
Europe and the Indo-Pacific: comparing France, Germany and the Netherlands

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Theme

This paper provides an analysis of the Indo-Pacific concept in Europe. It compares the positions of France, Germany and the Netherlands, the three EU member states that have so far published documents on the topic.

Summary

The Indo-Pacific as a geo-economic and geostrategic concept has at least partially replaced the Asia-Pacific area, with Japan, Australia, the US and India each adopting and promoting their own respective vision over the past decade. Before 2020, in the EU only France had developed an Indo-Pacific strategy, based mainly on the fact that it sees itself as a resident power in the region. Germany and the Netherlands followed in September and November 2020. Together, the three member states have initiated a debate at the EU level with the goal of adopting an EU position on the Indo-Pacific. Despite some notable differences in the three approaches, they agree on the region's economic and strategic importance for Europe and they share fundamental interests and objectives. A major challenge for their national strategies, as well as a possible future EU positioning on the Indo-Pacific, will be how to address China and its role within this new framework. The comprehensiveness especially of the German 'Policy guidelines for the Indo-Pacific' raises the (not at all new) question of what objectives should be given priority. And the biggest challenge will be to allocate the necessary financial and human resources to fulfil the expectations that have been created among partners in the Indo-Pacific region.

Analysis

(1) Background and context

Over the last decade, Japan, Australia, the US and India have each adopted the concept of the Indo-Pacific region as a new geographic and strategic frame of reference, replacing –at least in part– the previously dominant Asia-Pacific construct. The individual conceptions of the Indo-Pacific vary considerably between countries with respect to geographical definition, policy priorities (security versus connectivity), specific initiatives and the emphasis on multi-, mini- or bilateral approaches, as well as on the question of excluding versus including China. However, all share the perception that the Indian and Pacific oceans constitute a single contiguous and integrated space. There are also other common denominators such as the commitment to a rules-based international and regional order and international norms such as the Freedom of Navigation. The rise of China and the question of how to respond to this challenge plays a central role in all

versions of the concept, even though the answers –if there are any– are far from identical.

ASEAN responded relatively late with its own ‘Outlook on the Indo-Pacific’ in June 2019, basically repeating and underlining long-held core principles of this group of 10 South-East Asian states and upholding ASEAN centrality.

(2) Where do we stand in the EU/Europe?

Within the EU, France published Indo-Pacific strategy papers in 2018 and 2019, and Germany and the Netherlands followed in September and November 2020 respectively. These three countries have also been working together to promote an Indo-Pacific concept or vision to be adopted by the EU.

France was the first EU member state to develop its own Indo-Pacific strategy. The French President Emmanuel Macron outlined his country’s position in a speech at the Garden Island naval base in Australia in May 2018, speaking about a new Indo-Pacific France-India-Australia axis. Official documents were published by the French Ministry of Defence (in 2018, updated in May 2019, and another later in 2019) and by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (June 2019).

The German ‘Policy Guidelines for the Indo-Pacific’, published first in German in September 2020 and shortly afterwards in English, was approved by the German cabinet, thus representing a whole-of-government approach. A relatively short Dutch ‘non-paper’¹ followed in November 2020, of which no official English translation has so far been published. In May 2019 the government of the Netherlands also published a new China strategy. Both the German and Dutch ‘guidelines’ on the Indo-Pacific make it clear from the beginning that they are to be understood as contributions and building blocks to lead to an EU position on the Indo-Pacific.

To get the discussion on the Indo-Pacific at the EU level started, France, Germany and the Netherlands together wrote a ‘non-paper’ (which has so far remained unpublished) in the autumn of 2020. Their initiative found support from some other member states in the EU, among them Portugal, Poland, Italy and Sweden. It was first discussed on 8 December 2020 at the meeting of the Asia-Oceania Working Party (COASI). It is expected that the debates on an EU position on the Indo-Pacific will continue in 2021. Four areas in particular have been mentioned for the EU to focus on in this context: trade; connectivity; maritime security; and global issues such as climate change and biodiversity. While trade is a given, since free-trade agreements can only be negotiated by the EU, for connectivity with Asia, maritime security and climate change the EU has broad frameworks in place that could be modified to accommodate a shift to the Indo-Pacific.

¹ ‘Indo-Pacific: guidelines for strengthening Dutch and EU cooperation with partners in Asia’, an unofficial translation provided by the Clingendael Institute.

(3) Comparing the French, German and Dutch documents

The respective starting points for France, on the one hand, and Germany and the Netherlands, on the other, for their positioning on the Indo-Pacific question are quite different. France is the only country that still has territories in the region, spanning the eastern coast of Africa (Mayotte, Scattered Island and La Réunion) to the French Southern and Antarctic territories and to the South Pacific (Vanuatu, New Caledonia, Wallis & Futuna and French Polynesia) all the way to the Clipperton islands off the coast of Central America. French citizens (1.6 million), its military presence (including 7,000 military personnel) and the second-biggest Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) in the world, more of 90% of which are located in the Indo-Pacific, make France a 'resident power' in the area in its own understanding. Given the geographical location of these overseas assets, the Indo-Pacific covers French interests more adequately than Asia-Pacific and also accounts for the –very broad– French geographical definition of the Indo-Pacific.

In absence of such a 'natural' role in the region, Germany and the Netherlands both argue mainly with their interests as big trading nations, depending on open sea lanes, and their support for maintaining a rules-based order. The Indo-Pacific is seen here as the new political and economic centre of gravity in the world, where the major strategic competition between the US and China is playing out and the future of the international order is likely to be decided. The COVID-19 pandemic is presented as an accelerator of the strategic trends. In geographical terms, both documents are less clear about what is included in the Indo-Pacific space than the French ones.

The German paper acknowledges that there are different geographic understandings of the region:

'The Indo-Pacific region is not clearly delineated in geographical terms and is defined variously by different actors. The Federal Government considers the Indo-Pacific to be the entire region characterised by the Indian Ocean and the Pacific. Strategic projections compete with each other and global value chains are intertwined here.'

For the Netherlands, the Indo-Pacific covers the space between Pakistan and the Pacific islands:

'For the Netherlands, the region encompasses in any event the countries around the Indian and Pacific Oceans, including the South China and East China Seas. The shipping routes through the Indian and Pacific Oceans that link Europe with Asia and Oceania are central to the concept. The region extends from Pakistan to the islands of the Pacific.'²

All three countries have an inclusive approach to the Indo-Pacific. In contrast to the US Indo-Pacific strategy, this also applies to China. In this respect, the European approach is close to the ASEAN 'Outlook on the Indo-Pacific', published in June 2019. The fact that ASEAN had after some hesitation adopted its own position on the Indo-Pacific might

² Unofficial English translation of the Dutch 'non-paper' on the Indo-Pacific, p.2.

have made it easier for Germany and the Netherlands to overcome their own reservations on using the term Indo-Pacific.

It is remarkable that the US is hardly mentioned in any of the European papers since the focus is clearly on partners in a more narrowly defined Indo-Pacific space, such as South Korea, Japan, Australia, New Zealand, India and ASEAN.

(4) Structuring the approach to the Indo-Pacific in comparison

(4.1) France

The Indo-Pacific strategy document of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, with the subtitle 'For an inclusive Indo-Pacific', covers in detail France's role as a player in the region. It starts by describing the Indo-Pacific as being at the heart of global challenges characterised by tensions and crises, China's new assertiveness and the rise of religious extremism, but also by demographic and urban transitions and a growing middle class. France's ambition is to strengthen its 'presence and activities in the region in the political, strategic, economic and environmental spheres...' (p. 16). This is to be accomplished by: (a) continuing to strengthen and balance the strategic partnership with China; (b) developing and deepening other partnerships in the region (with Australia, India, Indonesia, Japan, New Zealand, Singapore and South Korea); (c) working to strengthen the EU's positioning in the region; (d) playing a greater role in regional organisations such as ADMM+, IORA and ReCAAP; and (e) contributing to a comprehensive response to Islamist terrorism in the region. The last part of the paper presents recommendations, listing seven areas of action for French diplomacy with the following four priorities (p. 18): (a) the safety of French citizens; (b) French independence combined with EU ambition; (c) transnational solidarity via the promotion of common goods; and (d) France's influence and attractiveness. The document mentions three times that France aspires to act as a mediating power in the region. This role had already been raised by Emmanuel Macron in his Garden Island speech. However, it does not explain how France intends to play this particular role (while also presenting itself as a resident power in the Indo-Pacific).

The two papers published by the French Ministry of Defence understandably focus more narrowly on security issues and France's military presence and activities in the Indo-Pacific. It is noteworthy, however, that the nexus between security and the environment is given special attention in this context.

(4.2) Germany

The German 'Guidelines' are structured along eight interests concerning the Indo-Pacific (peace and security, diversifying and deepening relations, neither unipolar nor bipolar, open shipping routes, open markets and free trade, digital transformation and connectivity, protecting our planet, and access to fact-based information), followed by seven principles (European action, multilateralism, the rules-based order, United Nations Development Goals, human rights, inclusivity and partnership among equals). Then it lists a plethora of initiatives under seven policy fields that fall partly in the interests category, partly in the principles category and in one case (bringing people together) in neither of the categories. The seven policy fields are presented in more detail in the

second and main part of the 'Guidelines'. They are: (a) strengthening multilateralism; (b) tackling climate change and protecting the environment; (c) strengthening peace, security and stability; (d) promoting human rights and the rule of law; (e) strengthening rules-based, fair and sustainable free trade; (f) rules-based networking and the digital transformation of regions and markets; and (g) bringing people together through culture, education and science. The third and final part of the 'Guidelines' provides a visual overview of Germany's already existing network in the Indo-Pacific. From the maps presented it can be concluded that the German government shares the narrower Dutch geographical definition of the Indo-Pacific (p. 64 ff.)

(4.3) The Netherlands

The short Dutch 'non-paper' starts by raising six key issues, summarising the dynamic and growing importance of the Indo-Pacific and the need to step up the Dutch and EU role and to strengthen partnerships in the region, with a focus on 'the international legal order, democracy and human rights, sustainable trade, security and stability, safe passage and maritime security, climate change, global healthcare and poverty reduction'. The Netherlands and the EU could help to broaden the strategic options for countries in the region and not become a pawn to great-power rivalry. The EU should neither over- nor underestimate its own role, especially as an economic heavyweight. COVID-19 is seen as an accelerator of geopolitical trends, but also as a driver of more international cooperation (p. 1) The chapters in the main text address the issues such as the development of a European vision of the Indo-Pacific, in reference to EU policy documents already in place as well as to the EU's strong economic links and geopolitical interests in the region. Next is a chapter on the elements of a European vision, namely peace and security, working with partners in the region to foster sustainable trade, effective multilateralism and the international legal order, sustainable connectivity and global challenges (climate and SDGs). A list of recommendations for the EU is included for each of these elements. The final chapter on 'The Netherlands and the Indo-Pacific' covers the contributions the Netherlands is willing to make in favour of these different elements, either nationally or through the EU or in other formats.

While the three countries' documents on the Indo-Pacific vary significantly in terms of status, government institutions involved, length/detail and structure, and France's starting point as a 'resident power' setting it apart from Germany and the Netherlands, there is a much agreement when it comes to the assessment of the major trends in the Indo-Pacific and its importance for Europe as well as the core objectives to be achieved identified by each of the three countries.³ They share the goals of strengthening the EU's role and profile in the region (as well as their own, of course) and of preventing military conflict there. All agree that a unipolar or bipolar regional order is definitely not in the European interest and that everything should be done to preserve a rules-based order, where countries do not have to take sides. They all want to strengthen partnerships with countries in the region beyond (but not excluding) China. ASEAN is attributed a central

³ For a detailed comparison between the French and German approaches see Felix Heiduk & Nedim Sulejmanović (2021), 'Will the EU take view of the Indo-Pacific? Comparing France's and Germany's approaches', Research Division Asia, Working Paper nr 01, SWP, January, https://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/arbeitspapiere/WP_EU_Indopacific_Heiduk_Sulejmanovic.pdf.

role as an EU partner in the region and contributions to ASEAN-centred and other regional organisations are to be increased. Contributing more to security and stability in the region is seen in the context of safeguarding the economic interests of the three countries and of the EU in general. These convergences should provide a common basis for discussions at the EU level.

(5) National initiatives in comparison

To list all the initiatives mentioned in the documents is beyond the scope of this paper. The three countries elaborate on what should be done by the EU and what they are prepared to do themselves, either nationally or in coalitions within the EU or in other contexts such as the UN and its organisations, the G7, the G20 and the 'alliance for multilateralism'. Many of the projects and initiatives are either already on the way or have already been recently accomplished, such as upgrading EU-ASEAN relations to a strategic partnership (the agreement was signed on 1 December 2020). Most commitments made at the respective national levels are about increasing or intensifying dialogue and cooperation with individual countries and ASEAN and with ASEAN-centred and other organisations in the Indo-Pacific. France (in 2006), the EU (in 2012) and Germany (in 2019) already acceded to the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, while the Netherlands plans to do so. The Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) is seen by all three as a venue to strengthen dialogue and cooperation with the Indo-Pacific.

Germany and the Netherlands, but not France, mention intensifying security cooperation through NATO's 'partnerships across the globe' with countries in the region (Australia, New Zealand, Japan and South Korea).

So far, France is the only country that has created a new ambassadorial position for the Indo-Pacific, appointing its then ambassador to Australia, Christophe Penot, in October 2020. This underlines the importance attributed to the region by French foreign policy. It is expected that France will publish a more comprehensive strategy paper on the Indo-Pacific over the course of 2021.

One of the few really new projects mentioned in the German 'Guidelines' is the establishment of a regional information centre in Singapore, which is supposed to counter the spread of disinformation (p. 10 & 17). The centre's mandate –countering disinformation in the Indo-Pacific in general or disinformation on Germany and the EU– is not clear from the information available so far. Another new development, following not long after the publication of the 'Guidelines', was the announcement by the German Defence Minister at virtual meetings with her counterparts in Singapore, Australia and Japan that the country planned to dispatch a frigate to the region in 2021.

Conclusion

Challenges ahead

The political will of the three governments of France, Germany and the Netherlands to work with the support of other EU member states towards an EU positioning on the Indo-Pacific region because of its growing economic and strategic importance is reflected in

all the documents issued so far. What kind of document will be adopted in the end by the EU, however, is far from clear.

One challenge for any positioning on the Indo-Pacific remains the reaction of China. Despite the fact that all three governments have made very clear that they pursue an inclusive approach to the region that also involves China as an important partner on issues such as climate change and nuclear non-proliferation, it will be difficult to convince Beijing that the Indo-Pacific concept is not –at least in part– directed against China. The three dimensions of the EU's China policy as outlined in the Strategic Outlook paper – China as a partner, a competitor and a systemic rival– are also clearly visible in the Indo-Pacific documents, and they will be difficult to balance.

How to ensure coordination and cooperation with the UK in the region will also have to be considered. According to press reports, the UK plans to formulate and roll out its own Indo-Pacific strategy in 2021, clarifying the post-Brexit role it has defined as 'Global Britain' and turning a greater degree of attention towards the Indo-Pacific. It has also been pushing for a D-10, which would add three regional (democratic) countries to the G7: South Korea, Australia and India. Whether this can then lead to a coordinated approach of the UK, EU member states and the EU in the Indo-Pacific remains to be seen.

The comprehensiveness of especially the German 'Guidelines' raises a long-standing issue in the EU: how to prioritise objectives and goals if hard choices have to be made. The biggest challenge for any vision or strategy vis-à-vis the Indo-Pacific, however, will be to bring it to life. This will require not only sustained political will but also considerable financial, material and human resources to follow up on the commitments made. Expectations have been raised among the partners in the region and the EU cannot afford to underperform.