



Is the European Engagement in the Indo-Pacific Already Coming to an End?

Emanuele Ballestracci



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By Emanuele Ballestracci

SYNOPSIS

Europe's growing interest in strengthening its presence in the Indo-Pacific and in diversifying partnerships has translated into deeper economic, diplomatic, and security ties with the region. However, its deteriorating security environment, structural constraints on defence integration, and strained transatlantic relations raise questions about the long-term viability of its emerging role as a security provider in the Indo-Pacific.

COMMENTARY

In recent years, European efforts to increase their presence in the Indo-Pacific have drawn growing attention to the debate over the role European actors can play in the region.

This occurs against a backdrop in which the geoeconomic centre of gravity is increasingly shifting from the Atlantic to the Pacific, American assertiveness and perceived unreliability are driving the need for diversified partnerships, transnational challenges, and the rise of China are reshaping global dynamics.

This has translated into strategic documents at both the European Union and member state levels, formalising an interest in playing a more active role in the region and in deepening relations with partners and allies.

Economic and Diplomatic Engagement

Thus, in recent years, economic partnerships have been steadily upgraded through the conclusion and implementation of several major free trade agreements (FTAs): an FTA in 2019 and a digital trade agreement (DTA) in 2025 with [Singapore](#); FTAs with [Japan](#) in 2019 and with [Vietnam](#) in 2020; an FTA with [New Zealand](#) in 2024; a DTA with [South Korea](#) and a Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) with [Indonesia](#) in 2025; the long-awaited FTAs with [India](#) and [Australia](#) in 2026; and ongoing negotiations with [Thailand](#), [Malaysia](#), and the [Philippines](#).

Moreover, the launch of the EU's [Global Gateway](#) – aimed at boosting European infrastructure and connectivity investments and cooperation with developing countries – is emerging as an alternative to the Belt and Road Initiative for Indo-Pacific countries.

European leaders have also become increasingly engaged in the region through high-level diplomacy. [French President Emmanuel Macron](#), arguably the most proactive, pitched Europe as a reliable partner for the region at the 2025 Shangri-La Dialogue as part of his tour of Southeast Asia. This year, he advanced the concept of a “[coalition of independents](#)” in Seoul and Tokyo, warning about the risks of entrapment in Sino-American rivalry.

Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni also recently visited [Japan](#), upgrading ties to a strategic partnership, and hosted [Malaysia's Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim](#) in the summer of 2025 for the first bilateral meeting at the highest level in over 50 years.

[Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez](#) recently returned from his fourth visit to Beijing since 2023, while European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen has increased her visits to the region in recent years, mirroring the conclusion of multiple new FTAs.

Security and Maritime Engagement

Such proactive European engagement in the region has also been reflected in military presence and procurement. [France](#) remains the most structurally embedded European power in the Indo-Pacific, maintaining a permanent military presence of around 7,000 troops stationed across five commands and participating in major joint exercises such as RIMPAC, Talisman Sabre, Balikatan, La Pérouse, and Croix du Sud, while actively promoting a European role in ensuring freedom of navigation.

The [United Kingdom](#) has reinforced its regional posture through expeditionary deployments, most notably the UK Carrier Strike Group 2021, which conducted joint exercises with Japan, Singapore, and other regional partners.

[Germany](#) has also undertaken significant deployments, including the landmark 2021-2022 Indo-Pacific voyage of the frigate Bayern designed to secure free sea routes, strengthen international law, and conduct joint exercises, followed by naval and air force deployments in 2023-2024 to uphold freedom of navigation.

[Italy](#) has increasingly aligned with this trend, expanding defence cooperation with Southeast Asia, deploying naval assets to the Indo-Pacific (including participation in multinational exercises and port calls), and strengthening its defence industrial footprint. A notable case is the transfer of the aircraft carrier Giuseppe Garibaldi to Indonesia, alongside broader agreements on naval cooperation and technology.

[Spain](#), while less visible, has also contributed through naval deployments, participation in multinational exercises, including Indo-Pacific missions by Spanish Navy vessels, and involvement in coordinated maritime security operations with allies.

Cooperation in the defence industry has deepened through joint defence development programmes, most prominently the [Global Combat Air Programme \(GCAP\)](#), which brings together the United Kingdom, Italy, and Japan to develop a next-generation fighter aircraft.

At the same time, [European arms exports to Southeast Asia](#) have increased both in volume and strategic relevance, reflecting the region's growing demand for advanced military capabilities.

Moreover, there has been a [proliferation of upgraded defence partnerships and cooperation agreements](#) between EU member states and Indo-Pacific partners. While member states have largely driven this process, the European Commission has advanced the economic dimension, reflecting its exclusive competence in EU trade policy.

Together, these developments illustrate the multi-level nature of Europe's growing strategic engagement in the Indo-Pacific.

Challenges and Structural Constraints

Nonetheless, continued American calls for Europeans to take greater responsibility for their security, the protracted Russian aggression against Ukraine, and the ongoing Middle East crisis are major warning signals for Europe.

The instability in its neighbourhood and perceived American unreliability now raise the question of whether more attention should be devoted to playing a more active role in the enlarged Mediterranean region rather than deploying resources in the Pacific.

This should be a major concern, especially given Europe's limited capacity to rapidly expand its military capabilities and asset volume, due to several structural issues related to limited defence integration.

Today, the European defence industry remains fragmented, with [174 main weapon systems](#), different procurement systems, industrial rivalries, non-integrated financial markets, and limited centralised military cooperation.

Nonetheless, increased defence spending following the Trump era, renewed uncertainty regarding NATO and [Germany's goal of rapidly expanding its military](#) may provide new momentum for European defence capabilities, even though limited cooperation and integration remain the main obstacles.

China poses a major constraint on Europe's ambitions to become a security provider in the Indo-Pacific. Naval deployments in the region risk straining ties with Beijing, at a pivotal moment when strained transatlantic relations are a natural push for improved cooperation, despite numerous challenges.

Thus, in an increasingly unstable neighbourhood and amid strained transatlantic relations, European governments must now assess whether naval deployments to the Indo-Pacific remain viable. This could lead to reduced European engagement in freedom-of-navigation operations and joint exercises, with assets potentially reoriented towards the Mediterranean.

While this has never constituted the core of European engagement in the Indo-Pacific – which has remained largely economic and diplomatic – it has nonetheless signalled a growing ambition to play a more significant role.

European engagement in the Indo-Pacific will not cease, as the need for partner and economic diversification will continue to drive deeper trade and investment agreements. However, its emerging role as a security provider may prove increasingly difficult to sustain.

Emanuele Ballestracci is a freelance consultant and researcher. He collaborates with the Indo-Pacific Programme at T.wai – Torino World Affairs Institute based in Turin. He was previously a Visiting Researcher at Universiti Malaya and a Graduate Visiting Student at Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, as a Zegna Scholar.

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