



OCTOBER 2019

Seizing the Momentum: Avenues for EU-Indian Maritime Cooperation in a Connectivity Context¹

In recent years, the maritime domain has emerged as one of the key areas of EU-Indian engagement. Rising competition in the maritime domain has pushed many actors to critically rethink their policies with respect to the security and governance of the high seas. In the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) China's Maritime Silk Road (MSR), as part of the broader Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), has been central to this growing sense of competition. Potentially conflicting connectivity approaches that cut across geographical boundaries and regional economic spaces are the result of this changing dynamic in the maritime domain. Amidst growing strategic competition, the EU and India are exploring various options to not only strengthen their cooperation around tackling security challenges in the region, but also to take the relationship forward based on mutually shared norms on connectivity. Against this backdrop, this policy brief seeks to analyse how the evolving policy approaches of the EU and India with regard to connectivity in the IOR affect potential maritime cooperation and initiatives, and which potential avenues for economic and security cooperation open up in this changed policy context.

Maritime Cooperation: A Key Area of Convergence

With the rising significance of the Indian Ocean, connectivity has increasingly featured as one of the key tools of 'enhanced engagement' between the EU and India. This is especially important against the backdrop of China's growing global maritime footprint in the [region](#). As Beijing's MSR envisages connecting Southeast Asia with Europe through the Western Pacific and the Indian Ocean, it has forced both India and the EU to prioritize connectivity as one of the core elements of bilateral engagement. Also, there has been a shift in India's perceptions vis-à-vis the EU in the region, which can best be explained by two key factors. Firstly, the overall change in the geo-strategic

environment fuelled by China's rise has led New Delhi to diversify its strategic partnerships, in the context of which the EU is currently seen as an important player. Secondly, at domestic level, the active advocacy promoted by the Indian Navy has been instrumental in propelling diplomatic engagement with the EU. Another added value of this engagement is that it acts as a means of reducing India's excessive dependence on its traditional partners,

¹ This paper has been written in the context of the EU-India Think Tank Twinning Initiative 2018-2019, funded by the EU. The views in this paper are, however, the authors', and its content their sole responsibility. A more detailed version of this paper can be found at <https://euindiathinktanks.com/publications/>

along with providing opportunities for both India and the EU to jointly carve out an alternative framework or a counter-narrative on [connectivity in the region](#). In addition to the competition among regional powers, maritime security in the IOR is challenged by a variety of non-traditional threats such as piracy, transnational organized crime, terrorism, illegal fishing and pollution, which can be managed to a great extent through promoting connectivity between countries and island states in the IOR.

The EU's India Strategy, published in November 2018, points to the common principles which the EU and India share vis-à-vis connectivity, with sustainability, transparency and preserving the [rules-based international order](#) being the most pressing. China's MSR initiatives are seen as potentially challenging these norms. Whilst the subject of maritime security had been under discussion since 2004, concrete engagement between New Delhi and Brussels still had to take off. The differences lay primarily at the level of perception, strategic divergence and operational postures. India's stance has been more focused upon containing threats in South Asian waters, both of conventional and unconventional kinds, and building influence among the littoral and island states of the region. The efforts by the EU, on the other hand, have been predominantly in the form of the counter-piracy operation 'Atalanta' of the EU Naval Force, capacity-building on land in East Africa, improving maritime governance and promoting sustainable development of marine resources. Indian policymakers believed, until very recently, that there is a lack of consensus among the EU member states with regard to the importance of the IOR and a lack of urgency when it came to fostering bilateral cooperation. The EU, on the other hand, was sceptical of India as a 'responsible power' prepared to [lead the region](#).

As the conversation between the EU and India has received new stimulus with the EU strategy on India, however, both sides

have found newer areas of convergence. The EU-India Strategic Partnership could, for example, function as a reliable platform for linking the Indo-Pacific.² Through the EU Operation 'Atalanta' and the naval officers' Shared Awareness and Deconfliction (SHADE) meetings in Bahrain, many East Asian actors such as Japan and South Korea are already involved in maritime initiatives in the IOR. The two sides aim to further identify concrete projects which can deal with the challenges, mainly of non-conventional kinds, in the region. India can gain technical expertise from various EU member states in its pursuit of strategic connectivity goals in the IOR.

Economic Aspects of Cooperation: The Blue Economy

As the use of oceans has broadened from a medium of transport to that of a wellspring of resources, the focus on the Blue Economy has acquired gradual recognition as an economic potential in maritime space. The concept, which gained currency in 2012 at the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, can be understood as harnessing marine resources for sustainable use; it can potentially spark the development of physical connectivity in the region through, for example, port development, enhancing information-sharing and monitoring networks and strengthening connections between coastal areas and the hinterland.

The Indian Ocean, by the division of seas, is the third largest in the world and covers an area of more than 70 million km², which includes extensive Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) of different countries and a variety of island states. A majority of these littorals are developing countries and they

² The author is grateful to one of the respondents for this point, which was made upon revision of the draft paper.

rely extensively on marine resources for food and livelihoods. It is the increasing pressure on marine resources which has led to growing public concern about the health of the oceans and their resources. Globally several countries and multilateral bodies have evolved strategies which focus on developing maritime resources and the Blue Economy in particular, as outlined in goal 14 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG). India also has its Blue Economy agenda and this has been clearly outlined in the 2016 Maritime India Summit. The first of its kind, the summit not only demonstrates India's maritime vision but also clearly lays out the priority sectors for India's [Blue Economy](#) ecosystem. The EU, for its part, launched its own Blue Growth Strategy in 2012, which prioritises aquaculture, marine renewable energy, marine mineral mining, marine biotechnology and coastal tourism as key drivers of the [Blue Economy](#).

At bilateral level, the Indian understanding of the Blue Economy differs from the European approach. The EU has a broader definition of the Blue Economy which encompasses all sectoral and cross-sectoral economic activities relating to oceans, seas and coasts, including those in the EU's outermost regions and landlocked countries, whereas India lacks a holistic approach to the concept and the idea appears in spurts in policies and initiatives of the government. Despite their differences, both India and the EU fully endorse the concept as a new pillar of economic activity and highlight the importance of sustainable tapping of maritime economic activities to improve people's livelihoods, including in the IOR.

At institutional level, the challenges facing the Blue Economy have been recognised by the regional body, the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), which carries out many programmes in fisheries, climate change and food security. In fisheries, IORA has established two relevant programmes: the Regional Centre for Science and Technology Transfer and the Fisheries Support Unit (FSU). The EU and India can therefore jointly contribute to the ongoing projects of the centre and develop initiatives to promote fishing cultivation as well as reforms in the fishing industry. As the concept rapidly

percolates into other regional groupings such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) and the South Asia Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), the prospects for EU-Indian cooperation by use of an institutional mechanism become higher. These regional forums not only lend more inclusiveness to the projects but also enhance the scope for regional and international involvement.

Security Aspects of Cooperation: Building on Counter-Piracy

Working together in maritime security has been high on the agenda of the EU-India Strategic Partnership for years. If not physical connectivity, maritime security cooperation addresses what is termed 'soft connectivity', as it has the potential to strengthen certain (security) governance mechanisms, norms, connectivity approaches and multilateral architecture in the region. Although the strategy and plans currently exist, concrete projects need to be implemented. There is momentum on both sides, however, and small but symbolic steps have been taken recently to take advantage of this. In October 2017 the first maritime naval passing exercise was held between the Indian Navy and the EU Naval Force. In December 2018 the Indian Navy escorted a humanitarian aid shipment of the World Food Programme to Somalia in support of Operation 'Atalanta' for the first time, responding to a request by the EU. Consequently, in January 2019 a high-level visit of a delegation of EU military representatives to Delhi and Mumbai took place on the occasion of the port visit of the French destroyer *Cassard* to Mumbai, which hosted the [EU delegation](#). The EU Military Staff also visited the recently launched Information Fusion Centre for the Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) of the Indian Navy in Mumbai, which has established links with the EU's Maritime Security Centre/Horn of Africa (MSC/HOA). This EU maritime diplomacy initiative was clearly an effort to promote the EU as a security actor in the IOR and was welcomed by India. This has

strengthened the sense in Brussels that their counterparts in India are ready and willing to engage.³

At the same time, India is reviving multilateral institutions and fora in the IOR and increasing its commitment to maritime multilateralism to foster ocean governance in the region. Delhi shares with the EU a certain reluctance to rely solely on [power projection](#) by major actors for governing the maritime space of the IOR. The relative weakness of the security architecture in the region should encourage India and the EU to work together in the regional multilateral forums, not only to strengthen these platforms but also to institutionalise their cooperation, enhance dialogue and build trust.

At bilateral level, the EU's lack of visibility in the region is considered to be a major hindrance to cooperation in the areas in question. Outreach activities of the EU's military structures are therefore of the utmost importance, not only to strengthen the understanding of the EU's workings in India but also to challenge the predominant view in India that the EU cannot be seen as a security actor. One of the prerequisites for tackling safety and security challenges in the IOR and co-operating in the maritime domain is information and data sharing. The EU Critical Maritime Route Wider Indian (CRIMARIO) project, launched in 2015, was designed to increase critical maritime awareness and secure a better understanding of the potential risks and threats in the IO. In a similar way, links between India's Information Fusion Centre and the EU's Maritime Security Centre have already been established, but could be strengthened by seconding a (semi-) permanent EU military representative to Mumbai.

At institutional level, the two most important multilateral maritime mechanisms in the IOR from New Delhi's perspective are the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS).

Although the EU supports the Indian Ocean Commission (IOC), applying for observer status or membership of these platforms would reflect Brussels' commitment to supporting the regional architecture and its greater willingness to engage with India. The EU should also explore ways to support India's initiative of a [disaster resilience infrastructure](#) under the aegis of the UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, initially proposed at the G20 of November 2018.

Maritime security is also a priority area in other regional organisations and platforms in the broader Indo-Pacific. As the EU and India both support the centrality of ASEAN in the region, and the EU co-chairs the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) Intersessional Meeting on Maritime Security in the period 2018-2020, the EU could propel India in this context. Under the current action plan this offers yet another platform to work jointly on maritime security activities.

EU Perspective

The concept of connectivity also featured prominently at the 12th Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) Summit in October in Brussels, where the EU high representative Mogherini reiterated: "We are very much focusing on increasing our partnership with Asia, be it on connectivity, be it on security (...). If we see developments in our regions – both in Asia and in Europe – we see the need to protect and promote a rules-based international order – not only on trade, but also on security – and a [co-operative approach](#) to foreign policy." This co-operative approach to foreign policy is not self-evident, however. The plethora of connectivity approaches and discursive narratives run the risk of intensifying the geopolitical competition in the maritime arena rather than mitigating tensions and stimulating cooperation. The EU needs to carve out a strong autonomous position while at the same time searching for common ground, convergent views and a shared narrative in the connectivity approaches that currently surface. The EU needs to reflect on how to position itself in the regional conundrum that is South Asia and the IOR, where India is a not uncontroversial neighbour to its region

3 Interview by the author with EU officials, Brussels, February 2019.

and China's influence is increasing. India has become more aware of this strategic context and the necessity of becoming more proactive and, although Delhi is somewhat disappointed in the non-confrontational posture of the EU towards China, it has recognised that the EU can nonetheless be a valuable partner in this regional context. It looks as if India under Modi is not only slowly moving away from non-alignment, but also cautiously looking west, despite residual hesitancy about the EU-Indian partnership on both sides. The EU feels it should build upon this momentum and intensify its cooperation with India, even if it is incremental. Cooperation in the Blue Economy and maritime security are not only seen as the most feasible and promising avenues for working together among all the subjects of the new EU policies, but they also fit best the EU's recent priority setting towards Asia and the norms the EU propagates in its maritime strategy, such as freedom of navigation and free trade.⁴

Indian Perspective

India under Modi has become more conscious of the EU's potential partner role in the IOR as China's presence in its direct surroundings has changed the strategic context faster than expected and the US has become a less trustworthy partner in Asia. Officials from both the Ministry of External Affairs and the Indian Navy have indicated that they increasingly view the EU as a constructive partner in this current context and that the potential for EU-Indian cooperation has improved in recent years.⁵ The EU's strategy on India has set the ball rolling in their eyes and tangibles need to be worked out. This new approach has actually opened up many avenues for cooperation and much depends on the level of consensus the EU and India are able to forge vis-à-vis China, infrastructure development, military ties, etc. Most of them have argued that the EU and India can work together to tackle

pan-regional challenges such as sustaining persistent surveillance at sea, countering piracy and improving disaster relief efforts, but also in increasing digitisation of the maritime space or tackling the dangers of cyber-malevolence that are already afflicting the maritime domain. Also, since India holds many joint military exercises individually with European countries, it has shown readiness to co-operate with the EU in (training exercises for) humanitarian assistance, disaster relief and counter-piracy operations. This will help in developing interoperability. In the context of the Blue Economy especially, the 'Sagarmala initiative' is mentioned as a promising avenue through which the EU can support India, and with regard to connectivity projects the strategic Chabahar port project in southeast Iran – the gateway to Afghanistan, Central Asia and beyond – is important to India. Few believe in a more strategic cooperation or in the formation of a regional security architecture that could tackle all of this.⁶

Conclusion

For the EU, working through the existing maritime security governance mechanisms and forging new co-operative ventures is currently the most workable way of achieving balanced cooperation with its partners in Asia, including India. Security cooperation with relevant maritime actors can strengthen the EU's profile as a promising and reliable security actor in the region, especially if more co-ordination in the IOR amongst EU Member States can be implemented to gain clarity in India's perception of the EU's actions. The recent [EU-China maritime exercise](#) evidences Brussels' involvement in engaging with China – the EU's engagement with India should not lag behind. Boosting cooperation with like-minded countries in the region is especially potent at a time when the US commitment to Asia under President Trump is either unclear or divergent from the EU's interests. This makes the EU's current momentum in pro-active policymaking

4 Interview by the author with EU officials, Brussels, February 2019.

5 Interviews by the author with MEA and Navy officials, New Delhi, January-February 2019.

6 Interviews by the author with MEA and Navy officials, New Delhi, January-February 2019.

with respect to Asia even timelier, not to say more sustainable, in the medium to long term. EU policymakers realise that the current vulnerability of the international order obliges them to strengthen their security profile and support partners in the region who synchronise with the EU's norms and interests. Although the EU's position as an extra-regional power in the IOR ultimately limits its options in the maritime security domain, there is more than sufficient scope to continue working on the EU's visibility, partnership profile and expansion of co-operative maritime ventures.

India has responded positively to the EU Strategy on India and, although developments are going slowly and incrementally, the two actors are on a more positive track now than they have been in quite a while. Considering India's strong historic links with the UK, New Delhi is still exploring how to perceive and deal with the EU after Brexit, including in the maritime domain. India's ambition to become a net security provider and pre-eminent power in the IOR, however, pushes New Delhi to forge new partnerships and be proactive in supporting regional organisations, platforms and initiatives. The EU has surfaced as a more likely partner than before in this context, and EU-Indian maritime cooperation has become more advantageous to both actors. Building on existing convergence in governance norms as well as connectivity approaches in the IOR, many constructive activities, as outlined in this policy brief, can be undertaken that reinforce the strategic partnership between the EU and India. In a multilateral order that seems more fragile than expected, this might turn out to be much needed.

Policy Recommendations:

- The EU should develop greater visibility as a security actor in the IOR and work towards convergence of maritime diplomacy of EU Member States in the area. EU flagship port visits are among the tools for branding the EU in India, as are high-level visits of (military) EU staff;
- Observer status or membership of the EU in IORA and IONS would also be a useful step in this regard; also co-ordination of activities and updating actors involved in ongoing projects;
- Consider creating a (semi-) permanent EU representative at India's Information Fusion Centre in Mumbai to work towards joint maritime domain awareness; an Indian visit to the EU's Maritime Security Centre would similarly be useful;
- Broaden the scope of the EU's 'Atalanta' mission, to expand from its core aim of counter-piracy to more comprehensive maritime cooperation;
- Consider initiating an exercise in counter-piracy and/or search and rescue, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief in the Indian Ocean Region. The same can be done in the Mediterranean Sea, as India has significant interests in terms of human capital in West Asia/the Middle East and previous experience of evacuation missions in the region. Given that the region is likely to remain unstable for some time to come, this would benefit both the EU and India;
- The EU should invite India to co-operate with and co-ordinate in capacity-building initiatives under the EU Maritime Security programme in the Seychelles and Madagascar and/or EUCAP Somalia. Africa remains a crucial region for the partnership to pan out in the coming years and joint capacity-building initiatives, such as the training of local coastguards and authorities in maritime domain awareness, should be explored by both sides;
- In the mid to long term, the EU and India should work towards a Framework Participation Agreement (FPA), allowing Delhi to co-operate with Brussels in humanitarian and crisis management operations, including increased cooperation in crisis response. EU-Indian collaboration could also be extended to disaster relief or evacuations;
- The EU and India should establish a structured dialogue to exchange ideas and improve understanding of the current security dynamics in the Indo-Pacific in view of discussing the potential, and the limits, of a joint EU-Indian approach to maritime security and freedom of navigation in the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean.

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