

The EU in the Indo-Pacific

A Pragmatic but Limited Maritime Security Actor

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The European Union (EU) has traditionally focused on addressing non-traditional security threats in the maritime domain, such as through anti-piracy operations and tackling smuggling. However, the EU's new strategies indicate that the Union seeks to expand its role as a broader maritime security provider in the Indo-Pacific region. Using the Coordinated Maritime Presences (CMP) concept as a case study, this memo explores how the EU's strategic maritime ambitions are evolving in practice within the Indo-Pacific.⁽¹⁾

THE INDO-PACIFIC HAS become the epicentre of today's geopolitical competition. Given the region's importance in terms of trade and critical technologies, coupled with the intensified rivalry between the United States and China, discussions about the EU's role in the region have become increasingly pressing.⁽²⁾ Through a number of new strategies, the EU views its security as increasingly interconnected with the Indo-Pacific. The Union has also outlined its aim to become a stronger maritime security provider in the region.⁽³⁾ This marks a considerable shift in the Union's maritime security ambitions, which had previously centred mainly on non-traditional security threats, such as piracy, smuggling, and other forms of "blue crime."

While specific countries have engaged in maritime activities in the wider Indo-Pacific,⁽⁴⁾ the geographical focus of the EU's maritime engagement and activities is mainly concentrated in the North Western Indian Ocean (NWIO). With significant parts of global shipping passing through the NWIO, the recent attack in the region by the Iran-backed Houthi movement has led to increased shipping costs, human casualties, and the possibility of environmental impacts.⁽⁵⁾ While there are several maritime operations in the region,⁽⁶⁾ the Union has since 2022 also launched a Coordinated Maritime Presences (CMP) concept in the NWIO, which aims to provide a framework for sharing information and coordinating member states' maritime assets in that area.⁽⁷⁾

In light of the tense security situation in the Indo-Pacific and the EU's evolving maritime ambitions in the region, this study aims to explore the Union's engagement and role in the Indo-Pacific, with a focus on the NWIO and the CMP concept. The study confines itself to the NWIO because this is the area where the EU has its most active military presence. Moreover, while the EU's various Indo-Pacific policies cover a wide range of issues, this study narrows its scope by focussing on the Union's role in the maritime security domain. Furthermore, as the EU's CMP concept and its actual outcomes are under-researched, the study also aims to fill a gap in the literature.

This memo outlines the EU's maritime ambitions towards the Indo-Pacific region, analyses how these ambitions are realised in practice, and assesses what the results suggest about the EU's role as a maritime security actor. It does so by posing the following research questions:

- What are the EU's ambitions in the maritime security domain in the Indo-Pacific?
- How are these ambitions realised in practice through the Coordinated Maritime Presences concept?
- What does this say about the EU's role as a maritime security provider?

To address these matters, the study draws on an analysis of three of the EU's main official strategic documents related to the region, as well as over 15 different official and working documents from EU institutions involved in developing the CMP concept.⁽⁸⁾ To further analyse the EU's role and the CMP concept, the memo also builds on semi-structured interviews with seven senior EU officials, diplomats, and EU military staff, all of whom were involved in the development of the CMP. Finally, the research triangulates the findings using desk research of academic and think-tank reports.

The next section discusses previous literature on the EU's maritime security role. It then outlines the Union's official stated ambitions toward the Indo-Pacific region. This is followed by a focussed case study on the Coordinated Maritime Presences concept in the North Western Indian Ocean, which analyses how the EU's ambitions are implemented in practice. The next section provides an analysis of the CMP concept's results and constraints as well as discussion regarding what this means for the EU's role in the wider Indo-Pacific region. The final section summarises the study's main results.

Descriptions of the EU as a maritime security actor

The academic and think-tank community has had an increasing interest in the European Union's overall maritime security role in recent years.⁽⁹⁾ For example, Bueger and Edmunds conclude that the EU has made substantial efforts to increase its visibility and role as a maritime security actor, arguing that the scope of its actions as a collective security entity is both notable and ambitious.⁽¹⁰⁾ This scope includes its contributions to combating piracy, smuggling, and other forms of blue crime through various missions and operations.

The EU has also played an important role in enhancing maritime situational awareness in various maritime theatres.⁽¹¹⁾ However, while the Union's ambitions have clearly grown in recent years, European navies have significantly decreased in size and capability following the period of the peace dividend after the end of the Cold War and the economic crisis of the 2010s.⁽¹²⁾

The EU's actions have also prompted an increased debate regarding its role in the Indo-Pacific theatre. With the new policies outlined in the following section, it appears that the EU is moulding a new role as a security actor. Nevertheless, ambiguity still surrounds the role that the EU will and can have in the region. In the

academic literature, it is possible to outline three images of the EU's maritime security role in the Indo-Pacific. One image depicts the EU as mainly a promoter of free trade in the region by ensuring the free flow of goods at sea.⁽¹³⁾ Another image has the EU responding to an increasingly tense regional geopolitical context, conveying an image of the Union as a geopolitical actor and providing maritime security in the region.⁽¹⁴⁾ Thirdly, in light of the US-China rivalry in the region, some earlier literature has depicted the EU's role in the Indo-Pacific as the adoption of a third way.⁽¹⁵⁾ This plurality of images of the EU as a maritime actor in the Indo-Pacific is partly due to member states' disagreement about the EU's role in the region, as well as its limited maritime resources.⁽¹⁶⁾

While the literature focusses on the role the EU is taking in theory, it is unclear what role the Union is performing in practice. For instance, the EU has been identified as initiating some form of hard power signalling in its strategies.⁽¹⁷⁾ Yet, most of the EU's efforts have used soft means to attain these hard-power goals.⁽¹⁸⁾ However, some view the newly created EU operation Aspides as a way for the EU to demonstrate its increased capabilities as a maritime security actor.⁽¹⁹⁾

Riddervold suggests that the EU is still focusing on portraying an image of itself as an upholder of multilateral cooperation and norms on the sea. The motivation for the EU's actions is to assure free trade and uphold such international laws as the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).⁽²⁰⁾ Pejsova, in turn, maintains that while the EU has relatively limited maritime capabilities, the Union has a diplomatic advantage to promote multilateral cooperation. Furthermore, despite its limited maritime capabilities, the EU's presence in the Indo-Pacific region holds symbolic value, serving as a message of solidarity to allies.⁽²¹⁾

The EU's Indo-Pacific ambitions

The EU has defined the Indo-Pacific region in broad terms, describing it as the "geographic area from the east coast of Africa to the Pacific Island States."⁽²²⁾ With the 2021 *EU strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region*, the Union highlighted the importance of increased engagement in the region. The strategy outlines that in the maritime domain, the EU and its member states will seek to conduct more port calls and joint exercises with Indo-Pacific partners. Moreover, the strategy underscores the importance of ensuring an

enhanced naval deployment by its member states, as well as increasing maritime-security capacity-building measures in the region.⁽²³⁾

The EU's 2022 Strategic Compass, in turn, underscores the importance of advancing the interoperability of European and partner naval forces through, among other things, live exercises and joint port calls.⁽²⁴⁾ The Strategic Compass also highlights the ambition to strengthen the links and support between EU missions in the region, including Operation Atalanta, and European ad hoc missions such as the European Awareness Mission in the Strait of Hormuz and its military track Operation AGENOR. Moreover, the Compass outlines that the EU should conduct live maritime exercises with Indo-Pacific partners as well as carry out more port calls and patrols in the region.⁽²⁵⁾

In 2023, the EU also launched a new EU Maritime Security Strategy (EUMSS) with an accompanying action plan. The new strategy enlarges ambitions and outlines the need for the Union to become a stronger maritime security actor. It also highlights the importance of the Indo-Pacific for the EU and underlines the ambition to be more present in the region in the maritime domain.

Moreover, the EUMSS emphasises that the Union and its member states in recent years have increased and developed their relations through port calls and exercises with Indo-Pacific partners, including, among others, Australia, Japan, India, Indonesia, the Republic of Korea, and Singapore.⁽²⁶⁾ In 2023, the EU also conducted the first joint EU-US naval exercise in the Indo-Pacific.⁽²⁷⁾ It also held joint naval exercises between EU Operation Atalanta and Indo-Pacific partners.⁽²⁸⁾ The 2023 strategy moreover underlined that the European Union will continue to improve and enhance cooperation with its Indo-Pacific partners on maritime security and situational maritime awareness through such projects as the Enhancing Security Cooperation in and With Asia (ESIWA) initiative and the EU Critical Maritime Routes Indo-Pacific (CRIMARIO 2) project.⁽²⁹⁾

Overall, four main ambitions can be identified in the strategic documents above: 1) increasing presence through initiatives such as port calls and exercises; 2) enhancing interoperability and cooperation both among EU member states and with regional states; 3) capacity-building; and 4) assuming a more prominent role as a maritime security actor.

However, as the EU does not have its own fleet, all EU maritime engagement is dependent on member states'

contributions. As a tool for coordinating the efforts of EU member states in the region, the Coordinated Maritime Presences concept may be seen as an opportunity for the EU to enhance its overall capacity and thereby strengthen its role in the region. The following section explains the purpose of the CMP and then analyses the role the CMP enables the EU to take in practice.

The EU Coordinated Maritime Presences concept

The EU has described the Coordinated Maritime Presences (CMP) concept as enabling the Union 'to act together by enhancing coordination of the existing Member States' naval and air assets present in specific areas that are of interest to the EU, around the world, to increase the EU's capacity to act as a reliable partner and maritime security provider'.⁽³⁰⁾

The development of this concept followed the increased maritime ambitions stemming from the launch of the EU Global Strategy in 2016. This prompted discussions on how to enhance the EU's maritime security capabilities and improve coordination between the navies of the EU member states and their activities in various regions of interest.⁽³¹⁾

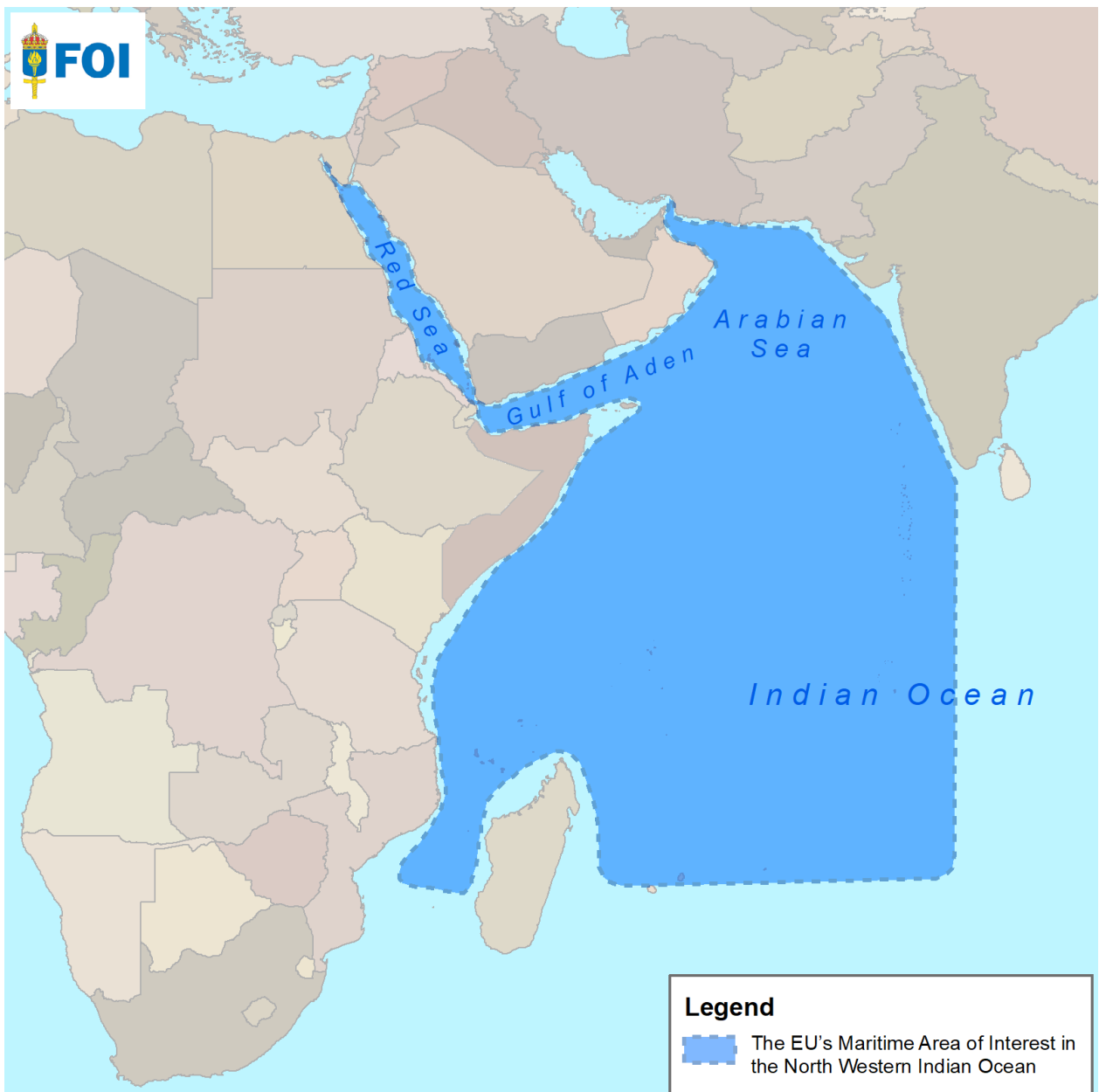
In 2019, the EU presented its initial concept ideas for the CMP. The Union emphasised that the initiative would increase its capacity to act as a maritime security provider by improving coordination and optimising the use of member states' naval assets when transiting and operating in designated Maritime Areas of Interest (MAI).⁽³²⁾ However, the CMP is not a Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) mission or operation. As a result, coordination through the concept occurs on a voluntary basis, with member states' assets remaining under their respective national chains of command.

The idea, in brief, is that the EU can implement the CMP concept in any maritime region that the Union has identified as an MAI.⁽³³⁾ Moreover, with the establishment of an MAI and the implementation of the CMP concept, a small coordination cell (MAICC) within the EU Military Staff has been established to lead this work.⁽³⁴⁾ The purpose of the MAICC is to collect and share information with the member states to enhance coordination of their maritime activities, with the aim of improving the EU's situational awareness and enabling the EU to monitor the security situation in an MAI.⁽³⁵⁾

After recommendations from the EEAS and the EU Military Staff, the EU Council decided in January 2021 to establish its first MAI and to launch the CMP

concept in the Gulf of Guinea.⁽³⁶⁾ This was due to the increased smuggling and other blue crime activities in the region.⁽³⁷⁾ Following the first implementation of the CMP concept in the Gulf of Guinea, along with the increased ambitions in the EU's 2021 Indo-Pacific strategy, discussions within the Union began about creating a new MAI and expanding the concept.⁽³⁸⁾ Thus, plans to establish the CMP concept in the North Western Indian Ocean were put forward. France strongly supported these plans, as it already was present in the

area, including by leading the ad-hoc European AGENOR mission. This mission faced problems with force generation, and France viewed the CMP concept as a way to improve coordination in the region. During this time, discussions among member states also explored establishing the CMP concept in the Eastern Mediterranean. However, political sensitivities in the area, particularly the tensions between Turkey, Greece, and Cyprus, led to the scrapping of these plans.⁽³⁹⁾



Map 1. The CMP in the North Western Indian Ocean.

Source: Per Wikström, FOI.

Consequently, the increased ambitions within the EU 2021 Indo-Pacific Strategy, along with a strong push from France, led to the establishment of the CMP concept in the North Western Indian Ocean in early 2022.⁽⁴⁰⁾ Furthermore, establishing the concept in this region was seen as “low-hanging fruit,” as the EU had already long been actively present through Operation Atalanta.⁽⁴¹⁾ The EU argued that, in the Indo-Pacific, the CMP concept would “support the gradual establishment of an open, rules-based regional maritime security architecture” and foster “cooperation with partners, including through joint maritime exercises, port calls, and information-sharing.” Furthermore, according to the EU, the implementation of the CMP in the North Western Indian Ocean is “giving a global range to EU maritime diplomacy.”⁽⁴²⁾

Since the adoption of the CMP in the North Western Indian Ocean, the tool has continued to evolve. In the military domain, this development is led by the MAICC within the EU Military Staff, which serves as the contact point for member states’ navies. The coordination cell works to gain an overall situational awareness of member states’ naval engagements in the Maritime Area of Interest and seeks, in part, to coordinate these efforts. This includes identifying opportunities for training missions and port calls, as well as maintaining a broader presence to deter, primarily, criminal activities in the region. Additionally, the MAICC receives weekly updates from engaged member states, allowing them to compile information on the area’s overall maritime security situation.⁽⁴³⁾

The diplomatic dimension is one of the most important aspects of the CMP concept.⁽⁴⁴⁾ The EU views the CMP as a key element of its maritime diplomacy, designed to foster cooperation with regional partners and support capacity-building efforts.⁽⁴⁵⁾ Because of their participation in, for instance, partner dialogues and attendance at port calls, the assignment of a senior coordinator for the CMP further highlights its diplomatic nature.⁽⁴⁶⁾ In collaboration with the navies of engaged member states and the MAICC, the coordinator also organises “CMP events,” primarily through the port calls, which play a crucial role in “showing the flag” and signalling the EU’s commitment to the region.⁽⁴⁷⁾

Thus, to a significant extent, the CMP appears to be designed to align well with the main ambitions outlined in the EU’s overall maritime strategies in the region: increasing the EU’s presence; enhancing its member states

interoperability and cooperation; facilitating capacity-building and assisting the Union in adopting a more prominent role as a maritime security actor.

Implementing the CMP: From strategy to practice

Overall, the NWIO region’s security situation has improved thanks to the CMP initiative, EU Operation Atalanta, the ad-hoc European mission AGENOR, and, most recently, EU Operation Aspides. Thus far, maritime assets from, among others, France, Spain, Germany, Italy, and the Netherlands have regularly contributed to the CMP concept in the region.⁽⁴⁸⁾ Moreover, the CMP initiative is generally regarded as a flexible tool that strengthens maritime surveillance capabilities and promotes greater cooperation with regional partners.⁽⁴⁹⁾

In this regard, our overall assessment is that the concept partly addresses the ambitions outlined in the EU’s strategies for the Indo-Pacific region. Generally, the CMP contributes to enhancing the EU’s naval presence in the region. This is limited, however, to the North Western Indian Ocean. Moreover, the concept helps in better coordinating the resources of member states and improving cooperation with regional partners, mainly through diplomatic outreach. In this context, the concept is contributing to the EU’s role as a maritime security provider. However, if the concept is to become a more effective tool in the EU’s overall maritime toolbox and fully meet the EU’s strategic ambitions, several hurdles need to be overcome in the coming years.

Firstly, the CMP faces challenges in how it relates to the EU’s other maritime operations. When the EU established the CMP concept in the North Western Indian Ocean, it deliberately defined the Maritime Area of Interest (MAI) in vague terms to allow flexibility in operating the CMP alongside other maritime missions in the region.⁽⁵⁰⁾ However, this approach has also created tensions with Operation Atalanta, as it questioned the CMP’s role in the area, particularly in the early stages.⁽⁵¹⁾ Nevertheless, the cooperation between Operation Atalanta and the CMP concept has recently improved.⁽⁵²⁾

Secondly, while the CMP in the Gulf of Guinea has achieved clear results and a more stable security situation in the area, the results of the CMP in the North Western Indian Ocean have been more mixed. The EU’s own evaluation of the concept in 2024 highlights that it has struggled to carve out a clear and distinct role for itself in the region. The presence of two EU naval operations makes the added value of the CMP concept less clear,

thereby diminishing its overall effectiveness.⁽⁵³⁾ Today, the area covered by Operation Atalanta and Operation Aspides also encompasses nearly all of the CMP's MAI.⁽⁵⁴⁾ In this regard, the Union will need to carefully consider the establishment of new areas for the CMP in the future. Another factor influencing the effectiveness of the concept is the worsening security situation that the Union faces in the region today, which underscores the differences between the MAI in the Gulf of Guinea and the MAI in the North Western Indian Ocean.⁽⁵⁵⁾

Thirdly, all of the EU's current naval operations, including the newly established Operation Aspides in the Red Sea, lack adequate resources.⁽⁵⁶⁾ Force generation is one of the Union's longstanding problems, which is likely to continue to negatively affect its maritime security ambitions. This will continue to impact the effectiveness of both the EU's CMP concept and its various naval operations.

Another factor affecting the functioning of the CMP concept is the willingness of member states to report their activities in the region. The concept's voluntary nature in that regard undermines the overall framework. Additionally, the MAICC cell within the EU Military Staff has suffered from inadequate staffing, limiting its ability to plan and coordinate naval activities and reducing the concept's overall effectiveness.⁽⁵⁷⁾

Finally, when the EEAS reviewed the CMP concept in 2024, the service outlined the possibility of either expanding the Maritime Area of Interest of the CMP into larger parts of the Indian Ocean (to the eastern part of the region, extending towards Thailand and Singapore) or even ending the concept in the region.⁽⁵⁸⁾ In the end, the member states instead opted to maintain the status quo regarding the concept's geographical scope. However, it only extended the mandate for the CMP in the North Western Indian Ocean until the spring of 2025, while it extended the CMP in the Gulf of Guinea until the spring of 2026.⁽⁵⁹⁾ Thus, the future of the CMP in the region is undecided.⁽⁶⁰⁾

The EEAS is also continuing with a new evaluation of the concept with the ambition to "swiftly put forward proposals for its [the CMP's] further improvement."⁽⁶¹⁾ The future of the CMP should also be viewed in connection with the EU's overall naval footprint and, consequently, its operations in the region, which will undergo strategic reviews. Different EU/European naval operations, while currently politically unfeasible, may be merged in the future.⁽⁶²⁾

The EU's role as a maritime security provider

On the whole, the CMP concept has struggled to establish a distinct role in the North Western Indian Ocean. In this regard, the EU's main military presence in the region is likely to continue to be best represented through its various naval operations, rather than the CMP concept. However, as all EU maritime missions, as well as the CMP concept, currently lack adequate resources, this clearly constrains the EU's overarching ambitions. Moreover, the lack of a common understanding and approach among member states also contributes to the EU's mixed signals with regard to the Indo-Pacific region.

The decision not to expand the CMP concept to a wider region can also be seen as a weakness in relation to the Union's political ambitions. This is a clear example of the Union's mixed signalling regarding the Indo-Pacific. For instance, while the EU's various strategies often emphasise the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea as key security challenges, the Union primarily focuses its presence in the North Western Indian Ocean, as highlighted in this memo.⁽⁶³⁾ Moreover, as most European states are currently more concerned about Russia's actions, supplying resources to the Indo-Pacific is of secondary priority.⁽⁶⁴⁾ As one interviewee outlined the situation, "European navies today have focused on the Red Sea, the Mediterranean, the Baltic Sea, and so on. Therefore we are already overstretched, and it is hard to see the maritime impact in terms of naval power in the wider Indo-Pacific."⁽⁶⁵⁾

All in all, realising the ambitions outlined in the EU's overall strategies faces significant limitations. These include, as outlined above, the availability of limited naval resources among EU member states, a lack of clear prioritisation, and differing views and political priorities across the member states. Today, European navies are clearly stretched due to post-Cold War downsizing, making it challenging to maintain a stronger naval presence in the Indo-Pacific. Moreover, while the development and launch of new strategies guiding the EU's Indo-Pacific approach are significant preparatory achievements, they now require implementation⁽⁶⁶⁾ In that respect, the preparatory activities are the easy part, while implementation is the real challenge.⁽⁶⁷⁾

While some earlier literature has presented various perspectives on the EU's role as a maritime security actor in the region, we assess that the EU should be viewed as a pragmatic, yet limited, actor in maritime security in the region. When viewed as a pragmatic security actor, the

EU's engagement through the CMP has several additional benefits. Firstly, it underscores the Union's concern over the deteriorating security situation in the region. Furthermore, European actors' focus on the North Western Indo-Pacific region may be viewed as a strategy to alleviate the United States' burden and steer clear of the region's most geopolitically tense areas. The EU also has a clear added value in offering a broad security toolbox in terms of maritime awareness initiatives, and it is likely to continue playing this role in the region.

If the CMP concept is viewed in the context of other EU defence maritime actions in the region, it has a part to play in carving the EU's role there. For instance, Operation Atalanta, as well as the CMP concept and Operation Aspides, have over time made significant achievements in the region, contributing to upholding the freedom of navigation and free flow of goods.⁽⁶⁸⁾ The Union also plays an important role as a naval diplomatic actor.⁽⁶⁹⁾ In that regard, the EU's actions in the region signal its presence and interest to its partners, while also contributing to the region's security.

Given the uncertainties in the transatlantic relationship under the new Trump administration, the ambitions of the EU and its member states toward the Indo-Pacific could shift. The US administration's focus on China may lead some European states to direct more of their efforts toward the Indo-Pacific region. On the other hand, if the US were to signal a diminished interest in European security, it might necessitate the allocation of more resources to Europe.

However, there are also indications that the EU may attempt to establish stronger links to partners in the wider Indo-Pacific region. For instance, the EU signed new Security and Defence Partnerships with both Japan and the Republic of Korea (ROK) in November 2024. These partnerships, among other things, focused on enhancing maritime security, including increased cooperation between EU Operation Atalanta and the

Japanese Self-Defence Forces as well as the ROK navy. Additionally, the agreements also underlined an ambition to cooperate through the EU's CMP concept, notably in the North Western Indian Ocean.⁽⁷⁰⁾

Conclusion

Our results show that the EU is clearly increasing its ambitions for the Indo-Pacific region in the maritime security domain. However, we also find that the CMP concept, as analysed in this memo, remains a very limited instrument for addressing the EU's ambitions in the region. This observation suggests a "say-do gap" in the EU's overall ambitions. Moreover, most EU states still lack credible naval capabilities, underscoring the challenges the Union faces in achieving its maritime security objectives. It is evident that the EU's actions generally fall short of its overall goals.

In all, we assess that while the EU is enhancing its maritime security ambitions in the Indo-Pacific, divergent views among member states, coupled with their limited naval and maritime capabilities, will hinder the EU from playing a greater role in the wider region in the future. In the coming years, only a few member states are likely to continue advocating for a greater European presence in the Indo-Pacific. As a result, the EU is expected to play a limited role in maritime security beyond the North Western Indian Ocean. European maritime security engagement in the broader Indo-Pacific region will likely continue to be carried out by a few member states. Their presence will also likely remain largely symbolic and ad hoc, consisting of temporary missions and training with local partners in the region.

To conclude, we have outlined and described several hurdles that hinder the effectiveness of the CMP in the region. This, alongside the efforts of its various naval operations, leads us to conclude that the European Union today can, at best, be seen as a pragmatic yet limited maritime security actor in the Indo-Pacific. ■

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Endnotes

- 1 This is a joint study conducted within the Swedish Defence Research Agency's International Military Missions and Northern European and Transatlantic Security (NOTS) programmes. The authors thank Professor Marianne Riddervold (Norwegian Institute of International Affairs/Inland Norway University/UC Berkeley) and Alina Engström (FOI) for reviewing this FOI Memo. The authors also thank participants in a seminar at FOI for their comments and suggestions on the study.
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