



The EU in the Indo-Pacific: The Potential and Limits of Bilateral Partnerships

Expert Exchange

Event Report

Date: 30 May 2024

Location: EIAS Brussels

Co-organized by the Brussels Office of the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP) and the European Institute for Asian Studies, the Expert Exchange on "The EU in the Indo-Pacific: The Potential and Limits of Bilateral Partnerships" was held at EIAS on Thursday, 30 May 2024. The event was conducted under the Chatham House Rule to encourage open and candid discussions.

The event focused on the European Union's (EU) strategy in the Indo-Pacific, exploring both the potential and limitations of bilateral partnerships in the region. The EU and its member states aim to foster closer relationships and convergence of interests with "like-minded" countries and "value-based partners" to reduce dependencies and address global competition between democratic and authoritarian regimes.

The importance of defining mutual interests and priorities in the Indo-Pacific was emphasised, highlighting the specific strategic role and need for partnerships that align with new regional priorities. The current crisis of multilateralism was noted and the increasing interest in bilateralism and unilateralism, advocating for diversification and closer cooperation to effectively align interests.

The necessity for the EU to offer tangible benefits to its partners in the Indo-Pacific was raised, questioning what unique advantages the EU can provide. The lack of correlation between value-based partnerships and actual outcomes was pointed out, suggesting that the EU needs to deliver on its promises to maintain credibility, noting how events like COVID-19 and the Ukraine crisis have distracted the EU from its strategic goals in the Indo-Pacific. This underscores the need for a more focused and deliberate approach. Further discussions stressed the importance of ASEAN centrality, suggesting that while values-based labels can create expectations, they must be backed by concrete deliverables. Trust, global cooperation, and adherence to the rule of law were identified as essential components of effective EU partnerships.



It was noted that the concept of "like-mindedness" often involves assumptions about shared norms and values, which may not align with the realities of partnerships on the ground. Divergences on issues such as Ukraine, free trade, and human rights protection highlight the complexities of these relationships.

During the Q&A session, participants delved into issues including the EU's role in regional stability, the role of the EU in the Shangri-La dialogue, and the potential for non-traditional security cooperation, discussing who determines "like-mindedness" and the limitations of value-based partnerships. The ambiguity of such partnerships was noted, with a consensus that interests—trade leverage, security, and other aspects—should drive EU strategies in the Indo-Pacific region. The importance of ASEAN as a central partner for the EU was reiterated, emphasising that any potential new EU strategy will need to address a broad range of priorities in the Indo-Pacific.

Overall, the discussions highlighted the need for the EU to reassess its approach to partnerships in the Indo-Pacific, balancing normative aspirations with practical realities. The exchange provided valuable insights into how the EU can navigate these challenges to foster more effective and pragmatic bilateral relationships.