

Asia in Security Politics

A new US-policy on China in 2025, an EU-strategy on the Indo-Pacific from 2021, and a German strategy on the region in 2020. Recent years have seen a surge in strategies and policies from Western states on the Indo-Pacific. Why has this region gained so much more attention? And are Indo-Pacific states mutually interested in the EU and the US if (security) developments in their region are concerned?

The Indo-Pacific encompasses the maritime and land regions around the Pacific and Indian oceans. Each day, over 25% of the world's maritime trade passes through this region. In addition, over the last years, security issues in the region have risen, including increasing nuclear weapon capacities of North Korea, an increasing militarisation of the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait, and more border clashes, on sea as well as land. These developments are one of the reasons why Western states have increasingly focused their security policies on the Indo-Pacific. What is probably even more important, though, is that the regional security order in the Indo-Pacific is changing.

Historically, at least since the end of the Korean War in the 1950s, the US have been at the centre of the regional security order. Through their “hub-and-spokes-system”, the US have relied on bilateral alliances for security provision, often providing security for the states in exchange for military bases and ports on their territories.

In recent years, China's influence in the region changed. While, up until around 2009, Chinese governments had focused on economic development and growth, China then started focusing on external action and foreign policy. In an attempt to provide the world with an alternative to, as China argues, Western-centric international and regional organisations and value systems, China has become more assertive in the Indo-Pacific.

This includes a rise in Chinese military spendings and military buildup, the creation of new regional (security) organisations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, the Belt and Road Initiative, and an increasing militarisation of the South Chinese Sea, among others.

The security order thus seems to shift – from the US being the only security actor in the region to at least a bipolar order including the US and China. The US have answered this growing Chinese assertiveness with their “pivot to Asia” and an increase in alliances and partnerships – calling China a “rival” that needs to be “balanced out”.

Most Indo-Pacific states, however, do not want to engage in this power-play between the US and China. The diverse smaller states of the Indo-Pacific are no unified actor, but mostly agree on certain norms that guide security policy, at their centre the ASEAN norms and a maritime security policy that upholds free trade and international law. India under Modi has decided to take on a more active role in Indo-Pacific security politics, supported by e.g. the EU. It remains unclear where these recent developments in re-ordering the security structure in the Indo-Pacific will lead to. In the process, Europe might become more important, as relations, at least with India, seem to be shifting from relations with former colonizers and states that still have oversea territories there to the whole of the EU.

Future political action, be it at the EU, the UN, or the Munich Security Conference, will need to address questions such as:

- How will different, at times diverging interests of the EU and the US impact their relationship and Indo-Pacific policies?
- How will different local notions of the regional security order play out? Will there be one order in the future or, as right now, several? And what does that mean for international organisations such as the EU?

Important specialist terminology

The Belt and Road Initiative is a plan to use Chinese assistance to fund infrastructure in and boost ties with other countries (CFR).

A bipolar system has two poles (here: powerful states) to which states are drawn to.

The pivot to Asia describes a US-policy under President Obama. This policy was supposed to put more emphasis on US relations to Asia, especially to China.

Members of the ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) govern their relations by certain norms, including peaceful conflict resolution, regional cooperation, and non-interference in internal affairs.

Almost all European countries had more or less formal colonies in Asia. Colonies and colonisers include, among others: India/Great Britain, the Philippines/Spain, Vietnam/France, Qingdao/Germany.