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Is the EU ready for an Indo-Pacific strategy?

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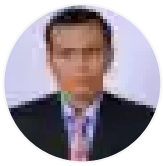

Chirayu Thakkar

Chirayu recently graduated from the Modern South Asian Studies program at the University of Oxford. He writes on the history, politics, and international relations of South As ... MORE

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Before Wang Yi could get over his jet lag after the EU visit, Germany announced a 40-page Indo-Pacific strategy, which has taken many by surprise. While Berlin stated two intentions for unveiling the new policy— "to avoid unilateral [economic] dependencies by diversifying partnerships" and "[Germany] wants to help shape the international rules-based order," it is the latter that is paid additional attention to by analysts and policymakers from Brussels to Beijing. In his remarks, German foreign minister

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Heiko Mass announced that Germany, along with France, is working with other EU partners for a European Indo-Pacific strategy. Adopting an Indo-Pacific strategy means pushing for a rules-based order, freedom of navigation in the Indo-Pacific, engaging with ASEAN and other democracies economically, among others, all to the chagrin of Beijing. It begs for the question is the European Union prepared for such a strategic shift. If at all, what immediate factors will animate the formulation of such a policy.

East vs. West

In the European Union's threat calculus, Russia aces all other geostrategic and geopolitical threats. While Beijing's mega investments are sometimes seen with suspicion, Beijing is not placed at par with Moscow as a geostrategic threat. All the more, Eastern and Western Europe have widely differing perceptions of Beijing. Some countries on the eastern flank, such as members of 16 + 1, see Beijing as a source of investment. In terms of individual engagement and cost-benefit analysis, EU member states do not share a coherent assessment of Beijing. China's economic engagement with CEE states, which includes an investment of 15.4 billion dollars in infrastructure, is seen by many as an attempt to drive a wedge

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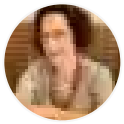
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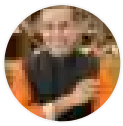
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between the EU member states in the formulation of a singular China (or anti-China) policy. Contrary to the differences, increasingly the EU realizes that the aptest way of dealing with a "systemic rival" such as China requires a "whole-of-EU" approach. The key challenge confronting the EU in framing an Indo-Pacific strategy is the bridging of the East v West chasm.

Whole-of-EU Approach

Despite many internal differences, the EU has shown a remarkable ability to unite on some aspects of foreign policy. The ongoing feud between Greece and Turkey remains a case in point. It is not that the policymakers in Vilnius or Bratislava care less about a free and open Indo Pacific. However, their response or agreement to an EU-wide Indo-Pacific strategy would be animated by three immediate developments within and beyond the continent.

First, the EU member states will be observing how Berlin's economic diversification works on the ground, both in terms of market access and supply chains. Can the ASEAN countries substitute for assembly lines established by German companies in various parts of China? Can Berlin negotiate tariff

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reductions or a partial trade deal with New Delhi's intransigent bureaucracy? How will Beijing react to these developments? These and other implications of Berlin's moves would be keenly followed across Europe.

Second, EU capitals would be watchful of the November elections in the US. It is widely understood that a Biden administration would be less hawkish towards Beijing compared to a Trump administration. If it turns out to be a dispensation that is more accommodative of Beijing, many countries would not want to rub a formal Indo-Pacific policy in the face of the White House, even if they are quietly disposed towards diversification.

Finally, while waiting for the other two developments, lawmakers in various EU capitals would also be following strategic developments within the Indo-Pacific region. There has been a lot of talk about the Quad alliance, coming together of democratic countries, joint naval exercises, so on and so forth. How much of it reifies into something substantive would also determine when and how the EU throws their hat into the Indo-Pacific.

Conclusion

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An Indo-Pacific strategy for the European Union is a matter of when and not if. Nevertheless, the Union's collective response would be reactive to various political and economic developments across the Atlantic and particularly in the Indo-Pacific. An indication of such a strategy in the offing can both irk Beijing, as well as its delay, can be used as leverage in driving home Brussels point, be it Hong Kong or the Xinjiang or some other transactional negotiations. With the EU's bandwidth mostly consumed with many other foreign policy developments, from Belarus to Greece, it is highly unlikely that the EU would start expending energy on an Indo-Pacific strategy immediately. It is, however, advisable that members of the EU start singing a similar tune while watching out for related developments.

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