


Future-proofing EU security and defence policies in the Indo-Pacific: doubling down with friends

Dylan Macchiarini Crosson | Researcher Foreign Policy Unit, CEPS |
@dylanmcrosson 

Stefania Benaglia | Head of EU Foreign Policy Unit, CEPS | @stebenaglia 

Linus Vermeulen | Project Assistant, CEPS.

Theme

Based on an analysis of the implications of Russia's war in Ukraine, this policy brief presents recommendations for a networked security defence cooperation between the EU, NATO and their Indo-Pacific partners –specifically Japan–.

Summary

[Russia's war against Ukraine](#) has led policymakers to re-prioritise Europe's security architecture and the EU's neighbourhood, including the positive re-assessing of NATO's role as *the* reliable security provider. However, Russia's full-scale war on Ukraine reinforces the imperative for the EU's strategic prioritisation of the Indo-Pacific once again. With the transatlantic and Indo-Pacific spheres intrinsically intertwined, but Europe overstretched in its capacity to project its values, interests and power, the time has come for it to assess how it should adjust its approach to Indo-Pacific security. How can the EU effectively strike a balance in security and defence cooperation with partners to uphold key principles of international law and order without endorsing the idea that 'might makes right' in the Indo-Pacific?

This policy brief recommends that the EU adopt a networked approach to security and defence cooperation with Indo-Pacific partners and mini-lateral regional formats. Because of the broad alignment between the EU, the US, NATO and Japan, this networked cooperation should be essayed through enhanced cooperation with Japan. Specifically, the EU should establish 'Transatlantic+' (EU and NATO) dialogue formats with key Indo-Pacific partners –[beginning with Japan](#)– to facilitate triangular information and knowledge exchanges, the sharing of best practices and policy coordination.

Analysis

The EU's attention to the Indo-Pacific region had been steadily on the rise over the past decade before the war in Ukraine and [conflict in Gaza](#) re-calibrated its focus back to its own neighbourhood.

If anything, however, Russia's full-scale war on Ukraine reinforces the imperative for the Indo-Pacific region's strategic prioritisation. An Indo-Pacific country, Russia boasts a significant 'no limits friendship' foreign policy cooperation with the People's Republic of China (PRC). That there is an inherent link between transatlantic and Indo-Pacific security may be self-evident, [particularly as regards Taiwan](#) (a potential large-scale conflict) and [the South China Sea](#) (where marine border delimitation disputes reign supreme), but also for [lasting peace on the Korean Peninsula](#) (a 70-year-old frozen conflict on the nuclear brink). Regardless, it is important to spell out.

While the Russian invasion of Ukraine is ongoing and its long-term consequences remain to be fully seen, large-scale conflict in Europe already carries deep implications for the state of security in the Indo-Pacific region. Beyond the analysis of tactical mistakes and successes on display in Ukraine, which Indo-Pacific actors are surely keenly monitoring, the consequences of Russia's attempts to re-define international norms and the European security order are systemic and will significantly influence how the international order is shaped in the coming years.

One view is that the war in Ukraine is leading global powers to firm up their foreign policy positions. The US and China have re-asserted their view that they are in a [significant competition of values and interests](#) with each other. They also fundamentally disagree on how to interpret and comply with international law.

In this competition, perceptions matter more than ever for security, specifically in the Indo-Pacific too. How the war in Ukraine plays out might reinforce China's interpretation that the US is pursuing an expansionist agenda and further fuel challenges to US global leadership. Chinese attempts to legitimise the application of [the principle of indivisibility of security](#) because of its claims over Taiwan, one that Russia is parroting with respect to Ukraine, is one way of disputing the post-World War II international order that the US played a fundamental role in structuring.

Or, depending on the outcome, the war may sow doubts about the political and human costs of solidifying its revisionist view of the international order by conducting operations to impose Beijing's control over Taiwan and disputed maritime territories in the South China Sea.

The PRC's [current calculus](#) is that sustained political support for Russia, a comrade-in-arms against perceived US imperialism exemplified by what it believes is an overreaching sanctions regime, as well as the potential economic and political benefits of Russia as a 'junior' partner, helps China undermine the US's claims of global leadership in the short- and medium-term and therefore is worth the added concern this creates more broadly for the regional Indo-Pacific security order.

Due to these tensions in their bilateral relations, the US (and China to a lesser extent) is in the process of future-proofing its interests by friend-shoring supply chains and bolstering security and defence partnerships with like-minded countries, both in (East and South-East Asian countries) and out (transatlantic NATO allies) of the Indo-Pacific.

This runs in parallel with a [shift in thinking](#) in Washington DC in favour of shedding absolute strategic ambiguity on Taiwan in favour of growing military support to the latter's efforts to maintain its territorial integrity and an enhanced military presence in the South China Sea. The US's intent is conservative in nature, seeking to not upset the East Asian regional security order it believes is both a recipe for stability in the present as well as worth preserving in the future. It is also grounded in values: the promotion of democratic governance models and the defence of standing international law.

Strategic trade-offs at play in the Indo-Pacific

Overall, there is a sense that the distance between the foreign policy orientations of China and Russia (as well as North Korea) on the one hand and the US and its allies (Europeans, Japan, Australia, New Zealand and South Korea) on the other is widening.

Yet the picture is far more nuanced, and several strategic dilemmas are at play. Indeed, the range of foreign policy positions emerging from the war in Ukraine shows that the global community is all but settling into a two-bloc mentality.

Many countries continue to pursue the (perhaps futile) endeavour of adopting a balanced position in increasing Sino-American rivalry or, rather, hedging against the potential consequences thereof. 'Swing' states such as Brazil, India, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, South Africa and Turkey, and other South-East Asian countries with a keen interest in developments in the Indo-Pacific have treaded carefully to safeguard their intertwined economic interests in the region, prevent insecurity from spiralling beyond control and ensure the viability of their own political models over time.

Many countries in this motley grouping are also uncomfortable with policies that make it harder to bridge this widening gap due to a recognised need to cooperate on global challenges such as climate change and public health (a legacy of [the COVID-19 pandemic](#)).

The members of the [Association of South-East Asian Nations \(ASEAN\)](#) are divided on the war in Ukraine too, with Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam boasting historical political, security and/or defence ties with Russia (to differing degrees). These countries are also mistrustful of US ambitions in the Indo-Pacific and of 'Western' values and wary of undermining ties with China or challenging its regional hegemony. Malaysia, Brunei, Indonesia and Thailand have adopted ASEAN's traditional position of non-alignment and non-interference, with only the Philippines and Singapore going beyond the proverbial tipping their hats to express outright support for Ukraine's defence against Russia's invasion.

As most ASEAN countries tread a delicate line between economic dependency and security concerns, deepened security alignment and cooperation between the US and Japan, South Korea, Australia and the Philippines is [met with suspicion](#) by some. Marginalising the concerns of regional partners in this regard by unduly scaling up the Western military presence in the region risks not only escalating tensions with China but putting off the West's partners as well, not least because a heavy-handed response would play right into China and Russia's anti-West narrative. In turn, this would

undermine the West's shared commitment to promoting a rules-based multilateral order in the region.

Some experts have labelled the US's approach as confrontational due to its freedom-of-navigation operations in the South China Sea and Taiwan Strait –occurring in parallel to China's alarming military flight patterns in Taiwan's Air Defence Identification Zone–. US operations, however, should also be viewed in the context of security guarantees that it provides to Japan, South Korea, Australia and the Philippines; guarantees those countries have gladly taken the US up on and are unlikely to renounce. The US's engagement is also viewed positively by Asia's trading partners, including the EU, as it aims to safeguard the viability and security of sea lines of communication.

On the other hand, with the US more forcefully turning its attention towards the Indo-Pacific, the EU should also occupy the political space to further develop its common security and defence policies. By taking on a greater responsibility for European security (a big 'if'), the EU and its member states should focus on enhancing its political engagement with Indo-Pacific affairs instead, and find ways of fostering EU-US convergence in their views towards the region. Moving forward, reluctance to do so may strain transatlantic relations and leave NATO fractured politically at a time when its role as a reliable security provider with war in Europe has been crucial.

Maintaining a transatlantic convergence of visions is especially pressing as budgetary fatigue in support of Ukraine's valiant defence against Russia and the unravelling of the Middle Eastern Peace Process have awakened the [proselytisers of realist prioritisation](#) in the US, who urge the West to accelerate a shift in focus even further towards the Indo-Pacific. It goes without saying that this acceleration would undermine NATO's spirit and the future viability of Europe's security architecture.

Biden and Xi's [recent pledge](#) to resume high-level military-to-military contacts is another argument in favour of enhancing transatlantic cooperation in the Indo-Pacific with partners, as it supports the idea that both parties are not free-wheeling their way to open armed conflict but are rather interested in managing their rivalry by establishing basic confidence-building exercises and re-opening communication channels. This also addresses the risk of alienation potentially felt by China.

Framing the outcome of war in Ukraine as a bellwether for future developments in international relations, policymakers in Europe –and partners such as Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand– have begun to re-assess their approach to the Indo-Pacific.

As it stands, [Europeans can barely project hard power in the Indo-Pacific region](#), not least due to their meagre security arrangements with partners *in situ*, and instead depend on cooperation with partners in the Indo-Pacific to amplify their values and interests.

And there is political alignment on the idea that enhancing partnerships with actors in the region is necessary. The transatlantic community has jointly recognised the strategic imperative of strengthening engagement to uphold international law, work towards the peaceful resolution of disputes, and protect human rights as well as ensure that their

reciprocal and shared security and economic interests in the Indo-Pacific are safeguarded.

The key policy question for the EU, however, is still up for debate. Considering the strategic imperative of maintaining engagement in the Indo-Pacific considering Russia's aggression in Ukraine, how can the EU effectively strike a balance in security and defence cooperation with partners to uphold key principles of international law and order without endorsing the idea that 'might makes right'?

European strategies towards the Indo-Pacific

The details on how to do so, however, remain fuzzy in light the ongoing battle of narratives, the challenges the West faces in engaging China on these matters, and tensions galore in the Indo-Pacific arena as spelled out above.

The 2021 [Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific](#) marked the first recognition by EU policymakers of the region's relevance at the strategic level and set out core tenets for stronger multilateral cooperation and a level economic playing field in the Indo-Pacific across seven priority areas, including security. In it, the EU focuses primarily on strengthening cooperation on low-hanging fruit such as 'maritime security, malicious cyber activities, disinformation, as well as from emerging and disruptive technologies, countering and improving resilience to terrorism, violent extremism and hybrid threats, countering organised crime and illicit trafficking'.

The EU's [even-keeled approach](#) has placed it in pole position to cooperate with Indo-Pacific partners on a more similar footing, as they face similar dilemmas, while structuring their foreign and security policies due to economic interdependence with China. As such, Indo-Pacific countries have turned to engaging with the EU, considered a global economic power but not a traditional security provider, on matters of soft security.

However, the Indo-Pacific Strategy's approach is reminiscent of the EU's security and defence Zeitgeist before its Russian reckoning and was an ill-conceived and insufficient proxy for addressing China's outsized role on the regional chessboard. The EU's 2022 [Strategic Compass for Security and Defence](#), published in March 2022 after the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion, sets out a roadmap to strengthen its security and defence capabilities based on four baskets: (a) acting more quickly and nimbly in crisis management situations; (b) a more holistic and resilient approach to security at home; (c) investments in defence capabilities development; and (d) stronger partnerships.

Although the Strategic Compass is, in part, a response to calls by Indo-Pacific partners such as Japan and Australia to clarify and step up the EU's engagement in the region, the [focus lies on Russia and Europe's neighbourhood](#), placing it firmly in the category of [regional power with outsized global ambitions](#). In it, the EU once again underscored the need to deepen its security and defence partnerships in the Indo-Pacific region, but only makes a feeble attempt to retroactively imbue its Indo-Pacific Strategy and [2019 EU-China Strategic Outlook](#) with a sense of military Realpolitik, in part due to its own pressing

and permacrisis challenges closer to home (regardless, both probably warrant a significant update due to the changed context and the European Commission's recent 'de-risking'-centred approach).

Building on momentum generated by the collective West's relatively coherent response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine (at least in its immediate aftermath), NATO found transatlantic alignment and coherence regarding the Indo-Pacific in its [2022 Strategic Concept](#). The Strategy is mostly focused on NATO's three core tasks for the next decade and how they relate to the ongoing war (deterrence and defence, crisis prevention and management, and cooperative security).

With a [first-ever mention](#) of the importance of Indo-Pacific security for transatlantic security, the Strategic Concept flags the weaponisation of economic dependencies, increased Russian-Chinese cooperation, and developments in China's space, cyber and maritime warfare capacity as signs of China's increasingly assertive intentions to subvert the rules-based international order. In response, the Strategic Concept calls to ramp up investments in defence and security, and to enhance cooperation with likeminded partners in the Indo-Pacific.

While the EU's Strategic Compass and NATO's Strategic Concept already showed significant overlap in orientation (and timing and name), the largely symbolic [2023 Joint Declaration on EU-NATO Cooperation](#) confirms that this is no accident. The Joint Declaration underlines that the threat posed by the war in Ukraine and China's growing assertiveness provides common ground for closer, broader and deeper EU-NATO cooperation along the lines stipulated in the Compass and Concept. This includes the expansion of cooperation in areas such as hybrid and cyber threats, maritime issues, military mobility, defence capabilities, defence industry and research, exercises, counter terrorism and capacity-building, as well as expanding cooperation in newer areas such as resilience, critical infrastructures, emerging and disruptive technologies, space, climate change and foreign information manipulation.

These documents accompany enhanced strategic attention by EU member states/NATO allies towards the Indo-Pacific region. Germany ([2020](#)), the Netherlands ([2020](#)) and France ([2021](#)) all have high-level policy guidelines for the Indo-Pacific, which have been reflected in practice by 2+2 (Ministers of Foreign Affairs and Defence) high-level dialogue between Germany and France respectively with Japan (along with Italy) as well as their deep soft security engagement with the Indo-Pacific as the main backers of the 'Enhancing security in and with Asia' initiative.

Piloting networked EU-NATO security and defence cooperation with Japan

The EU's approach, though, has not yet led to any noticeable breakthroughs in security and defence cooperation with actors more firmly placed in the US hub-and-spokes system of security alliances in the Indo-Pacific including Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, the Philippines, Thailand, Australia and New Zealand. Transcending the traditional hub-and-spokes model of hard security guarantees by networking and coordinating the security and defence approaches of the EU and NATO to partnerships is therefore a welcome opportunity to add weight to Europe's stake in the region and ability to project

its voice, principles and interests. Stepping up this cooperation with Japan can prove to be a pilot project for even broader networked security and defence cooperation.

Japan's bilateral cooperation with the US ([evidenced by numerous joint military exercises](#)) is strong and was cemented by the substantial alignment between the [US's partnerships-centred approach](#) to the Indo-Pacific, the Kishida Government's pro-US stance and an alignment in their respective visions for a [Free and Open Indo-Pacific](#) premised on the international promotion of the rule of law, freedom of navigation and free trade; the pursuit of economic prosperity through improved people-to-people contacts and institutional connectivity; and a commitment to peace and stability through capacity building, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief.

The current Kishida government, [spurred by the Russian invasion of Ukraine](#), added meat to the FOIP vision with Japan's 2022 [National Security](#) and [National Defence](#) strategies, respectively. These strategies stipulate a doubling of the defence budget from 1% to 2% of gross domestic product (approximately, depending on how it is calculated), the acquisition of counter-strike capabilities, the strengthening of military cooperation with the US and further diversification of international cooperation.

Aware that Japan is an indispensable Indo-Pacific partner, [NATO-Japan relations](#) have progressed with an [Individually Tailored Partnership Programme](#) (ITPP) since July 2023 and Japan's [regular participation in NATO Summits](#) since Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The ITPP focuses on cooperation in the fields of arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation, cyber defence, emerging and disruptive technologies and defence innovation, space, maritime security, and climate change and emergency management and disaster relief, and resilience/civil preparedness. Furthermore, at the [2022 Leaders' meeting of NATO's Asia-Pacific Partners](#) (AP4), Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand condemned the Russian invasion of Ukraine and pledged to coordinate their cooperation with NATO in the Indo-Pacific.

Bilateral cooperation between Japan and the EU is also robust and growing. Designated by the EU during the [EU-Japan summit on 13 July 2023](#) as the EU's 'closest strategic partner in the Indo-Pacific region' building on the 2019 Strategic Partnership Agreement, the EU and Japan have regularly discussed security issues such as weapons of mass destruction, serious international crimes, terrorism (including its financing), chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear risks, illegal trade in small arms, corruption and organised crime, money laundering, illicit drugs, cybercrime and international law (including maritime affairs). The Summit itself produced the vague bilateral commitment to further deepen their cooperation on peace and security, prosperity and economic security, digitalisation, climate change, sustainable development and health security.

First steps for networked cooperation

Cooperation could be reinforced in the more traditional security and defence sphere to mirror the EU and Japan's respective upgrading of their own ambitions. The EU, then, must think of innovative ways to go beyond its low-hanging fruit approach to security and defence in the Indo-Pacific together with partners. If not, the result is preordained: the EU will take a plunge into Indo-Pacific irrelevance.

The EU must refocus on the strategically vital Indo-Pacific region but can only maximise the potential of its engagement if doing so in coordination with the experience and platform that NATO provides. Triangulating efforts with what NATO has also committed to is essential to better connect the dots with the US's approach as well as to share best practices from Europe's multilateral security architecture with Indo-Pacific countries. Furthermore, countries in the hub-and-spokes system view additional cooperation with NATO as increasing the costs of escalating tensions in the Indo-Pacific. Bringing European countries on board could provide a bulwark against US instincts to harden its position in the future as well as increase China's potential cost of escalating its assertive posturing in the region. As such, and building on the 74 (42 in 2016 and 32 in 2017) concrete actions that the EU and NATO have agreed to take forward together and the more recent Joint Declaration on EU-NATO Cooperation, the EU and NATO must outline how they will bring forward cooperation in the Indo-Pacific with their overlapping partners.

Several concrete actions should be considered for these joint actions. Building on the EU Strategic Compass' call to explore how to 'build pan Asian security arrangements', setting up 'Transatlantic+' (EU and NATO) dialogue formats with key Indo-Pacific partners as well as smaller cooperation formats. This should include triangular information and knowledge exchanges, sharing of best practices and policy coordination between the EU, NATO and Indo-Pacific partners such as Japan on areas such as hybrid and cyber threats, maritime issues, military mobility (including across seas), defence capabilities, defence industry and research, exercises, counter terrorism, capacity-building, resilience, critical infrastructures, emerging and disruptive technologies, space, climate change and foreign information manipulation. Building on the EU's vocation for preventive diplomacy, new topics should be added to this roster such as conflict prevention and conflict mitigation strategies and methods.

Furthermore, the EU, NATO and Indo-Pacific partners such as Japan should enhance joint messaging, crisis communications and strategic narratives on topics such as weapons of mass destruction, nuclear non-proliferation and conventional arms control. In the operational sphere, following the EU's first-ever live military exercise, the EU should work towards plugging into NATO military exercises conducted with Indo-Pacific partners in tri- or multi-lateral formats to enhance readiness and interoperability.

Our proposals on how to enhance EU-Japan defence technological and industrial cooperation must also be reviewed and updated considering recent EU developments, such as the Act in Support of Ammunition Production and the European defence industry reinforcement through common procurement regulation (as well as the future European Defence Investment Programme regulation) and triangulated with various NATO initiatives in this sphere and those of Indo-Pacific partners. Doing so might help overcome EU-US political wrangling in this sphere as well as the intra-European fragmentation of capabilities development, the prime example being the parallel development of two future combat air systems, with Japan involved in one of these. In adopting this issues-based approach and cooperating selectively with countries, the EU and NATO will prove that they have understood the concerns of Indo-Pacific partners regarding the over-institutionalisation of cooperation, while at the same time finding a

more effective way to network their cooperation and the initiatives of their respective organisations and member states.

Conclusions

As correctly noted, without US-Europe cooperation on Ukraine, around 70 years of political and economic investments in the transatlantic relationship would be lost. Looking ahead, US-Europe cooperation on matters of security and defence in the form of enhanced EU-NATO coordination on the Indo-Pacific is a sure way of future-proofing transatlantic ties for the long haul.

It is also the best defence against the authoritarian revisionist countries' push for a world in which might makes right. Already a hotbed of international politics and potentially its fulcrum moving forward, greater networking of US and European approaches in the Indo-Pacific is necessary, with a leading role taken on by the EU in coordinating and triangulating initiatives with key partners and mini-lateral formats for cooperation and dialogue.

Piloting this approach with Japan, a key partner for the transatlantic community, makes the most sense to ensure the sustainability of such an approach. Networked security and defence cooperation with Japan, necessarily in close coordination with NATO, should include setting up a first ever 'Transatlantic+' (NATO and EU) issue-based dialogue format. This model should be replicated with key Indo-Pacific partners to coordinate trilateral cooperation on the joint development of concepts, joint exercises, and joint defence technological and industrial cooperation.