ELF – POLICY PAPER
No 28 | December 2024

A second-tier partner?

Taiwan in the EU's Indo-Pacific strategy

Abstract

The EU published its Indo-Pacific strategy in 2021, aiming to position itself as a cooperation partner and increase its presence in the region. The strategy represented an effort to re-position itself and influence its perception by its regional partners in the Indo-Pacific from its traditional focus as an economic partner towards a security partner in a broad sense. Therefore, this strategy can only be seen in the context of the EU's recent trade and economic strategies, especially its 2021 Trade Policy Review and the strategic autonomy strategy, and the 2023 Economic Security strategy. The ever-present factor in the EU's Indo-Pacific strategy is the presence and influence of China in the region, which the EU perceives as increasingly assertive and potentially de-stabilising. In that regard, the countries in the region play a key role in the EU's effort to de-risk and diversify its supply chains and increase the resilience of its economy. Considering all this, the EU's relation with Taiwan is an issue that has raised its priority in EU policy-making and discourse, and consequently, Taiwan appears for the first time as a factor and partner for the EU in the Indo-Pacific region. This paper analyses the EU's Indo-Pacific strategy from the perspective of its policy towards Taiwan, its commitments and what they represent for the future of their relationship going forward, especially with a new Parliament and Commission take off.

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Introduction

Until quite recently, most people in Europe had not heard about Taiwan, where it was, why was it important if it was so far away, and what was the history that led it to its current political situation. Taiwanese diplomats in Europe strived to raise the awareness about the identity and attractiveness of Taiwan among European policymakers and especially the broader public. Yet, the events that put Taiwan on the map and in the minds of Europeans was in no way related to Taiwan or even to China: first, the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and the shock on global supply chains that ensued, and second, the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Beyond their relevance for and relation to Taiwan, which will be later explained, those events revealed the necessity for a stronger toolbox in the European Union to ensure its autonomy in face of political and economic turmoil, some of which had already been under discussion for half a decade, but which suddenly took on a whole new light.

For clarity, 'open strategic autonomy' derives from the 2021 Trade Policy Review, the latest policy document guiding the EU's trade policy, and is defined by the European Commission as "the EU's ability to make its own choices and shape the world around it through leadership and engagement, reflecting its **strategic interests and values**" (emphasis added) (European Commission, 2021:4). From 2013 to 2016, strategic autonomy was mainly seen as an approach to security and defence matters, but since the first Trump presidency in 2016, Brexit and China's growing assertiveness, the EU began to see strategic autonomy as a way to defend its interests in a hostile geopolitical environment (Damen, 2022). As a response to the taxes imposed by President Trump on European goods, together with the trade war he started with China in 2017-18, the European Union began to equip itself with an array of trade defence instruments aimed at defending its single market and trade interests in the face of unfair trade practices, for instance, the Anti-Coercion Instrument, the International Procurement Instrument, the Foreign Subsidies Instrument, the Critical Raw Materials Act, or the FDI Screening Mechanism, to name a few. Since 2021, strategic autonomy is seen as a horizontal principle, being applied to all policy areas, and it has been materialised with various policy objectives, such as 'de-risking', 'resilience', 'strategic sovereignty' or 'capacity to act'.

More recently, as a result of the COVID pandemic and the war in Ukraine, as mentioned, the EU realised the need to enhance its economic security, that

is, minimise the risk from certain economic flows in the context of increased geopolitical tensions and accelerated technological shifts, while aiming to preserve its high levels of economic openness and competitiveness (European Commission, 2023a). This includes the resilience of supply chains, cyber security and critical infrastructure, technology security, and weaponisation of economic dependencies or economic coercion. In this context, the EU prioritises its partnerships with 'like-minded countries', and Taiwan arises as an important partner, not only because its key position in technology supply chains but also because of its geographical location and its strong expertise on matters of cyber and technology security, and foreign information manipulations and interference (FIMI).

Source: The Defence Horizon Journal.

Taiwan in the EU's Indo-Pacific Strategy

The emergence of Taiwan as a key partner in the region is illustrated in the EU's 2021 Indo-Pacific Strategy, where Taiwan appears for the first time. The Indo-Pacific, as a region, was not seen as a real top priority by the European Union

as a whole until late 2020, and even the term Indo-Pacific created resentment among certain policy circles, as it was believed to have anti-China connotations (Cunningham, 2022). Even though this strategy was largely based on and inspired by the previous Indo-Pacific strategies published by Germany, the Netherlands and France, none of those actually include Taiwan, so as not to alienate China, and mostly rely on their informal relationship and actions in the Indo-Pacific to define the role of Taiwan in their Indo-Pacific strategy (Fortier et al., 2022). Nonetheless, those strategies laid the groundwork for an EU Indo-Pacific approach (Cunningham, 2022).

Specifically, Taiwan figures as a partner in the EU's Indo-Pacific strategy in five main areas of cooperation:

- As a **geopolitical partner** to promote the stability of the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea, that the EU considers the two main regional hotspots, in the context of what Europe recognises as a significant military build-up by China that has led to intensified competition in the Indo-Pacific. Thirdly,
- **Ocean governance:** The EU commits itself to take forward action to strengthen "ocean governance in the Indo-Pacific in full compliance with international law, in particular UNCLOS, and with the main objective to ensure the sustainable management of the ocean's resources and safeguarding biodiversity." It aims to do so through its various Sustainable Fisheries Partnership Agreements in the region and its dialogues and working groups, with Taiwan, Thailand, China, Ghana, Korea, the US and Japan, on Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) fishing. Thus, here, the EU considers Taiwan a partner in ocean governance under the law of the seas, whom it will support to improve fisheries compliance and contribute to the conservation and sustainable management of marine biological resources across the region.
- **Resilient and diversified value chains:** The EU considers Taiwan as a partner to diversity and strengthen trade relations, by developing cooperation in strategic sectors, including to address strategic dependencies in supply chains. This has a clear global perspective, as the EU aims to strengthen international trade rules through these international partnerships with like-minded countries.
- **Trade and investment:** The EU recognizes that, even though it does not have a trade and investment agreement with Taiwan, it wants to deepen their trade and investment relationship. Yet, the strategy does not specify how it specifically aims to do so, and thus it stays at the aspirational level, being left to future policy documents and actions to specify. In that area, nonetheless, the EU and Taiwan organized their first Trade and Investment Dialogue (TID) in June 2022 and their second in April 2023 (European Commission, 2023b), designed as a forum to discuss both bilateral economic, trade and investment challenges, and global trends currently affecting the world economy (Grgić & Tercovich 2024).
- **Data protection:** The EU aims to work together with Taiwan towards the convergence between data protection regimes to ensure safe and free data

flows. This includes potentially an "adequacy finding", if the conditions are met, which means agreeing "essential equivalence" between two countries data protection standards, in the EU's case, the GDPR regulation (Reg. (EU) 2016/679). Taiwan, on its side, has already adopted a modern Personal Data Protection law (LRD, 2023), which paves the way for future adequacy talks. This takes place in the context of the EU's intention to shape common data protection standards together with ASEAN partners.

Instead, China hardly gets a mention in the EU strategy as the EU follows a combination of its policy of **'principled pragmatism'**, first iterated in the EU's Global Strategy of 2016 (EEAS, 2016), which leaves the door open for cooperation with partners such as Vietnam or China that are friendly towards the EU whilst not necessary espousing the same values (Cunningham, 2022); and a policy of **'multifaceted engagement'**, where China is seen both as an indispensable partner with whom to cooperate on issues of common interest by encouraging it to play a peaceful role in the region's development, while at the same time affirming disagreements with it, particularly on the issue of human rights (Fortier et al. 2022). This stems from the EU's 2019 Strategic Outlook (European Commission, 2019), where China was defined for the first time as 'cooperation partner', an 'economic competitor', and a 'systemic rival'. Coherently, in the Indo-Pacific Strategy, the EU prioritises trade and development over military competition, aiming to respond to the region's receptivity to infrastructure development, trade liberalization, research and innovation collaboration, connectivity advancement, digitalization, and capacity building, fostering greater resilience (Kliem, 2022).

> The Indo-Pacific strategy underscores that the region's stability directly impacts European security and prosperity.

Most importantly, the Indo-Pacific strategy evidences that the EU has a stake in the region and needs to do more to strengthen its strategic reach and its supply chains there, as it recognizes that the stability in the region has a direct impact on European security and prosperity (Mohan, 2021). The strategy marks a departure from the EU's approach to the region, as it stresses diversifying its partnerships beyond China, putting more emphasis on like-minded partners such as Taiwan, Australia, South Korea, Canada or the US (ibid.). Overall, through this strategy, the EU Member States recognise that their best bet is united action in a region dominated by China and the US (Odgaard, 2024), even if not all Member States share the same priorities in the region and the same desire to strengthen their security presence there as Germany, the Netherlands and France do (Fortier 2022). On defence issues, internal divergences and limited military capabilities have prevented the EU from establishing a defence footprint in the Indo-Pacific, and its focus has largely been on upholding international law and global institutions like the World

Trade Organisation (WTO) and preserving an open economy rather than explicitly targeting China (Odgaard, 2024).

> Engaging with Taiwan is a geopolitical imperative for the EU, balancing its strategic autonomy with maintaining relations with China.

In this context, **engaging with Taiwan is a geopolitical imperative for the EU, in a region where geopolitics and economic developments have increasingly become intertwined**. Yet, China is still framed as a potential partner in the region, and thus the strategy is not directly aimed against China, neither explicitly, not implicitly, even if it is not considered as a like-minded partner, which is a term reserved for other countries in the region (Van Willingen & Blarel, 2024).

Shaping the EU's role and identity in the region

The EU's Indo-Pacific Strategy, and the very fact that Taiwan figures in it in various areas, as detailed before, signals the EU's willingness to shape its perception in the region from one where it was mainly regarded as an economic partner, towards portraying itself as normative or civilian power (Van Willingen & Blarel, 2024) and especially as a security actor in the region, recently figuring more prominently in the political and security agendas of the Indo-Pacific countries (Grgić & Tercovich, 2024). Several instances of this include the EU's recent security and defence partnerships with South Korea (EEAS, 2024a) and Japan (EEAS, 2024b), or the Trade and Technology Council with India (European Commission, 2023c), which faithfully follow the priorities outlined in the Indo-Pacific strategy, in the context of the EU's bilateral relationship with each of these countries.

> The EU's Indo-Pacific strategy signals a shift from being primarily an economic partner to portraying itself as a normative and security actor in the region.

Indeed, while economic engagement remains the top priority, the EU's growing security and defence capabilities are also referred to extensively in the strategy, especially in the context of maritime operations (Grgić & Tercovich, 2024). Aiming

to contribute to the stability of the Indo-Pacific region, the focus of the EU seems to be on ensuring a "meaningful" European naval presence and making sure there is more intra-European coordination particularly through mechanisms like Coordinated Maritime Presences, as well as joint naval activities and capacity-building programmes (Mohan, 2021). The framework for maritime cooperation is the 2014 EU Maritime Security Strategy (Council of the EU, 2014), which lists rule of law and freedom of navigation as strategic maritime interests. The Indo-Pacific strategy includes a commitment to promote sealines of communication and enhance naval deployments by EU member states in the region, and to support Indo-Pacific partners' capacity to ensure maritime security (Odgaard, 2024). This shows that, as tensions between China, Taiwan and the United States have risen, EU member states have also become increasingly active in this location, especially France and the Netherlands (ibid.).

> Taiwan emerges as a pivotal partner for the EU in building resilient and diversified supply chains and advancing cyber security in the Indo-Pacific.

Nevertheless, there are still questions around whether the EU can credibly and effectively signal as an autonomous actor in a distant geopolitical region (Van Willingen & Blarel, 2024), especially because without enlarged naval capabilities, the EU faces significant limitations with regards the security and defence role it can effectively play in the Indo-Pacific (ibid.). Beyond maritime security, the EU wants to strengthen its security cooperation in Asia to cover the areas of counter-terrorism, cyber security, crisis management, maritime security, and information handling and foreign interference (Fortier et al., 2022). Yet, any attempts to promote multilateralism in security and defence in the region, will likely come up against broader geopolitical and geoeconomic trends, such as economic de-coupling or policies to ensure supply chain resilience, and the EU faces the risk that the rising expectations this strategy created may not be matched by the EU's capabilities (Van Willingen & Blarel, 2024).

A second-rate first-priority partner

When it comes to Taiwan specifically, it is primarily considered as an economic partner, and not a security partner, by the EU in the Indo-Pacific region (Fortier et al., 2022). This is because of the sensitivity of any security engagement and deal with the island towards China, and the desire of the EU to not antagonise Beijing. This is especially true considering that the EU's policy towards Taiwan needs to navigate within the various definitions and understandings of each

Member States' 'one China' policy, i.e. the balance between their policy towards China and that towards Taiwan. While some Member States, like Lithuania or the Czech Republic, offer a more maximalist and flexible definition of the 'one China' policy that allows them to have a broader partnership with Taiwan, others, like Hungary, Greece or Cyprus barely have any relations with Taiwan, prioritising their political and/or economic relations with China instead, while a third group, like Spain, have decided to focus their relationship with Taiwan exclusively in the field of field of commerce. Still, even in the economic area, the EU's approach has sent mixed signals to both Taiwan and the EU's regional partners on the direction that the EU would like to give to its relations with Taiwan. On the one hand, its intensified political signalling in support of Taiwan potentially comes in contradiction with its advocacy for and promotion of economic de-risking (Grgić & Tercovich, 2024), especially around semiconductors and technology supply chains.

> Despite prioritizing economic engagement, the EU recognizes the need for a 'meaningful' naval presence and enhanced coordination among member states in the Indo-Pacific.

On the other hand, in the trade and investment area, while the EU aims to deepen its relationship with Taiwan, how this will be done is left unspecified, and instead Taiwan is clearly put in a third tier under the countries where the EU has already concluded a trade agreement and those with which it aims to conclude one, such as New Zealand or Australia. Therefore, the EU's economic engagement with Taiwan is left to *ad hoc* cooperation, which mostly takes place at an informal level, even if the EU is trying to make an effort to increase its institutionalisation through initiatives like the Trade and Investment Dialogue. Yet, the European Commission has been careful not to engage with the high-level policymakers, engaging only up to the level of Director-General, in its bilateral contacts with Taiwanese policymakers, and it has clearly ruled out of the table any trade or investment agreement, including a partnership agreement like that concluded by the UK with Taiwan (Executive Yuan, 2023) or the 21st Century Trade Initiative negotiated with the US since 2022 (Office of US Trade Representative, 2022), or a double taxation agreement like the one the United States announced in October 2024 (U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2024). The European Parliament, instead, has long called for such trade or investment agreement between the EU and Taiwan, most recently in its Motion on the misinterpretation of UN resolution 2758 approved on the 23rd of October 2024 (European Parliament, 2024).

Thus, the EU mostly considers Taiwan as an unofficial partner, particularly in the spheres of trade and investment, as well as in sharing its experience on best practices to counter Chinese hybrid warfare and diaspora-based influence operations (Jung & Tan, 2024). For instance, the Taiwan Government established a Fact Checking Centre (實查核中心, *shí cháhé zhōngxīn*), which provides the public with a reliable, easily accessible database of facts to dispel Mainland attempts to inject disinformation into the media narrative (Thornton 2023).

> Taiwan is not just an economic partner but a like-minded ally sharing the EU's democratic values and commitment to global security.

Finally, the European Union attaches great importance to the shared values it has with Taiwan, as liberal democracies, and this is why it is considered not only an economic partner but also a like-minded partner. This has mostly an external perspective, as the EU aims to work together with Taiwan to promote and protect those democratic values not only in the Indo-Pacific region but also at the global level. This is especially relevant in the context of their institutional cooperation, as the EU is committed to help Taiwan increase its presence in international institutions, which has been severely limited due to its statue as a non-sovereign entity. Previously, creative solutions were found under the 'first China, then Taiwan' formula, for instance, at the WTO, where Taiwan is recognised as the "Separate Customs Territory of Taiwan, Penghu, Kinmen and Matsu (Chinese Taipei)". Yet, the global balance of power has currently shifted, as China has become a global superpower *en par* with the United States, and thus its capacity to block Taiwan's actorness in international institutions is much greater. Nonetheless, the EU is committed to help Taiwan in this area, and thus their institutional cooperation must be taken into account.

Conclusion

In sum, Taiwan is undoubtedly considered as a like-minded partner by the European Union, both at the economic and the security level. In that regard, there has been clear political signals around the increased importance that the EU seems to give to their partnership, most emphatically by the European Parliament, but also by the Commission's President and the European External Action Service around the need to preserve the peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait, which is clearly aimed as a deterrence to any type of aggressive behaviour by China, who has not ruled out the use of force against Taiwan in the future, and which it considers a crucial step towards the attainment of its Second Centenary Goal in 2049.

Yet, aiming to appease China, the EU has shied away from any kind of formal commitment towards the island, in the form of a trade and investment agreement or security deal, which need not be in the area of traditional military security, but could also include cyber security, FIMI, or technology governance, sending mixed signals with its de-risking strategy and incidentally relegating Taiwan into a second-tier partner. Considering the commitments made in its Indo-Pacific strategy, and if the strategy is to truly shape the EU's image and role in the Indo-Pacific region, the EU will need to reconcile its priorities and values, and its alliance with Taiwan not only in the context of its partnership with China, but also in the context of the broader regional strategy, bringing the third like-minded partners in the region, like the Philippines, India, Japan and South Korea in the table to develop and signal a clear deterrence strategy. Especially within the network of strategic partnerships – with Australia, India, South Korea; and long-standing partners like New Zealand, Malaysia, the Philippines, the Pacific Island Countries (PICs), or Thailand, the EU is especially located to lead a multilateral strategy to support peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific, especially in non-military security areas. Only a joint deterrence strategy between the EU and its regional partner will minimize the risk of a military takeover by China and paves the way for a more comprehensive engagement with Taiwan, beyond the traditional economic field and towards other areas that can be of benefit for the European Union, like FIMI, supply chain resilience and hybrid warfare.

Policy recommendations

Taking the above-mentioned analysis and the main insights derived from it into consideration, there are several steps that the new European Parliament and the new Commission cabinet can put in place in order to consolidate their relationship with and commitments towards Taiwan in the context of their Indo-Pacific Strategy:

1. The EU should develop a **structured exchange with Taiwan on how to counter Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI)**, which would include joint discussions on cyber challenges, hybrid warfare and societal resilience to foreign interference.
2. The EU needs to be conscious of where its strengths lie in the Indo-Pacific. Particularly, it can have the most impact on questions of **economic security**. This would mean taking a broader approach to regional security, going beyond concluding more FTAs and committing to work with its regional partners on resilient and diversified supply chains, joint action against unfair trade practices such as economic coercion and forced technology transfers, creating digital partnerships, and promoting infrastructure connectivity in the Indo-Pacific, especially by leveraging the potential of the Global Gateway beyond Africa and Latin America.

3. The EU's 'de-risking' strategy can potentially send the wrong signals in the region, as it could transpire that the EU is hedging itself towards a Chinese attack on Taiwan, and protecting its economy from the severe economic impact this would have. Therefore, the next Commission **should develop an implementation plan of its 'de-risking' strategy for the Indo-Pacific region** that reconciles its political with its economic objectives within the multilateral network of alliances in such a complex region as the Indo-Pacific.
4. The European Commission, together with the Council, should develop a **clear deterrence strategy** that takes into consideration both the soft and hard power of both the EU and its Member States. This deterrence strategy should take particular care to reassure China that the EU does not encourage Taiwanese independence in any way, while being clear on the values it protects and promotes. This will have the greatest impact on ensuring long-term security for Taiwan, particularly if the EU manages to bring regional powers on board (the United States, India, Korea, Japan, Australia, etc.).
5. In parallel, while deterrence is the first and utmost priority, the EU should develop a **comprehensive contingency plan for a potential Taiwan invasion.** This goes hand in hand with the commitment to not decouple from Taiwan because of the shadow of such invasion and, to this aim, the EU should have a detailed bifocal strategy: on the one hand, depicting the necessary movements to protect its economic interests and supply chains taking into consideration the halt this would imply in its trade with Taiwan and, similarly, the impact this would have on its trade and investment relationship with China, who would suffer from sanctions and isolation from the West as Russia has since its invasion of Ukraine. On the other hand, the EU needs to clearly signal to Taiwan, not necessarily in public – which is covered by the deterrence strategy – what kind of support it would be able to offer in the event of such military attack and coordinate with the defence plan outlined by Taiwanese military and political authorities.
6. If it is to become a security partner in the Indo-Pacific region, the EEAS needs to develop its **defence diplomacy strategy**, with specific actions and responsible people in each of its EU delegations in the region, so as to avoid getting trapped in the capabilities-expectation gap that results in unfulfilled expectations. Here, it will be key to work together with the defence attachés in the embassies of its Member States in each country.
7. In the context of geopolitisation of the EU's foreign trade policy and strategic competition between the United States and China in the Indo-Pacific region, the EU should establish its presence there by plugging into the networks and alliances that dominate decision-making in the security and defence realm. This will consolidate its identity as a security partner in the region and exploit the synergies with its partners. Until now, the EU is not present in such security fora. Therefore, it should **join existing decision-making networks and develop informal fora with regional powers** where matters essential to its security interests, broadly understood, and those of the region would be discussed.

8. Finally, the European Commission and the EEAS need to work closely with the Council of the EU to reconcile the various positions among Member States on their alignment with the United States versus the willingness among some Member States to hedge between the United States and China, which has resulted in different interpretations of the Indo-Pacific strategy in the EU capitals and will derive into inconsistent application and potentially inaction. Thus, the EU needs to discuss and reconcile its intention to reassure Washington of its support without antagonizing Beijing, and turn this into an actionable strategy in the Indo-Pacific.

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A liberal future in a united Europe

DOI: 10.53121/ELFPP28

ISSN: 2736-5816

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Graphic Design: Altais
Cover image: iStock

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