

EU Indo-Pacific Ministerial Forum, Brussels, 2 February 2024

Round table: Geopolitical and security challenges in the Indo-Pacific

Concept note

(designed to introduce and facilitate the discussion)

Global geopolitical competition has become an increasingly key feature in the Indo-Pacific adding to growing tensions on regional political stability and casting a shadow over the security of trade and supply chains. The European Union and Indo-Pacific partners have a shared interest in each other region's security as they both face complex and interconnected security challenges.

Geopolitical competition is weakening multilateralism. Growing geopolitical rivalries, as well as significant challenges to international peace and stability and the rules-based order, highlight the need for increased cooperation between the EU and its Indo-Pacific partners. The global security environment continues to deteriorate, amid rising revisionism and nationalism.

World military spending grew for the eighth consecutive year in 2022 to hit an all-time high of \$ 2.24 trillion. Last year, military expenditure in Europe was 30% higher than in 2013. Across Asia, the trend is even greater. In 2022, military expenditure of countries in Asia and Oceania was 45% more than in 2013.

Threats are becoming increasingly complex and multi-layered, with some countries seeking to re-define the core tenets of the multilateral order, including through violations of national sovereignty and borders. Growing tensions in the South and East China Seas and in the Taiwan Strait, Russia's military aggression against Ukraine, as well as recent grave developments in the Middle East affect global security and have a direct impact on the prosperity of both Europe and the Indo-Pacific.

In today's challenging geopolitical landscape, translating our converging interests into concrete strategic cooperation remains a key priority. Through its Indo-Pacific Strategy launched in 2021, the EU aims to promote a free and open Indo-Pacific, to reinforce respect of international law and address global challenges. The EU can contribute in the region's security and stability by being a "smart enabler": a powerful non-traditional security actor seeking to enhance its partners' capabilities through a tailored approach.

In this context, the EU will continue developing synergies with partners in the areas of maritime security, cybersecurity, counter-terrorism, crisis management, conflict prevention, countering hybrid threats, foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI), including disinformation. As set out in the EU Strategic Compass of 2022, the EU wishes to establish "tailored partnerships" in the Indo-Pacific designed to better address our common challenges. It is equally important that we continue our active engagement in the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) to promote peace and security in the region.

Maritime security the Indo-Pacific is of key importance. The region hosts major waterways that are vital to international trade and supply chains, spanning from Bab el-Mandeb and the Gulf of Aden to the South China Sea through the Malacca Straits. The Indian Ocean is the principal gateway between the European and Indo-Pacific markets. Almost one-third of global maritime trade (by volume) goes through the South China Sea. It is therefore of critical importance to ensure stability and freedom of navigation in this area in accordance with international law and, in particular, the UNCLOS. Conducting more joint naval exercises, building experts networks, raising awareness on emerging threats and aiming at increased coordination would benefit this common goal. The EU will continue to seek synergies in particular through the implementation of a Coordinated Maritime Presence in the North West Indian Ocean, as well as through the implementation of EU-funded programmes such as: Safe Seas for Africa, Port Security and Safety of Navigation, Critical Maritime Routes Indo-Pacific (CRIMARIO), and Enhancing Security Cooperation In and With Asia (ESIWA).

Hybrid threats are increasing in severity and are a growing challenge both in Europe and in the Indo-Pacific. **Cybersecurity** is a global challenge. Cyber threats evolve fast, they are increasingly complex and adaptable, and can target individuals, companies, essential services and critical infrastructures alike. FIMI, including disinformation, is a key emerging security issue, also in the Indo-Pacific region. It is important that the EU and Indo-Pacific partners enhance cooperation in the areas of countering hybrid and cyber threats, as well as FIMI, including disinformation. It is essential that we continue to jointly enhance cyber security and resilience, promote responsible state behaviour in cyberspace, as well as to prevent, discourage and respond to malicious cyber activities. International cooperation is instrumental to counter these threats.

The **space** domain is critical for our societies and economies and is a key enabler for security and defence. Forging strong partnerships is essential to promote a common vision for peaceful and responsible behaviours in space and to respond to space threats, as well as to exchange information and share best practices on the resilience of space infrastructures.

We propose that this Roundtable focuses on the following guiding questions:

- How can the EU and its partners address jointly the profound security shifts currently underway in the Indo-Pacific, and build resilience?
- How can our converging interests be translated into concrete strategic cooperation and partnerships in the area of security and defence?
- How can we engage more effectively to enhance regional security, and address challenges in the areas of maritime security, space, countering hybrid and cyber threats as well as FIMI, including disinformation?