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# Strategic Digest

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## EU Strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific

The European Council on April 19, 2021, approved conclusions on an EU strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, setting out the EU's intention to reinforce its strategic focus, presence and actions in this region of prime strategic importance for EU interests. The EU's strategy, approved after consensus among its 27 member states, needs to be seen in the larger context of the EU's global power aspirations and the region's changing dynamics due to China's revisionist challenge to the rules-based international order. The European Council asked the European Commission and high representative to draw up an Indo-Pacific strategy by September this year.

 Council of the European Union		Brussels, 16 April 2021 (OR. en)
		7914/21
COASI 58 ASIE 18 CFSP/PESC 379 WTO 109 TRANS 215 ENER 121 ENV 233 CLIMA 77 COHAF 35 DIGIT 47 MARE 10 COEST 92 ASEM 6 CYBER 99 DEVGEN 74 SUSTDEV 42 ECOFIN 350		COMPET 255 EDUC 124 RECH 156 CULT 25 RELEX 326 OCDE 8 CCG 23 AVIATION 83 FIN 297 FISC 63 TOUR 23 MIGR 70 COVID-19 153 ATLANTA 9 EUMC 77 COPS 142
<b>OUTCOME OF PROCEEDINGS</b>		
From:	General Secretariat of the Council	
On:	16 April 2021	
To:	Delegations	
No. prev. doc.:	7695/21 + COR1	
Subject:	EU Strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific - Council conclusions (16 April 2021)	
Delegations will find in the annex the Council conclusions on an EU Strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, approved by written procedure on 16 April 2021.		

Defined as a region spanning from the east coast of Africa to the Pacific island states, EU's Indo-Pacific approach is a distinct reconfiguration of its earlier Asia-Pacific approach given the changing geopolitical situation. In Europe, apart from the United Kingdom's "Indo-Pacific tilt", EU member states like Germany, France, and the Netherlands have already articulated their Indo-Pacific strategy. Till about a year ago there existed some reluctance in the EU about the idea of an EU Indo-Pacific strategy. However, the shifting geopolitical context led to the acknowledgement that the Indo-Pacific region represents the global

economic and strategic centre of gravity. In addition, it of significant economic and strategic interest to the EU that the regional architecture in the Indo-Pacific region remains open and rules-based.

While the Indo-Pacific strategy of many regional and global actors had singled out China's aggressive foreign policy and military adventures in its neighbourhood as destabilising factor in the region, the EU document alludes to the China challenge by making rather oblique references to geopolitical competition, tensions over supply chains, the universality of human rights, compliance with international law, and reciprocity in trade and investment and connectivity. The EU considers China, according to its foreign policy chief Josep Borell, a "partner, competitor and rival". Accordingly, in a balancing and inclusive approach, the EU has called for a Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI) with China.

The document states the need for the EU to leverage its economic weight through applying high standards in free-trade agreements in the entire Indo-Pacific region. The Council communicated its intention to help strengthen regional organisations and more generally contribute to the resolution of global issues such as climate change and maritime security. The EU's renewed commitment to the Indo-Pacific region will have long term focus and will be based on upholding democracy, human rights, the rule of law and respect for international law. The EU intends to reinforce its role as a cooperative partner in the Indo-Pacific, bringing added value to relations with all its partners in the region.

The Council Conclusions represent a consensus reached by the 27 EU member states and reflects Brussels' evolving perception of regional security challenges in the Indo-Pacific. The EU's strategy aims to connect with its existing initiatives at the geographical margins of the Indo-Pacific regions. While the conclusions on the EU Indo-Pacific strategy has provided strategic pathways, a more clear assessment of the EU's Indo-Pacific strategy would have to wait till September 2021 when it will be finally completed.

### **The Philippines and China spar anew in the South China Sea**

Since early March 2021, about 220 Chinese fishing vessels have been massing around Whitsun Reef, named Julian Felipe Reef in the Philippines. Whitsun Reef is situated in Union (Pagkakaisa) Banks, a submerged atoll in the Spratlys. Unlike China and Vietnam, the Philippines does not have any occupied features in the area, but it is well within the country's exclusive economic zone and has been a traditional Filipino fishing ground for generations.



In response to the latest incident, Manila lodged a diplomatic protest and sought the immediate withdrawal of the Chinese vessels. On 13 April, the Philippine government summoned the Chinese ambassador to “displeasure over the illegal lingering presence of Chinese vessels around Julian Felipe

Reef”. China has argued that Chinese fishing vessels have been taking shelter from rough weather around the reef which is part of China's Nansha Islands. Even though, the number of Chinese vessels around the reef has reduced still around 40 Chinese vessels remain in the area along with Chinese militia and Chinese Coast Guard Ships.

On 23 April 2021, the Philippines Foreign Ministry stated that "The continued swarming and threatening presence of the Chinese vessels creates an atmosphere

of instability and is a blatant disregard of the commitments by China to promote peace and stability in the region," The Philippines has also decided to step up its maritime patrol and bolster the presence of maritime forces around the disputed area. The Philippines maritime forces have begun to conduct sovereignty patrol to assert their jurisdictional rights. In response to the exercises, China's foreign ministry said that the Philippines should "stop actions complicating the situation and escalating disputes".

On 29 April 2021, Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte has said he will not withdraw navy and coastguard boats patrolling the disputed South China Sea, insisting the country's sovereignty over the waters is not negotiable. At the same time, he added that he wants to maintain friendly ties with China, citing Manila's "debt of gratitude" for Beijing's help with the coronavirus vaccine. Duterte is under growing domestic pressure to be more determined in pushing back against Chinese advances. There is growing frustration in Manilla over recurring incidents of sovereignty violation.

### **US, Israel to form a working group on Iran's drones, ballistic missiles**

The United States and Israel agreed to establish an inter-agency working group "to focus particular attention on the growing threat of Unmanned Aerial Vehicles [UAVs] and Precision-Guided Missiles produced by Iran and provided to its proxies in the Middle East region". This was announced by the White House on April 27, 2021, following a bilateral meeting in Washington between the US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan and his Israeli counterpart Meir Ben-Shabbat.

The meeting between National Security Advisors of the US and Israel took place in the backdrop of the third round of indirect negotiations between Iran and the US which began in Vienna on the same day. As per the statement from the White House, the United States updated Israel on the talks in Vienna and emphasized strong U.S. interest in consulting closely with Israel on the nuclear issue going forward. Further, the United States and Israel agreed on the significant threat posed by Iran's aggressive behaviour in the region, and U.S. officials underscored President Biden's unwavering support for Israel's right to defend itself.

The decision to try to counter UAVs or drones has been in the works for years. Back in 2018, Congress first authorized a cooperative US-Israeli Counter Unmanned Aerial Systems (C-UAS) program. The US NDAA (National Defense Authorization Act), FY 2020 authorized the US Secretary of Defense to 'carry out research, development, test, and evaluation activities, on a joint basis with Israel, to establish capabilities for countering unmanned aerial systems that threaten the United States or Israel.'

The rise of Iranian drone threats has been increasingly bedeviling US partners in the region. The cooperation between the US and Israel on countering drone threats has shown greater salience due to complex threat from small- and medium-sized UAVs.

## **Sudan Reportedly suspends Russian Naval Base Agreement**

As per various media reports, Sudan has reportedly suspended military agreements signed with Moscow by the regime of ousted President Omar al-Bashir which had included the establishment of a logistics support centre for Russia's navy in Sudan. On 28 April, various African and Middle East news agencies citing Sudanese political, military and civil senior sources reported that the Sovereign Council of Sudan has suspended the military cooperation deal with Russia "until it is approved by the parliament, the Sudanese Sovereign Council or the transitional government." They pointed to the Council's rejection of any new deployment of Russian troops at the Flamingo naval base, adding that Moscow has not respected the agreed-upon details. Sudan has been under a transitional civilian-majority government since the April 2019 ouster of long time president Omar Bashir.

In November 2020, Russia had announced the plan to establish a naval logistics and support base in Sudan. As per the draft agreement made public by Russia, the proposed base would have facilities to support nuclear-powered ships, berthing space for up to four warships at a time, and be staffed by 300 personnel. This new facility would be Russia's first official military base on the African continent since the fall of the Soviet Union and the second naval facility abroad after Tartus in Syria. According to news reports, Russian military ships had started to bring equipment and radars to build the naval facility from early April 21.

Russia's Embassy in Khartoum denied the reports, saying on its Facebook page that it "has not received any official notifications from the Sudanese side. This agreement will enter into force only after both parties ratify it. Since this has not yet happened, all other statements are speculative and aim to damage traditionally friendly Russian-Sudanese relations." A former Russian Navy admiral told Interfax that he believes that Sudan suspended its agreement with Russia "under pressure from the U.S."