



Parliamentary engagement strengthens democracy in the Indo-Pacific

By David McAllister | 25 March 2022

Key Issues

- The geopolitical shift towards the Indo-Pacific poses new challenges for the European Union, in terms of strategic stability, security, prosperity, and geopolitical relevance. The war in the Ukraine impacts also on the Indo-Pacific and the relationship of the region with the EU. The parliamentary dimension plays a fundamental role for strengthening democracy in the region. Parliamentarians constitute the link between executives and citizens.
- Besides the core interest of European countries on the economic development in Asia, security and defence-related issues become increasingly important. One of the major challenges in the region is the lack of an overarching regional security order and keeping maritime routes secure and open.
- Europe's approach to the Indo-Pacific region should be pragmatic, flexible, and inclusive. Diversifying relations and deepening and forging new partnerships in the Indo-Pacific is key to preserving peace and stability in the region.

The geopolitical shift towards the Indo-Pacific is a reality and a new rallying point for major global players with the United States and China at the centre of this rivalry. This competition poses new challenges for the European Union, in terms of strategic stability, security, prosperity, and geopolitical relevance, which are closely related to developments in the region. In recent years, the dynamics in this area have given rise to intense geopolitical competition, mirrored in an increase in military spending and in a more aggressive rhetoric, putting to question the rules-based international order. Many sensitivities and diverging views, interests, and aspirations exist in this part of the world. At the same time, the Indo-Pacific has undergone immense economic growth in the past years. The European Union and Asia combined account for 70 percent of the global flow of goods and

services as well as 60 percent of the global GDP. Moreover, the Indo-Pacific is home to around 60 percent of the world's population.

The countries of the region have increasingly become significant political, trade, and security partners for the EU. The growing geostrategic importance of the Indo-Pacific was widely recognised by some EU member states in their national strategies, including France, Germany, and the Netherlands. The recent first-ever Ministerial Forum for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific in Paris was a good opportunity to facilitate the debate about implementing the EU's strategy for cooperation in this region, which has been presented on 16 September 2021. The strategic focus on the area has also been recognised in the Strategic Compass, as well as the EU Global Gateway initiative to strengthen

connectivity across the world. A common objective of all these European initiatives is to safeguard unity as a precondition to realise our ambition of strategic sovereignty amidst the increasing competition between the United States and China. The EU Indo-Pacific strategy sets out the intention to reinforce the EU's presence and action in the region based on inclusiveness and principled long-term engagement with regional partners. It is about maintaining a free and open Indo-Pacific region for all and on promoting an open democracy and rule-based regional security architecture, in line with the principles of democracy, the rule of law, human rights, and international law. The new orientation of the EU is strategically logical considering the growing importance of the region that has developed towards being a key shaper of the global international order. The developments in the Indo-Pacific region directly affect our security and prosperity in Europe. We need to address them in close cooperation and coordination with our regional partners.

To be able to do so, building strong relations and security cooperation with Indo-Pacific regional organisations and countries is crucial. The EU can already rely on a broad network of partnerships and agreements with a number of countries, such as Japan, the Republic of Korea, Australia, India, New Zealand, Singapore, as well as regional organisations, such as ASEAN and the Organisation of African, Caribbean and Pacific States. In December 2020 under the German Presidency of the Council of the EU, concluding six years of talks, the EU and ASEAN upgraded their relations from “dialogue” to “strategic partnership”. The EU has long been ASEAN's number-one development partner, but is also its third trade partner, and third investor. EU exports to ASEAN countries grew from €54 billion in 2010 to €85 billion in 2019 and imports from ASEAN countries grew even more, from €72 billion in 2019 to €125 billion. By 2050, ASEAN is set to be the world's fourth-largest economy. End of this year, the 45th EU-ASEAN summit will take place in Brussels. This summit will highlight the long-standing relations between the two organisations on security and defence matters as well as further developing a common agenda under the strategic partnership.

The EU also needs to deepen its engagement with emerging security structures such as QUAD and AUKUS, support ASEAN centrality and promote

maritime security and freedom of navigation in full compliance with international law, in particular the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). The European Parliament calls for the EU and its member states to anchor and extend its presence in the region by deepening cooperation. In this context, the EU should make use of its standing as a credible and reliable actor amidst a growing geopolitical competition between global and regional powers.

The parliamentary dimension

The parliamentary dimension plays a fundamental role for strengthening democracy in the region. Parliamentarians constitute the link between executives and citizens. There is no overall approach on the inter-parliamentary dimension to the Indo-Pacific region as it is simply too large and diverse. Through its vast network of standing inter-parliamentary delegations, the European Parliament has established direct communication channels with parliamentary counterparts in partner countries. These delegations operate under the oversight of the Committee on Foreign Affairs (AFET). Presently there are 45 delegations, including delegations for relations with Australia and New Zealand, Japan, India, the Korean Peninsula, the People's Republic of China and the countries of South Asia. Parliament's relations with the ASEAN and the ten countries that compose ASEAN are channelled through one, dedicated delegation: the delegation for relations with the countries of Southeast Asia and ASEAN, abbreviated as the DASE delegation.

The European Parliament – as the only directly elected body within the EU – is an official observer of the ASEAN Inter-Parliamentary Assembly (AIPA). The AIPA and the European Parliament are natural partners, as both have a significant potential to contribute towards strengthening EU-ASEAN relations. A new and more ambitious agenda in the EU-ASEAN strategic partnership requires a stronger parliamentary dimension and a continuous engagement with ASEAN counterparts, one that provides effective guidance and parliamentary scrutiny. An annual inter-regional meeting with AIPA would allow for a more structured dialogue with the aim of developing targeted fields of cooperation between both sides such as trade, mitigating the

pandemic, human rights issues, the green transition and (digital) connectivity. Both sides are actively committed working towards the creation of an EU-ASEAN Parliamentary Assembly. This is key since in 2022 the EU and ASEAN will prepare the ground for their upcoming 2023-2027 Plan of Action, developing new fields of cooperation and further enhancing the relation between the two blocs. One of the objectives

as cybersecurity, terrorism, organised crime, nuclear security and non-proliferation. It is worth noting that many Indo-Pacific countries have condemned the Russian war against Ukraine and imposed sanctions on Moscow, including prohibitions on the sale of military and dual-use technologies to Russia as well as economic restraints, seizures of assets, and bans on the issuance of travel visas. Even though ASEAN



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in the coming years could be a region-to-region Free Trade Agreement, beyond the bilateral trade agreements already ratified or being negotiated.

The Asia-Europe Parliamentary Partnership Meeting (ASEP), on the other hand, is the parliamentary dimension of the Asian-Europe Meeting (ASEM), a political dialogue bringing together 53 partners from across Europe and Asia. This parliamentary platform has existed since 1996 with the aim to create a people-centred and people-oriented inter-regional community. The declaration of the Eleventh Meeting in 2021, which was held virtually, stressed “the relevance of parliamentary diplomacy and inter-parliamentary partnership in promoting peace, security, as well as inclusive and sustainable developments, and encourages more interactions and effective institutional partnerships between ASEP and ASEM processes.”

The security dimension

Besides the core interest of European countries in the economic development in Asia, security- and defence-related issues become increasingly important. One of the major challenges in the region is the lack of an overarching regional security order. This represents a serious threat to the stability in the region and beyond. Europe and the Indo-Pacific share increasingly similar challenges in a number of security-related areas, such

has been rather restrained in mentioning Russia as the aggressor, individual countries of the region have taken concrete actions. Australia has pledged to provide Ukraine with lethal military equipment. The governments of Australia, Japan, New Zealand, the Republic of Korea, and Taiwan have all announced in recent weeks either unilateral bans on trade engagement with Russia or intentions to join further sanctions invoked by the United States and the European Union.

As being responsible for a report in the European Parliament on the security challenges in the Indo-Pacific, I emphasise the need to promote an open and rules-based regional security architecture, including secure sea lines of communication, capacity-building, and enhanced naval presence by EU Member states in the region. By constructively engaging with the countries and organisations in the Indo-Pacific, inclusive and effective partnerships can be fostered and further built, and hence strengthen multilateralism via the United Nations and other international organisations. An additional benefit of European engagement in the Indo-Pacific lies in its comprehensive range of civilian and military assistance measures, including well developed non-military contributions. The EU can make additional use of its vast network of diplomatic assets to facilitate dialogue on conflict-resolution, legal solutions and expertise in setting up confidence-building measures.

We should work towards the involvement in the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM+) and in the East Asia Summit to strengthen security dimension of our cooperation. Also, our dialogue with NATO's four Asia-Pacific partners, Australia, Japan, the Republic of Korea, and New Zealand could be enhanced with a view to raise mutual situational awareness on security developments in the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific regions. On 11 February, the US administration published its new US Indo-Pacific strategy, which focuses to "building bridges" between these areas. This is also an invitation for the EU to work more closely in the region.

The maritime dimension

The EU's added value in the Indo-Pacific could be to contribute to secure maritime routes based on international law, in particular UNCLOS. The EU has identified the necessity to further strengthen its role as a global maritime security provider. Since more than 75 percent of imported goods in Europe arrive by ship, safeguarding open access to sea lines of communication will remain one of the key challenges of the EU's engagement in the region. On 21 February, the Council launched the implementation of the Coordinated Maritime Presences concept in the North-Western Indian Ocean, by establishing a maritime area of interest covering the maritime area from the Strait of Hormuz to the Southern Tropic and from the north of the Red Sea towards the centre of the Indian Ocean. This is a crucial part of the EU's maritime diplomacy. It will allow the EU to enhance cooperation with countries in the Indo-Pacific by establishing systematic and coordinated frameworks including joint exercises and port calls as well as facilitating the exchange of information. Until recently, France has been the only member state with a permanent military presence; the Netherlands and Germany have recently sent single frigates. I call on the EU and its member states to step up their own maritime capacities in the region in a coordinated way. The implementation of the Coordinated Maritime Concept to the Indo-Pacific should complement member states' activities with the ultimate goal to explore ways ensuring a permanent and credible European naval presence in the Indian Ocean.

One first step into this direction were the joint naval exercises that EU Operation ATALANTA has thus far undertaken with Japan, the Republic of Korea,

India, Vietnam, Oman, and Djibouti. Based on various UN resolutions, its mission is to contribute to the deterrence, prevention, and repression of acts of piracy and armed robbery off the Somali coast. ATALANTA plays an important role in naval diplomacy and contributes to regional security in the Indian Ocean. Critical Maritime Routes in the Indian Ocean as part of the EU Critical Maritime Routes Programme is another valuable project for deepening maritime partnerships with regional actors and countries active in the Indo-Pacific. Effective maritime security requires a broader vision of maritime stability. This means to take into account onshore problems of corruption, root causes for illegal fishing, illegal drugs, arms and people trafficking, and piracy and the environmental impact of commercial and industrial maritime activities including fossil energy sources extraction. These issues ought to be addressed in parallel to more traditional maritime security measures.

Conclusion

The EU's Strategy towards the Indo-Pacific provides a good starting ground. Now, it needs implementation. Europe's approach to the region should be pragmatic, flexible and inclusive. Our overreaching engagement in the region should not preclude cooperation with China. Yet, inclusivity should not lead to appeasement. I support an engagement with China that is principled, practical, and pragmatic. Our policy should be based on the following three principles: cooperate where possible, compete where needed, confront where necessary. Diversifying relations, deepening and forging new partnerships in the Indo-Pacific is key to preserving peace and stability in the region. It should allow the EU to adapt and build its cooperation with different partners according to specific policy areas in which we can find common ground based on shared principles, values or mutual interest. In response to the growing geostrategic importance of the Indo-Pacific, we have numerous opportunities to strengthen our engagement with the region and contribute to its peace and security. The EU should be well equipped to enhance its role as a global security provider, but also boost interlinkages with the countries in the Indo-Pacific. This new orientation of strategic focus reflects a significant evolution in the way the EU looks at its interest in the region and the potential role it can play in the world.




ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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David McAllister chairs the Committee on Foreign Affairs in the European Parliament and serves as Co-Chair of the UK Contact Group. He is a Member of the European Parliament since 2014 and is a Vice President of the European People's Party (EPP). From 2003 till 2010, he served as Chairman of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) Group and, from 2010 until 2013, as Prime Minister of Niedersachsen. In 2012, he received an honorary doctorate from the University of Edinburgh.

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