Flying the Flag

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The discourse surrounding security dynamics in the Indo-Pacific region primarily revolves around riparian states such as the United States (US), its key regional allies, China, India, and emerging influential nations from Southeast Asia. However, one actor remains peripheral despite its significant interest in an open and rules-based Indo-Pacific, the European Union (EU).

The EU's updated Maritime Security Strategy (EUMSS), unveiled on March 10, 2023, was a significant development. It reflects the EU's ambition to play a more substantial role in safeguarding maritime interests globally in response to evolving threats such as piracy, illegal migration, trafficking, terrorism, geopolitical tensions, climate change, and hybrid and cyber

threats. One year after its publication, the question is whether the EU is finally ready to translate these aspirations into action in the Indo-Pacific region.

The EU has long been involved in maritime security efforts in the region, exemplified by the EUNAVOR Operation Atalanta combating piracy since 2008. In 2020, CRIMARIO II was launched to support peace and stability in South and Southeast Asia. Following its 2022 Indo-Pacific Strategy, the EU also designated the Northwestern Indian Ocean as a new Area of Maritime Interest and implemented the Coordinated Maritime Presences (CMP) tool, which allows EU member states to coordinate their naval actions while remaining under the national chains of command. Additionally, the EU became a Dialogue Partner of the Indian Ocean Rim Association in February 2024. Although the EU's effort is recognisable, the current situation demands a more robust approach due to the emergence of new threats and rising geopolitical tensions. This bid, however, is facing opposition and capacity challenges.

Not only since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, there have been divisions among member states regarding the EU's role in international security. While France advocates a more independent approach, most Eastern European members prioritise NATO as the primary security provider. Furthermore, US analysts argue that Europe should leave the Indo-Pacific to the US and focus on its continental defence to free up US resources for its Indo-Pacific engagement. These arguments, however, disregard that the purpose of the EU naval presence is not solely to support the US in its engagement in containing China. The EU also tries to build its own security relationships with regional partners, as manifested in the Enhancing Security Cooperation in and with Asia project. In addition, the EU's focus on non-traditional security threats makes it a beneficial actor for the region, not only in regard to traditional security.

Limited naval capacities are also undermining an enduring European engagement in the Indo-Pacific. At this point, contributions from various member states are crucial to share the burden. While the burden was mostly on France in the past, more member states are starting to commit. Recent examples are Greece and Italy leading EUNAVFOR Operation ASPIDES in the Red Sea. Their engagement not only shows more countries taking up responsibility but also the EU's drive for a more US-independent approach. Greece's announced more significant commitment to the Indo-Pacific also indicates another possible benefit of an EU engagement for the region. Their less hostile relationship with China closer represents the hedging strategies of the riparian states, especially in Southeast Asia. This position can make the EU an alternative security provider advocating an inclusive Indo-Pacific region.

To be regarded as a credible and proactive contributor to Indo-Pacific maritime security, it is essential for the EU to address internal challenges, for member states to invest in their naval capabilities, and together

strengthen ties with regional partners. By 'flying the flag' in the region, the EU can demonstrate its readiness to take on a more active role. The planned deployments of naval assets to the region by France, Italy, and Germany in 2024 are tangible steps forward and provide the chance to translate the EU's aspirations into action further.

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