



TRUMP'S RETURN AND THE INDO-PACIFIC: A STRATEGIC WINDOW FOR EUROPE?

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An AI-Generated Picture of Naval Deployments. Source: Canva (AI picture generator)

Donald Trump's return to the White House and his 'America first' policy is set to amplify US-China tensions, sharpening the Indo-Pacific's role in global geopolitics. This presents both a strategic opportunity and a stark challenge for the European Union (EU).

However, as outlined by former High Representative Josep Borrell [last year](#), EU capacities are greatly constrained by the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war and the rise of nationalist leaders who may commit less to

distant theatres – like the Indo-Pacific – amidst a widespread cost-of-living crisis.

Nevertheless, the Indo-Pacific is a vital region for the EU. In 2019, trade exchange between the Indo-Pacific and Europe accounted for [€1.5 trillion](#). About [90%](#) of EU external trade is seaborne and [40%](#) of its trade transits through the region, including the critical resources and technologies the Union relies upon.

Acknowledging these stakes, the EU unveiled its [Indo-Pacific Strategy in 2021](#), which materialized through initiatives such as naval exercises conducted by France, Germany, and Spain.

In parallel, China's growing influence undermines European economic interests, thus prompting efforts to reduce dependencies and secure supply chains. Such initiatives include the [Critical Raw Materials Act](#), which highlights the EU's resolve to diversify its resource procurement from China.

Apart from economic concerns, the EU perceives China's actions in the South China Sea and Korean Peninsula as challenging the global rules-based order and maritime security the EU promotes, threatening maritime trade and security. Such tensions challenge European values and call for greater involvement.

Limits to the European Involvement in the Indo-Pacific

The ongoing Russia-Ukraine war is the greatest limitation to the EU's involvement in the Indo-Pacific. Despite providing over [€120 billion](#) in aid, the war does not show signs of ending soon, with senior military figures warning about an [escalating global conflict](#) with the [engagement of North Korea](#) in the war.

In this regard, Trump mentioned on several occasions that he may stop support for Ukraine and force a [truce or peace](#) between Moscow and Kyiv. This urgent situation calls for the Union's full attention at the expense of other regions.

Looming economic pressures aggravate these challenges. The plausible shift of American priorities away from Europe and the Russia-Ukraine war paired

with upcoming [American tariffs](#) on EU goods will further limit Europe's ability to project power overseas.

Political divisions echo these economic limitations. For example, the 27 EU members have different interests and levels of involvement with Beijing. While some, namely Southern and Eastern European states, favour adopting economic pragmatism to defend their economic interests, others push for distancing from China and aligning closer to the US.

Domestically, the rise of nationalist leaders, such as Meloni in Italy and Orbán in Hungary, could prioritize domestic concerns at the expense of the EU's willingness to intervene outside Europe. This inward turn complicates presenting a unified EU strategy.

As a result, concrete, large-scale initiatives have yet to materialize. Despite a plethora of slogans and declarations, EU efforts pale in comparison to the US regional footprint, exemplified by its 'hub-and-spoke' network of alliances with the Indo-Pacific 4 (IP4) – Japan, ROK, Australia, and New Zealand.

While France and Germany have increased [defense spending](#), the European naval presence remains minute. Even France, the [most active EU actor](#) in the Indo-Pacific, maintains a limited diplomatic and naval presence – with 7,000 personnel and five military commands. Even though naval exercises signal intent to further engage the Indo-Pacific, the EU's Indo-Pacific Strategy remains largely symbolic.

What Does Trump 2.0 Mean for the Indo-Pacific and the EU?

While Trump's decisions are often unpredictable, he will likely strengthen China's containment in the Indo-Pacific. Two main Indo-Pacific scenarios are plausible, both of which leave room for the EU to assert itself.

First, Trump might pursue more bilateral, ad hoc, and transactional relations – as during his first term – at the expense of multilateral initiatives such as the Quad. He may also pressure allies like Tokyo and Seoul to increase their defense spending, as hinted by [similar demands](#) during his first mandate. The Union could

grab such an opportunity to fill the gaps left by US unilateralism as regional powers might be more incentivized to engage with Europe.

Alternatively, the Trump administration could consolidate its regional alliances to further pressure on Beijing, leaving less room for a distinct EU strategy. In this scenario, the EU could align its Indo-Pacific Strategy with NATO and leverage American resources to bolster its regional presence. Cooperation with the US Seventh Fleet – which [boasts](#) 50 to 70 ships and submarines, 150 aircraft, and more than 27,000 personnel – would help prevent overextending Europe's limited capabilities.

Seizing this Indo-Pacific strategy is key for the EU as failing to do so would mean missing many trade and investment opportunities while failing to safeguard EU supply chains and values.

Can the EU Seize Indo-Pacific Strategic Opportunities?

Before reshaping its Indo-Pacific Strategy, the EU must promote discussions among its members and pragmatically address crisis prevention and management. For a long-term presence in the region, maritime security, cyber defense, and counterterrorism should be prioritized.

Strengthening ties with the IP4, India and Southeast Asian nations would also offer significant benefits. These ties could provide both new security frameworks and economic venues in the bustling Indo-Pacific trade hub.

As Trump is determined to [impose more tariffs](#) on Indo-Pacific actors, the EU has an opportunity to raise its regional economic profile through investments and trade initiatives. The [Global Gateway Initiative](#), a €300 billion investment scheme, could be expanded to solidify ties with Indo-Pacific nations.

The Union's commitment to multilateralism is another strength. Engaging with ASEAN and other regional frameworks could counterbalance Trump's transactional approach. Absent at key forums such as the Raisina Dialogue, the EU should strive to integrate

existing and spearhead new security frameworks to solidify its position.

Furthermore, the EU's focus on green technology, climate efforts, and development aid could solidify its regional position without overstressing its limited resources and capabilities. Indeed, centering EU diplomacy around these areas is a relatively cheap way to improve its political clout with limited additional investments.

Beyond these diplomatic and economic efforts, however, it is unlikely that the EU will take full advantage of the 'Indo-Pacific opportunity' during the second Trump mandate. Entangled in political, security, and economic crises, convincing EU citizens to allocate considerable resources and manpower to a remote region is far-fetched. Considering the Russia-Ukraine war and considerable security challenges that persist in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, allocating significant resources to Asia appears unlikely.

Despite the update of the EU [Maritime Security Strategy](#) in 2023, the European naval presence in the Indo-Pacific remains minimal as only the French Navy [maintains a continuous](#) regional presence.

Besides, balancing China in its own backyard may result in a significant backlash. EU nations – [Germany in particular](#) with a trade volume of [€253 billion](#) in 2023 – heavily rely on China for trade and supply chains – China is the EU's [second-largest trading partner for goods](#) with bilateral trade amounting to €739 billion in 2023. Diverging opinions on engaging Beijing prevent a unified China policy, thereby impeding a cohesive Indo-Pacific strategy.

That is not to say the EU cannot improve its Indo-Pacific standing. After presenting a coherent and cohesive vision, the EU can leverage its multilateralist approach and economic assets to solidify its partnerships with Indo-Pacific actors – thus capitalizing on gaps created by Trump. With planned French and German [naval deployments](#) in 2025, the EU has the opportunity to turn discourses into actions, asserting itself as a credible actor in the Indo-Pacific.

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