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The Eu Indo-Pacific Strategy and the China-Russia relations

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The China-Russia relations are facing a changing external environment, including the Indo-Pacific. This article focuses on the EU Indo-Pacific Strategy, which is a new and little-researched theme. It aims to address a central question: what the implications of the EU Indo-Pacific Strategy on the China-Russia relations are. It focuses on the discourse of the EU's supranational authorities. The qualitative content analysis of that discourse unveils that the nature of this strategy is to enhance the legitimacy and uniqueness of the EU as a global player. It argues that this strategy has important implications for both China and Russia in direct or indirect ways. One main assumption is that the EU's impact will be more concentrated in low politics than high politics. This article develops two hypotheses. One is that the EU Indo-Pacific Strategy will enhance the West as external pressure to China and Russia in the region, especially on low political issues. The other is that increasing external pressure from the EU and the West in this region highlights the necessity of cooperation between China and Russia. It concludes that while the implications for China and Russia are different respectively, the EU's ambition as an exogenous factor will compel China and Russia to uplift their bilateral ties.

Keywords: European Union, Indo-Pacific Strategy, China-Russia relations.

Introduction

Since the 1990s, China and Russia have upgraded their relations in various fields. In 2001, the heads of two countries signed the China-Russia Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation, which served as a prime legal framework for the relationship. That Treaty is generally recognized as an important milestone of the contemporary rela-

tionship. In June 2021, the two countries declared to extend that Treaty. China values the current China-Russia comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination for a new era, which “boasts strong momentum and broad prospects”¹. In February 2022, the two sides released a joint statement on international relations in the new era and global sustainable development, which “spells out the common position of China and Russia on how they view democracy, development, security and order”². Up to date, China has become Russia’s largest trading partner for 12 years. In 2021, their bilateral trade volume has consecutively surpassed 140 billion US dollars. Russia is one of China’s main suppliers of energy, including natural gas and coal.

The Indo-Pacific constitutes one important part of the external environment of the China-Russia relations. The Indo-Pacific as a geographical and strategic concept has been discussed in Asia and the Pacific for many years. Japan and the United States (US) declared their Indo-Pacific strategies in 2007 and 2017 respectively. This region has becoming increasingly crowded in terms of various power configurations led by the US to contain China, including the QUAD which was upgraded to the Summit level in 2021, and the AUKUS established in September 2021³. Since 2018, France, Germany and the Netherlands announced their own Indo-Pacific strategies one after another⁴. In April 2021, the Council of the European Union (EU) adopted the conclusions on an EU Strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific (CCEUSIP). Five months later, the EU issued the Joint Communication on the EU Strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific (JCEUSIP)⁵. This represents a recent momentum of western attention to the Indo-Pacific before the Russia-Ukraine conflict started in February 2022.

This article aims to address the implication of the EU Indo-Pacific Strategy on the China-Russia Relations, which is a new and little-researched theme. This article firstly reviews the literature on the China-Russia relations and the EU’s Indo-Pacific Strategy. After that it presents an analysis of the EU’s discourse on the Indo-Pacific. Using the methods of content analysis, it unveils the nature and ambition of the EU Indo-Pacific Strategy including the contexts, motivations, objectives, and approaches. Finally, it attempts to reveal the implications of this strategy for China and Russia and their relations.

¹ Xi Jinping’s address at the Opening Ceremony of the Plenary Session of the Sixth Eastern Economic Forum 3 September 2021 (2021), *China Daily*, September, 6. Available at: <https://language.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202109/06/WS613583b0a310efa1bd66d91b.html> (accessed: 08.03.2021).

² President Xi Jinping Held Talks with Russian President Vladimir Putin, February 4, 2022, *Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the People’s Republic of China*. Available at: https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjb_663304/zjzg_663340/dozys_664276/gjlb_664280/3220_664352/3222_664356/202202/t20220204_10638923.html (accessed: 05.02.2022).

³ The QUAD is a quadrilateral dialogue between Australia, India, Japan and the US. The AUKUS is a trilateral security cooperation mechanism between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the US.

⁴ See the official documents of three countries: *France’s Defence Strategy in the Indo-Pacific* (2019). Available at: https://apcss.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/France-Defence_Strategy_in_the_Indo-Pacific_2019.pdf (accessed: 05.02.2022); *Policy guidelines for the Indo-Pacific region. Germany — Europe — Asia: shaping the 21st century together* (2020). Available at: <https://rangun.diplo.de/blob/2380824/a27b62057f2d-2675ce2bbfc5be01099a/policy-guidelines-summary-data.pdf> (accessed: 05.02.2022); *Indo-Pacific: Guidelines for strengthening Dutch and EU cooperation with partners in Asia* (2020). Available at: <https://www.government.nl/binaries/government/documenten/publications/2020/11/13/indo-pacific-guidelines/Indo-Pacific+Guidelines+EN.pdf> (accessed: 05.02.2022).

⁵ *Joint Communication on the EU Strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific*. Available at: https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/104126/joint-communication-indo-pacific_en (accessed: 05.02.2022).

Literature review

The theme of this article is relatively new for academic literature in Chinese and English language on both the China-Russia relations and the EU's Strategy on the Indo-Pacific. Because the EU's Indo-Pacific Strategy documents were issued only after April 2021, the existing literature has not had a systematic analysis on it. The published work is mainly on the EU and its member states' policy on the Indo-Pacific before 2021 [1–13]. Some have analyzed the Indo-Pacific strategies of Germany and France [14; 15]. Few latest studies noted the EU's Indo-Pacific Strategy documents. One believed that “the EU and Russia are welcomed as additional partners” by the smaller Indo-Pacific nations but have limited influence in the region [16]. Another argued that the Association of Southeast Asian Nations' (ASEAN) strategic autonomy from ASEAN-US bilateral arrangements needs “extensive ‘look east’ (towards China) policies and ‘Concern the west’ policies (towards EU, US, Canada, and other western counterparts)” [17, p. 224].

The existing English literature on the China-Russia relations by Russian scholars and other scholars has touched upon the Indo-Pacific. In these discussions, the EU, which is often regarded as a power outside of this region, receives less attention than the US as a superpower and those players in the region such as India, Japan and the ASEAN [18]. Against the background of China-US rivalry, scholars mentioned the EU as a background factor within the West, which is a more relevant stakeholder in Eurasia than in the Indo-Pacific [19–23]. Scholars noted the enhanced cooperation between China and Russia due to not only the pressure from the West but also broader common interests [24–29]. Some argued that Trump's policies “drives Mosco and Beijing” closer together [30]. Others contended that the reactions of China and Russia depends also on “other regional powers”, which refers to players within this region such as the ASEAN [31].

In China, studies of the China-Russia relations have touched upon many fields with majority on politics, economics and trade, geopolitics and diplomacy, especially on the development of the China-Russia strategic partnership [32–40]. Yet, neither the EU nor the Indo-Pacific received much attention in the existing discussion. The US and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) received more attention than the EU [41–46].

Some Chinese researchers noted the common pressure of the US and the EU on both China and Russia. One paper noted that the expansion of NATO and the EU led to the unbalance of power in Europe and the lack of mutual trust between the EU and Russia, and that from Obama's rebalance strategy in Asia-Pacific to Trump's Indo-Pacific strategy, the US continued to shape containment lines around China, which constrains the broader Eurasia partnership between China and Russia [46]. Another paper argued that benign and strong ties between China and Russia, which attribute to their accumulated mutual trust and interdependence, leave little room for the US to use to divide the two [47]. Indeed, the two countries have formed their mutual perceptions when facing various challenges such as the West's sanction on Russia over Ukraine crisis and Trump's launching trade war with China. In addition, another study pointed out that Russia also paid more attention to India as a regional power alongside China in security and cooperation in Indo-Pacific region [48]. That study stressed a pragmatic and mixed picture of Russia diplomacy.

Some Chinese scholars also noted Russian researchers' work. One article on Trump's Indo-Pacific policy on the China-Russia relations by two Russian authors was translated

into Chinese, which mentioned that Russia is dissatisfied with the US's framework of Indo-Pacific, as it excludes Russia and will begin to interfere in the politics of eastern and southern Eurasian continent and thus undermine Russian proposal to cooperation in the Eurasia continent [48]⁶. It also discussed the concept of Indo-Pacific, but did not include the European Union at all in the text, implying that the EU is an extraterritorial power for the Indo-Pacific. Another Chinese scholar noted that for some Russian authors the thought of the human community of a shared future seems more inclusive than the US Indo-Pacific Strategy and Russia would benefit more from the former [50].

Feng Shaolei, one of the leading Chinese experts on Russia, recently argued that the decentralization of global transformation and the decline of the west would bring about new dimensions of the China-Russia cooperation in the new era [51]. He believes that China and Russia need to further lift their ties from "exogeneity" (mainly due to the US-led western pressure as key external pressure) to more "endogeneity". Of course, he also noted that Russia now clearly proposed a new nonalignment stance to extend its own independence or wiggle room. His insights on the driving forces of this relationship from exogeneity to endogeneity is very interesting as this highlights the key of the development of this relationship.

Therefore, there are some interesting questions to be further answered. One question is about the EU's role in this transition of the driving forces of the China-Russia ties from exogeneity to endogeneity. This article is to analyze the implications of the EU Indo-Pacific Strategy for China and Russia respectively and their relations. It also tries to catch latest development including the Russia-Ukraine conflict.

The EU's discourse on the Indo-Pacific

This research used qualitative content analysis method to understand the EU's discourse, which in this article refers to the discourse of the EU's supranational authorities. For the purpose of analysis, it is necessary to distinguish this discourse from that of member states. Yet, the EU shows a hybrid feature in external relations: its supranational authorities have limited competency and they often need support from its member states. The stances of member states play important roles in influencing and shaping the discourse of supranational authorities and vice versa. Thus, in order to better understand the EU's discourse, this research took the discourse of member states as a background and revealed the connections and differences between them.

The data includes official documents and webpages of the EU and its member states on external relations. The analysis took two steps. The first was to check how the EU's discourse on the Indo-Pacific changed in past years. A specific question is whether the EU had a single conception on this region in a specific document or webpage. Thus, the unit of analysis is at word level. The counts of words such as "India" or "Indian" were recorded. This step can outline the brief history of discourse in this regard.

The findings show that not until recently did the EU have a single conception on the Indo-Pacific. This is clear in its official webpages on foreign policy, in which Asia, Africa

⁶ Wang Xiaobo translated this article from Russian into Chinese. According to the limited information provided by the translator, the original article was by A. V. Torkunov and A. V. Lukin, and the English title provided by the translator is: The Impact of Trump's Asia-Pacific Policy in Promoting the China-Russia Ties. See: [49].

Table 1. Keywords analysis of the State of the Union (2015–2021)

	2015	2016	2017	2018	2020	2021
Africa/African	6	7	5	19	4	3
Asia/Asian	1	0	0	0	1	1
Pacific	1	1	0	0	0	0
India/Indian	0	1	0	0	0	0
Indian Ocean	0	0	0	0	0	0
Indo-Pacific	0	0	0	0	0	1

Note: Compiled by the author. All six documents include four by Jean-Claude Juncker (November 2014 — November 2019) and two by Ursula von der Leyen (December 2019 — September 2021).

and Pacific are separate regions listed parallel and there is no a single umbrella concept to cover them⁷. The State of the Unions by the two recent Presidents of the European Commission until 2021 had not clearly mentioned the concept of Indo-Pacific (see Table 1). Only in some other documents on foreign relations after 2016 did the related concepts begin to appear sometimes. For instance, the EU Global Strategy of 2016 mentioned “across the Indo Pacific and East Asian regions”⁸. In 2021, the EU has up to date issued two key documents on the Indo-Pacific: the CCEUSIP and the JCEUSIP.

The second step was to focus on the few latest key documents around the Indo-Pacific by the EU and France, Germany, and Netherlands. Comparison between the EU and its member states can highlight the subtle differences in perspectives. For instance, as shown later, these documents vary in ways of framing of big players such as China and Russia. Here, a working assumption is that if an official document explicitly mentioned one international player, it means the authority which issued that document regards that player as relevant player on this topic. So readers can go further to check whether that player was regarded as an ally, partner, friend, or foe. If a document did not mention one player at all, then readers may think more about the reasons why that player was not mentioned. Therefore, word counts somehow help illustrate the extent to which certain international players are relevant around the Indo-Pacific in the eyes of the EU or its member states. Table 2 shows the word counts of important players in key documents issued by France (2019), Germany and Netherland (2020), and the EU (2021). This table obviously indicates the difference between the EU and its member state in mentioning international players. It will be revisited later in more details where necessary.

In addition to word counts, more carefully reading was conducted to examine more details of the EU’s discourse in terms of the issue areas, relevant international players, and proposed actions. The below is about the two key documents of the EU: the CCEUSIP and the JCEUSIP.

⁷ See the EU’s official webpage, EU in the World. Available at: https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/area/geo_en (accessed: 02.10. 2021).

⁸ *Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe A Global Strategy for the European Union’s Foreign And Security Policy*, p.38. Available at: https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/top_stories/pdf/eugs_review_web.pdf (accessed 10.12. 2021). That original sentence reads: “Across the Indo Pacific and East Asian regions, the EU will promote human rights and support democratic transitions such as in Myanmar/Burma”.

Table 2. Keywords analysis of official documents of Indo-Pacific Strategy

	France	Germany	Netherland	CCEUSIP	JCEUSIP
	2019	2020	2020	2021	2021
United Nations	8	19	1	0	2
United States	8	3	0	0	3
NATO	0	8	7	0	0
G7	1	1	0	0	1
G20	0	11	0	1	4
Russia/Russian	2	4	2	0	0
China/Chinese	32	70	26	1	18
Belt and Road Initiative	1	3	3	0	0
Japan	10	29	15	1	22
Korea	13	27	13	1	14
ASEAN	3	63	20	4	31
Vietnam	2	20	2	1	7
Philippines	1	8	1	0	7
Singapore	4	10	5	1	8
India/Indian	41	60	17	1	32
Pakistan	4	20	2	0	5
Australia	13	21	13	1	12

Note: Compiled by the author. For the purpose of analysis, this table also include word counts of the Belt and Road Initiative, which will be discussed in more details later.

The CCEUIP in April

That CCEUIP defined the Indo-Pacific as “encompassing the geographic area from the east coast of Africa to the Pacific Island States”. It set cooperation as the theme and the tone of the strategy. It claimed the aim of the EU as “contributing to the stability, security, prosperity and sustainable development of the region, based on the promotion of democracy, rule of law, human rights and international law”. It defined the EU’s role as “a cooperative partner in the Indo-Pacific, bringing added-value to relations with all its partners in the region”. It underlined that the EU’s approach “should be principled with a long-term perspective, contributing to the EU’s capability to act as a global actor”. It stated that the EU would engage with those like-minded partners, including the ASEAN and other regional organizations. It stressed that “The EU’s Indo-Pacific strategy is pragmatic, flexible and multifaceted” so that in specific policy areas “partners can find common ground based on shared principles, values or mutual interest”.

It listed six fields such as working with partners in the region, global agenda, economic agenda and supply chains, security and defence, high quality connectivity, as well as research, innovation and digitalization. Regarding partners, the document stressed the aim of the EU as to “promote effective rules-based multilateralism”, through cooperation in particular with the ASEAN and other multilateral and regional organizations. Regarding supporting the global agenda, it focused on five issue areas including human right, green, ocean governance, disaster risk reduction, and the health sector. On the economic

agenda, it claimed to “promote key EU economic interests, principles and objectives including on sustainable development”, to diversify supply chains and to reduce strategic dependencies on critical raw materials, and to strengthen the EU’s strategic trade position through various trade and investment agreements in the region. On security and defense, it stressed “a meaningful European naval presence in the Indo-Pacific” and the cooperation with likeminded partners in the framework of CSDP missions and operations to address various challenges. On connectivity, it announced to adhere the international norms and highest standards and a level-playing field. On research, innovation and digitalization, it stated to cooperate in “key enabling technologies to stimulate green growth”, to promote digital governance through more ambitious global standards and regulatory approaches.

To summarize, the basic message of the CCEUSIP is that the EU will act as a harmless global player not an invader to the Indo-Pacific.

The JCEUSIP in September

Building on the CCEUSIP, the JCEUSIP restated that the EU “intends to increase its engagement with the region”. It set out four aspects of the Strategy, including the EU’s rationale, principles, approach, agenda, and key actions. Regarding the rationale, it underlined the role of the EU as a “natural partner” to reinforce cooperation with the region to address geopolitical dynamics, intense competition, military build-up, democratic and human rights issues in the region. It reaffirmed the engagement being principled and long-term, with eight pursuits from the rule-based international order to global demographic trends. The document seemingly wanted to include everything in the text to build an attractive image of the EU pursuing inclusive, open, fair, and a level playing field in the Indo-Pacific where everyone can benefit, through highlighting values and stances endorsed by the west. Of these principles, the document highlighted the human rights and democracy as well as various social rights from gender equality to decent work and humanitarian assistance.

Regarding the approach, under the subtitle of “partnership and cooperation”, the document stressed “a Team Europe approach with concrete initiatives at country and regional levels”, through which the EU works together with its member states. The document noted that the EU will reinforce cooperation with multilateral and regional organizations such as the ASEAN to promote “effective rules-based multilateralism” in the region. It mentioned that the EU will deepen engagement with the US and others that already have their own Indo-Pacific approaches. The document also mentioned to engage with the QUAD. The document was issued before the AUKUS. Otherwise, the AUKUS will probably also be included in this logic. In general, the document viewed the Indian Ocean as a “gateway for Europe into the Indo-Pacific”, and stressed the centrality of the ASEAN.

The document proposed seven priority areas, including sustainable and inclusive prosperity, green transition, ocean governance, digital governance and partnerships, connectivity, security and defense, and human security. These priority areas are the extension and specification of five issue areas of the global agenda and the EU’s own agenda in the CCEUSIP. While the six priority areas are basically low political issues, security and defense are certainly high politics. This is not very common for the EU’s foreign relations, because the EU often claims itself as a normative power and its military capability is basi-

cally in Europe with only some very limited military forces deployed outside Europe in various civilian missions by the United Nations (UN), such as peacekeeping mission in Africa and fighting piracy. What's more, in the past decades, the EU and its member states mainly developed economic and trade ties with Asian countries. The military, security and defense ties between them are not the mainstream topic. Therefore, the EU's concern of security and defense in this region inevitably invites worries about the EU's intention of disposing military force to infer or threaten peace and stability in the region.

The EU's ambitions

How to review the EU Indo-Pacific strategy from these documents?

Firstly, in temporal dimension, now the EU needs this strategy to officially claim its interest and share in the cake of the Indo-Pacific. In the past years, the EU has been facing various challenges including Brexit and Euroscepticism. Now the EU recognizes the Indo-Pacific as "the world's centre of gravity". Against the backdrop of big powers' declarations of their own Indo-Pacific strategies, the EU cannot afford to be absent from this race for charming cake of the new emerging global economic hub. In order to secure its own slice of the pie, the EU must firstly show presence and make its mark in this region. Thus, the EU needs its own version of Indo-Pacific strategy to squash into and compete for potential opportunities and interests. With the versions of France, Germany, and the Netherlands, finally the EU issued a version at European level to show a "single voice" based on the convergence and coherence of member states. These documents basically synthesized and extended the existing competences, mechanism, and actions of the EU in this region, and proposed new goals, initiatives and plans.

In the State of the Union 2021 in September, President Ursula von der Leyen of the European Commission shed special light on the Indo-Pacific. In that speech, she showed her framing of the region under the subtitle of a Europe United in Responsibility, claiming:

If Europe is to become a more active global player, it also needs to focus on the next generation of partnerships. ... In this spirit, today's new EU — Indo-Pacific strategy is a milestone. It reflects the growing importance of the region to our prosperity and security... Europe needs to be more present and more active in the region... So we will work together to deepen trade links, strengthen global supply chains and develop new investment projects on green and digital technologies.

For her team, the Indo-Pacific represents the "next generation of partnerships" and connecting to the region represents "a template for how Europe can redesign its model to connect the world" through the so-called Global Gateway, the EU's new connectivity strategy.

Secondly, this strategy is also an effort to show its solidarity and common stance and narrow down the internal differences on the Indo-Pacific in terms of scope of the concept, goals and priority areas. France, Germany and the Netherlands obviously have divergent perspectives on this region. For France, the Indo-Pacific spans from Djibouti to Polynesia. This space has a geostrategic coherence, inherited from long history. Vital maritime routes run from Indonesia to Madagascar, from Oman to Singapore, from Japan to Australia, and from China to Polynesia, and connect the largest demographic and economic bodies of the twenty-first century.

Furthermore, France views itself as “a sovereign power of the Indo Pacific” and has claimed “seeking to defend its national interest and contribute to the regional stability by upholding a rules-based and multilateral international order”. Therefore, France wants to play as a great power in the region with great national interest, ambition of global influence, and even reputation.

However, both Germany and the Netherlands acknowledge that different actors have various definitions of the Indo-Pacific in geographical scope. For Germany, the region is the whole area of the Indian Ocean and the Pacific where “strategic projections compete with each other”⁹. For the Netherlands, the region encompasses the countries around the Indian and Pacific Oceans, including the South China and East China Seas. The shipping routes through the Indian and Pacific Oceans that link Europe with Asia and Oceania are central to the concept. The region extends from Pakistan to the islands of the Pacific. Therefore, we see different understandings of the region.

In addition, it is not unusual for member states of the EU differ in objectives and priorities in external relations with non-Europe countries. Compared with France, Germany and the Netherlands focus more on low political areas including economic and trade ties, climate change, culture, international norms and multilateralism. Yet, it is unusual for Germany to include security and defense dimension in its strategy. This is not natural for Germany in the post-World War Two era. Although the rest 24 member states have not announced their stances on this region, it is natural that some are more interested in their near borders than the Indo-Pacific where they do not have vital interest.

Thirdly, the EU tries to show its own approach which is deliberately expected to be different from the US. The European approach is featured in objectives and ways. The prime goal of the US is to comprehensively contain China on which Donald Trump and Joe Biden have no fundamental differences. Regarding issue areas and ways, the US has determined to show muscles in both high and low political areas through various means, including pushing decoupling with China in economic and technology, directly deploying military forces around China and forming the QUAD and the AUKUS.

In contrast, The EU’s two key documents tried to highlight its strategic autonomy through showing its neutral, harmless, and contributing roles. Strategic autonomy is recently a hot topic for European leaders in internal debates. Although the EU included security and defense into dialogue and cooperation with partners in the region, the JCEUIPS did not even mention either the NATO or the US on security and defense issues while the CCEUIP did not totally (see Table 2). This implies the EU’s shaping its image of strategic autonomy. Compared with the US strategy on this region, the EU’s stance appears more flexible. At least, the key texts issued up to date claims the EU’s approaches as “broad-based and inclusive”, not explicitly exclude China or Russia. The EU has not up to date sent clear signals of containing China. In addition, the EU takes more pragmatic and indirect approaches, focuses more on low political areas, stresses the rules, norms, and values it endorses. The EU tends to view this region as a “key player in shaping the rules-based international order and in addressing global challenges”¹⁰.

⁹ *Policy guidelines for the Indo-Pacific region. Germany — Europe — Asia: shaping the 21st century together*, p.8.

¹⁰ See the factsheet document of EU strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, updated in February 2022. Available at: https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/96740/eu-strategy-cooperation-indo-pacific_en (accessed: 23.10.2021).

Yet, the CCEUSIP in April even did not mention the United Nations, only mentioned G20 (see Table 2), implying that the so called “rules” are only what the EU endorsed not necessarily international. The EU is apparently pursuing its own agenda in the name of international rules, norms and standards. In a word, the EU doesn't simply duplicate the style of anyone including the US.

To summarize, the EU Indo-Pacific Strategy is to officially show its interest and secure its slice of the Indo-Pacific cake. Through shaping the “single voice” of common stance among member states, the EU wants to highlight its strategic autonomy and own distinctive approach to, agenda on, and interests in the Indo-Pacific, which should be distinguished from those of others including the US. In other words, the nature and the ambition of this strategy is basically to enhance the legitimacy and uniqueness of the EU as a global player.

Implications for China and Russia

Based on the above analysis, this article argues that the EU's Indo-Pacific has important implications for both China and Russia as powers within this region. One caveat is that the implications of the EU depend on the implementation of this strategy in the coming years. That is, the implications will take years to unfold. This article does not aim to predict the EU's actions in this region which is far beyond its scope. It only tries to develop few hypotheses to be tested.

One main assumption of this article is that the EU's impact will be more concentrated on low politics than high politics. This judgment is due to various factors within and outside the EU. First, it is attributed to three facets of the EU itself: its limited military forces available to be deployed to the Indo-Pacific, it as one of the world's leading economic and trade power, and as a leader in global agenda on many low political issues including climate change and sustainable development. In contrast, the EU itself has much less influence on high political issues such as defence, security and military, on which it obviously depends partially on NATO led by the US. Arguably, the EU is largely a leader in low politics rather than high politics.

Second, the EU is facing various internal challenges, including debates among member states on how to better distribute the limited budget, military resources and diplomatic power. After all, there are up to date only France, Germany and the Netherlands released their Indo-Pacific strategy. It is natural for some of the rest member states to prioritize the near border regions such as Eastern Europe rather than the Indo-Pacific or other remote regions. Although in response to the current Russia-Ukraine conflict, some EU member states such as Germany declared to enhance their defense muscles, the EU's top defense priority arguably remains in its near border in Europe rather in Asia.

Third, in security and defense areas, the EU is facing not only discrepancies with the US and other allies but also diverging relations with local powers in the Indo-Pacific such as the ASEAN, Australia and India. There is a recent case supporting the above assumption. The disputes between France and the AUKUS in 2021 illustrate how fissures between the western allies developed into distrust and diplomatic disputes. In 2016 Australia signed a contract with France for the purchase of 12 conventional diesel-electric submarines. In September 2021, Australia, the US and the United Kingdom (UK) unveiled their new security partnership called “AUKUS”. Meanwhile, Australia scrapped the deal to ac-

quire French-designed submarines and decided instead to invest in US nuclear-powered submarines. Obviously, French government felt its trust with Australia was betrayed and viewed the trilateral move as a “stab in the back”. France recalled its ambassadors to the US and Australia for consultations. It is reportedly the first time in the history of France that such a decision was taken vis-à-vis these two countries¹¹. Because France is a main power pushing the EU Indo-Pacific Strategy, this experience of France is informative for the EU. It seems that Anglo-Saxon countries do not endorse an influential presence of European continental powers in the Indo-Pacific. The two groups of powers are to some extent competing to dominate the region. This case also shows the limitations of the EU and its member states in military capacities, and internal and external coordination in the Indo-Pacific in high politics.

Based on the above assumption, two hypotheses are developed. The first is that the EU Indo-Pacific Strategy will enhance the West as external pressure to China and Russia in the region, especially on low political issues. The issues range from trade and connectivity to regional governance and global agenda such as sustainable development. The pressure means more competition and disputes in economic growth and norms setting. In low political areas, the EU has more roles in normative agenda setting and economic competition in the Indo-Pacific. In these areas, economic concerns often interweave with normative discourse. The implications have two basic ways. One is direct on China and Russia respectively. The other is indirect mainly through ties with other powers and actors to affect the behavior of China and Russia. In order to ensure its strategic autonomy, the EU claimed to pursue “resilient and diversified value chains” and to uphold standards and regulations based on values and principles it endorses including sustainable development.

The second hypothesis is that increasing external pressure from the EU and the West in this region highlights the necessity of cooperation between China and Russia. This region is becoming a more crowded stage with the arrival of the EU. In response to this pressure, China and Russia will need each other more to consolidate their interests in the region. Of course, an enhanced China-Russia relationship is not what the West wants¹². For instance, the EU pressed China on stance towards the Russia-Ukraine conflict in 2022, warning “not to interfere” with sanctions imposed on Russia¹³. It is to be noted that in 2021 the EU became China’s largest trading partner again and China values its relations with the bloc. However, given the recent deterioration of political relations between China and the EU against the background of US-China strategic rivalry, enhanced cooperation with Russia seems more strategically necessary for China to sustain its international wiggle room. China and Russia indeed need more comprehensive cooperation from low politics to high politics to secure their respective territory and sovereignty integrity and geopolitical stability.

¹¹ Xinhua News Agency, France recalls ambassadors to US, Australia over submarine row. Updated on September 18, 2021. Available at: <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202109/18/WS614516d-da310e0e3a68226c5.html> (accessed: 25.09.2021).

¹² Chinese scholars have discussed the US’ dividing the China-Russia ties. See [42; 47].

¹³ Brzozowski, A. EU tells China ‘not to interfere’ with Russia sanctions (2022), *EURACTIV.com*, April, 1. Available at: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/eu-china/news/eu-tells-china-not-to-interfere-with-russia-sanctions/> (accessed: 01.04.2022).

China

The EU's tries to show its neutral, balanced, and flexible stance to players in the region. Four implications of this stance for China are worth noting.

First, the EU wants to take a relatively independent stance towards all players in the region. The voices of strategic autonomy get increasingly heard among France politicians and EU leaders, which urge reducing dependency on the US and pursuing the EU's own interest and capacity. This implies that the EU is reluctant to easily take sides in any geopolitical tensions, including US-China competition.

Second, the EU also seeks to diversify its economic and trade ties. Since 2020, China replaced the US as the EU's largest trading partner, and the EU became China's second largest trading partner following the ASEAN. The EU aims to ensure supply chains and value chains including key strategic goods, especially in the outbreaking of the COVID-19. Through diversification of trade ties, the EU expects to reduce its dependency on China and enhance ties with alternative partners. The EU's intention of diversification will undermine China's economic leverage vis-à-vis the EU.

Third, the EU's recent policy on China has become more mixed with cooperation, competition and confrontation. The JCEUSIP used one separate paragraph on China under the subtitle of "partnership and cooperation", implying China is different from other partners in the region. That document explicitly claimed "multifaceted engagement with China", including engaging, cooperating, and encouraging on common challenges and also "pushing back where fundamental disagreements exist". Thus, cooperation in areas including trade and climate change is a mutual beneficial option for both sides. According to the European External Action Service (EEAS), the EU Indo-Pacific strategy is "deliberately pragmatic, flexible and multi-faceted", which enables the EU to cooperate with partners in specific areas¹⁴. Yet, the EU also underlined competition and confrontation with China. In the State of the Union 2021 in September, President Ursula von der Leyen said, "it does not make sense for Europe to build a perfect road between a Chinese-owned copper mine and a Chinese-owned harbour". She underlined the EU's connectivity strategy called Global Gateway. In a sense, this is a European alternative to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), in spite that these EU official documents avoided mentioning the BRI (see Table 2). Therefore, although the EU's discourse tries to present a neutral and balanced stance towards the region, in its perspective the partners vary largely. Those so called "likeminded partners" are basically the EU's western allies. In contrast, for the EU China is more of a power to be scrutinized in many ways. Therefore, some Chinese experts on Europe recently called for more attention to the complexity of the EU [52].

This mixed stance towards China is also in accordance with a recent resolution on a new EU-China strategy adopted by the European Parliament in September 2021¹⁵. That resolution represents the EU's latest perception of China and their relations. It noted that China's pursuit of a stronger global role "poses serious political, economic, security and technological challenges to the EU". It underlined the "multifaceted nature" of EU-China

¹⁴ EEAS, *EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific*, 19/04/2021. Available at: https://eeas.europa.eu/regions/asia/96741/eu-strategy-cooperation-indo-pacific_en (accessed: 23.04.2021).

¹⁵ *European Parliament, A new EU-China strategy, European Parliament resolution of 16 September 2021 on a new EU-China strategy (2021/2037(INI)) P9_TA (2021)0382*. Available at: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2021-0382_EN.pdf (accessed: 17.09.2021).

relations, and China as a “cooperation and negotiating partner for the EU, but is also an economic competitor and a systemic rival in an increasing number of areas”. Thus, it urged the EU to “develop a more assertive, comprehensive and consistent EU-China strategy”, with which the EU Indo-Pacific Strategy “should be in conformity”.

Finally, the EU’s indirect impact on China is also worth noting. As it claimed, the EU has sought to enhance its ties with those “likeminded partners”. It has stressed to cooperate with the ASEAN, Japan, India, Australia, and others in building resilient, diversified and sustainable global value chains, green transition, ocean governance, digital governance, connectivity, security and defense. In particular, Japan and India are the EU’s first two “Connectivity Partners”, which apparently will lead to alternative projects to the BRI. The EU’s enhancing comprehensive ties with QUAD members will inevitably turn the geopolitical and geoeconomics balance more against China.

Russia

One key finding of this research is that neither the CCEUSIP nor the JCEUSIP mentioned Russia. In contrast, the two documents altogether mentioned almost all relevant players in the world and the Indo-Pacific (see Table 2). Given Russia’s global influence and geographical scope, this “omission” seems unexpected. What does this mean? Possible explanations are either the EU never thinks of Russia being geographically located in this region, or the EU deliberately excludes Russia on its discourse or radar screen of the region.

However, Russia is the elephant in the room, which is too big for the EU to totally neglect in the Indo-Pacific. Russia’s geographical scope makes it a big country of both Eurasia and the Indo-Pacific. In the Indo-Pacific, Russia has its own interests and concerns from high politics such as territory integrity and geopolitics to low politics such as economics and trade. Russia and Japan have territory disputes over the four Kuril Islands. India is one of the most important partners of Russia in the Indo-Pacific. Arms sales to India occupy a lion’s share of Russian weapon trade. India and Russia had joint naval maneuvers in the Indian Ocean. Russia also highly values India’s huge population, market scale, geopolitical location, and unique diplomacy. In addition, in order to seek economic opportunities and expand diplomatic influence, Russia recently began to enhance its relations in Southeast Asia and the Pacific through various bilateral and multilateral mechanisms including those with the ASEAN. To summarize, Russia pursues a peace, stable and prosperous Indo-Pacific.

In geopolitics, Russia has already been facing pressure from the West around its borders in the Western hemisphere. Against this background, Russia launched its military actions in Ukraine in February 2022. The Russian-Ukrainian conflict has already resulted in a new round of sanctions on Russia from the EU and its allies. Although the sanctions are mainly in economic fields, their consequence seems profound and far-reaching. The future expansion of the West in the Indo-Pacific will inevitably encircle Russia from the Atlantic to the Indo-Pacific. It clearly doesn’t server the geopolitical interest of Russia. Thus, Russia opposes the expansion of the NATO to the Indo-Pacific.

The EU’s ambition of increasing presence in the Indo-Pacific will bring about some new imputes to Russia’s geopolitical situation. The EU’s enhanced relations with Japan and Australia will boost the western influence in the region. Japan, as a key western player supported by the US and the EU, may become more assertive. For instance, Japan’s new Prime

Minister Fumio Kishida recently claimed the nation's sovereignty extended to the four Kuril Islands. In addition, upgraded EU-India strategic partnership will also attract more Indian attention to European powers as alternatives in security and defense cooperation. In January 2021, the EU and India launched a dialogue on maritime security and agreed to strengthen their cooperation at sea, including joint naval exercises. In this sense, the EU is contributing to the changing of power balance not only in Europe¹⁶ but also in the Indo-Pacific.

In low political areas, the EU has more roles in normative agenda setting and economic competition in the Indo-Pacific. The EU underlined resilient value chains and standards based on values and principles it endorses. One important issue area is connectivity. The CCEUSIP stressed the principles of “quality and sustainable connectivity” in all dimensions of connectivity — digital, transport, energy, human-promoting quality infrastructure projects. The JCEUSIP has a special section under the subtitle of Green Transition called Clean Energy and Transport, claiming the focuses of the EU on “mobilising energy dialogues, partnerships, and financial instruments for sustainable, secure and affordable energy” and “prioritizing a just transition towards a decarbonised, integrated energy system that takes into account and mitigates the impact on more vulnerable countries and regions”¹⁷. The EU's ambition in promoting agenda on sustainable development, green transition and climate change will generally strengthen the voices and values of the west in low politics of the Indo-Pacific. Furthermore, for the EU, the energy exporters in the West and Central Asia are alternatives to Russia. As the documents did not present more details of clean energy cooperation, it remains unclear whether or how the EU will seek alternative energy sources in this region.

Yet, it is certain that the EU generally pursues reducing energy dependency on Russia. If the EU attempts to diversify its energy supply in the Indo-Pacific, it will have an impact on energy market and geopolitical in Europe and the world. The EU's ambition of reducing energy dependency on Russia will undermine the leverage of the latter not only in energy market in Europe but also in international politics over energy transition and supply through North, East and South Europe. Nonetheless, this ambition will certainly face various challenges and difficulties in-and-outside the EU. For instance, countries like Germany and Hungary indeed rely on Russian energy and are reluctant to impose sanctions on Russia in energy areas. It is difficult for the EU to change its overall situation of energy supply in the short term. After all, the new and alternative energy transition projects cost time, finance and uncertainties related to global energy market changes.

Implications on the China-Russia relations

Firstly, China and Russia face common external pressure from the west which the EU Indo-Pacific Strategy will enhance. The EU is trying to squeeze into the region in various fields from low politics to high politics, even including security and defense issues. If some non-NATO powers claim to increase their military presence around Europe, European countries would naturally view this as threatening or provoking signal. In the same logic, the EU's increasing its military presence in the Indo-Pacific is naturally viewed by local countries as a threatening or provoking action. In addition, although there are differences

¹⁶ As the existing literature has pointed out. See [46].

¹⁷ *Joint Communication on the EU Strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific*, p. 8.

and even discrepancies between the EU and its western partners, the EU Indo-Pacific Strategy basically adds clout to the west in the region. In this sense, the EU's stance will lead to a more complex situation of peace, stability, and development of this region. Although the worldwide decentralization processes and the decline of the west seemly exist generally [51], the EU's ambition implies more concentrated presence of the west in this region, which constitutes increasing exogeneous pressure against both China and Russia.

Secondly, China and Russia need each other more than ever to safeguard their own national interests. The EU Indo-Pacific Strategy generally enhances the western influence which inevitably intensifies the race in the region. This move makes the US-China competition more drastic. While China feels mounting pressure, Russia faces a similar situation. There is increasing need for China and Russia to cooperate to protect their national interests in key issue areas, including their territory and sovereignty integrity, geopolitics, economic and trade (supply chains and value chains) and connectivity. In fact, China and Russia have demonstrated mutual support to each other's core territorial and sovereignty concerns. Facing the EU's diversification of supply chains and value chains, more cooperation in economic and trade ties including energy, raw material and agricultural products will be an attractive win-win option for China and Russia to sustain and boost their stability and development.

Third, the China-Russia cooperation is of importance for peace, stability, and development in the Indo-Pacific and the broader world. The stronger ties between them underpin various mechanisms such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization to assist Asian countries in coping with various challenges from terrorism to natural disasters. A closer China-Russia cooperation will also unlock potential in mechanisms such as BRICS and initiatives such as the BRI in connectivity, value chains, economic growth, and social development in the Indo-Pacific. In addition, China and Russia have similar stances on contributing to better global governance on various issues from security to sustainable development through making their own wisdom and voices globally heard.

Of course, the enhanced China-Russia ties does not simply mean alliance in old sense. Russia seeks an independent or near nonalignment stance. Meanwhile, as one of Chinese top diplomats said in October 2021, China is a "natural partner of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM)" and devoted to various partnerships building, including promoting South-South cooperation¹⁸.

Conclusion

This article addresses the EU Indo-Pacific Strategy which is a new research theme for the current studies of the China-Russia relations and of the Indo-Pacific. It contributes to these studies in several ways. Firstly, it presents the analysis of the EU's discourse on the Indo-Pacific, which reveals that not until very recently did the EU have a single conception of this region. It unveils the nature of this strategy of the EU in three dimensions, namely to officially claim its interest and share among big powers in the rush for the cake of the Indo-Pacific, to show its solidarity and common stance on this region, and to highlight its strategic autonomy and distinctive approach to the region from others including

¹⁸ Chinese State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi made the remarks at a high-level meeting marking the 60th anniversary of the NAM. See news in the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs: Available at: https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/wjzb_673089/zyhd_673091/t1913879.shtml (accessed: 13.10.2021).

the US. To summarize, its nature and ambition is to enhance the legitimacy and uniqueness of the EU as a global player.

Secondly, this article argues that the EU Indo-Pacific Strategy has important implications for both China and Russia as powers within this region. One main assumption is that the EU's impact will be more concentrated in low politics than high politics. This judgment is due to various factors within and outside the EU. Based on this assumption, two hypotheses are developed. One is that the EU Indo-Pacific Strategy will enhance the West as external pressure to China and Russia in the region, especially on low political issues. The other is that increasing external pressure from the EU and the West in this region highlights the necessity of cooperation between China and Russia.

Although the worldwide decentralization processes and the decline of the west seemingly exist generally, the EU's ambition implies more clout of the west in this region. While the implications for China and Russia are different respectively, the China-Russia relations face some opportunities. First, the increasing presence of the EU and the whole west in the region constitutes common exogenous pressure against both China and Russia. Second, China and Russia need each other more than ever in safeguarding their core national interests and sustain economic and social development. For instance, facing the EU's diversification of supply chains and value chains, the China-Russia cooperation in energy, raw material and agricultural products will be an attractive win-win option for them. Third, enhanced ties between China and Russia will in turn contribute to regional peace, stability and development, and better global governance. To sum up, the implications for the China-Russia relationship is basically pushing it towards more enhanced levels.

Finally, this article also presents several hints for future discussion. The first one is about the EU itself. The key hypotheses of this article are to be tested in the future. One related question is how the EU can keep its claimed strategic autonomy in the Indo-Pacific. The second is to explore how the EU's ambition in this region as an exogenous factor will trigger endogenous needs of further China-Russia cooperation. Up to date, it remains a question to what extent the Russia-Ukraine conflict draws the EU's attention back to Europe. The third is on the chain reaction of China and Russia back to the EU in the Indo-Pacific and Europe. Finally, future studies also need to draw on more academic literature in Russian and other languages.

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