

COMMENT 200 - India-EU Maritime Cooperation: Defining contours for a partnership in the Indo-Pacific Region

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The first [India-EU Maritime Dialogue](#) was held on January 20, 2021. It featured consultations on issues such as the maritime security environment and the enhancement of regional cooperation. The dialogue took place within the larger framework of India-EU Strategic Partnership, in accordance with its [Roadmap to 2025](#). This development comes at a time when the Indo-Pacific as a regional construct is gaining prominence in world politics.

The Indo-Pacific, a confluence of the Indian and Pacific oceans forming a single geopolitical construct, is the most populous region of the world – and one-third of the world’s trade in goods and energy crosses the region. The EU is a significant stakeholder in the area, as the majority of EU’s exports to Asia-Pacific markets traverse the Indo-Pacific waters. The stability and security of vital sea lanes of communication in the area remain crucial for the EU. Similarly, India, being a responsible resident actor in the region, aspires for a free and open Indo-Pacific and is alarmed by the territorial aggression from its neighbour China, as well as by the latter’s growing inroads and influence in New Delhi’s neighbourhood. Taking these factors into account, and focusing on a dynamic security environment engulfing the Indo-Pacific region, one may ask: ‘What objectives and goals should the Indo-EU Maritime Cooperation entail in the larger region?’

The Indo-Pacific is marred by traditional as well as non-traditional security concerns, including piracy, terrorism, refugee crises, climate change, and the not-so-peaceful rise of China. Even though there are mechanisms in place for the peaceful settlement of maritime disputes under international law, the region has

witnessed unilateral territorial aggrandisement by China, especially in the South China Sea, hampering peace in the wider region. In this regard, the contours of an India-EU maritime cooperation should be value-based, reflecting the vision for a free, inclusive and open region. As a strong normative actor, the EU could further its rights-based agenda when dealing with Beijing by using its leverage as the latter's strategic trading partner. This would eventually support Brussels and New Delhi's visions for a rules-based international order and help stimulate Beijing to rethink and amend its unruly approach to maritime policy in the Indo-Pacific region.

The India-EU maritime cooperation should address the issue of piracy collectively at the two major maritime chokepoints in the region: the Gulf of Aden and the Strait of Malacca. The EU has been emerging as a net security provider in the western Indian Ocean through its operation ATLANTA off the coast of Somalia, often regarded as the EU's most successful counter-piracy and security engagement overseas. Similarly, India has been fruitfully active in its anti-piracy patrolling in the Gulf of Aden. An India-EU maritime cooperation should seek to actively engage with ASEAN countries in tackling piracy in the critical Strait of Malacca so as to ensure the free flow of world trade through resources pooling and joint patrolling. This would further help underline the notion of ASEAN centrality in India's Indo-Pacific outlook by strengthening the EU-ASEAN partnership.

Brussels and New Delhi both have immense potential to actively solving the refugee crisis in the Indo-Pacific through the mechanism of maritime cooperation. The Indo-Pacific region has been witnessing an alarming refugee crisis – in fact, the Bay of Bengal can be compared to the crisis-ridden Mediterranean Sea. Thousands of Rohingya refugees have been fleeing Myanmar in search of a safe haven by crossing the rough Bay of Bengal and reaching the shores of countries such as Bangladesh, India, Indonesia and Thailand. These refugees are often the victims of human trafficking, slave trade, and indoctrination by terrorist groups, giving rise to further human security concerns in the Indo-Pacific. Moreover, the refugees reaching La Réunion and Mayotte, European overseas territories in the Indo-Pacific, complicate the already sensitive issue of the European refugee crisis. India-EU maritime cooperation should aim to create a surveillance mechanism for neutralising refugees' smuggling routes in the Indo-Pacific and averting loss of life in the rough and troubled waters of the region through joint maritime deployments.

India-EU maritime cooperation should not remain restricted to the Indian Ocean. It could be activated in the Pacific region as well by constructing trilateral mechanisms of cooperation with like-minded partners so as to bridge the existing resources and capabilities gap as well as improve manoeuvrability in the region. The India-EU-Japan and India-EU-Vietnam trilateral initiatives could be explored for further constructive engagements in the region with regard to maritime connectivity, maritime surveillance and strengthening maritime domain awareness in the Indo-Pacific region. In addition to this, avenues of cooperation in non-traditional security domains such as Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief, as well as climate change, should be explored jointly by New Delhi and Brussels.

The India-EU maritime cooperation becomes imperative with the rise of maritime consciousness simultaneously in New Delhi and Brussels. The need for such maritime cooperation was voiced at different contemporary forums and dialogues between the two actors in the Indo-Pacific. However, the partnership between Brussels and New Delhi underscores ‘realisable goals’ more than ‘actual achievements’. Thus, the potential of such a partnership remains yet to be realised. The EU, though a budding geopolitical actor in the Indo-pacific, is a major economic actor in the region, necessitating Brussels to formulate a clear Indo-Pacific strategy in the near future. The India-EU bonhomie has to go beyond economic and trading circles and touch strategic angles for implementing a strengthened rules-based international order, especially in the Indo-Pacific theatre.

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