

Schuman Paper
n°786
8th April 2025

The Future of European Influence in the Indo-Pacific

Pierrick BOUFFARON
Benjamin BLANDIN

The Indo-Pacific region has emerged as a central stage for global power dynamics in the 21st century, where geopolitical ambitions and economic aspirations intersect. The growing rivalry between the U.S. and China underscores the region's strategic importance, as both powers vie for influence through security initiatives, economic partnerships, and technological superiority.

THE INDO-PACIFIC AS A STRATEGIC EPICENTER

This shifting geopolitical landscape presents challenges and opportunities for the [European Union](#) and France, pushing them to rethink their strategic engagement in the Indo-Pacific. While the EU has focused on trade, diplomacy, and regional cooperation through programs echoed in its [Strategic Compass](#), France's longstanding presence in the region has positioned it as a distinctive and central geopolitical actor in the Indian and Pacific Oceans among its peers. Over the past decades, the French [strategy](#) has evolved toward a more integrated approach that links security and defense with economic, diplomatic, and regional partnerships. Together, the EU and France face the complex task of asserting influence while navigating the constraints of geography, military capabilities, and multilateral diplomacy. While inflation, mounting debt, and sluggish productivity pose significant domestic challenges within the Union, the Indo-Pacific's vast economic and demographic potential, coupled with its growing interdependencies with European economies, renders the region an indispensable [focal point](#).

The renewed Donald Trump presidency has brought a sharper focus on recalibrating [U.S. engagement](#) in the Indo-Pacific, further emphasizing a "zero-sum" approach to countering China's influence. Building on his previous term's policies, the Trump administration is expected to double down

on the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" strategy, but with heightened rhetoric around prioritizing U.S. immediate interests. Recent actions, such as expanding naval exercises with Indo-Pacific allies and increasing tariffs in Chinese exports, signal a return to a more confrontational stance. In parallel, questions have arisen about the administration's commitment to broader regional engagement, particularly following the significant USAID budget cuts and program cancellations, which risk creating a vacuum in development and soft power influence that China could quickly seize to expand its [regional footprint](#).

While Trump's assertive policies may bolster security partnerships with European allies willing to do so, they require the European Union and France to navigate a complex balancing act. They must maintain strategic autonomy while leveraging opportunities for collaboration with the U.S. on shared concerns, such as maintaining freedom of navigation and securing critical supply chains. JD Vance's recent speech at the [Munich security conference](#), which emphasized the need for Europe to take greater responsibility for its own defense while aligning with U.S. priorities, further underscores the need for Europeans to strengthen their [strategic framework](#). This surely means adopting a more assertive stance in global affairs, something that has drawn criticism in both Brussels and Paris for being either too cautious or insufficiently aligned with the urgency of today's shifting power dynamics.

2

GEOPOLITICAL STAKES: FROM REGIONAL CONFLICTS TO GLOBAL REPERCUSSIONS

Spanning from the west coast of the U.S. to the eastern coast of Africa, the Indo-Pacific is both a vast geographical expanse and a contested geopolitical arena where strategic rivalries play out through military deployments, territorial disputes, and trade alliances. With at least [seven versions](#) globally, the definition of its perimeter varies across nations and institutions, underscoring its fluid and evolving nature as a strategic concept. At its core, the region's significance lies in its control over key maritime routes—particularly the Malacca, Sunda, and Lombok Straits—crucial to global trade. The South China Sea has emerged as a major flashpoint, with China asserting expansive territorial claims through artificial island-building, military outposts, and legal maneuvers such as the ambiguous “10-dash line,” claims of “historical rights,” and attempts to impose “archipelagic baselines.” These actions have drawn widespread condemnation, particularly from the U.S. and its regional allies, who view them as threats to international law and [freedom of navigation](#).

Tensions escalated again in late 2024 when China launched its [largest naval deployment](#) in decades near Taiwan. This blockade exercise, featuring aircraft carriers, destroyers, submarines, and live missile tests, [was widely seen](#) as both a stress test for Taiwan's defenses and a demonstration of Beijing's willingness to escalate militarily if its territorial claims were challenged. In response, [the U.S. deployed](#) naval task forces, confirmed in writing the perimeter of the MDT linking it to the Philippines, and kept developing its “sea air battle” strategy through an expansion of its network of airfields in the Pacific Ocean. Japan, under [a newly revised national security strategy](#), reinforced its defenses in the Ryukyu islands, including new interceptor missile bases there, boosting the range of its Type-12 anti-ship missiles, and expanding its jet fleet.

This reflects a delicate balancing act for the U.S.: maintaining regional influence and leadership while avoiding overextension. The approach underscores a recognition of the limits of military power in achieving strategic goals and using various tools to shape the region's future. The lingering consequences of the

Afghanistan and Iraq wars, mounting domestic pressures to scale back overseas engagements, and the financial strain of the 2008 financial crisis have marked a period of introspection that legitimately fuelled concerns about U.S. disengagement from global leadership.

Consequently, a noticeable shift in U.S. military posture in the Indo-Pacific was noted, marked by a more restrained approach to force deployment to avoid resource strain and minimize regional tensions. Despite the “Pivot to Asia” initiated by the Obama administration, critics would argue that the pivot is more rhetorical than substantive, the U.S. adopting a “reduced footprint” strategy, prioritizing transitional occupations and investing in renovating allied bases in key locations such as Guam, Okinawa, and Australia while supporting the defense capabilities of allies like Japan, South Korea, and the Philippines, and reviving forward installations in Papua New Guinea, Palau and Micronesia.

The approach has raised questions about declining U.S. military capacities, particularly as China expands its naval and missile capabilities. The war in Ukraine has further exposed vulnerabilities in U.S. production capacity, supply chains, and readiness for large-scale, high-intensity conflicts while also emphasizing the challenges of maintaining dominance on a battlefield increasingly shaped by drones, cyberattacks, and electronic warfare. Although the U.S. Navy remains a formidable force, its ability to sustain an uncontested presence in the Indo-Pacific is under mounting pressure. The approach's effectiveness and the potential impact of the new Trump administration remains uncertain as regional dynamics shift rapidly.

As such, 2025 will be a turning point for global leadership, with the G20 summit—hosted for the first time by an African nation, [South Africa](#)—providing a platform to reshape multilateralism and amplify diverse voices on global challenges. Meanwhile, as the U.S. retreats from climate action, China may seize the opportunity to position itself as a leader in environmental initiatives, while [Malaysia's ASEAN chairmanship](#) aims to reinforce regional unity in the Indo-Pacific. We can expect many moving pieces in 2025.

FRANCE'S INDO-PACIFIC AMBITIONS: MILITARY PRESENCE AND STRATEGIC AUTONOMY

With nearly two million citizens in the Indo-Pacific—across New Caledonia, French Polynesia, and a dispersed expatriate community—France has significant geopolitical and economic stakes in the region compared to its European peers. Its strategy stands out for rejecting bloc-based geopolitics, instead advocating “sovereignty partnerships” that empower regional states to collaborate flexibly on a project-by-project basis. France is integrating its overseas territories as key stakeholders, promoting regional multilateralism, and playing a leading role in shaping the European Union’s Indo-Pacific engagement.

This approach has led to concrete initiatives in recent years: a Franco-Indian roadmap on maritime security, the blue economy, and ocean governance; joint climate, biodiversity, and infrastructure projects with Japan in third countries; and strengthened ties with Australia through a regional energy transition center and expanded maritime security cooperation. France’s Indo-Pacific policy also leverages its status as a resident power with a permanent UN Security Council seat, reinforcing its diplomatic presence.

On the defense front, France is striving to reinforce and develop [its military footprint](#) through a diverse range of activities, conducting freedom-of-navigation operations in the South China Sea with deployments such as the *Charles de Gaulle* aircraft carrier. It has deepened security ties with Australia, India, and Japan through joint exercises, intelligence sharing, and arms deals. While the AUKUS pact and the cancellation of its submarine deal with Australia initially strained relations, the fallout reaffirmed France’s strategic relevance. Indo-Pacific nations, including India and Indonesia, increasingly view France as a valuable counterweight in great power competition, appreciating its emphasis on regional priorities like maritime security and sovereignty.

Despite financial constraints back home, France’s Indo-Pacific strategy remains integral to its national interest. Its reliance on maritime trade and its vast Exclusive Economic Zone (the world’s second-largest at 10.2 million square kilometers) shape a defense policy centered on deterrence,

naval power, and regional partnerships. French military operations in the region have expanded, strengthening interoperability with regional allies. Exercises such as *Pegase* (air and naval forces) and *Jeanne d’Arc* (maritime security) reinforce freedom of navigation and strategic stability in an era of escalating geopolitical competition.

Bilateral defense agreements with India and Indonesia have deepened, with Rafale fighter jet sales, joint naval patrols, and submarine development projects signaling a shared commitment to counterbalancing China’s influence. Similar agreements with Japan have bolstered maritime surveillance in contested waters. While France avoids framing the Indo-Pacific as a purely adversarial space, it maintains that its position is not one of neutrality between Washington and Beijing. As a resident power, France shares key strategic perspectives with the U.S. while emphasizing its autonomy, operating under the principle of being “an ally, but not aligned.” This balance led to the initiation of the 2024 Franco-American Indo-Pacific dialogue, fostering cooperation in maritime security, disaster response, climate action, and infrastructure development.

France has also strengthened its regional engagement by becoming an ASEAN development partner in 2021. A joint action plan focuses on disaster response, climate resilience, biodiversity, sustainable agriculture, the blue economy, and energy transition. Implementation is underway, with the French Development Agency (AFD) spearheading efforts—having invested over €4 billion in 170 Southeast Asian projects over the past decade. Recent initiatives, such as air quality improvement and plastic pollution reduction, highlight France’s long-term commitment. ASEAN remains central to France’s Indo-Pacific vision, given its support for international law, multilateralism, and inclusive regional governance—values that align closely with France’s and the EU’s strategic priorities.

THE EUROPEAN UNION IN THE REGION: AN AMBITIOUS PICTURE

The European Union’s strong economic influence, diverse member states, and commitment to multilateralism position it as a key player in the Indo-Pacific. Its 2021 *Indo-Pacific Strategy* marked a significant step forward in defining its regional engagement, with strong backing

from France, Germany, and the Netherlands. This strategy prioritizes multilateral cooperation, a rules-based international order, and economic security, reflecting the EU's distinct approach to global affairs. While the U.S. remains focused on countering China's military expansion, the EU addresses a broader spectrum of regional challenges, tackling non-traditional security threats such as climate change, illegal fishing, and piracy. This comprehensive approach underscores Europe's role as a stabilizing force, complementing military deterrence with economic development and governance support.

The EU also differentiates itself through a softer yet strategic form of engagement, blending hard power with investments in education, infrastructure, and cultural ties. This makes the bloc an attractive partner for nations like Indonesia and Malaysia, which seek diverse partnerships beyond traditional military alliances. Unlike other major powers, EU member states collectively maintain embassies in nearly every Indo-Pacific nation, reinforcing their diplomatic presence and deepening long-term relationships across the region.

France exemplifies the depth and diversity of Europe's presence in the Indo-Pacific, showcasing what coordinated efforts could achieve. With a well-established network of chambers of commerce and industry, cultural centers, French international schools, specialized attachés, and institutions like the French Development Agency, France brings a comprehensive and multidimensional approach to engagement in the region. Beyond France, Germany has strengthened its Indo-Pacific strategy through its [Policy Guidelines for the Indo-Pacific](#), emphasizing economic partnerships, multilateralism, and climate resilience. These commitments have been reinforced by tangible actions, such as deploying the frigate *Bayern* to support freedom of navigation and regional security. Similarly, the Netherlands, through its *Indo-Pacific Guidelines*, has highlighted the importance of international law and deepened its cooperation with ASEAN. Italy has also expanded its role in the region, with its participation in [Pitch Black 2024](#), a major multinational military exercise involving twenty nations, showcasing Rome's growing commitment to international maritime security. Smaller European states have made notable contributions as well: Denmark, a leader in maritime technology and renewable

energy, is advancing sustainability initiatives, while Sweden's emphasis on innovation and the green transition bolsters Europe's presence in the region. Even landlocked countries like the [Czech Republic](#) are engaging with the Indo-Pacific; its *2022 Indo-Pacific strategy* prioritizes economic and scientific partnerships with nations such as Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, demonstrating a shared European effort to support stability and prosperity in the region.

These collective assets—France's historical ties and military presence, Germany's and Italy's security commitments, the Netherlands' diplomatic initiatives, and the niche strengths of smaller European states—form a strong foundation for European engagement. France continues to be a driving force in shaping the EU's Indo-Pacific strategy, advocating in Brussels for a more explicit recognition of Europe's geographical and strategic ties to the region. Its outermost regions and overseas territories, primarily French, offer a crucial platform for anchoring and expanding Europe's influence, serving as logistical hubs and bridges for deeper engagement.

In recent years, however, the tension between the EU's strategic ambitions and its fragmented capabilities has resulted in a form of disjointed internationalism—one where Europe aspires to lead but often lacks the unified political will and resources to do so effectively. While trade and investment ties strengthen its global presence, internal divisions and competing national interests frequently undermine its strategic coherence. This fragmentation risks diluting the EU's economic and diplomatic influence at a time when global power dynamics are rapidly shifting. Rather than attempting to replicate national efforts at the supranational level, the EU could position itself as a coordinator of European strengths, integrating its member states' diplomatic, economic, cultural, and military assets into a more cohesive global strategy. A unified approach would amplify Europe's influence, minimize inefficiencies, and allow the bloc to compete more effectively in an Indo-Pacific region increasingly defined by rapid innovation and economic dynamism.

As a collective, the EU stands for multilateralism, the rule of law, and inclusivity—values that resonate strongly with the younger generations and emerging middle classes of the

Indo-Pacific. By leveraging these strengths and investing in youth-focused initiatives such as educational exchanges, technology partnerships, and cultural programs, the EU could distinguish itself from traditional great powers and establish itself as a modern, adaptive, and forward-looking partner in the region. This is especially true as the U.S., once seen as a beacon of hope and opportunity, shifts away from its role in development financing.

THE TECHNOLOGICAL DIMENSION: A NEW ARENA FOR POWER RIVALRY?

The Indo-Pacific is no longer just a geopolitical and military theater—it is also a digital battleground where technological competition shapes power dynamics. In this era, military strength, economic competitiveness, and diplomatic influence hinge on control over emerging technologies, with semiconductors at the core. Taiwan remains the global leader in advanced chip manufacturing, while India, South Korea, and Vietnam are rapidly expanding their semiconductor industries. Meanwhile, the U.S. and Japan are investing in revitalizing domestic production, aiming to counterbalance China's technological rise and secure critical supply chains.

China's Digital Silk Road strategy has positioned technology as a central pillar of its Indo-Pacific ambitions. Huawei's global expansion in 5G networks, Beijing's AI-powered surveillance systems in maritime territories, and the Beidou satellite system, designed as a rival to the U.S. GPS network, all reflect China's drive to assert technological dominance. These developments have fueled security concerns in Western capitals, which fear growing Chinese influence in telecommunications infrastructure and cyber espionage risks.

The EU and France have responded by emphasizing technological sovereignty and cybersecurity resilience. [The European Chips Act](#), launched in 2022, aims to bolster Europe's semiconductor production, though its scale remains modest compared to the industrial powerhouses of Asia. France, leveraging its defense-industrial base, has emerged as a leader in AI-driven military systems, autonomous naval drones, and satellite-based surveillance. State-backed initiatives like

France Relance attempt to further accelerate innovation in secure communications and cyber defense.

As geopolitical tensions rise in the Indo-Pacific, [Maritime Domain Awareness](#) (MDA) and [Situational Awareness](#) (SA) have become critical to securing territorial waters, monitoring economic zones, and responding to security threats. MDA refers to the ability to detect, track, and understand activities at sea in real time, encompassing naval movements, illegal fishing, piracy, and environmental monitoring. Situational Awareness (SA) expands this by integrating real-time intelligence across multiple domains—air, sea, space, and cyber—enhancing strategic decision-making. Global competition over MDA and SA is intensifying. The U.S.-led [Indo-Pacific Maritime Domain Awareness](#) (IPMDA) integrates satellite intelligence, AI-driven vessel tracking, and naval data sharing to counter illegal activities and enhance regional security. A key component of this effort is *SeaVision*, a maritime surveillance platform developed by the U.S. Department of Transportation, which is widely used across Africa, the Indian Ocean, and the Asia-Pacific. Meanwhile, China employs AI-driven maritime surveillance and Beidou-powered geolocation tracking to enforce its territorial claims in contested waters.

Europe's response remains more decentralized yet increasingly strategic. The EU's [Critical Maritime Routes Indo-Pacific](#) (CRIMARIO) program enhances regional maritime security by providing capacity-building and intelligence-sharing tools. Among them, the [Indo-Pacific Regional Information Sharing](#) (IORIS) platform enables secure communication and coordinated responses among maritime agencies, while [Shared Awareness and Interoperability in Maritime Surveillance](#) (SHARE. IT) fosters collaboration by integrating surveillance data across partner nations. The [European Coordinated Maritime Presence](#) (CMP) also aims to expand European naval patrols and enhance real-time intelligence sharing, although it still lacks the cohesion of U.S.-led initiatives. France, as a resident Indo-Pacific power, has bolstered its own MDA capabilities through the [MICA center](#), the development of naval drones, AI-powered ocean monitoring, and intelligence-sharing agreements with India, Australia, and ASEAN states. Thales and Airbus are playing a crucial role by providing non-aligned, high-

resolution surveillance systems to Indo-Pacific partners looking for alternatives to U.S. and Chinese intelligence networks. France's defense industry giants should be seen as a key asset in accelerating its strategic influence and emboldening the Union, positioning Europe as a more proactive and capable actor in the Indo-Pacific.

TOWARD A COMPREHENSIVE INDO-PACIFIC POLICY

The Indo-Pacific is quickly becoming the epicenter of global power competition, where military strategy, economic influence, and technological dominance converge. For the EU and France, maintaining strategic relevance in this contested area requires a more assertive and coordinated approach that extends beyond economic engagement. As major powers redefine regional security frameworks, Europe must actively shape the rules of the game instead of merely responding to them.

To achieve this, the EU must evolve from a regulatory and economic player to a geopolitical actor with concrete security commitments. This means reinforcing maritime security through joint naval operations, better integrating European defense capabilities, and expanding strategic partnerships with ASEAN, India, and Japan. A more assertive [security posture](#), backed by intelligence-sharing and technological investments, would allow Europe to remain a credible counterbalance to growing regional tensions.

France, as the Union's leading Indo-Pacific power, must continue leveraging its military footprint while strengthening defense-industrial ties with both European allies and regional partners. Its ability to balance hard power projection with soft power diplomacy will be essential in reinforcing the rules-based order while maintaining strategic autonomy from both Washington and Beijing. Deepening its engagement in Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) initiatives and regional defense cooperation will ensure France's role as a security provider rather than a peripheral player. For France, there is no doubt: the European Union is the relevant scale to address the challenges of the Indo-Pacific.

Ultimately, the Indo-Pacific represents more than just a distant theater of competition—it is a test of Europe's ability to act as a global power. If the European Union and France fail to adapt, they risk being sidelined in a region that will define the 21st century. But if they seize the moment—through military credibility, technological leadership, and strategic alliances—they can establish themselves as indispensable actors in shaping the future geopolitical order. The choice is ours to make.

Pierrick Bouffaron

Partner, Entropia Capital

Benjamin Blandin

Maritime Security Expert, Research Fellow, Korea
Institute of Maritime Strategy (KIMS)

You can read all of our publications on our site:

www.robert-schuman.eu/en

Publishing Director: Pascale JOANNIN

ISSN 2402-614X

The opinions expressed in this text are the sole responsibility of the author.

© All rights reserved, Fondation Robert Schuman, 2025

THE FONDATION ROBERT SCHUMAN, created in 1991 and acknowledged by State decree in 1992, is the main French research centre on Europe. It develops research on the European Union and its policies and promotes the content of these in France, Europe and abroad. It encourages, enriches and stimulates European debate thanks to its research, publications and the organisation of conferences. The Foundation is presided over by Mr. Jean-Dominique Giuliani.