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## PROMOTING NORMS OR PROTECTING INTERESTS? THE ROLE OF DEMOCRATIC VALUES IN THE EUROPEAN UNION'S INDO- PACIFIC STRATEGY

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**Abstract:** *The European Union (EU) has been perceived as a normative power (by itself and some others) in the international system. Through this concept, the EU's policies and actions can be aligned with its identity, which is grounded in democratic values. Yet there is often a gap between those values and their practical implementation. The EU's 2021 Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific offers an opportunity to test how well it is positioned to advance democratic norms in the world's most economically dynamic and increasingly geo-politically contested region. This article argues that, while the Strategy reflects the EU's foundational democratic values, it lacks clarity regarding the primacy of those values. As currently framed, the Strategy leaves the EU facing key unresolved democratic dilemmas in its Indo-Pacific engagement. The article concludes that the efficacy of the Strategy as a vehicle for bolstering democracy in the region will hinge on how it is operationalised, which will require confronting these dilemmas and making hard choices, especially between interests and values. Such choices are exemplary of a more general conundrum for the EU as an international organisation with 27 members whose interests often constrain the pursuit of its role as a self-consciously normative actor in international affairs.*

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**Keywords:** European Union, Indo-Pacific region, Democratic values, European Union Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific.

### Introduction

The European Union (EU), unlike other great powers in the international system, does not generally influence states and other actors through the use of military or economic tools but

prefers to draw on the power of norms, rules and values. As a self-consciously normative power, the EU considers itself a bastion of global democracy. Democratic values and principles define its essence as an international organisation and guide its interaction with the rest of the world. Coupled with the rule of law and human rights, they have long underpinned the European integration project. Yet there is often a gap between those values and principles and their implementation in practice when dealing with the realities of international relations.<sup>1</sup>

The EU's 2021 "Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific" (hereafter referred to as "the Strategy" and cited as "EU Strategy, 2021") offers an opportunity to test how well it is positioned to play its favoured normative role in bolstering democratic values in the world's most economically dynamic and increasingly geo-politically contested region. This article argues that, while the Strategy's language and contents reflect the EU's foundational democratic values, it lacks conceptual clarity regarding the primacy of those values, especially *via-a-vis* interests. Strategies involve setting objectives, determining priorities and allocating resources to achieve them. In its current high-level form, the Strategy is deficient on all three levels, primarily because it avoids addressing key challenges and opportunities for advancing democratic norms in the region. In particular, it fails to acknowledge several democratic dilemmas confronting the EU as a normative actor in the Indo-Pacific, which can be summed up in three questions. Does the EU consider the Indo-Pacific to be a region or a concept? Does the Strategy prioritise values or interests? Does the EU favour an essentially rules-based approach to regional order in the Indo-Pacific or one based on both rules and democratic norms? Therefore, the very framing of the Strategy may hamper the EU's intentions to promote its foundational values and fails to make clear what success would look like.

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Balfour (2021) notes that the EU has "constitutionalized the values of democracy and human rights like no other actor . . . including their promotion in its external action". But, while EU leaders "insist there is no question of 'values versus interests' . . . the EU mostly falls short of following through", especially when dealing with great powers, due to "the primacy of stability, a mix of business and energy interests, the need for dialogue with other countries on security matters, and the legacy of historical relations". Similarly, Smith and Youngs (2018: 45) argue that "in recent years the EU's own approaches to global order and international challenges have adopted a more selective or contingent liberalism". See also Pänke (2019) for a novel assessment of the balance between the promotion of norms and interests by framing the EU as a "liberal empire".

The paper concludes that the efficacy of the Strategy as a vehicle for bolstering democracy in the region will hinge on how it is operationalised, which will require hard choices about how to align interests and values. Such choices are exemplary of a more general conundrum for the EU as a self-perceived normative actor in international affairs and as an international organisation with 27 members whose interests often make the EU base its actions on compromises.<sup>2</sup>

### **The EU as a normative champion of democratic values**

The concept of the normative power of Europe—defined and developed by Ian Manners (2002) and grounded in social constructivism—has gained much appreciation not only among scholars but also within EU institutions, as it aligned the freshly defined identity of the EU with its policies, actions, successes and failures. The perception of the EU as a normative power “shields” it from judgements of insignificance in comparison with states as traditional and primary actors in international relations. At the same time, the specificity of the EU creates more expectations regarding its influence in international relations than usually expected of Inter-Governmental Organisations (IGOs). Manners’ concept was a response to changes following the creation of the EU that gradually superseded the European Community (EC).<sup>3</sup> François Duchêne’s 1972 concept of Europe as a civilian power (referring to the European Economic Community, later known simply as the Economic Community), was no longer applicable with the ongoing political integration in Europe after Maastricht. Manners’ idea was a response to that indirectly and directly to Hedley Bull’s critique of the civilian power concept. Manners’ idea of Europe’s normative power is largely embedded in the constructivist approach and particularly in the constructivist explanation of the diffusion of norms (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998). Manners asserts that the EU’s normative power is diffused thanks to six processes and

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<sup>2</sup> For a pithy but scathing critique of the implications of this conundrum, see “On bullshit: Brussels edition,” *The Economist*, December 4<sup>th</sup> 2021.

<sup>3</sup> The European Communities: European Coal and Steel Community, European Economic Community and European Atomic Community. After the Treaty on European Union signed in Maastricht in 1991, the European Economic Community became known as the European Community.

factors: contagion, information diffusion, procedural diffusion, transference, overt diffusion and cultural filters.

According to Manners, the core values for the EU are peace, liberty, democracy, human rights and the rule of law, which are embedded in the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU (TFEU) and the Treaty on EU (TEU). Article 2 of the TEU is unequivocal about the values that the EU is founded on: “respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. These values are common to the Member States in a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail”. These fundamental values are emphasised again in Article 3.5 as definitive of the EU’s international role: “In its relations with the wider world, the Union shall uphold and promote its values and interests and contribute to the protection of its citizens. It shall contribute to peace, security, the sustainable development of the Earth, solidarity and mutual respect among peoples, free and fair trade, eradication of poverty and the protection of human rights, in particular the rights of the child, as well as to the strict observance and the development of international law, including respect for the principles of the United Nations Charter”. The TFEU, which is the amended version of the Paris Treaty of 1957 that led to the creation of the EEC, provides for rules on the functioning of the EU institutions and members precisely with respect for the principles mentioned in Article 2 of the TEU.

Further development of the integration process in the 21st Century with the Treaty of Lisbon (2007) reinforced the concept of the normative power of the EU but also brought complex challenges related to it: the more integration and supranational elements in the EU, the more contested the concept of Europe as a normative power was becoming. The key challenge is the fact that the EU remains an IGO and not a supranational “state”, as the member-states have created the organisation and its policies and actions and, without their governments, the EU would not exist. There are, of course, *sui generis* elements of this international organisation of a highly supranational character (the European Parliament, the EU Commission and the EU Justice Tribunal to give only institutional examples) but it still bears the predominant characteristics of an IGO and not of a state, as the Convention on the Future of the European Union presided over by former French President Valéry Giscard d’Estaing wanted it to be. The

nature of the EU, with its 27 members (states that have their own preferences, interests and goals in foreign policy) and the organisation itself which has grown into a type of actor previously unknown in global history (whose set of preferences, interests and goals in its common European foreign and security policy is much more difficult to trace and define), makes for a perennial conundrum of non-alignment between these two constitutive elements (members and/vs. the organisation). The weaknesses, lack of clarity and possible omissions of the EU's external strategies usually stem first and foremost from the fact that the promotion of fundamental democratic values and principles of the EU may not always be in line with member states' interests of a political, strategic, military or economic character. Moreover, the enunciated values and principles often become a decoy for realistically constructed national interests. Examples include the EU's promotion of human rights and rule of law as values of its refugee protection system, while nonetheless signing an agreement with the Turkish government<sup>4</sup> and reimbursing Turkey for containing irregular migration flows within its territory (which in itself led to questioning of one of the fundamental human rights—the right to seek and enjoy asylum) (Dagi, 2020).

A normative power works internationally through soft instruments (soft power) and through the promotion of values and principles linked to the particular actor's identity. A normative power does not use traditional means in its international endeavours, such as military power, but builds on recognition of the attractiveness of itself encoded in promoted standards, values, principles and procedures (Skolimowska 2015: 112). What is necessary, therefore, for a normative power to exert influence is not only the self-recognition of the normative significance of the actor but also that of third parties. If the integration process that has led to the current form of the EU was not attractive for non-members, there would be no attempts to join the club. However, a question arises whether the promotion of values, rules, norms, principles, standards, and their diffusion take place due to the fact that they are admired by state actors or rather because they see that the admiration is a *sine qua non* condition of membership or close

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<sup>4</sup> For more information about the bilateral EU-Turkey agreement, see: European Parliament (20 November 2019). Legislative Train: Towards a New Policy on Migration: EU-Turkey Statement and Action Plan.

cooperation.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, to what extent can one divide the significance of the actor's (EU's) normative power from the associated economic or political power? These and other questions need answers which are case-specific, but it is also possible to draw more general conclusions through qualitative case studies, the EU approach to the Indo-Pacific being one of them.

### **The Indo-Pacific as a geo-politically contested and democratically challenged region**

The Indo-Pacific is the world's most important region—and its most puzzling. Depending on definitions, the region accounts for over half the world's population, at least half of the global economy and an even greater percentage of military expenditure. There is much disagreement, however, about what defines the “region”: geography; geo-politics; economics; history; and/or culture (Pulikapa and Musaddi, 2021; Heiduk and Wacker, 2020). There is no general consensus about which nations are part of the region, as reflected in the definition in the EU Strategy, which differs from those used by the United States and even from those applied by EU member states in their own strategies for the region. The Indo-Pacific concept is not only confusing but vigorously contested. China insists that the Indo-Pacific does not even exist and that “Asia-Pacific” remains a perfectly appropriate designation for most of the region in question—as does Russia, for the most part (Denisov, Paramonov, Arapova and Safranchuk, 2021). Indeed, only in the past decade has the term gained traction as an expanded alternative to the Asia-Pacific. It is worth recalling why the concept has emerged at all, given that it was rarely used in earlier years. There is general agreement that its impetus has been primarily geo-strategic as a response to the rising power of China. Beijing certainly views the Indo-Pacific reframing of the Asia-Pacific region as an explicit effort to contain its legitimate rise—a view that Russia appears to share. Much commentary about the concept has focused on it in these geo-political terms (Saeed, 2017); Medcalf, 2019; He & Li, 2020; Denisov, Paramonov, Arapova and Safranchuk, 2021). This focus has perhaps underplayed salient democratic

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<sup>5</sup> The notable example is Kosovo: there was little domestic support for the EU rule of law mission EULEX but still a high level of support for possible membership. Can one say that the EU's norms and values were treated as rather instrumental and were internalised only to the extent necessary to sign the Stabilisation and Association Agreement with the EU? That is in line with constructivist view that socialisation and internalisation may be the result of external pressures of various types.

dimensions of the Indo-Pacific formulation. Arguably, its very conceptualisation has been driven by an effort to sustain, defend and extend democracy. While undoubtedly representing a geo-strategic response to the rise of China, this response is one driven by democracies, especially as exemplified in the so-called Quad grouping of the United States, India, Japan and Australia. Viewed in this light, the European Union is to some extent making a “democratic bet” simply by having a policy on the Indo-Pacific (although it has avoided explicitly framing it in such terms).

The broadly democratic impetus behind the emergence of this Indo-Pacific re-conceptualisation is further reinforced by considering why it has steadily eclipsed the Asia-Pacific (Heiduk and Wacker, 2020; Saeed, 2017). The latter concept was also historically constructed, beginning in the Cold War era with the United States as the great power which most prominently connected the Asian and Pacific worlds. From the 1990s, the Asia-Pacific enjoyed positive momentum as a zone of peace and prosperity, led economically by Chinese growth, stabilised geo-politically by American power and connected multilaterally through mechanisms for regional dialogue centred around the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). This regional configuration almost organically gave rise to a set of arrangements which could accommodate a range of unlike-minded states. However, continuation of this benign Asia-Pacific strategic environment hinged on the assumption that China would be increasingly integrated in that framework without challenging the loose rules around the region’s implicitly “free and open” character. That has not been the case in recent years, at least in the perceptions of the Quad partners and a number of other states.

In this context, the United States adoption of its Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy was effectively an effort to retain the underlying character of the “old” Asia-Pacific by broadening its geographic scope, above all to include India, the world’s most populous democracy (United States Department of State, 2019; Poling, 2019; Denisov, Paramonov, Arapova and Safranchuk, 2021). Over the past few years, others who were initially wary of the American move and of the Quad as clumsy efforts to “contain” China, have come to embrace the Indo-Pacific reframing of the region, albeit with a strong emphasis on inclusiveness. The ASEAN Outlook (2019) on the Indo-Pacific stands out in his regard but other states like New

Zealand have moved from sceptics of the concept to embrace it on similar terms to ASEAN (Ardern, 2021).

Neither the “old” Asia-Pacific nor the “new” Indo-Pacific have been regional conceptualisations in which democracies predominate. Rather, they are democratically challenged and contested spaces, but the Asia-Pacific had developed skeletal regional architecture through ASEAN centrality which allowed for peaceful (and prosperous) interaction between often fundamentally unlike-minded states (Yates, 2017). This regional architecture has proven inadequate to manage a fraying of relations between regional great powers, which has precipitated the Indo-Pacific response from the region’s democracies. In this context, a key question confronting the EU (and others) in responding to the “new” Indo-Pacific is to what extent it is a democratic project as much as a geo-strategic initiative—while confusingly described as a “region”, even though its geographical boundaries lack any consensus definition and its most populous country does not formally recognise the existence of such a region.

### **The place of democratic values in the EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific**

The EU Strategy is certainly congruent with democratic principles in its language. The introduction to the Strategy explicitly affirms that the EU’s increased engagement with the region “will be based on promoting democracy, the rule of law, human rights” (EU Strategy, 2021:1). The first point in the EU’s vision for engaging with Indo-Pacific partners is similarly couched in terms of promoting democratic norms, stating that it will seek to: “Solidify and defend the rules-based international order, by promoting inclusive and effective multilateral cooperation based on shared values and principles, including a commitment to respecting democracy, human rights and the rule of law” (EU Strategy, 2021: 3). Moreover, the 18-page public document outlining the Strategy includes numerous direct or indirect references to related elements, including the defence of human rights and rules-based approaches to regional order, which anchor the Strategy in the EU’s identity as a democratic actor and one which seeks to promote democratic norms—at least rhetorically.

However, while not agnostic on the subject, the Strategy studiously avoids spelling out how the EU will promote democracy in the region. It is telling that the words “democracy” and

“democratic” together appear only seven times in the document, while “trade” appears 38 times, “investment” 22 times and “security” 36 times. Moreover, democracy does not feature explicitly in the Strategy’s seven priority areas: “Sustainable and inclusive prosperity; Green transition; Ocean governance; Digital governance and partnerships; Connectivity; Security and defence; Human security” (EU Strategy, 2021: 5).

Thus, as set out in the document presented to the European Parliament and the European Council, the Strategy is hardly a visionary call to democratic arms. There is no reference at all to “democratic values”, even though “values” are mentioned six times. There are few specific references to those countries in the region which are democracies and the Strategy does not engage with the concept of a “free and open” Indo-Pacific championed by the United States and some of its regional allies.

Notably, the Strategy includes no direct reflection on the key democratic challenges in the region nor on what exactly, if anything, the EU can do to help face them. Challenges undefined amount to challenges unaddressed. Similarly, there are few intimations of what opportunities the EU might take up to help diffuse democratic norms in the Indo-Pacific. In part, such shortcomings reflect the EU’s more general default focus on itself as a democratic actor rather than on democratic challenges and opportunities in the region. Of course, there are reasons why democratic values are not given greater prominence in the strategy. These merit more extended analysis in evaluating the likely prospects for the EU to make a meaningful contribution to bolstering democracy in the region.

### **The EU strategy as a vehicle for strengthening democracy in the Indo-Pacific**

Any critical assessment of the democratic promise of the Strategy must consider its timing, its framing of the region and why a failure to grapple with key challenges and opportunities limits its potential efficacy as a vehicle for democratic enlargement in the region. Only by directly addressing those challenges and opportunities in engaging with the region in its self-professed role as a purveyor of democratic norms will the EU be able to align values and interests rather than privileging the latter.

To begin assessing the role that democratic values are likely to play in the EU's engagement with the Indo-Pacific, it is important to note why such a strategy has been developed at this time. After all, the EU evidently did not need an Asia-Pacific strategy, so why has it come to require an Indo-Pacific one? As noted in the Strategy, the importance of the "region" speaks for itself, especially in economic terms. However, that was also true of the Asia-Pacific. Clearly, the timing of the Strategy has been influenced by the growing geo-political competition between a rising China on the one hand and the United States and other powers on the other. The same general considerations lie behind recent Indo-Pacific "strategies" issued by three EU member-states. A former EU member, the United Kingdom, has also actively pursued its own Indo-Pacific "tilt", most recently embodied in participation in the new AUKUS grouping (Pant and Kamath, 2021; Rabel, 2021). In all these cases, there is a sense that there are "European" interests at stake in the Indo-Pacific in terms of economics and security but also that democratic values and rules-based approaches to regional order are under challenge. However, there has been less reflection about whether those interests and democratic values can be promoted in tandem or may require potentially difficult choices. What stands out most, though, is acceptance of the Indo-Pacific concept. Simply by having a strategy on the Indo-Pacific, the EU is accepting a revised conceptualisation of the Asia-Pacific that has been driven by democratic powers. Given that both China and Russia resist this nomenclature, the EU is aligning itself implicitly with the region's leading democratic actors.

While taking the decisive step of accepting the language of the "Indo-Pacific", the EU avoids engaging with the contested conceptualisation of the region. This basic shortcoming means there is a degree of conceptual confusion beguiling the Strategy, beginning with its very definition of the Indo-Pacific, which constitutes one of the democratic dilemmas facing the EU.

Given that the EU had no conception of an Indo-Pacific "region" a few years ago, there is no explanation in the Strategy about why it now defines it as "a vast region spanning from the east coast of Africa to the Pacific Island States" (EU Strategy, 2021: 1). Strikingly, this definition differs from those of its three member-states who have issued comparable documents. The French Indo-Pacific Strategy (2020) defines the region as "a vast space centred around Asia and Oceania and its two great oceans (Pacific and Indian), the expanses of which stretch from the coasts of East Africa to the American shores of the Eastern Pacific". In contrast, the Dutch

“Guideline” on the Indo-Pacific (2020) excludes both Africa and the Americas: “For the Netherlands, the region . . . extends from Pakistan to the islands of the Pacific”. The Germans are more expansive in their “Policy guidelines for the Indo-Pacific” (2020), stating that “The German government uses the term to describe the entire area shaped by the Indian and Pacific Oceans”. In the absence of a shared understanding of the geographical boundaries of the region, it is difficult to envisage how the EU and its member-states will avoid the invariable differences between collective and individual interests that beset the organisation as a normative power more generally when implementing this particular Strategy.

In addition to illustrating the EU’s enduring structural challenge as an international actor, the definition invoked in the Strategy raises at least one other issue in terms of the role of democratic values in cooperation with Indo-Pacific states. By excluding the United States from its definition, the Strategy treats the most powerful actor in the region as an outside power analogous to the EU in this respect. Yet, the United States not only sees itself as an intrinsically Indo-Pacific power but has arguably done more to drive the shift from Asia-Pacific to Indo-Pacific than any other state actor over the past five years.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, other democracies in the region such as Australia, Japan and New Zealand must be puzzled by the EU’s exclusion of the most important democratic actor in the region from its definition. In effect, this decision amounts to a foundational flaw in the Strategy as an agenda for democratic engagement and reflects an outsider’s perspective on what the region is rather than how insiders perceive it. More significantly, this flaw is exemplary of the EU’s aversion in the Strategy to grapple directly with the contested character of the Indo-Pacific as a region and as a concept (illustrated most prominently by China’s outright rejection of the Indo-Pacific reframing of the Asia-Pacific).

This aversion means in turn that the Strategy avoids addressing key challenges to democratic norms in the region. Those challenges are extensive and can be viewed on various levels, the range of which cannot be examined within the scope of this paper. Some relate to democratic backsliding within specific states, such as the egregious case of Myanmar, but also

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<sup>6</sup> As declared in the opening sentence of the Trump administration’s strategy for a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific (2019), “The United States is and always will be an Indo-Pacific nation.”

within democracies such as India.<sup>7</sup> (There is also the matter of the erosion of democracy in some of the EU's own member states.) But the broadest challenge across the region arises from the ripples generated by the rise of the world's most powerful autocracy that have turned into a veritable tsunami of concern due to the evident failure of China's rise to be accommodated within the skeletal regional architecture of the Asia-Pacific. In whatever terms the "region" is framed geographically, this fundamental challenge arises from differences in values between that rising power and the United States as the hitherto dominant regional power that also happens to be a liberal democracy. This challenge—which is a shared one, as the EU Strategy implicitly acknowledges in its references to "like-minded partners"—is about how to deal with the uncertainties caused by a rising power that is behaving in more assertive ways externally and more autocratically at home. China's forceful defence of sovereignty claims has raised tensions in the South China Sea, the East China Sea and the Taiwan Straits, as well as on the Sino-India border. It has allegedly launched cyber-hacking attacks on Western states and lured developing countries into dependency through its Belt and Road Initiative. At home, the Chinese Communist Party has tightened its increasingly technologically powered authoritarian control from Xinjiang to Hong Kong. But the challenges presented by Chinese behaviour are complicated by the deep economic interdependence associated with its status as a key economic partner for the EU, by far the most important in region. There is also an overriding need to work with Beijing on climate change, pandemic management and other transnational issues, not to mention the desirability of having China as a "responsible stakeholder" in regional architecture and welcoming the multiple benefits that its rise has delivered for the Chinese people and the world, especially in terms of enhancing mutual prosperity. Whether it will prove effective or not, the Indo-Pacific concept is a response to this central dilemma by the region's leading democracies.

An underlying deficiency in the Strategy is that it avoids framing the EU's response in this context. As a consequence, it risks the worst of two worlds. On the one hand, it alienates China by merely having an "Indo-Pacific" strategy. On the other hand, for fear of antagonising

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<sup>7</sup> For a bleak summary assessment of democratic decline in the region, see "Down and to the right", *Economist*, December 18<sup>th</sup> 2021. There is also the related issue of EU's tolerance for backsliding in some of its own member states.

China and incurring both economic and military risks, it does not reference the democratic drivers of the Indo-Pacific vision. The EU thereby fails to articulate its own public vision of how it can act as a self-identified normative power to contribute to two grand democratic purposes: on the one hand, strengthening democratic norms amongst the states of the region; on the other hand, demonstrating democratic tolerance in helping to expand the Asia-Pacific regional architecture that has allowed mutually beneficial economic engagement between diverse, unlike-minded states while minimising political tensions and avoiding inter-state armed conflict between them.

Similarly, with respect to democratic opportunities, the Strategy could be bolder. There are myriad ways in which the EU can contribute to promoting democratic values in cooperation with regional states, numerous examples of which are explicitly mentioned in the Strategy such as support for female empowerment, human rights and academic exchange programmes. But there is little evidence of thinking on a grander scale about how the EU as a normative champion of democratic values can model those values to have a more systemic impact on the region, without imposing them in a Eurocentric way. Above all, there is the opportunity of conceiving of the Indo-Pacific as less of a geographical “region” and more as a space of democratic promise. While many Indo-Pacific countries are not democracies, large numbers of their citizens are democrats or would-be democrats. A dilemma for the EU and fellow democracies is how to support and reach out to them without undermining sovereignty, risking conflict and harming economic interests. This dilemma is compounded for the EU by the absence of the advantage it has in its home region of dangling the carrot of membership of the organisation as a way of diffusing democratic norms. (In that sense, the EU is arguably less attractive as a democratic model than the region’s own democracies such as Japan and India, which have more vested interests at stake.) Yet, there is little evidence of any serious thought regarding this dilemma in the Strategy.

Another aspect of the Strategy which merits deeper consideration is the extent to which rules and democratic norms or values actually align. Such an alignment is certainly implied in the Strategy’s opening reference that it “will be based on promoting democracy, the rule of law, human rights” (EU Strategy, 2021:1). Yet rules and democratic values are not necessarily synonymous and ASEAN has built its regional centrality on this very distinction in championing

adherence to a loose “rules-based” order that facilitates dialogue between un-like-minded states, many of which do not adhere to democratic values. Strict observance of non-interference in domestic affairs is one of the few “hard” rules of this approach to regional order. In view of the challenge posed by a rising China, some states like Japan have emulated ASEAN in placing more emphasis on building consensual, rules-based frameworks that can accommodate the region’s political diversity, rather than advocating that these frameworks should be based on shared views about democratic norms and human rights (Asplund, 2018; Hatakeyama, 2019; Nagy, 2021). Thus, a further dilemma facing the EU is if it will adopt a similar stance to avoid directly clashing with the region’s autocracies or if it intends to risk such confrontation by prioritising democratic values.

Ultimately, whatever the inherent strengths and weaknesses of the Strategy, the EU’s impact as a normative promoter of democratic values will depend on its actions. Operationalisation of the Strategy will bring inevitable tensions between interests and values that will require hard choices, including the extent to which the EU wishes to align itself with the region’s democracies in concerted efforts to defend core democratic values. As noted previously, much more of the content of the Strategy is focused on economic interests and, to a lesser extent, security considerations than on values. There is no discussion in the Strategy of how or if those interests align with democratic values for the EU as a collective actor or for its individual member-states. Those discussions and consequent decisions will need to occur if the EU is to address both the democratic challenges and opportunities that characterise the emerging Indo-Pacific mega-region in its competing conceptualisations—and if the EU is to help ensure that the Indo-Pacific is free and open as well as inclusive and transparently rules-based.

## **Conclusion**

Both the shortcomings and strengths of the Strategy as an instrument for democratic engagement illustrate the challenging character of the EU as an international actor. The European Communities created in 1951 and 1957 were characterised as a civilian power, as they did not influence their external setting through means characteristic of states. As the European integration process moved forward, the EC member states gradually made steps towards the

Common Foreign and Security Policy, which however was never thought of as a community policy and thus means that decisions in the sphere of EU external relations are made and implemented through intergovernmental procedures and not through supranational mechanisms and institutions. The EU institutions lack sovereign control over foreign and security policy (unlike trade policy, for example), which remains largely the domain of the individual member states. That means that the European foreign and security policy is a set of rules based on consensus and compromise between the EU and its state members, leading to a certain element of lowest common denominator positions—or, as *The Economist* (December 4<sup>th</sup> 2021) uncharitably put it, a “soporific consensus”. Each of the members has their own preferences and interests in national foreign policies on political, economic, security and strategic matters and they do not necessarily always align between the 27 governments. Therefore, the external strategies of the EU will represent the combination of national interests and preferred approaches—meaning it is cumbersome for the EU to develop and implement strategies with clear, measurable objectives that are resourced in ways that will achieve those objectives.

Moreover, the EU, which perceives itself as a normative actor (yet with limited self-reflection about the extent to which that perception is shared by others), possesses practically no hard power mechanisms to back its actions in the international sphere. As a normative power, the EU is therefore dependent on working with like-minded others to achieve shared objectives. The example of the EU Strategy towards the Indo-Pacific raises doubts as to whether the EU will have the capacity to proceed with its strategic objectives while, for example, omitting the United States in the very definition of the region. There is also no clear road map in the document about how the EU will engage in closer collaboration with Indo-Pacific states that may share values common to the EU. The regional environment in the Indo-Pacific is not necessarily favourable to the EU foundational principles at present and those principles are often actively contested. Hence, there is an even more pressing need to welcome as partners those with whom cooperation on championing and supporting democratic values is feasible (like-minded states and such initiatives as the Quad, for example).

The EU Strategy in its current format falls short as a vision for bolstering democracy because it avoids choices and taking sides in the struggles for democracy in the region. This weakness reflects the default “soporific consensus” that led *The Economist* (December 4<sup>th</sup> 2021)

to conclude bluntly that “the EU’s policy in the Indo-Pacific barely matters”. There is nonetheless much for democrats to commend in the Strategy in terms of principles and its rhetoric resonates with both constructivist and liberal institutionalist theories about the EU as a normative power. However, its efficacy in diffusing democratic values will depend on whether the EU, together with its member states, finally decide on how to manage the alignment between democratically inspired norms, rules and principles with economic, political and other interests.

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