

# European Security Cooperation with the Indo-Pacific

This examination of the evolving landscape of European security cooperation with Indo-Pacific partners includes a discussion of the key drivers of cooperation and the different types of relations between actors. Critical questions remain about the buy-in and benefit of these ambitions for all involved.

By Gorana Grgić

As European interest and involvement in the Indo-Pacific increases, inevitable and pressing questions arise concerning the value of these ambitions for both European and Indo-Pacific security. Even before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, various European countries have for the first time identified China as a security challenge and recognized the urgency of addressing global security threats such as climate change and cyber warfare, leading to a shift in foreign and security policies. Importantly, a number of strategic policy pronouncements across Europe, from national security strategies to defense reviews, pointed to partnerships with like-minded states in the Indo-Pacific as critical components in addressing these emerging security challenges and helping to shore up European security.

Different terms have been used to describe the cross-regional cooperation between the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific (see [CSS Strategic Trends 2022](#)). Reports and analyses frequently reference “inter-regional”, “cross-theater”, “inter-theater” and “Atlantic-Pacific” cooperation, and the idea that we are seeing the blurring of geopolitical boundaries into “one theater” or “single theater.” From a US foreign policy perspective, Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific cooperation can be seen as “bridging allies”, among other terms. In brief, these modes of cooperation include at least two state or



A concept model of the Global Combat Air Programme (GCAP) fighter jet on display at the DSEI Japan defense show in Tokyo, March 2023. *Kim Kyung-Hoon / Reuters*

intergovernmental entities from the two regions in any domain of statecraft – from diplomatic and economic, to military and intelligence. Another crucial factor to note is that the states under discussion are all part of US alliance and partner networks.

While it is imperative to comprehend the various forms of cross-regional cooperation, this analysis focuses on security cooperation. This encompasses a diverse range

of activities, though at its core it is aimed at fostering partnerships that align with and support partner states' strategic objectives. Under this broad umbrella, various programs and terms are employed at strategic, operational, and tactical levels to benefit either one's own country and/or that of the partner nation. This often includes efforts to bolster capacity, provide direct assistance or training to security forces, and support more robust defense

institutions. Security cooperation efforts span from high-profile activities like joint training exercises and arms trade deals, to less conspicuous efforts like diplomatic talks, workshops, personnel exchanges, professional military education, and initiatives for achieving interoperability.

### Drivers of cross-regional cooperation

There are three different types of drivers that have spurred on the recent wave of cross-regional security cooperation. Firstly, both European and Indo-Pacific states have increasingly recognized the value of deeper partnerships with other regions around the globe, leading to a significant shift in the strategic priorities of all parties in the last five or six years. Secondly, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, and its global ramifications, has created a new sense of urgency among many states to protect the rules-based international order through increased diplomatic, economic and defense cooperation as well as inter-governmental organizations. Finally, the foreign policy of the Biden administration has emphasized building inter-allied cooperation, strengthening partnerships between trusted actors over relying on strictly geographical alliances.

Since at least 2018, various European states and intergovernmental organizations have articulated specific strategies for security cooperation with the Indo-Pacific region, indicating a discernible shift in geopolitics towards greater coordination. This strategic reorientation has involved key players such as France, Germany, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Italy, the EU, and NATO, which all developed unique approaches to engagement suited to their particular needs and priorities. For instance, France and UK maintain a perma-

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nent military presence in the Indo-Pacific, while after a long time Germany and the Netherlands first deployed military vessels to the region in 2021 and subsequently participated in military exercises with their regional partners. Others yet, such as Italy, have been criticized for having Indo-Pacific ambitions unmatched by resources. Yet, common to all was a recognition of the

region's increasing significance in global affairs and the necessity of participating in and shaping security arrangements that extend beyond traditional geographical boundaries. Moreover, these approaches all served to underscore that cooperative measures such as coordinated maritime presence and capability-building exercises can be instrumental in addressing shared challenges and opportunities in the Indo-Pacific region. This groundwork laid by European entities is especially pertinent in understanding the broader geopolitical context surrounding Russia's ongoing aggression in Ukraine.

Secondly, cross-regional cooperation was boosted in the immediate aftermath of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Some of the most powerful states in the Indo-Pacific, such as Australia, Japan, and South Korea rallied behind the Ukrainian government by providing military, financial, and humanitarian aid, and imposing economic sanctions on Russia. Moreover, states across the region joined the overwhelming majority of European states to forge coalitions to condemn Russia's aggression in global forums such as the United Nations General Assembly. Simultaneously, European and Indo-Pacific partners entered formal agreements on arms and materiel procurement to address and overcome the shortcomings in the European defense industrial base.

Thirdly, the Biden administration is re-prioritizing alliances as one of the key tools of US foreign policy and a chief source of geostrategic advantage. The incumbent US president has pursued mending allied relationships that were strained during his predecessor's tenure. More importantly, his administration has put forward the idea of inter-allied cooperation that transcends geographical boundaries. The 2022 National Security Strategy explicitly states: "We have also reinvigorated America's unmatched network of alliances and partnerships (...) We are doing more to connect our partners and strategies across regions (...) And we are forging creative new ways to work in common cause with partners around issues of shared interest." The most recent remarks by the key policy principals, such as those by the National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan in an address to the Council on Foreign Relations in early 2024 reaffirm this: "We've also worked to connect our European and Indo-Pacific alliances (...)

### Further reading

Gabriele Abbondanza / Thomas Wilkins, "Europe in the Indo-Pacific: Economic, security, and normative engagement," *International Political Science Review*, 2023.

Gorana Grgić, "What Type of Actor? The EU's Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific," *The EU in a Globalized World*, Routledge, 2023.

Luis Simón, "Bridging US-Led Alliances in the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific," CSIS Briefs, 2022.

Luis Simón / Zack Cooper, "Rethinking Tradeoffs Between Europe and the Indo-Pacific," *War on the Rocks*, May 9, 2023.

United States Institute of Peace, "Report of the Expert Study Group on NATO and Indo-Pacific Partners," February 2024.

Japanese Prime Minister [Fumio Kishida] has been particularly articulate in explaining that what happens in Ukraine matters in the Indo-Pacific, and President [of South Korea] Yoon [Suk Yeol] has reinforced that."

### Modes of cross-regional cooperation

As European and Indo-Pacific partnerships grow, it is important to understand exactly *how* these connections are developing. So far, security cooperation has tended to fall within one of three categories, with the key distinguishing feature being the number of parties involved in such exchanges: bilateral, minilateral, and multilateral cooperation.

The strengthening of bilateral ties between the two regions is perhaps most evident through examining the rate and volume of arms transfers. In 2023, European NATO states saw a substantial 65 per cent increase in overall arms imports amid heightened concerns about Russian threats. Similarly, arms imports across the Indo-Pacific region also increased, with India, Australia, Japan, and South Korea experiencing the highest growth. This is reflected cross-regionally. For instance, a 2022 arms deal providing Poland with 13.7 billion USD of rocket artillery systems and fighter jets represented the largest-ever arms sale in South Korean history. Australia also recently sealed its biggest defense export deal. In March 2024 German *Bundestag* greenlit the purchase of over 660 million USD worth of Boxer Heavy Weapon Carrier vehicles to be manufactured by Rheinmetall in Australia. Meanwhile, as early as 2021,

around 50 per cent of France’s arms exports were to India and around 47 per cent of India’s arms imports were from France. By 2023, France had become the second largest arms exporter in the world.

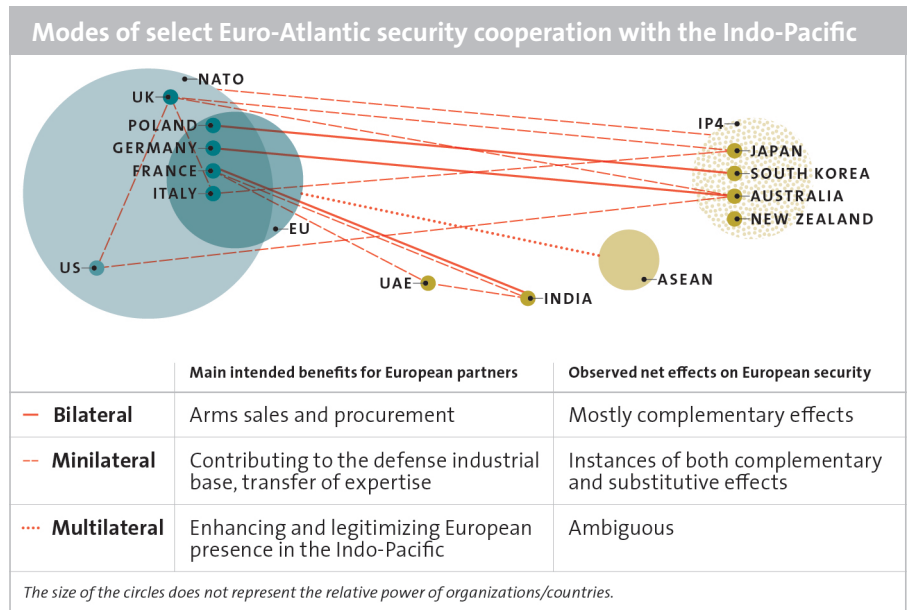
Beyond arms transfers, there has also been a notable deepening of some cross-regional bilateral relations. For instance, this was observed in the case of strengthening ties between Lithuania and Taiwan, which have been forged with a clear security signaling element vis-à-vis China, and Netherlands and South Korea, which have announced they would establish a “chip alliance.”

Minilateral modes of cooperation are the ones which have seen the most innovation. The international system is growing increasingly competitive and unstable, and many states consider stronger multilateral governance a necessity to manage this newfound reality. Paradoxically, the institutional mechanisms designed to address the challenges of global security are currently, at best, contested and, in many instances, dysfunctional. This is evident in the abundance of impasses and unsuccessful resolutions at the United Nations Security

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Council, particularly in addressing the most acute crises and conflicts such as those in Ukraine and Gaza. Although minilaterals, characterized by groups of up to a half a dozen states collaborating on specific issues in a loosely institutionalized format, are not novel, they have undergone a resurgence over the good part of the past decade. Significantly, this resurgence has coincided with a period during which multilateralism has demonstrated shortcomings in delivering effective solutions.

The minilateral that garnered the most attention is the trilateral security agreement between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States (AUKUS) announced in 2021. Most notably, the agreement promises to deliver nuclear-powered submarines to Australia, prompting intense scrutiny from supporters and detractors alike. AUKUS also seeks to promote greater cooperation on quantum computing, AI, cyber capabilities, and undersea technologies between the three countries. Further-



more, in 2023, Italy, Japan, and the United Kingdom signed a treaty to develop a sixth-generation stealth fighter under the Global Combat Air Program. Another novel cross-regional minilateral is between France, India, and the United Arab Emirates, which was formally announced in early 2023. The three countries’ leaders stated their joint aim to have a strong security component of cooperation with the focus on defense, technology, and energy. Furthermore, the Partners in the Blue Pacific (PBP), while US-led and touted as primarily developmental and diplomatic in nature, also displays an element of cross-regional cooperation in cybersecurity. The UK is one of its five original members and Germany is a partner state.

Another minilateral that has been gaining a lot of traction could be best described as an upgrade of the existing relationships NATO had with its Indo-Pacific partners into a more coherent whole. The Indo-Pacific Four (IP4), comprising Australia, Japan, South Korea, and New Zealand, have strengthened their individual ties with NATO. More importantly, they are collectively engaging in discussions on Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific security matters, focusing on collaborative areas of enhanced value, particularly in cybersecurity and emerging technologies. IP4 leaders have participated in NATO summits in Madrid (2022) and Vilnius (2023), indicating an expanding trajectory of NATO’s reach into

the Indo-Pacific. The trend towards minilateralism more generally highlights an evolving alliance structure and mutual recognition of shared strategic imperatives in addressing contemporary security challenges.

Multilateral formats have seen some elements of cross-regional cooperation related to security, though much less so than through bilateral and minilateral initiatives. For instance, the EU’s relations with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) have strengthened over the past decade and the implementation plan of the existing strategic partnership is explicit about the need to deepen security cooperation on a comprehensive list of areas – from capacity-building and maritime security initiatives to cybersecurity. The EU’s “Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific” from 2021 underscores the centrality of ASEAN. Yet, there is also a considerable division between the EU and ASEAN emerging from their different stances towards Russia’s continuing aggression against Ukraine, on top of the enduring complexities inherent in the EU’s foreign policy approach as it is primarily an economic and normative power, rather than a security actor.

These instances of cross-regional cooperation have diverse effects on European security, many of which are still unclear, but that seem to range from complementary to substitutive. Bilateral cooperation, particularly in arms procurement, has thus far proven

mostly complementary. The European defense industrial base has been unable to respond to the increased demand for materiel, and augmenting existing stores through arms imports seems to be enhancing collective defense capabilities. Meanwhile, multilateral collaborations showcase a mix of complementary and substitutive impacts. For example, the UK-Italy-Japan partnership displays complementary effects as it offers the promise of boosting defense production and capabilities. On the other hand, AUKUS has fomented competition between NATO allies, resulting in more substitutive dynamics in the first instance. On the multilateral front, initiatives directed at primarily projecting stability and crisis management in the Indo-Pacific have resulted in ambiguous effects for European security, as observed in the EU-ASEAN collaboration. The intricate interplay of these cooperative efforts underscores the nuanced and varied nature of their impact on European security.

## Outlook

Reflecting on the recent drivers of cross-regional cooperation, there are reasons to be both optimistic as well as cautious about the prospects of its strengthening and deepening. In the examination of long-term strategies of the European states and intergovernmental organizations, the outreach to the Indo-Pacific began in some cases long before the full-scale war in Ukraine. On the other hand, the reality of that war has reduced the policymaking

bandwidth for many countries and put a strain on the resources needed to be more ambitious outside the Euro-Atlantic realm. There is no doubt the United States will continue to prioritize security challenges posed by China, but different administrations might not be as supportive of legacy alliance networks and fostering cooperation across the two theaters.

Some critical questions remain. Firstly, it is still unclear how much institutionalization is needed to maximize the efficiency and effectiveness of existing efforts. Perhaps the goal should be to institutionalize these partnerships, though maintaining as much flexibility as possible may prove more desirable to regional partners. Secondly, cross-regional cooperation efforts must contend with an already-dense security architecture in the Euro-Atlantic. How in particular the novel bilateral and multilateral initiatives can most effectively integrate themselves into these networks remains to be seen. Thirdly, and relatedly, some of these initiatives are by definition exclusionary, not just of rivals and competitors, but also other allies and potential partners. Would opening such platforms up be a wise and desired path forward? Fourthly, systematic study of the role that private sector actors are playing, as well as the impact of non-governmental and civil society sectors across the two regions, will be increasingly necessary. For example, in some cases, private funding needs to be mobilized and supported by the state as

demonstrated in the recent contentions over South Korea's syndicated loan to assist Poland in its arms acquisition. Lastly, the long-term commitment of the United States to its allies remains in question, looming large over these discussions and necessitating approaches that would still strengthen European security regardless of the US position.

Ultimately, in assessing the prospects of cross-regional cooperation in security, the key question revolves around the extent to which all actors involved can harness the benefits of such cooperation. The future trajectory of Indo-Pacific and European partnerships hinges on the success and effectiveness of these endeavors to deepen and broaden security relations. Beyond symbolic gestures, practical considerations such as the political buy-in and the availability of resources will be instrumental in shaping the outcomes – whether it is for weapons manufacturing and procurement, or the provision of military, economic, and humanitarian aid.

For more on perspectives on Euro-Atlantic Security, see [CSS core theme page](#).

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