



EU Indo-Pacific Strategy and Pacific Security Conference

ELIAS Brussels, 05.06.2026

Event Report

The European Institute for Asian Studies (EIAS), the Pacific Regional Security Hub (PRSH) at the University of Canterbury, and the Centre for Defence and Security Studies at Massey University convened a conference on the EU Indo-Pacific Strategy and Pacific Security on 5 June 2026 at the European Institute for Asian Studies in Brussels. The event brought together academics, military officers, and security experts to examine how the EU can support security and resilience in the Pacific Ocean in an era of intensifying strategic competition.

The conference opened with welcome addresses from the hosting institutions, which framed the growing connectivity between the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific security environments as both a strategic reality and a relational opportunity. Speakers noted that the EU-New Zealand relationship, long anchored in people-to-people ties and economic cooperation, is now extending into the security and defence dimension, reflecting a broader shift in how European and Pacific partners understand their shared interests.

The panel discussion, moderated by a senior security and defence analyst with extensive NATO and EU operational experience, brought together two New Zealand-based academics specialising in Pacific security and a NATO military cooperation officer covering Australia, New Zealand, Japan, and the Republic of Korea. The moderator opened by framing the structural context: the geographic and perceptual distance between Europe and the Pacific is narrowing as global confrontation between superpowers intensifies, and the economy-security dichotomy that smaller countries have long tried to navigate is becoming increasingly difficult to sustain.

The discussants argued that the Pacific Islands are no longer a peripheral theatre but a central arena of strategic competition. China has moved from being a development partner to actively reshaping the region's security architecture, as illustrated by some Pacific Islands' diplomatic switch from recognition of Taiwan to China, the testing of Chinese intercontinental ballistic missiles in the Indo-Pacific, and the passage of Chinese naval flotillas between Australia and New Zealand. Pacific island states are being progressively integrated into broader Indo-Pacific planning, and external security partnerships are increasingly functioning as instruments through which outside powers shape regional order. The key dynamic, however, is not uniform alignment with any external power, but rather a trend of differentiated alignment that reflects each country's own priorities and threat

perceptions. Pacific countries are seeking agency, prioritising collective security and regional sovereignty, and the critical question for the EU is whether its engagement strengthens or fragments that regional security architecture.

The panel stressed that the security challenges facing the region are increasingly interconnected and holistic in nature. What had historically been concentrated on human rights, development, and climate is now understood to encompass foreign interference, disinformation campaigns, unregulated fishing, drug trafficking, cybercrime, human trafficking, and economic coercion. Such threats are particularly dangerous as they emerge alongside genuine development needs and infrastructure gaps. Russia's presence in the region through semi-grey power tactics was also highlighted as an underestimated factor. Pacific island states, though small individually, carry collective weight in international organisations such as the United Nations, and their primary concern remains climate security, a priority that external powers may seek to leverage for strategic purposes through diplomatic engagement. The goal articulated was a free, open, and secure Indo-Pacific in which countries retain genuine agency over their own development and security choices.

From the NATO perspective, it was recognised that awareness of the Indo-Pacific within European security institutions has grown dramatically in recent years. NATO's engagement with Indo-Pacific partners operates through three complementary channels: political engagement at the embassy level, individual tailored partnership programmes that translate political commitment into concrete military cooperation, and joint exercises and crisis management response coordination. The officer identified three priorities for deepening this engagement. First, cooperation must be demand-driven, as NATO cannot oblige Indo-Pacific partners to cooperate but must instead demonstrate what it can concretely offer, including military training, crisis management, and climate security tools. Second, technology and innovation cooperation, through NATO centres of excellence, investment projects, and interoperability standards, is essential to ensure that partner nations are not technologically dependent on a single foreign partner. Finally, resilience-building remains central: NATO's seven baseline resilience requirements align closely with Pacific island priorities, and translating this alignment into clear roadmaps with accountability mechanisms is a prerequisite for credible partnership.

The discussion followed by examining the structural constraints facing smaller states navigating great-power competition. The economy-security dilemma was identified as particularly acute for Pacific island countries: their margin for manoeuvre is thin, and economic pragmatism frequently drives policy decisions, as illustrated by countries such as Kiribati's switch of diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to China to secure access to its large exclusive economic zone. Economic dependence, it was argued, progressively erodes a country's freedom of choice, making multinational cooperation with like-minded partners the only viable path to sustained sovereignty for smaller states. The combination of civil and military cooperation, reflected in new national security strategies across the region, was noted as a promising development.

The audience discussion raised several substantive questions. Drawing a comparison with ASEAN's management of relations with China, it was observed that although countries such as Vietnam and the Philippines face direct military pressure, the unanimity requirement in ASEAN decision-making and China's economic leverage make collective responses structurally difficult. On France's role in the Pacific Islands' cooperation architecture through its Pacific territories, speakers noted that the inclusion of French territories in the Pacific Islands Forum remains a contentious issue, and that France tends to engage with Pacific regional architecture primarily when it serves its own interests. On India's role, it was noted that India's commitment to strategic autonomy makes it an inconsistent partner for Pacific countries and a reluctant participant in NATO-adjacent frameworks. Finally, the panellists highlighted a distinction between economic coercion and cooperation, arguing that coercion begins when a partner extracts strategic concessions in exchange for investment.

The conference concluded with final reflections that drew together the day's main themes. The Pacific is no longer a secondary consideration for European security policy. First, the connectivity between the Indo-Pacific and the Euro-Atlantic is structural, and the EU's engagement in the region carries real consequences for the agency and resilience of Pacific island states. Second, the Pacific Islands have shifted from a peripheral theatre to a central arena of strategic competition, with China, the United States, and increasingly Russia all actively seeking to shape the region's security architecture. Pacific island states are responding not with uniform alignment but with differentiated strategies that reflect their own priorities, threat perceptions, and economic realities. Climate security, regional sovereignty, and collective resilience remain the primary concerns of Pacific governments, and external engagement that subordinates these priorities to great-power strategic agendas risks undermining rather than supporting regional stability. Economic dependence is a form of strategic vulnerability, and for smaller states it progressively forecloses freedom of choice, a dynamic that only multinational cooperation with like-minded partners can offset. NATO's growing engagement with Indo-Pacific partners is real but must become more structured, with clearer offers, roadmaps, and accountability mechanisms to be credible. For the EU specifically, the critical test is whether its presence in the Pacific strengthens regional agency or further complicates an already crowded strategic environment. The answer depends on whether the EU is willing to take a genuinely demand-driven, long-horizon approach that prioritises the needs of Pacific partners over its own strategic visibility. The risk of the EU entering a region already crowded with competing great-power influences and being perceived as yet another external actor asserting strategic priorities was presented as the central challenge that EU Pacific policy must address.