

European Middle Powers in the Indo-Pacific amid Great-Power Strategic Competition

By Nilanthi Samaranayake

European middle powers are not typically part of U.S. discussions of the Indo-Pacific. However, in an era of growing strategic competition, they are collectively and individually expressing stronger equities in the stability of the region. In May 2021, for example, the United Kingdom's aircraft carrier HMS Queen Elizabeth set sail for the first time on a tour that will take it to various locations, including to the Indo-Pacific region. The Dutch frigate HNLMS Evertsen, as well as a U.S. destroyer and aircraft, are also part of the carrier strike group. Thus, now is a good moment to step back and reflect on the role of European middle powers in the Indo-Pacific amid the backdrop of great-power, strategic competition.

The Netherlands, Germany, and France have recently published strategy documents focused on the Indo-Pacific. The Netherlands' document released in November 2020 discussed concerns about upholding the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea in the South China Sea and the need for the European Union to take a more vocal stance on stability in this region. Germany published a similar document in September 2020 in which it emphasized its deep economic interests in the Indo-Pacific "rules-based international order." Earlier, France led thinking about evolving regional dynamics in 2018. Through the publication of France's Defense Strategy in the Indo-Pacific and France and Security in the Indo-Pacific documents in 2019, France expressed its concerns about the impact of China's activities in the East and South China Sea on regional stability. These issues have also been raised through NATO, which has been grappling with the belief that "China does not share our values" and the implications for alliance security and the international rules-based order.

At the operational and institutional levels, European middle powers are important U.S. allies and critical partners in coalition operations in the Middle East and Africa. In the Indo-Pacific, their territories advance allied interests in basing and access throughout the vast region. For example, in the Indian Ocean, the United States is not a resident power with its own territories and thus must rely on basing provided by close partners such as the United Kingdom in Diego Garcia to implement its Indo-Pacific strategy. The deployment of European navies in contested Pacific waters also lends support for U.S. freedom of navigation interests. For example, before the HMS Queen Elizabeth's historic carrier strike group deployment, the deployment of a French submarine to the South China Sea in February and transit by a French frigate through the Taiwan Strait in 2019 contributed to U.S. objectives in this regard. France's leadership in organizing the La Pérouse naval exercise with the India, Japan, Australia, and the United States in the Bay of Bengal during April also supports U.S. interests in regional stability through this high-profile presence.

Regarding regional architecture, European leadership is important in institutions where the United States has comparatively less standing. The United Kingdom recently won approval to begin the process of joining the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP). The United States prominently withdrew from the Trans-Pacific Partnership in 2017, and for the time being it does

Nilanthi Samaranayake, the Director of the Strategy and Policy Analysis program at CNA, a non-profit research organization in Virginia, explains the critical importance of European institutional leadership, naval deployments, and territories to U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy.

not appear likely that the new Biden administration will try to reverse the decision. Moreover, France became a full member of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) in 2020 and is chair of the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) through 2022. By comparison, the United States does not even have formal observer status in IONS and is only a dialogue partner in IORA.

Way forward

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The future, however, may not be smooth sailing between European middle powers and the United States in the Indo-Pacific. Going forward, it will be essential to monitor potential obstacles to a unified European-U.S. approach to the region. First, not all European powers agree with the level at which Washington perceives the threat from China. These differences can be seen in internal German debates over the deployment of the Bayern frigate to the Indo-Pacific. Second, the United Kingdom and France are colonial powers, holding onto territories that even today remain controversial, ranging from the Chagos Islands to New Caledonia. Third, despite their combined geoeconomic might and present-day regional territories and nationals, European middle powers lack a robust military presence in the far seas, especially when compared with India or the United States. Many European capitals are reluctant to commit additional forces to the far seas as Russia is perceived as a more significant threat than China. Furthermore, European powers are themselves not unified, at the national level as well as multilaterally between NATO and the EU. Finally, their objectives at times compete with those of the United States such as French, British, and German interests in arms sales to Indo-Pacific countries.

Despite these potential obstacles, U.S. policy generally supports efforts to multilateralize the strategies and activities of close allies and partners to reinforce the norms of the prevailing international order. The United States pursues this goal operationally through naval deployments and exercises. U.S. policymakers often conceive of France and the United Kingdom in a Transatlantic context. Subsequently, they do not always embrace the opportunity to incorporate these allies into Washington’s Indo-Pacific strategy, as seen by their omission from the State Department’s 2019 A Free and Open Indo-Pacific: Advancing a Shared Vision. Building on European countries’ deployments to the region, the United States, India, and Japan should consider including both the French and Royal Navies in the upcoming MALABAR exercises. This multilateral naval exercise continues to evolve and expand its participation, as seen in Australia’s inclusion last year for the first time in over a decade. Through nimble strategic-level cooperation and advance planning for operational-level activities, the United States and its European allies can demonstrate their presence and pursuit of stability in the Indo-Pacific.

Nilanthi Samaranyake is the Director of the Strategy and Policy Analysis program at CNA, a non-profit research organization in Virginia. The author can be contacted at samaranayaken@cna.org

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