figure 2). Wellington is already a member of the 'Five eyes' and the Five Power Defence Arrangements (see box).

Another example of possible multilateral cooperation of like-minded democracies is the UK-promoted D10 (see box). The UK is increasing its activity in the Indo-Pacific, where it maintains a military outpost in Brunei and has access to a naval support facility in Singapore. Annual Japan-UK 2+2 foreign and defence ministerial meetings have been taking place since 2015, and a UK-Japan free trade agreement (FTA) was agreed in October 2020. While cooperation with Japan is flourishing, Sino-British relations have deteriorated since the political crisis in Hong Kong in 2019 and China’s adoption of the national security law.

Convergences and divergences on China

All Quad members advocate a rules-based system in the Indo-Pacific that would preserve the freedom of navigation, uphold democratic values and ensure stability and openness, as opposed to Beijing’s coercive methods, militarisation of vital trade routes in the region, and opaque deals pushing smaller countries into debt traps while eroding their sovereignty. Meanwhile, the Quad’s prospects can be assessed on the basis of its members’ opinions on what the grouping may entail, including on how to approach relations with China. For instance, Washington’s rhetoric became increasingly confrontational under the Trump administration. While the tone has shifted, analysts have remarked a continuity in substance under President Biden. In a March 2021 speech made at the time of the release of the US Interim national security strategic guidance, the US Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, stated that US-China relations (Washington’s 'biggest geopolitical test of the 21st century') could be competitive, collaborative or adversarial, and underlined ‘the need to engage China from a position of strength’. The strategic guidance itself refers to the Indo-Pacific as a key area where the US must have a robust presence in order to deter adversaries and defend its interests. The other Quad countries, being geographically closer or more economically linked to China (see Figure 2) than the US, have been more circumspect in identifying Beijing as a threat actor, and have voiced support for an inclusive concept about the Indo-Pacific.

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India is traditionally reluctant to form alliances and has a rather cautious approach towards China. However, Beijing’s increasingly aggressive stance, including its conduct at the Himalayan land borders and its support to India’s historical enemy, Pakistan, has softened the Modi government’s attitude towards the Quad. Yet, Delhi remains wary of any evolution of the framework towards minilateralism.
China’s reaction and the framing of the Quad as an ‘Asian NATO’

In March 2018, China’s Foreign Minister, Wang Yi, mocked the idea of reviving the Quad as ‘foam in the ocean, destined to dissipate soon’. However, articles published in the Chinese communist party newspaper Global Times, lambasting the Quad as a new ‘Asian NATO’ and Quad meetings as ‘ruthless and toothless photo-ops’, only revealed Beijing’s anxiety. This anxiety has found expression in attacks against former US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo; at the same time, in an attitude that The Diplomat has defined as two-pronged, the remaining Quad partners have been spared, in an attempt to dissociate them from Washington.

Russia is quite critical of the Quad as well: in December 2020, Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov, said that ‘India is currently an object of the Western countries’ persistent, aggressive and devious policy as they are trying to engage it in anti-China games by promoting Indo-Pacific strategies’, a statement that prompted Delhi’s answer, reflecting the independence pursued in respect of its foreign policy.

Contrary to Chinese rhetoric, experts suggest that the Quad is unlikely to become a formal military alliance. They argue that it has gradually developed through cooperation among like-minded partners, rather than through a rapid process of institutionalisation (one that political leaders and citizens would not be likely to support, especially in the name of containing China). There are no joint statements after the Quad ministerial meetings: the four countries issue their own read-outs separately; this even happened when they held their second ministerial meeting – their first stand-alone – in October 2020 in Tokyo. Meanwhile, the Quad’s prospects could be more promising than those of other groupings (e.g. BRICS: Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa), as its members are closer to being natural partners sharing the same values and geopolitical challenges. In the meantime, all four Quad members being democracies, the grouping may occasionally need to adjust to the changes in political leadership that its members undergo. Cooperation across a range of sectors not limited to security may guarantee the Quad a long life as a policy coordination mechanism.

The post-coronavirus framework represents an opportunity. In September 2020, the trade ministers of Japan, Australia, and India launched a supply chain resilience initiative to counter their excessive dependence on trade with China. The Trump administration promoted the Economic Prosperity Network within the Quad plus countries: an alliance of trusted partners operating under the same set of standards in multiple sectors. Joe Biden is expected to keep the US focus on China’s increasing assertiveness in the region: the US navy is continuing its Freedom of Navigation operations in the South China Sea; in March 2021, Indo-Pacific Commander, Admiral Phil Davidson, advocated the creation of a longer-range land-based missile network in the western Pacific to deter China from carrying out military action against Taiwan and on the Senkaku/Dyaoyu islands. As The Diplomat noted, during the US presidential electoral campaign, Biden preferred to talk about a ‘secure and prosperous’ as opposed to a ‘free and open’ Indo-Pacific, which was Trump’s preferred wording: this new wording seems more suitable for the purposes of forging consensus among the other Indo-Pacific countries, especially those that are members of ASEAN, and more aligned to their interests. Kurt Campbell (former assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific Affairs in the Obama administration) has been named coordinator for Indo-Pacific affairs.

Figure 2 – China’s share of total trade in selected countries in 2019

![China's share of total trade in selected countries in 2019](image-url)

Source: DG Trade, European Commission.
ASEAN’s role

It remains to be seen how the Quad will coexist with ASEAN, the premier forum for regional cooperation in the Asia-Pacific. The Quad members’ statements have confirmed ASEAN’s centrality in the regional architecture. The June 2019 ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific, the first ASEAN document mentioning the Indo-Pacific, while avoiding references to the Quad among the frameworks to explore potential synergies, ‘recognizes the potential for cooperation with other regional mechanisms in the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean regions on issues of common interests’.

March 2021: The first Quad summit

In March 2021, the Quad held its first summit, in virtual mode. This was Joe Biden’s first multilateral summit. The four leaders issued a joint final statement, The spirit of the Quad. They reaffirmed their concept of an Indo-Pacific that is free, open, inclusive, healthy, anchored by democratic values, and unconstrained by coercion; once again, they expressed support for the unity and centrality of ASEAN. The coronavirus pandemic was a key topic of discussion. As part of their strategy to counter Beijing’s vaccine diplomacy, they launched the Quad vaccine partnership to assist Indo-Pacific countries with vaccines produced in India; set up a senior-level Quad vaccine experts group; and called for reform at the World Health Organization. Recognising climate change as a global priority, the leaders committed to strengthen climate action, including to keep temperatures to the limit fixed by the Paris Agreement on climate change, and launched a Quad climate working group. Acknowledging the need for critical and emerging technology to be governed according to shared interests and values, they set up a Quad critical and emerging technology working group. The final statement did not mention China (nor did the leaders’ remarks do so), but the leaders reaffirmed their commitment to the complete denuclearisation of North Korea (which analysts in Seoul consider a departure from the arrangements of the June 2018 Singapore Summit for a denuclearised Korean Peninsula). They are to hold an in-person summit by the end of 2021.

The EU and the Indo-Pacific

The EU has five strategic partners in the Indo-Pacific: China, India, Japan and South Korea, to whom it added ASEAN in December 2020. It has trade agreements with Japan, South Korea, Vietnam and Singapore, as well as with some Pacific countries. It is negotiating with Australia, Indonesia and New Zealand, while its negotiations are on hold with Malaysia, the Philippines and Thailand. The EU used to refer to the region as the ‘Asia-Pacific’, and only started referring to it as the ‘Indo-Pacific’ in 2018. The October 2018 strategy on EU-Asia connectivity (Connecting Europe and Asia – Building blocks for an EU strategy), which is considered as the EU’s response to China’s BRI, and which put emphasis on rules, sustainability and local benefits and ownership, does not mention the Indo-Pacific.

Nevertheless, the region is on its way to becoming the most relevant part of the world at the geopolitical level, representing 62% of global GDP and being home to the world’s largest and fastest-growing economies. The region is also particularly important for the EU, as it is the destination of around 35% of EU exports and home to five out of the EU’s 10 top trading partners. The EU economy itself relies on the sea-lanes crossing the Indo-Pacific and would be severely damaged in case these were disrupted. A 2018 paper by the EUISS suggests that ‘an enhanced dialogue on how to keep the Indo-Pacific truly “free and open” could provide a broader comprehensive strategic framework to strengthen EU ties with its strategic partners in the Quad. In addition, collaboration with the EU could bring legitimacy to the four-party framework.

The Trump administration’s ‘free and open Indo-Pacific’ concept included a containment strategy against Beijing and was understood as the expression of a strategic US-China rivalry. The EU, on the other hand, looks at China as an economic competitor and a systemic rival, but also as a partner for negotiation and cooperation on key issues (including climate change); together with deteriorated EU-US relations during the Trump administration, this could explain past reluctance to use the term. However, the coronavirus pandemic has highlighted the fact that the EU is too dependent on China for the supply of strategic products. The tools employed in Beijing’s Wolf Warrior diplomacy,
including disinformation campaigns and mask diplomacy seeking to distract public opinion from China's responsibility for the pandemic, have further deepened EU leaders' concerns, adding to issues such as the national security law for Hong Kong or the Uyghurs' repression in Xinjiang.

The appetite for engagement with China may have subsided in some European capitals: in February 2021, the 17+1 annual summit between China and 17 central and eastern European countries (including Greece) was a political setback for Beijing. Lithuania withdrew from the format and decided to open an office in Taiwan’s capital Taipei. This has not prevented the EU from reaching an agreement in principle on investment with China (CAI) in December 2020, which will require the European Parliament's (EP) consent. Meanwhile, there is a growing interest for closer ties with India and EU-India relations are a priority of the Portuguese Presidency of the Council, with a summit scheduled for May 2021, where the EU-India Connectivity Partnership could be announced.

The EP condemned the national security law for Hong Kong in a June 2020 resolution and the Uyghurs' repression in Xinjiang in a December 2019 resolution. In April 2020, it adopted a resolution on EU coordinated action to combat Covid-19, calling on the EU to ask China to shed full light on the pandemic and asking the Commission 'to counter aggressive Russian and Chinese propaganda efforts that are exploitting the Covid-19 pandemic with the aim of undermining the EU and sowing mistrust in the local population towards the EU'.

With a view to relaunching EU-US bilateral relations following Joe Biden’s election as US President, the EU put forward a new EU-US agenda for global change, which states: 'Increased EU focus on the challenges and opportunities in the Indo-Pacific region will help deepen cooperation with like-minded partners in the region. Working closely with the US to align our strategic objectives and support democratic progress in Asia will be essential'. The EU supports President Biden’s proposal for a summit for democracy and is proposing to establish an EU-US Trade and Technology Council (TTC). The latter would allow the development of technological and industrial standards as an alternative to China's, which could provide a tool to counter Beijing's growing economic and technological influence that is challenging Indo-Pacific societies.

The EU’s past security initiatives in the region have mostly been limited to its western part: Operation Atalanta countering piracy off the coast of Somalia; the CRIMARIO initiative to enhance maritime domain awareness (MDA) through information-sharing, training and capacity-building; the Programme to Promote Regional Maritime Security (MASE), funding for the Regional Maritime Information Fusion Centre in Madagascar, and the Regional Centre for Operational Coordination in the Seychelles. In September 2019, the EU launched the action ESIWA 'Security cooperation in and with Asia' with five pilot countries (India, Indonesia, Japan, South Korea and Vietnam) on maritime security, counter-terrorism, crisis management and cybersecurity. The EU is not a traditional security player in the region; nevertheless, the 2014 EU Maritime security strategy encourages the EU Member States to use their military forces to defend freedom of navigation and to fight illicit activities worldwide. The revised Maritime strategy of June 2018 includes 'support for the application of UNCLOS and the establishment of mechanisms for regional maritime confidence-building measures in the Asia Pacific region' in its action plan. The 2016 Global Strategy for the EU's foreign and security policy acknowledges that 'security tensions in Asia are mounting'.

Three EU Member States have published strategy papers on the Indo-Pacific. Following a May 2018 statement in Sydney by French President, Emmanuel Macron, that France and Australia could be at the heart of a new 'Indo-Pacific axis', the French ministry of defence published the paper France and security in the Indo-Pacific in June 2018 (which it updated in 2019), followed by the French Strategy in the Indo-Pacific in May 2019. In September 2020, France had its first trilateral dialogue with Australia and India, focussed on the Indo-Pacific, which will take place annually. In February 2021, a French nuclear submarine patrolled the South China Sea. France also has an agreement with India on reciprocal access to naval bases in the Indian Ocean, signed in March 2018.

Germany published its Policy guidelines for the Indo-Pacific in August 2020. The Netherlands issued its guidelines for the Indo-Pacific in November 2020. Certain differences have been noted between
the French and the German approach. France is present in the Indo-Pacific via its overseas territories and considers itself an Indo-Pacific power: the region is home to 1.5 million French citizens. In addition, 93% of France's EEZ (the world's second largest), is located in the Indo-Pacific, as is an established French naval presence and 8,000 soldiers. It focuses on maritime security and aims to deepen bilateral and trilateral ties with Australia, India and Japan. Germany approaches the region from a much broader perspective that goes beyond peace and security to include diversification of partnerships, support for open shipping routes, open markets, free trade and other issues. The German government has decided to dispatch a frigate to patrol the Indo-Pacific as of 2021.

Despite divergences in their approach, France's and Germany's positions are not antithetical, and according to some analyses they may set the tone for the currently negotiated EU strategy in the region. As an example of their commonality of intentions, in September 2020 the two countries, together with the UK, submitted a note verbale to the United Nations, challenging the legality of Beijing's claims in the South China Sea. The debate within the Council has picked up: in January 2021, Motegi Toshimitsu was the first Japanese foreign minister to address the EU Foreign Affairs Council (held in virtual format). Motegi briefed the Council on Japan's free and open Indo-Pacific policy. Oxford Analytica expects the EU strategy to have an 'inclusive notion without China as a target'; the High Representative/Vice-President of the Commission Josep Borrell advocates a strategy with 'a broad and inclusive prism, putting the accent on our support for regional and multilateral approaches'.

While the 2018 strategy on EU-Asia connectivity did not mention the Indo-Pacific, the concept was acknowledged by the European Parliament resolution on connectivity and EU-Asia relations adopted in January 2021. MEPs support the initiative of developing a common EU Indo-Pacific strategy and cooperation with partners in the region, 'including military-to-military exchanges'.

ENDNOTES

1 Asō Tarō's speech, unlike Abe Shinzō's, contained a clear mention not only of the US, Australia and India but also of the Member States of the EU and NATO.
2 In February 2021, China enacted a controversial law that allows its coast guard law to fire on foreign vessels.
3 The false tweet post followed the November 2020 Brereton report, which found that Australian special forces had committed at least 39 unlawful killings in Afghanistan.
4 In a March 2021 webinar organised by the Elcano Royal Institute, analysts argued that the EU strategy is to be adopted by the end of the first half of 2021, and may cover four areas: maritime security; connectivity; trade; and global issues.

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