

АКТУАЛЬНЫЕ ПРОБЛЕМЫ СОВРЕМЕННЫХ МЕЖДУНАРОДНЫХ ОТНОШЕНИЙ И ДИПЛОМАТИИ

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The EU's Indo-Pacific Strategy. Motivations, influences, challenges, and implications for China*

J. Junbo, F. Jiongsheng

Fudan University,
299, Guonian Road, Shanghai, 200433, People's Republic of China

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The European Union's Indo-Pacific Strategy (EU's IPS) is one of the most important geopolitical strategies of the EU in recent years, but the motivation behind the launching of this strategy, its influence and challenges, and the possible response of China as a major Indo-Pacific power, still need further study. Using various research methods including power transition paradigm, levels of analysis approach, as well as the traditional Chinese strategic framework of upper/middle/lower scenarios, the article endeavors to offer insights into the above research questions. The motivation of EU's IPS is the 'Geopolitical Awakening' to avoid the negative results of potential great power rivalry during a period of global power transition. The IPS will accelerate the identity transformation of the EU from a 'soft' multilateralist to a 'hard' pole in the multi-polarized world, increase geopolitical uncertainty in Asia, and remodel China-EU-US strategic triangle. However, the implementation of the EU's IPS will face multiple challenges, including gap in policy orientations among member states, different concerns of Indo-Pacific partners, and the EU's awkward position in the US IPS. The EU's IPS could bring about three possible scenarios of China-EU interaction in this region — pure confrontation, limited cooperation, or a positive-sum game. In this context, the Chinese government could effectively manage differences with the EU in Indo-Pacific, attempt to engage with the EU and together play a more active order-shaping role for the development of the region.

Keywords: The European Union, Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS), power transition, geopolitical influence, China.

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Introduction

Promoted mainly by France, Germany and the Netherlands, the European Union (EU) approved “EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific” in September 2021. This strategy formulated for the first time in the EU’s history reflects that the EU is accelerating its engagement in the Indo-Pacific region and is planning to integrate all of its decentralized and diversified policy approaches in the region to a more unified action. By taking this strategy, the EU aims at surviving and thriving in the new round of global geopolitical competition, as well as maintaining and promoting its international status as a key geopolitical player in the world.

The EU’s Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS) has far-reaching influences both on the EU’s foreign policy and for the world order. Scholars in the realm of international relations have conducted researches on this issue.

Firstly, some scholars analyze the text and the content of the EU’s IPS. They have pointed out that the strategy is focused more on low politics than high politics, and the aim of the strategy is to enhance the legitimacy and uniqueness of the EU as a global player [1]. Some other scholars put forward that promoting rules-based multilateralism and enhancing security and economic cooperation are the priorities of the EU’s IPS [2], while some of them have argued that a special focus on China stood out as the highlight of this strategy [3]. Chinese scholars compare the EU’s IPS with EU’s three “Asia Strategies” of 1994, 2001 and 2018, and point out that the transformation from Asia Strategies to IPS reflects EU’s strategic focus from economic interest to a broader field, including political security, and further towards great power competition [4].

Secondly, researchers have made comparative studies among the IPSs of the EU member states. Scholar argued that France’s IPS can be regarded as the most security-oriented, while Germany and Netherlands’ ones attached more importance to multilateralism [5]. A study of the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) pointed out that the similarities of the three member countries’ strategy were that they all stressed the importance of ‘inclusivity’, reflecting their viewpoint that the Indo-Pacific rim should be an area of mutually beneficial cooperation instead of a circus of confrontation [6]. Chinese scholars argue that France’s IPS is the most ambitious among all EU member states in pursuing ‘strategic autonomy’ and great power status, and France has the aspiration to re-balance the Indo-Pacific regional order. However, this ambition is restricted by France’s relatively limited strategic resources in the Indo-Pacific [7, p. 44–49].

Thirdly, scholars have questioned the long-term sustainability and actual effects of the EU’s IPS. Even after the introduction of the EU’s IPS, most the EU member states, especially the Central and Eastern Europe countries, are largely indifferent to it. Such passive attitude in the national level restricts the implementation of this strategy [8]. Some highlight that the outbreak of Russia-Ukraine conflict has further pushed the EU to turn its policy focus towards the aid of Ukraine and the security in its eastern flank, and the diplomatic resources that can be allocated to the Indo-Pacific have to be reduced [9]. It seems that the EU is engaged in ‘a bit of everything’ in its IPS, exposing that its strategic objectives are unclear and unorganized [10]. The complex internal structure and decision-making procedure, as well as the different institutional level of EU and the Indo-Pacific region also have negative effect on the EU’s IPS [11]. On the contrary, other scholars hold a more optimistic view, stating that although the EU’s influence in the geopolitical arena is

limited, it could contribute significantly in the governance of, for example, cyber and digital space in the Indo-Pacific [12]. A French scholar even argued that the EU could become a third pole to balance between China and the US in the Indo-Pacific [13, p. 95]. Also with a positive tone, some Chinese scholars argue that the EU's IPS is an exhibition of its 'principled pragmatism', and believe that EU's IPS will contribute to the development of small island developing states in the Indian and Pacific Oceans, and could increase the significance of regional pluri-lateral organizations in the governance of Indo-Pacific region [14].

Existing literatures have provided critical research concerns and valuable findings, but important questions still remain. How will the EU's IPS influence its pursuit of 'strategic autonomy'? What kind of change will the EU bring about to the regional order of Asia? What is the relationship between the EU's IPS and the US IPS? How will the major countries in the Indo-Pacific region, especially China, will respond to the EU's IPS? Based on the aforementioned researches and in consideration of these research puzzles, this article will further research the motivations, influences and challenges of the EU's IPS, and discuss the potential responses of the Chinese government towards it.

Considering the choice of research methods, in the first section the article will discuss the motivations of the EU's IPS through the power transition paradigm of international studies, highlighting the EU's understanding and responses to the transformation of international order. In the second and the third sections, by utilizing the levels of analysis method, the article will offer a comprehensive view of the influences and limitations of EU's IPS from the EU level, Indo-Pacific regional level and global level respectively. And in the fourth section, the article will introduce the traditional Chinese analytical framework of 'Three scenarios' — the upper scenario, the middle scenario and the lower scenario — to analyze the possible strategic interaction between China and the EU in the Indo-Pacific region.

Motivations: Power transition and the EU's 'Geopolitical Awakening'

"Indo-Pacific" as a geopolitical concept is originated from the writings of German strategist Karl Haushofer, who coined the term "*Indopazifischer Raum*" (Indo-Pacific Rim) in 1920. He claimed that although China and India, the two great civilizations in Asia, is traditionally viewed as separated by the Himalayas, in the modern time they can be regarded as an integrated geopolitical block connected by the sea lanes in the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Haushofer described the Indo-Pacific geopolitical block with the characteristics of "dense Indo-Pacific concentration of humanity and cultural empire of India and China, which <...> are geographically sheltered behind the protective veil of the offshore island arcs" [15]. During World War II, the Indo-Pacific concept was used as the theoretical basis for the establishment of German-Japanese axis against the Anglo-American alliance. Although Haushofer's geopolitical theory have been marginalized in the academia after World War II due to its notorious connection with the Nazis, the Indo-Pacific terminology has been rediscovered in the first decade of the 21st century. In August 2007, then Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe used the term in a speech during his visit to India. This speech re-conceptualized "Indo-Pacific" and made it popular again in the discourse of international relations [16]. And in November 2012, then United States (US) Secretary of State Hillary Clinton put forward that "the Indo-Pacific region is crucial to our future". This is the first time that the US leadership officially endorsed this concept

[17]. The Trump administration, though having fiercely criticized the Obama administration's foreign policy decision-making, still chose to inherit and enrich this strategic concept, and launched the first-ever US IPS in 2019. The Biden administration renewed the IPS in 2022, marking that the 'Indo-Pacific Pivot' has become a bipartisan consensus in the US. Taking the EU's launching of IPS into consideration, those rhetoric and actions collectively mark the resurgence of the Indo-Pacific concept on international stage.

What are the motivations for the EU, along with many Western countries, decided to launch the IPS? The realism approach of power transition theory could offer explanation. As was put forward by Kenneth Organski, the rapid economic development of a major country in the international system influences the leadership position of hegemonic country, and this situation is likely to cause power struggles, confrontations and even great power wars [18]. And now China — US competition is seen as a part of global power transition by many scholars and policy makers in the world. In this background, the EU, considering itself as a normative power or civilian power rather than a hegemonic power, has great concerns on power transition and is keen to avoid being caught between the potential confrontation between the hegemonic power and the rising power. At the same time, the EU is also trying to take advantage of the opportunity brought about by the rising power, in order to reverse its relatively declining trend. These considerations have led to the 'geopolitical awakening' of the EU. The IPS can be seen as a tool of the EU to enhance its strategic presence outside its traditional 'sphere of influence' — in particular Africa — and the response to the geopolitical competition in the world.

Rapid changes of international geopolitical situation

International power structure directly reflects the allocation of power in international society. Within this decade, due to the re-allocation of power among states, the international power structure has changed fundamentally. The Indo-Pacific quickly becomes a new and growing pool of power. This is the most important factor that stimulates the EU to formulate its IPS.

The development of the Indo-Pacific region has shown that this region will become a new wealth-creating and wealth-gathering center, and therefore it will emerge as one of the world's most eye-catching geopolitical sector of technological innovation and economic takeoff. New political players are rising in this region and they have strong interest to determine the agenda of global governance and even create new international regimes.

As the Indo-Pacific becomes a new center of power convergence, the EU has no reason to ignore it. According to the IPS, the EU has a clear understanding of the tendency of the development of the Indo-Pacific region, and tries to elucidate its irreplaceability in the region. It concludes in the IPS text that the Indo-Pacific region includes seven G20 countries, produces 60 % of world's GDP, and is home to three-fifth of world's population. It points out that Indo-Pacific has become the main driving force of global economic growth, especially considering its economic scale, population, consumption market size and increasing funds of R&D, etc. It defines the EU as an irreplaceable partner of Indo-Pacific region due to its importance in field of investment, trading and financial assistance (ODA) in the world [19, p. 1]. In all, the strategy describes Indo-Pacific region as a "natural partner" of the EU and the destination of its strategic extension.

Meanwhile, due to the increasing strategical importance of Indo-Pacific, international powers have been more actively engaged in this region or deeply adjusted the policies

to this region, which has caused the situation in Indo-Pacific more complicated, and also makes the EU face more competitive pressure in the region. For example, the United States is paying more attention on Indo-Pacific and has taken “pivot-to-Asia” strategy since the Obama Administration. When more American soldiers and warships move from the Atlantic and Persian Gulf regions to Indo-Pacific waters, the situation in the Indo-Pacific becomes more complicated and even more dangerous than before. In this context, the relations among major powers, such as the US, China, India, Japan, ASEAN and so on, are re-shaped.

Consequently, in order to seize the opportunities brought by the rapid development of the Indo-Pacific, and also to adapt to the changing political and strategical situation in the region, the EU has to re-position its policies to South Asia, Southeast Asia and Pacific regions as a whole.

‘Geopolitical Awakening’ of the EU

The power transition in world system has triggered the return of geopolitical thoughts in Brussels and the capitals of EU member states. For a long time, the EU has been regarded as an economic bloc, lacking strategic capability and even a unified strategic culture. To be more precise, geopolitical thoughts have long been a ‘taboo’ in the EU’s culture. After World War II, when Jean Monnet and Robert Schuman promoted European integration, their main aim was to overcome the problems caused by power politics and wars in the Europe. The Franco-German reconciliation and the success of European integration reflected the ‘obsolete’ of geopolitical thoughts, and the neoliberal concepts of shared sovereignty and democratic peace gradually replaced the geopolitical concepts [20]. The end of cold war was widely considered as the triumph of neoliberal political thought, which has made the geopolitical thoughts become even stranger for the Europeans. Although some EU member states did take part in military actions in Western Balkans, Middle East and African countries, the logic behind these actions are still neoliberal, as the openly declared aims were to ‘promote democracy’ or to fulfill the obligations of ‘responsibility to protect’. The Europeans largely believe that geopolitical conflicts have been an ever-past story in Europe, and the EU has entered the ‘post-historical paradise’ where the ‘perpetual peace’ can be achieved [21, p. 3].

However, the EU’s self-perception of ‘normative power’ has been seriously challenged in the second decade of the 21st century. The refugee/migrant crisis, the recurrent terrorist attacks, as well as Brexit, all represent the deep-rooted challenges that are unable to be solved by neoliberal approach. The political crisis caused by Crimea’s incorporation into Russia, and the military confrontation between Russia and Ukraine since February 2022, has turned the Europe (especially Eastern Europe) once again the forefront of the geopolitical conflicts. Facing this situation, the EU has to revive the geopolitical thoughts in its external relations. In 2019, after Ursula Von der Leyen assumed the presidency of the Europe Commission, she proposed to establish a ‘geopolitical commission’ which has the capability to deal with conflicts and crises [22]. Josep Borrell, the EU’s high representative for foreign and security affairs and Vice President of the Europe Commission (HR/VP), also stated that the EU has to ‘learn to use the language of power’ [23]. Similarly, French President Emmanuel Macron warned that unless the EU could act with strategic forces, The Europe will ‘disappear geopolitically’ [24].

Apart from those imminent challenges, the leadership of the EU and its member states believes that the most severe geopolitical risk in this era is China-US strategic competition. French President Macron has put it straightforwardly in his speech to French ambassadors in August 2019, asserting that the world will be centered around China and the US, and the core interest and even survival of the EU could be severely threatened, had the EU been forced to choose sides between the two [25]. The EU's HR/VP Josep Borrell also proposed that the strategic competition between China and the US could eventually lead to a 'new cold war' where the world is divided into two blocs, and the EU will be reduced to the 'colony' of one superpower. He argued that the EU should follow the so-called 'Sinatra doctrine', which means pursuing strategic autonomy, investing in the independence of the EU, and avoiding dependency on either side of the line [26]. Olaf Scholz, who took over the position of Angela Merkel and became Chancellor of Germany in 2021, warned that the EU should think preemptively on how to keep independent in face of the risk of a coming new Cold War [27]. As President Joseph Biden and his administration vowed to 'outcompete' China in the US National Security Strategy 2022, and as the US continuously endeavored to build political and economic blocs in the neighborhood of China, the risk of China-US standoff has increased.

The EU realizes that the Indo-Pacific could be the new 'hot spot' for geopolitical competition. In its IPS, EU states that intense competition has already taken place in the Indo-Pacific, especially around contested territories and maritime areas. The result is, military build-up in this area has become increasingly significant, while ideological antagonism has also contributed to the hostile atmosphere [19, p. 2]. In the worst case scenario, if a geopolitical fault line come into existence in the Indo-Pacific area, the EU could be forced to 'decouple' from China, its interdependence with Asia and Africa countries could be reduced, and its critical sea lines of trade and energy transportation through the Pacific and Indian Ocean risks being cut off. As the US is pushing forward financial sanction and technological embargo towards China, the EU is also concerned about the division of cyber, technological and financial network into two parallel systems in the Indo-Pacific, thus significantly increase the cost of the EU in its own business activities. Considering the unacceptable consequences of the geopolitical divide in Indo-pacific, the EU has to actively pursuing its independent IPS, in order to keep a 'proper' independent status between China and the US, step in to influence and manage the competition between the two sides when possible, and act as a potential leader of countries that do not want to choose sides between China and the US. Just as French President Macron said when he attended the Summit of Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) in 2022, '[France's] IPS is to provide dynamic balance in this environment', and France will try to keep an equilibrium of power which 'could not be the hegemony of one of those, could not be the confrontation of the two major powers' [28]. The EU can avoid the fate of being used as a pawn only if it transforms itself as a geopolitical player, and this is the important consideration behind the launching of the EU's IPS.

Comprehensive influences of the EU's IPS

The EU's IPS can be regarded as one of the most important regional strategies of the EU in recent years. It aims at regenerating the EU's overseas outreach and rebuilding the reputation of the EU as an effective and responsible global geopolitical player. As the EU's

IPS gradually unfolds, its influences have progressively extended while some challenges have been exposed. In order to comprehensively analyze the influences and limitations of the EU's IPS, the article will utilize the levels of analysis method of Kenneth Waltz in this section and the following section [29]. As the individual level in Waltz's method is not applicable to the analysis of influences and limitations, and as the regional powers in the Indo-Pacific are unneglectable partners of the EU in its IPS, a necessary modification has been made to Waltz's method and the following sections will instead focus on the EU level, regional level as well as the global level.

At the EU level: From 'soft' multilateralism to 'harder' multi-polarization

The introduction of the EU's IPS reflects and accelerates the transformation of the EU's political philosophy from the neoliberal approach of multilateralism to the neorealist approach of multi-polarization. Since its establishment, multilateralism has always been the political correctness of the EU [30]. As European Council President Charles Michel put forward that 'Multilateralism is the DNA of the Europe Union' [31]. The EU believes that by respecting multilateral norms, following multilateral rules and contributing to multilateral institutions, the EU could 'lead by example', increase its international reputation and gain a decisive status in the world stage. However, the effectiveness of this 'soft' way of leading has faded in the global transformation of power structure. As the geopolitical concepts like Indo-Pacific once again become the EU's official rhetoric, the Europe leaders realize that it cannot rely solely on multilateralism to achieve objectives. Instead, the 'hard power' concept of multi-polarization has gained more attention.

Compared with multilateralism, which focuses more on non-material elements like international regime and even political value, the concept of multi-polarization is consisted of additional physical factors, stressing the importance of economic and military capacity for a country to become a 'pole' in the world. Moreover, multilateralism indicates that all states, regardless of their size or developmental level, can and should be equal in world affairs. In contrast, multi-polarization implies a hierarchical world scenario, where the 'poles' could have primacy and influence over other states. When Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger famously put forward the term 'multipolarity' to describe the world situation in 1970s, they refer to the relative decline of American material power and the need to rebalance the material power distribution among major countries [32]. There is no doubt that Nixon and Kissinger's strategic approach is a realist's approach, taking primarily a country's economic and military capacity and its 'sphere of influence' into consideration, and paying less attention on whether it follows the rules and values of multilateralism or not.

Although the EU has mentioned 'multilateralism' in its IPS for several times, the strategy itself represents the EU's turnaround towards multi-polarization. This turnaround can be seen from the recent talks of some European leaders, which contains the expression of 'multipolarity' more frequently than ever. For example, in 2021 the EU's HR/VP Borrell stated that 'The world today is becoming more multipolar and less multilateral', and the EU should reconcile both dimensions and revive multilateralism in a growing multipolar world, by bridging the gap between the EU's economic power and its geopolitical power. Borrell stressed that multilateralism cannot be realized by itself, and the promotion of multilateralism has to lie on power politics in the current era. Hence, the EU has to become a

political pole in the multipolar world [33]. In the Shangri-la dialogue of 2023, Borrell expressed an updated version of his view, saying that the world is both 'bipolar' and 'multipolar', as China and the US have become two focal points of the international system, while many other actors in the world, including the EU, are trying to promote their own global agendas and making every effort to become a pole that is independent from China or the US [34]. German Chancellor Olaf Scholz chimed in with Borrell, stressing that the world of 21st century will be a multipolar one, and the Europe as a pole has to improve its ability to 'change and act' in order to withstand competition from the other major powers [35]. French President Macron outspokenly expressed his view that the EU will have limited choices in the few years- becoming the independent third pole between China and the US, or becoming a 'vassal' easily controlled in the turbulent world order [36].

To conclude briefly, multilateralism is still an important part of the EU norms, but the IPS has exhibited the EU's realization of the importance of multi-polarization in the turbulent world order. To achieve its major goals of balancing the China-US strategic competition, the EU must acquire enough power to project its influence. To become a reliable partner and effective leader of Indo-Pacific, the EU must prove itself to have enough physical or material strength. To avoid falling into a target or playground of geopolitical competition, the EU must defend itself with material capability. These goals can only be achieved when the EU is a pole of power instead of simply a facilitator of rules and values.

At the regional level: Increasing the geopolitical uncertainty in Asia

The EU's IPS intentionally remains some strategic ambiguity, and thus carries double-edged influence to the countries in the region. Although the strategy may bring opportunities for the development of the region, it could also cause new problems and complicate the regional situation.

On the one hand, the EU's IPS could bring about new resources for the development of the region. As is declared in the strategy, the EU intends to participate in the sustainable development and post-pandemic recovery of the Indo-Pacific region, and invests to value chains, green transition, biodiversity, ocean governance, digital transformation, connectivity as well as public health in the region [19, p. 5–16].

Until now, the most significant action the EU has taken is the launching of 'Global Gateway' strategy. Back into 2018, the EU adopted a policy plan in the name of 'Connecting Europe and Asia'. The aim of this plan was to invest in the construction of air, sea, and land transportation in Asia, in this way to secure the EU's energy supply while promoting the EU's ideas of sustainable and rules-based infrastructure construction [37]. Three years later, in coordination with the launching of the EU's IPS, European Commission released 'Global Gateway', an updated version of the 2018 policy plan. The new document in 2021 clarified for the first time that the budget of the infrastructure building plan will be 300 billion Euros in the period of 2021–2027, and a more comprehensive investment targets of digital, climate and energy, public health and education & research was added, along with continued focus on transportation [38]. Indo-Pacific region will be one of the major foci of 'Global Gateway', and the EU has carried out flagship projects in more than ten countries from the region [39].

The establishment of regular coordination mechanism between the EU and Indo-Pacific countries is another progress that is worthy of noting. The EU has, until now, held

two rounds of EU Indo-Pacific Ministerial Forums, and reached some consensus with Indo-Pacific countries. The first Ministerial Forum was held in February 2022, with the support of French Presidency of the Council of the EU. The forum invited the representatives from 30 Indo-Pacific countries, and its first and foremost aim was to promote the 'Global Gateway' initiative in the Indo-Pacific area. The participating countries agreed to enhance cooperation on areas such as security and defense, connectivity and digital, as well as mutual support on global challenges like green transition and illegal fishing [40]. During the forum, the EU also reached a joint declaration with several Indo-Pacific countries, which called on the making of an international legal framework of data protection and cross-border data flow [41]. On May 2023, the EU held the second Ministerial Forum with Sweden. This year's forum inherited the major topics of the forum 2022, and aims to significantly push forward the implementation of the EU's IPS [42].

On the other hand, however, the EU's IPS could also sharpen the competition in the region, no matter intentionally or unintentionally. There is no secret that the above-mentioned EU projects include elements of competition and even containment. As was made clear by European Commission President Von Der Leyen, the 'Global Gateway' is a geopolitical project, and it seeks to enhance the EU's competitiveness in the geopolitical game [43]. When it comes to the EU-Indo-Pacific Forum, it is worth noting that the press release of 2023 forum includes more ideological elements compared with the previous one. It stressed the importance of 'democratic values' in the headline, and mentioned that 'freedom of navigation and overflight' is a 'foundational principle' of regional security [42]. These wordings did not appear in the 2022 Paris forum. Apart from the influence of Russia-Ukraine conflict and the diplomatic style of the host country Sweden, another reason for this difference might be that the US was invited to the forum in 2023. In contrast, the 2022 forum, in line with French President Macron's pursuit of strategic autonomy, invited neither the US nor China.

The subtle change in the contents of the EU-Indo-Pacific Forum reflects that despite the European leaders' willingness to gain strategic autonomy from the US, in essence there is still a 'path dependence' effect in the implementing of the EU's IPS, which, sometimes, makes the EU's policy approach more similar to the US than not. On the security aspect, France and Germany naval vessels have entered the South China Sea and carried out military exercises in order to support 'freedom of navigation'. Moreover, the EU has developed its military cooperation and conducted joint naval drills with Australia, India and Japan [44]. Although China did not give fierce response to the EU's military conduct until now, these actions are no doubt against China's security interest, and could intensify the territorial disputes in this region. If the EU fails to deal carefully with security issues there, it will seriously damage the stability in the Indo-Pacific.

On the economic aspect, the EU makes no secret that one of its motives of launching the IPS is to reduce the degree of economic and trade dependence on China. European Commission President Von der Leyen expressed her policy of 'de-risking' from China before her visit to China in April 2023 [45], and this concept was soon echoed by the US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan in his remarks on economic policy the same month [46]. The EU-US coordination on 'de-risking' could trigger the removal of some industrial chains from China. Through its IPS, the EU has also taken steps to 'friend-shoring' its investment by reducing its interdependence with China while cultivating alternative supply chain and market in India and the ASEAN. The resumption of free trade negotiations of

the EU with India and ASEAN can be regarded as part of this project. Such politicalized intervention could destroy the original division of labor based on comparative advantage, causing disturbance in the economic development of the region.

On the ideological aspect, the EU's increased involvement could intensify the competition on governance models in Indo-Pacific. The EU has claimed to embed the European norms and rules in infrastructure construction and investment in Indo-Pacific. And the EU has unjustifiably condemned China's so-called 'debt trap diplomacy', 'vaccine diplomacy', 'economic coercion', 'environmental degradation' and 'violation of human rights' in its investment. Through these discursive stigmatizations, the EU attempts to squeeze out the Chinese investment while promoting EU's high standards of governance in its IPS. This will no doubt initiate and sharpen the competition between two governance models in the Indo-Pacific, which has no benefits to the pragmatic cooperation in this region.

At global level: Remodeling of China-EU-US strategic triangle

From the global perspective, the EU's IPS will change the world's geopolitical landscape, making the EU once again an unneglectable participator of geopolitical game. The EU has been experiencing a trend of 'geopolitical disappearance' in the second decade of 21st century, especially due to Brexit. The exit of the UK from the EU not only greatly reduced the economic aggregate of the EU, but also significantly weakened the defense capability of the EU, as the UK had the largest defense budget and the strongest capacity of overseas intervention among the EU member states. After Brexit, the EU has experienced a period of strategic retrospection, when its major foci were overcoming the multiple internal crises rather than taking part in the global geopolitical competition. Therefore, the so-called 'China-EU-US' strategic triangle, which was once prominent in international strategic studies, has been played down in recent years.

The launch of the IPS marks a turning point of the EU's strategic ambition, and represents the resolution of the EU to restore its geopolitical capability. The Indo-Pacific has been the center of geopolitical competition in the current era, and the 'return' of the EU to the Indo-Pacific reflects its political will to expand its geopolitical outreach. For a long time after the end of the Cold War, from a geographical point of view, Western intervention and great powers' competition were scattered in many spots of the world- from Africa to the Middle East, from Eastern Europe to Asia-Pacific. Today, the West is withdrawing forces partially or completely from some regions where it has intervened before. For example, NATO and some western countries' troops are withdrawing from Afghanistan, Iraq, and the Sahel. In converse, Western countries' engagement and intervention in the Indo-Pacific is increasing. This trend proves that the Indo-Pacific has become an important place for global powers' competition and a region that attracts the attention of all major powers, and the EU's IPS signals that it is amongst them.

Although the EU's engagement in the Indo-Pacific may not be as strong as China or the US, and the EU's complex, multi-layered decision-making process could negatively influence its policy implementation, the EU has still been taken seriously in the Indo-Pacific as a player that could have strategic significance. The US IPS 2022 recognized 'the strategic value' of the EU in Indo-Pacific, and paid attention to the EU's 'increasing regional role'. The US government even declared that its IPS is 'much like' the EU, having similar 'principled' and 'long-term' approaches, and both anchoring in 'democratic resilience'. The US

also proposed that it would endeavor to bring together its partners in the Indo-Pacific and Europe [47]. China also continuously acknowledged that the EU is an ‘independent pole’ and ‘strategic force’ in world affairs, and would like to deepen cooperation with European countries like France on strategic issues, and enhance mutual understanding with each other on international and regional security issues [48].

Therefore, it can be observed that even though the EU do not yet have enough ability alone to decide the evolution of Indo-Pacific geopolitical order, it could act as a player that both China and the US wish to strive for. For China, it hopes that the EU can truly act independently and autonomously in the Indo-Pacific to achieve regional peace and prosperity. For the US, it treats the EU as its natural partner, and look forward to absorbing the EU into its alliance, working together to contain China in the Indo-Pacific. Through the launch of its IPS, the EU has effectively and partly regained its geopolitical status and rebuild the strategic triangle among itself as well as China and US, where it could pursue benefits between the two major powers.

The multiple challenges facing the EU’s IPS

Through the launch and implementation of IPS, the EU has tried to adapt itself to the reality of global power transition, and shape itself as an active competitor of power politics rather than a target of this competition. Nonetheless, the EU’s IPS has encountered many challenges in the process of implementing, including concept gap among member states, difference in concerns among Indo-Pacific partners, and the EU — US divide between their interests in this region, etc.

At the EU level: Gap in policy orientations among member states

Before the launch of the EU’s IPS, three EU member states — France, Germany, and the Netherlands, issued their own IPS respectively, which indicates these three countries’ shared views are somehow embedded in the EU’s IPS. However, there are still differences among the three countries’ IPSs.

France is the first EU member that put forward the IPS. In May 2018, in a speech at the Garden Island Naval Base in Australia, French President Emmanuel Macron proposed a new concept called ‘France-India-Australia axis’, which marks the beginning of France’s enhanced engagement in this region. In 2019, French Ministry for the Armed Forces issued “France’s Defence Strategy in the Indo-Pacific”, mainly focusing on the Indo-Pacific regional security issue [49]. Later in the same year, the French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs released a document entitled “France’s Partnership in the Indo-Pacific”, which aimed to broaden France’s participation in various areas in the region [50]. France government appointed an ambassador of Indo-Pacific in 2020, and released a comprehensive IPS in 2022 [51]. President Macron has declared that France is an ‘Indo-Pacific country’, as it is the only EU member state that has several overseas territories in the Indian Ocean and the south Pacific. France’s IPS has strong ambition and a significant military color, in comparison with the EU version. The French government stresses that its IPS will ‘concretely rely on its permanent military presence of over 7,000 soldiers in the region’, and it vows to ‘closely monitor regional strategic changes’, while proposing more regular deployment of naval ships, submarines and aircraft in Indo-Pacific [52].

The German Indo-Pacific policy paper is entitled as 'Guideline' instead of 'Strategy', appearing to be more cautious and low-profiled when it handles issues related to geopolitical affairs. Due to Germany's cautiousness on developing military capacity after World War II, the purpose of this guideline is not to project German military power to Indo-Pacific, but to deepen its overall cooperation with the region. In Germany's Indo-Pacific Guideline document, it mainly focuses on low-politics issues such as climate change, connectivity, as well as economic and trade cooperation. Although there is one policy field in this guideline called 'strengthening peace, security and stability', its major contents are focused on civil security and non-traditional security threats, like cross-border armed crimes, anti-terrorism, and anti-piracy, etc. [53]. After the tripartite 'traffic light coalition' of SPD/Grüne/FDP came to power, it has added some certain military elements to Germany's Indo-Pacific policy, but such elements still remain vague and limited [54].

Similar to Germany, the Netherlands also names its Indo-Pacific Policy paper as 'guideline' instead of 'strategy', and it also focuses more on the EU's 'civilian capabilities' like economic interdependence and the advanced technology in assisting the Indo-Pacific countries to combat Covid-19 pandemic. In the field of security, the Netherlands selects arms control as its major focal point, and it also does not have much interest in involving directly in the military issues of Indo-Pacific. Another characteristic of the Dutch Indo-Pacific Guideline is, as a relatively small state, the Netherlands highly recommends the 'Europeanization' of IPS, rising it from individual member states to the European level [55].

Therefore, although the current Indo-Pacific document issued by the Europe Union is stimulated by France, Germany and Netherlands, the detailed goals, ways and orientations of the strategy among member states, just like among France, Germany and Netherlands, are different. According to the Lisbon Treaty and Treaty on the Functioning of the Europe Union, the EU's primary external actions must adopt the 'consensus' voting rule, and the effect and implementation of the IPS of the EU should be processed in a comprehensive manner. In the middle-to-long-term, if lacking proper policy coordination, the different orientations of leading countries may cause policy divide in the implementation of the EU's IPS.

At regional level: Different concerns of intra-regional partners

The EU's IPS lays great emphasis on cooperation with regional partners, especially with India and the ASEAN. However, the major concern of India and ASEAN could be different with the EU, and their willingness of following the EU's policy approach remains in question.

India has always regarded itself as an independent major power, or to put it straightforwardly, a regional hegemon of Indian Ocean. India has long regarded the Indian Ocean as 'India's Ocean', and hopes to further promote its interests in Southeast Asia and East Africa where a great number of populations of Indian descent inhabits. It has also endeavored to extend its influence to the Pacific region, and strengthen political and economic relations with the US and other Western powers. As a country with extremely strong 'non-align' strategic heritage, India is no doubt unwilling to give up its independent status or follow the Europe Policy approach without condition [56].

The EU has upgraded its strategic partnership with the ASEAN, but the gap between the EU and ASEAN's development level makes it difficult for them to align their strate-

gies, especially in the regions where the ASEAN needs to meet the demands of the high-level cooperation with the EU. The EU has put forward high environmental and social standards in its IPS. However, for ASEAN members, the EU's excessive high standards are difficult to be incorporated, as most ASEAN member countries are still relatively underdeveloped and the resource for surveillance and governance on environmental and social issues are relatively scarce. If the EU endeavors to use political and ideological coercion on the ASEAN and force them to accept the EU's values and technical standards, this will be seen as an offence on ASEAN member states who cherish sovereign independence and economic development.

The EU's few experience in infrastructure construction in developing countries is another challenge for its cooperation with regional partners. The effectiveness of the EU's foreign aid and development cooperation has been widely criticized as 'slow', and developing countries have criticized that the EU's foreign aid contains too much additional conditions. It is also a challenge for the EU to mobilize its private enterprises to invest in the underdeveloped areas where profit cannot be maximized [57]. All these have indicated that there are no special advantages for the EU to carry out its developmental programs and attract the developing countries in Indo-Pacific region, or even encounter great difficulties related to financing, resettlement of migration population, local resistance or natural disaster, etc. Therefore, the EU's envisage may be eclipsed by the real difficulties in developing countries.

In short, the Indo-Pacific is not a 'colony' region that external powers can enter freely. In this region, there are countries and powers with a strong sense of self-dominance and independence. The goals, principles, and actions of their own policies do not fit with the EU's IPS in all areas.

At global level: Facing an awkward position in the US IPS

Concerning the EU — US relations, the EU's IPS faces challenges from the international blocs established by the US in the Indo-Pacific. The US has set itself as the core of some cooperative frameworks in the region, and has established several mechanisms to assure and consolidate its position. However, there exists an interest gap between the EU and the US, and some actions taken by the US will dilute or challenge the effects of the EU's IPS and undermine its influence in the region.

It can be said that the EU's IPS is not mainly aimed at containing China. It tries to minimize such containment elements to the lowest level, or hide these elements behind the overall framework of the regional governance. This determines that at the strategic level, it is not easy for the EU, to a certain extent, to cooperate with the US in the region to realize the EU's strategic objective, as containing China somehow is the no. 1 priority of the US.

A most representative example of the awkward position of the EU, is the establishment of the AUKUS framework by the US, UK and Australia in September 2021. According to press coverage, it was the Australian official who first reached their US counterpart as early as April 2021, and sought the US assistance of technological transferring which could enable Australia to construct nuclear-powered submarines. The UK has played the role as a broker between Australia and the US, and decided to take part in the alliance as part of its 'Global Britain' strategy after Brexit [58]. The major aim of this military bloc,

as was released by relevant governments, is to maintain the US and its allies' competitive edge in undersea military technology over China [59]. However, the newly-established alliance has challenged the EU's IPS in two aspects.

On the one hand, the alliance directly damaged the cooperation between France and Australia under France's IPS framework. France has regarded Australia as a key partner in its 'Indo-Pacific axis' among Paris, Delhi and Canberra, and has concluded a multi-billion contract with Australia, aiming to build twelve new submarines for the Australian navy. After the establishment of AUKUS, Canberra abruptly canceled the contract with France, causing fury in Paris and Brussels. Then French Foreign Minister Le Drian called the cancellation as a 'stab in the back', and condemned the Australian governments as 'betrayed the trust' of France [60]. He even went further to accuse the US government of taking 'unilateral, brutal, and unpredictable decision' against the Europe allies' interest. France even recalled its ambassadors of the US and Australia in protest of their action [61]. The European Commission President Von der Leyen also expressed her dissatisfaction in interview, saying that it is 'unacceptable' that one of the major member countries of the EU was humiliated, and she urged the US government to make further clarifications [62]. The EU's HR/VP Borrell, called the AUKUS as an 'awkward wake-up call' of the EU to seek strategic autonomy [63]. The establishment of AUKUS has made a fresh warning to the EU that as the US is conducting 'Indo-Pacific pivot', the EU's interest could easily be sacrificed by the US, and it would be difficult, if not impossible, for the EU to turn this tide.

On the other hand, the establishment of AUKUS indirectly injured the EU's interest by intensifying the confrontation between China and the US in the Indo-Pacific. A key element of the AUKUS is to provide Australia, a non-nuclear-weapon state, with nuclear-powered submarines. It is obvious that this deal has taken advantage of a loophole in the international non-proliferation regime, and was seen as a 'damaging precedent' even by American scholars [64]. China, as the major target of AUKUS, strongly opposed the form of this collision, and has called AUKUS as 'stimulating an arms race, undermining the international nuclear non-proliferation system and damaging regional peace and stability' [65]. From every perspective, AUKUS is a catalyzer of the already-turbulent Indo-Pacific regional security situation. This is no doubt contrary to the strategic interest of the EU, which aims at avoiding being involved into the competition between China and the US.

Apart from AUKUS, the US has even established more blocs in the Indo-Pacific region, causing worrisome atmosphere that an 'Asian NATO', a multilateral military alliance led by the US and aiming at containing China, may emerge in the Indo-Pacific [66]. The most remarkable endeavor of the US is the forming of Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), consisting of the US, Australia, India and Japan. China has sounded the alarm after the forming of the QUAD, as it could become a 'crescent encirclement' from China's eastern seashore to South China Sea, and extending towards the southwestern Himalaya Mountains, causing a 'chain reaction' among China's unsettled land and maritime borders. China is especially concerned that India could 'align with the far and against the near', deepen military cooperation with the US and break the delicate balance between the two Asian giants [67]. Moreover, the US has increased the Indo-Pacific element of the 'Five Eyes' intelligence alliance, as the two major extraterritorial members, Canada and the UK, have launched their own IPS or involved more frequently into Indo-Pacific affairs. In 2022, the US established another 'mini-lateral' coalition with India, Israel and United Arab Emirates. The so-called 'I2U2' alliance shows the ambition of the US to connect its

geopolitical blocs of Middle East and Indo-Pacific, and integrate its strategy towards the Asian continent in a more cohesive manner. For the EU, these newly-established alliances further narrowed its strategic choice in the Indo-Pacific, depleted the potential partners of the EU, and pushed the EU to choose between marginalization in the region, or following the US and getting entrapped in the China-US strategic competition.

Consequently, the EU's IPS will be challenged by the dilemma — it should collaborate with the US in Indo-Pacific in order to strengthen transatlantic partnership which is a core dynamic to implement its IPS, but at the same time, this collaboration would partly lose its independence which is also a core dynamic for the EU's IPS.

China's potential responses to the EU's IPS

China is one of the most important geopolitical actors in the Indo-Pacific region, and China's attitude towards the EU's IPS is one of key elements for its success or failure. Until recently, the Chinese government still carefully observes the EU's IPS and does not give clear comments on it. In comparison, China has already criticized the US IPS as a disturbance to region order and its strategic goal will no doubt fail [68]. This stark comparison reflects that China is still striving for a better and cooperative scenario with the EU in the Indo-Pacific. Therefore, this section will discuss the possible scenarios of China's relationship with the EU in Indo-Pacific, and the policy recommendations for both sides to achieve the best scenario.

To make the discussion more concrete and contribute to the methodology of strategic analysis, the article will try to make use of the traditional Chinese analytical framework of 'three scenarios'. In ancient Chinese history, when a political or military advisor carried out strategic plans that are of vital importance for a country, usually three possible scenarios will be listed for the decision-maker to choose [69]. *Shangce* (The upper scenario) is the best scenario, but it is usually difficult to achieve due to the restraints in the resources and the high demand for the resolve of the decision-maker. *Zhongce* (The middle scenario) is the highest possible scenario, but may not be beneficial enough for the country and thus needs to be maneuvered to achieve the positive result. And *Xiace* (The lower scenario) is the least-favorable scenario that should only be considered by the decision-maker when there are no better options. For the upper scenario, the advisor will try to find the positive factors in the circumstance. For the middle scenario, the advisor will concentrate on the current trend and offer a balanced view of both positive and negative factors. And for the lower scenario, the advisor will remind the decision-maker of the dangers and risks in the reality. The following part will discuss the three scenarios accordingly.

The three possible scenarios of China's relationship with the EU in Indo-Pacific

The lower scenario for China is, the EU is unable to keep a balanced stance in the Indo-Pacific, and actively or passively follow the US's geopolitical confrontation with China. This hypothetical situation will only happen when the US strategic competition against China evolved into a 'new cold war'. Some European scholars have argued that a new cold war has already occurred after the Russia-Ukraine conflict [70], and a large number of European citizens have expressed their concern that they could be drawn

into this new cold war, if the EU institution and governments of the member states cannot handle the geopolitical conflict properly [71]. Based on these analysis, the article will take the situation of 'new cold war' into consideration as the lower scenario. If this situation really happens, the EU could be forced to pick sides. On the military aspect, the EU might promote defense cooperation with QUAD or other US-led blocs. On the economic aspect, the EU would try to 'decouple' from China in trade and investment, carry out strong 'friend-shoring' strategy, and transfer European investment from China to India or Southeast Asia. On the ideological aspect, the EU could further stigmatize China on issues like political regime and human rights and portray China as a 'threat' to the 'liberal world order'. In this scenario, the EU's IPS will be more similar with the US IPS, which have a keynote of containing and weakening China [72, p. 146]. Under such circumstance, China will tend to interpret the essence of the EU's IPS as 'provocative' towards China and take a tough response including military standoff, economic sanctions and diplomatic downgrading.

The middle scenario is, the EU will not openly contain China, but take a moderate step to 'hedge' towards China. As European Commission President Von der Leyen is pushing forward the seemingly balanced stance of 'de-risking' in her China policy, this scenario has gained the highest possibility [73]. On the one hand, the EU would keep a neutral stance militarily, restrict its actions on hotspot regions like Taiwan Strait and South China Sea, and avoid joint military operations with the United States. On the other hand, the EU would not take a high-profile on the economic policy towards China. The EU would leave the major part of interdependence with China undisturbed, while working to 'diversify' from China on some 'vulnerable' areas, and searching substitute supplies in the Indo-Pacific countries. The EU has started to take 'diversification' actions in areas such as raw material, rare earth elements, and some high-technology sectors such as data collection and storage, 5G communication, and interactive social media [74]. Under this situation, China would take a relatively flat attitude towards the EU's IPS, seeking cooperation in regional governance when possible, in areas such as environmental protection, regional security, climate change and transnational crimes. China and the EU may burst into disputes in some specific issues of trade and investment, as was shown in the already declared EU's anti-subsidy investment into China's electric vehicles [75], but the mainstream of bilateral cooperation in the Indo-Pacific could remain stable.

The higher scenario is, the EU might realize that, if the IPS was strongly resisted by China, it would not reach its goals, and also would not bring stability and peace in the Indo-Pacific region. Therefore, the EU would take a more pragmatic approach towards China in the Indo-Pacific and play down the confrontational tones. The evidence is, in fact the EU and China have established multiple cooperation mechanisms and platforms that are relevant with Indo-Pacific development. Among them the most well-known mechanism is the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). The AIIB is a multilateral developmental investment mechanism that mainly focuses on the infrastructure development in the Indo-Pacific, and in fact, 19 EU member countries have acquired the membership of AIIB, including France and Germany. Although the cooperation between China and EU under the AIIB was negatively influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic, both sides have shown their willingness to resume the cooperation in 2023. During the China-France 9th High Level Economic and Financial Dialogue on July 29, 2023, as well as the 3rd China-

Germany High-Level Financial Dialogue on October 1, 2023, China, France and Germany have reached consensus on strengthening coordination and cooperation under the framework of AIIB [76; 77]. This example has indicated the cooperative potential between China and the EU in Indo-Pacific. If the EU's IPS could exhibit a more positive attitude on the joint developmental projects between EU and China like AIIB, the EU's IPS could be more optimistically regarded as an opportunity by the Chinese government, and China would be more eager to strengthen broader cooperation with the EU. The two sides could even deepen tripartite cooperation with third country in the Indo-Pacific.

Policy recommendations for China to strive for the best scenario

China has invested significant diplomatic resources to engage with the EU in 2023. This reflects Beijing's strategic judgement that a stable China-EU relationship will be beneficial for China to withstand the harsh pressure from the US. In the Indo-Pacific region, it is also possible for China and the EU to achieve a positive-sum game. In order to seek the best scenario shown above, China could take the following policy choices.

Firstly, China could send clear signal to the EU that redlines on territorial sovereignty cannot be crossed. For China, the most significant risk in the EU's IPS is, the EU may directly involve in the Taiwan issue or China's land and maritime dispute with neighboring countries, thus making the regional situation more complicated and China-Europe relations more unpredictable. However, as the EU's military capacity could not support a large-scale overseas deployment, its intervention in these regions will be highly symbolic. China could attempt to form a stable and controllable interactive mode between the Chinese and the EU navies in South China Sea or the Taiwan Strait, by guarantee a double-redline that China's territorial integrity should not be damaged, and the minor confrontational postures between naval ships should not escalate into a major conflict that is unwilling to be seen by both parties.

Secondly, China could endeavor to assure that its interdependence with the EU will not be harmed by the 'de-coupling' or 'de-risking' rhetoric. A major difference between the EU and the US IPSs is the relative economic pragmatism of the former. The EU has repeatedly stressed that a comprehensive 'decouple' from China will be neither possible nor beneficial. Therefore, China should distinguish the EU's economic approach from the US, keep offering fair and convenient business environment for the EU enterprises in China, and encourage joint projects between Chinese and the Europe enterprises in Indo-Pacific. By strengthening the economic bond between China and the EU, China could achieve the 'mutually assured interdependence' with the EU and avoid being isolated by the US and its allies [78].

Thirdly, China and the EU should deepen dialogues on Indo-Pacific affairs. As the EU has shown its resolution to become a power in Indo-Pacific, China should face up to the EU's strategic logic and endeavor to find common grounds with the EU, making sure that the EU can be a friend, or at least not an enemy in China-US strategic competition. Therefore, China could deepen the 'Blue Partnership' relation with the EU, and establish more diplomatic or track II diplomacy dialogues with the EU on Indo-Pacific issues, focusing primarily on low sensitivity issues like ocean governance and regional development. China and the EU could exert 'complementary' and even 'concerted' order-shaping roles in the Indo-Pacific, and open up new room for China-the EU cooperation [79].

Conclusion

Partly by launching IPS, the EU makes an important turn from a neoliberal value advocator to a geopolitical player in the turbulent world order. Although facing many challenges, the EU's IPS still has significant potential and could generate far-reaching effects in regional and global geopolitical competition. The key point of the EU's IPS is to keep 'strategic autonomy', avoid picking sides and maintain a necessary distance from the IPS of the US. However, this delicate balance is difficult to keep for the EU in the harsh geopolitical competition. The Chinese government, a long-term supporter of the EU's political and diplomatic autonomy, should further its engagement with the EU, maximize the positive elements in the EU's IPS, thus promoting regional stability and prosperity.

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Autors' information:

Jian Junbo — Associate Professor; jianjunbo@fudan.edu.cn

Fang Jiongsheng — PhD; jf Fang20@fudan.edu.cn