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Revisiting EU's Indo-Pacific Strategy

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SYNOPSIS

*Security concerns in and around Europe in the past couple of years have absorbed much of the European Union's political and strategic resources. Nevertheless, EU member states still put a premium on implementing the EU Indo-Pacific Strategy to capitalise on the benefits that the Indo-Pacific littoral states, particularly those in Southeast Asian, could bring. **GILANG KEMBARA** analyses the EU member states' initiatives and breakthroughs in Southeast Asia in the past several months.*

COMMENTARY

The European Union's Indo-Pacific Strategy, launched in 2021, was positively welcomed by most of the Indo-Pacific littoral states, especially those in Southeast Asia. The strategy showcases the European Union's commitment to diversify its relations in various sectors and ensure a sustainable and long-term engagement with countries in the Indo-Pacific region.

For countries in Southeast Asia, it provides an alternative development path without having to endorse the anti-Beijing rhetoric evident in the United States' Indo-Pacific Strategy. With strong emphasis on maritime governance and trade connectivity, the EU strategy puts less emphasis on beefing up the defence capabilities of the Indo-Pacific countries and more on the economic capacity that it believes will provide opportunities for the European economy to grow.

Yet, strategic developments in and around Europe continued to impinge upon the European Union's commitment to the Indo-Pacific. With the Russian invasion of

Ukraine in 2022 and the Israel-Hamas war that broke out in 2023, EU member states are battling to divide their resources as they seek to maintain their strategic interests.

Nonetheless, the Indo-Pacific is still high on the European Union's agenda, and this fact is reflected in developments in relations between various European powers and countries in Southeast Asia in late 2023 and early this year.

France

As France considers itself a resident power in the Indo-Pacific, it has been the most active European power pushing for the realisation of the EU's Indo-Pacific Strategy. The French government has organised various gatherings and discussions among officials and strategic thinkers to gain greater understanding of the Indo-Pacific region. Since late 2023, France has intensified its relations with various Southeast Asian states, particularly in the area of defence and security cooperation.

In [December 2023](#), France's minister of the armed forces, Sebastien Lecornu, met in Manila with his Philippine counterpart, Gilberto C. Teodoro, Jr., to discuss regional and global security issues as well as underscore the importance of a rules-based international order. Both ministers deliberated upon various defence agreements, such as considering a status of visiting forces agreement (VFA), which would allow the armed forces of the two countries to conduct joint activities in each other's territory. Should such an agreement be concluded, France would be the third country to have a VFA with the Philippines.

Subsequently, Prime Minister Hun Manet of Cambodia paid a visit to France in [January 2024](#) to discuss economic cooperation, education initiatives, and defence relations between the two countries. His visit was seen as an attempt by Phnom Penh to counterbalance its over-reliance on China by diversifying its cooperation with other major powers. Prime Minister Hun Manet's visit was followed by a confirmation from President Emmanuel Macron that Paris will provide €200 million to support Cambodia in its development of energy and water sources.

Finally, we saw Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin of Thailand meeting with President Macron in [March 2024](#) in the hopes of cementing economic ties between the two countries through the negotiation of a free trade agreement (FTA), which is expected to be finalised by 2025. Talks were also conducted on defence industry cooperation, during which PM Srettha proposed joint investments and technology transfers for Thailand to become a military equipment production and maintenance hub in Southeast Asia. Thailand's approach came on the heels of a slow recovery of the Thai economy following the devastating effects of the COVID pandemic.

Germany

Germany's presence in the Indo-Pacific has gradually expanded since the deployment to the region of the frigate *Bayern* in 2021–2022, laying the groundwork for future development. Speaking at the 2023 International Maritime Security Conference (IMSC) in Singapore, the chief of the German navy, Vice Admiral Jan Christian Kaack, outlined Berlin's intention to deploy a frigate and a combat support ship to the Indo-Pacific region [in 2024](#). Although Admiral Kaack did not identify the ships to be

deployed, he was confident that the deployment would involve one of Germany's newest frigates of the *Baden-Württemberg* class, which entered service between 2019 and 2022.

In the foreign policy arena, Germany has doubled its efforts to deepen ties with Southeast Asian countries as it attempts to diversify trade relations in Asia and become less dependent on China.

Between 11 and 13 March 2024, Chancellor Olaf Scholz [played host](#) to the visiting heads of state of Malaysia, the Philippines, and Thailand. The talks with the three leaders focused on economic partnerships, particularly the supply of raw materials for hi-tech products, as well as cooperation to attract skilled workers and deepen free trade.



German Chancellor Olaf Scholz and Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. in Berlin, Germany, March 2024. Scholz received the heads of state of Malaysia, the Philippines, and Thailand in the course of the week in a bid to deepen economic partnerships with Southeast Asian countries and reduce one-sided dependencies on China. *Image from Wikimedia Commons.*

Italy

Italy has been considered one of the most active contributors to US- or NATO-led military initiatives, including through an [expanded military presence](#) in the Indo-Pacific. Rome has initiated significant collaborations with various regional countries as well as actively deployed military vessels and personnel to the region. Such interest is due to Rome's realisation of the growing importance of the Indo-Pacific from both the economic and geopolitical standpoints. In line with this growing recognition, Italy has designated Southeast Asia as a significant zone of interest, aiming to prioritise the expansion of trade and economic interconnections.

In parallel, Italy is also keen to improve its security role in the region, especially in the maritime domain. In mid-2023, Italy deployed one of its newest vessels – *Francesco Morosini*, a *Thaon di Revel*-class offshore patrol vessel – to the Indo-Pacific. The ship conducted port calls in Ho Chi Minh City and Bangkok, took part in defence exhibitions in Malaysia and Singapore, and participated in the Indonesia-led multinational Komodo 2023 exercise, the latter being Italy's first participation in the event.

Italy's security relations in Southeast Asia are very much apparent in its cooperation with Indonesia. In December 2022, the Italian defence minister, Guido Crosetto, visited Indonesia with the agenda of boosting defence and industrial cooperation. The visit could be considered a follow-up to the 2021 deal between the Italian shipbuilding company Fincantieri and the Indonesian navy for the latter's acquisition of eight naval vessels. The deal stipulates a sale of six FREMM-class frigates to Indonesia, along with the sale of two used *Maestrale*-class frigates. However, owing to the delay in production of the frigates, both parties held fresh talks in [October 2023](#) over the transfer of two *Thaon di Revel*-class offshore patrol vessels.

Conclusion

As the European Union sets out its medium- to long-term strategy for the Indo-Pacific, the geopolitical dynamics in Europe, the Middle East, and the Red Sea region seemed to have redirected some of its attention and resources to tackling crises nearer home. But this shift does not necessarily mean the European Union has completely backtracked from its commitments articulated in its Indo-Pacific Strategy.

On the contrary, we have seen high-profile meetings and an exchange of visits, including those involving heads of state, between Southeast Asian states and major European powers in the past couple of months. Several new commitments and pledges have been made on trade and the defence sector.

Such re-engagement signals continued commitment of the European Union to its Indo-Pacific Strategy and is a fundamental step forward in its efforts to help secure the maritime domain.

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