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THE EU'S ACTORNESS IN THE LIBERAL INTERNATIONAL ORDER (LIO): AN IMPLICATION FOR THE INDO-PACIFIC REGION

ABSTRACT: *In the last five years, the world has seen dramatic and turbulent changes in the geopolitical landscape, which have also challenged the LIO. A significant geopolitical shift has been observed, altering the European Union's (EU) domestic and international politics, particularly following the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine. Traditionally, the EU's actorness is mainly known for its norms and values-based foreign policy roles in the LIO. The study's main aim is to assess the EU's actorness, which has been frequently questioned and tested after recent developments in the international arena. It then examines how the concepts of purpose, legitimacy, and recognition shape the EU's actorness towards the Indo-Pacific, a region that has emerged as a politically contested arena for major actors. The puzzle lies in narrowing the literature gaps: What kind of acting capabilities does the EU have? Is the EU's actorness having similar transactions in the Indo-Pacific region? The EU is concerned about maintaining a free and open Indo-Pacific.*

KEYWORDS: European Union; Liberal International Order; actorness; international relations; Indo-Pacific.

1. Introduction

The EU and LIO are both outcomes of World War II, and the 'West' has served as a framework for both to prevent the deadliest conflicts in the future, advocating an 'open and rule-based order' in international relations. Since then, the role of multilateral institutions has been seen as vital for fostering international cooperation based on political and economic liberalism (Kundnani, 2017). Since the Treaty of Rome (1957), the EU has developed into a significant supranational regional actor in Europe, engaging in activities from peacemaking to tackling global challenges. The EU has consistently emerged as a 'most loyal defender' to respond to the crisis of the LIO (Bargués et al., 2023). Its key institution, the European Commission, has played a leading role in international relations through its diplomatic expertise in negotiations on trade, peace and conflict, developing policies, and providing aid to partner countries worldwide (European Commission, 2024). According to the EU's Migration and Home Affairs, the EU plays a crucial role in international affairs; for example, "the areas of justice, freedom, and security are of central priority in the EU's external relations, ensuring a coordinated and coherent approach involving all relevant stakeholders. Cooperation with our partners is based on bilateral engagement combined with regional and multilateral commitments" (Migration and Home Affairs, 2024).

Likewise, a lot has changed in the last five years, posing unprecedented challenges to the EU

and LIO. The major development occurred in 2020 when Brexit was completed, the COVID-19 global pandemic began, and finally, Russia's aggression on Ukraine started in late February 2022 (Bharti, 2025). These all presented significant challenges, not only for the EU but also for the world, that altered international politics. In these crisis scenarios, the importance of international actors in protecting the LIO and promoting it used to be the most challenging role in a rising illiberal world. It used to be a matter of actorness as the saviour of the rule-based world order. In the linguistic sense, the first language of actorness needs to be understood in international relations.

Twardzisz (2013), in his book 'The Language of Interstate Relations, defines 'the language of international actorness' as a traditional significance derived from the "Peace of Westphalia in 1648" that states as an actor to regulate cooperation in a literal sense as a sovereign actor. Like any other sovereign state, such acts, for example, 'represent, protect, and rule over a population and territory'. The 'theatre' metaphor of actorness on the international stage is diverse. The primary split of international actors is between state and non-state actors, demonstrating that statehood's privileged status serves as a significant watershed moment in actor identification. In a non-literal sense, an actor might be defined as 'someone who performs a role', and this definition demands a virtual stage on which forged performers act out their roles. In a drama with more than one actor, those in prominent roles take up the middle of the stage, while the others play peripheral roles (Twardzisz, 2013).

Also, the subject of the study aims to provide an assessment of the EU's actorness based on the above discussion: 1) How does the EU emerge as an actor in LIO, and what kind of capacity does it have? 2) After 2020, a major unprecedented challenge occurred, e.g., Brexit, COVID-19, the War in Ukraine and China's aggression towards Taiwan. What is the EU's attitude towards addressing it? 3) Based on these events, we analysed the EU's transaction of these actor capabilities in the Indo-Pacific. We have chosen this topic due to a lot that has been discussed in the last five years. Since then, the geopolitics of the world has also changed. The premises of the research also engage the academic discussion based on three major geopolitical shifts that pose serious challenges to the LIO: 1) There are still socio-economic impacts of COVID-19, and other natural challenges are still affecting the world in the form of environmental crisis and adaptations to climate protocols; 2) conflicts (the war in Ukraine and Gaza); and 3) economic challenges are there. these three factors are more responsible. These are the ontological inquiry that needs to be studied. Moreover, economic regulations are more challenging in the midst of sections of politics and the increasingly illiberal economic order promoted by China and Russia. As we know, the EU has been mainly an economic actor, but Russia's aggression in Eastern Europe brought it into active politics. Therefore, it is a matter of maintaining economic liberalism and political liberalism. Based on these arguments, there is a need to conduct an assessment.

The study applied qualitative textual and interpretative analysis of the EU's press releases, strategic documents, reports, global strategy, and the European Commission's and other websites to draw epistemological assessments and results. The study used peer-reviewed articles, books, and book chapters published after 2020 to conclude the EU's role in the Indo-Pacific region from an interpretivist approach. A combination of these examines how EU actorness is instrumental in protecting LIO. Likewise, this article's structural framework first examines the actorness of the EU in international relations; second, it provides the changing geopolitical landscape and factors that posed challenges to the LIO; third, it interprets acting capabilities and their instrumental parts; and last, it provides an assessment based on these on how the EU is effective in the Indo-Pacific region.

2. Theoretical Underpinning of the EU's Actorness

In the IR discipline, the metaphors 'actors' and 'actorness' are frequently used in talking and writing. Let's first understand the connotation of 'actors' (or agents), which are the entities in order to ensure and operationalise interstate relations. The major IR schools of thought are briefly summarised, and the two sorts of international actors—nation-states and nonstate actors—are defined and examined (Twardzisz, 2013). Also, international politics encompasses individuals, corporations, groups, nation-states, international organisations, transnational actors, and possibly others. Each of these actors has unique aims, resources, and techniques of influence, and they work together in complex ways to shape the international system. So, there is little reason to believe that all of these diverse actors have similar interests or that the preferences of the same types of actors (states, groups, and international organisations) are homogeneous (Frieden, 1999). Scholars in IR considered actorness as a complex concept due to the proliferation of new actors such as extremist and terrorist organisations and authoritarian states in the 21st century.

Traditionally, the international order has been dominated by nation-states; now, supranational actors like the EU have emerged as single actors in the international arena. Over the past decades, scholars of the IR have tried to theorise the EU's actorness as a rightful defender of LIO. The 'actorness' of the EU is influenced by its complex structure of foreign policy, specifically its distinctive decision-making process. The complex cross-pillar structure of the EU's foreign activity is one of the primary causes of the EU's lack of overall efficiency; hence, institutional restructuring has emerged as a critical option for improving the EU's global performance. However, the EU's 'actorness' is a matter of its capacity to act in IR coherently, consistently, and effectively (Puigserver et al., 2014). Scholars have shared diverse conceptualisations of actorness, and they don't have a common agreement. However, the most commonly used definition by Sjöstedts in 1977 is that actorness is the "capacity to behave actively and deliberately in relation to other actors in the international

system" (Guske & Jacob, 2019).

The EU is a significant active and practical actor that has the TRIGGER project (Trends in Global Governance and Europe's Role), which provides 'advice and support for the European Commission to increase their actorness, effectiveness, and influence in global governance'. The TRIGGER model for actorness defines seven dimensions: the internal dimensions are 1) authority, 2) autonomy, and 3) cohesion; 4) credibility and trust; and the external dimensions are 5) recognition, 6) attractiveness, and 7) opportunity or necessity to act. However, the academic literature refers to determinants of effectiveness based on internal and external framework conditions. The internal dimensions are 1) constellation of interests; 2) bargaining configuration, and 3) diplomatic engagement, and the external dimensions are policy areas (Guske & Jacob, 2019).

Čmakalová and Rolenc (2012), in their review essay, framed the international actorness of the EU as its legitimacy as domestic and international precision. The normative turn is simply defined by almost all scholars in IR, but the theoretical debate also focuses on behavioural and structural criteria of actorness, as we also discussed above. In this scenario, one can simply define whether the EU has the right, capacity, and opportunity to act in international practice and one can simply define. As per the European Commission's external role, Sjöstedt (1977) defined three criteria for evaluating the EU's actorness: 1) delimitation from other actors; 2) autonomy (or sovereignty); and 3) possession of a number of state-like characteristics. These are still internal factors that define actorness.

Jupille and Caporaso (1998) presented four criteria for evaluating the EU's actorness: 1) recognition as acceptance and interaction by and with the organisation, other members, and third parties; 2) authority as legal competence and mandate; 3) autonomy as institutional distinctiveness and independence from other actors; and 4) cohesion with various degrees and dimensions. However, the legitimacy of the EU defines the possibility of an actor. Čmakalová and Rolenc suggested that "the EU is actor sui generis (e.g., a multi-level, multi-faceted structure of transnational institutions, member states, and various other actors), which is continuously evolving". These authors also acknowledged that the EU has "undisputed international potential, deriving either from its sheer size and economic power or, more likely, from its normative and cultural attractiveness" (Čmakalová & Rolenc, 2012; Simão, 2022; Reiterer, 2023).

The above discussion provided a traditional theorisation of the EU's actorness in international affairs. The new discussion brought up the EU's capacity as an interactionist role theory framework. Likewise, Delaere and Van Schaik (2012) argued that the EU is effective in negotiations, and normally it can increase the degree of negotiation when it needs to act and strengthen its presence in the international system. In this context, the authors presented three aspects of actorness: 1) EU authority; 3) preference for homogeneity; and 3) EU socialisation. Actorness is also defined by other

scholars' effectiveness of the EU's 'capacity to act'. The EU's effectiveness in the Copenhagen negotiations was due to the robust participation of other entities with opposing views, particularly the United States (US) and the BASIC countries (Brazil, South Africa, India, and China) (Groen & Niemann, 2011). It will be five decades since Gunnar Sjöstedt first conceptualised the EU's actorness, which has been central to theory and analysis. Since then, a lot of theorisations of the EU's role in international affairs have been discussed. Our study is more about the EU's emerging actorness in the Indo-Pacific. In this regard, Klose (2018) provided an analysis of the "EU's emerging actorness in (a specific context of) international affairs from an interactionist role theory perspective."

Klose provided a three-step analytical framework for a specific context: "1) the EU's (re)-imagination of an international role in response to problematic situations (being moments of uncertainty, which challenge established routines); 2) the EU's attempts to realise its (re)-imagined role in social interaction; and 3) the implications of this role-making process for the EU's 'self' and others specific case of international affairs. According to his essay, analysing these three processes allows us to better understand how resources, creative action, and expectations interact in the EU's emergence as an international actor, as well as a dynamic perspective on the Union's evolving actorness (Klose, 2018). Richard and Van Hamme (2013) presented 'a geographical assessment of European actorness based on three criteria such as opportunity, consistency, and effectiveness'. This method applies to 'comparing the geography of the EU's political action to its functional relationships' (Richard & Van Hamme, 2013).

3. Changing Geopolitics and Challenges to the LIO

The 'open and rule-based' LIO has been enshrined under institutions like the United Nations and is being promoted by norms such as multilateralism. Since LIO is understood as self-explanatory, global geopolitics has been changing and brought major challenges each decade. However, 21st-century change has been evident in new nationalism (the rise of populism and right-wing politics). More than forty liberal governments have fallen since Trump took the oath as US president. Following the recent US-led trade war with China, there has been a drop in multilateralism and an increase in trade protectionism. Other signals of change include new US immigration laws and the proposed wall along the US-Mexico border, a shift in US policy from openness to isolationism, and the US's departure from the 2015 Paris Climate Agreement. These brought three major implications: 1) the decline of the liberal order; 2) distrust in the international system (like liberalism becoming less trusted); and 3) the new global anarchy due to the rise of the illiberal order as a consequence of globalisation (Amadi, 2020).

Cerny and Prichard (2017) argued that 'new global anarchy' as a consequence of globalisation

in the international system, which powered much of the liberal currents, is now neutralised by contradictions of protectionism, racism, nativism, and isolationism, resulting in the formation of quasi-governmental institutions, global terrorism, tension, and the growing question of alternative global governance. The changing order is a result of distrust and uncertainty, and the world is in search of new global leadership. Nye (2017) mentioned that President Trump argues that the costs of liberal order outweigh the advantages, reinforcing cynicism in capitalism (Cerny & Prichard, 2017; Nye, 2017; Amadi, 2020).

Geopolitical issues have been present since the emergence of the LIO, and the enduring power of this order has been challenged from time to time. Its consequence is ‘an increasingly formidable coalition of illiberal powers, China, Iran, and Russia’ as added by Walter Russell Mead. Ultimately, even if China and Russia do attempt to challenge the fundamental parameters of the current LIO, the adventure will prove to be difficult and futile. These powers would face not only the United States but also the world's most internationally organised and profoundly entrenched system, ruled by liberal, capitalist, and democratic states. A US-led network of alliances, institutions, geopolitical agreements, client states, and democratic partnerships supports this system. Meanwhile, changing geopolitics also occur due to the rise of the more significant group of democratic middle powers such as Australia, Brazil, India, Indonesia, Mexico, South Korea, South Africa, and Turkey, which promote multilateral cooperation (Ikenberry, 2014).

In short, there are growing international authorities, and some of them have different views on universal goals regarding free trade, human rights, and domestic democracy promotion. Kreuder-Sonnen and Rittberger (2023) identify three major challenges to the LIO: 1) the LIO is under threat from a variety of sources; 2) we still don't fully comprehend the causes for the order's growing rejection among the general population; and 3) the institutional arrangement of LIOs has a growing 'democracy gap', which refers to a divergence between participatory legitimation for political authority and the technocratic legitimation reasoning of liberal international organisations (IOs).

Keohane (2012) indicated an earlier ‘change in fundamental global power’ due to political and economic conduct. Wealth and power are key struggles among independent actors in a state of anarchy, which is continued in international relations. Radical forces like al-Qaeda, North Korea, and Iran are already challenging American dominance. Keohane mentioned China as a 'more enduring and fundamental sense’. These actors continue to pose a counter-narrative towards a progressive and pacific narrative of institutional liberalism. (Keohane, 2012). If we look at the current implications of Western overreach towards LIO, the Western governmental approach itself has changed over the past decades due to anti-globalism and domestic political fragmentation, which has broadened the democracy gaps. Nationalism has become the key ‘fragmentation of Western party systems’ that

resulted in the decline of mainstream parties and brought the rise of populist and nationalist parties in Europe. Central and Eastern Europe were already anti-globalism, especially strict towards migration. While countering China and Russia, Western solidarity has been weakened in the past decade. Anti-globalist parties have gained national vote share by blaming mainstream parties for outsourcing jobs to lower-wage manufacturers like China and Eastern Europe, as well as giving too much discretionary power to supranational agencies such as the European Commission and the World Trade Organisation (Trubowitz, 2023).

Democratic backsliding is not only a challenge faced by European states, but the whole world is facing a democratic recession. Even after twelve years of Keohane's prediction, China and Russia continue to challenge the liberal institutions and democracy and 'exert antidemocratic influence across borders' in the global south. According to Carothers and Press (2022), "the most common explanations offered by analysts—ranging from the role of Russia and China and disruptive technologies to the rise of populism, the spread of political polarisation, and democracies' failure to deliver—fall short when tested across a wide range of cases." Apart from these external drivers, there are also internal drivers such as grievance-fuelled nationalism. The political polarisation was initiated after President Trump took charge in the US in 2017. After that, the polarisation created an 'us versus them' divide within countries like the US, Brazil, India, and Turkey, among other countries, which has risen globally. These global developments brought 1) the effect of autocriticism and socio-political division. The economic recession made globalisation and liberal institutions become villains and 'opened the door for illiberal actors to win power in several democracies', for example, Bolsonaro, Modi, Orbán, and Erdoğan. Democratic backsliding was regarded as the failure to deliver socioeconomic and good governance promises. These all weakened the political system's legitimacy, and the masses lost faith in democracy (Carothers & Press, 2022; Freire et al., 2022; Cimarra Etchenique, 2023).

The main reason for the dramatic change in the global geopolitical landscape occurred due to the launch of China's ambitious 'Belt and Road Initiative' (BRI) in 2013, the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Israel-Hamas War. As the US and the EU's relations with China and Russia deteriorate, understanding geopolitics becomes increasingly important since it integrates political and geographical dynamics as a theoretical framework for analysing emerging strategic concerns (Hamdan, 2023). China can negotiate with both Russia and Iran in the context of the ongoing conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza. Despite the significance of the BRI, China is more interested in pursuing its strategy in the Middle East and the Global South. China is also pioneering role towards anti-West and LIO through the BRICS groups and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). According to Ties Dams (author of 'Xi', 2023), "Beijing is aiming for a multipolar world order in which countries

refrain from interfering in the internal politics of other countries, where the notion of 'universal values' is viewed with scepticism, and where the United States is just one of the players. In this new world order, democracy and liberalism are no longer universal ideals but only hold sway over certain parts of the world. The liberal world order will transform into a regional order" (Dams & Veldkamp, 2024).

4. Question to the EU's Actorness Capabilities

The US-led liberal order supports the actor's efforts to restore the international system. Since the emergence of the EU as an active player in international affairs, this institution is generally considered a companion (traditional ally) of the US in supporting LIO. Here, we have to understand the EU's actorness capabilities in terms of materials and transactional implications in the contested territories.

The EU can act as a coherent and influential entity on the global stage through its recognition and legitimacy. There are two recognitions: 1) Internal recognition by the member states that the EU is a legitimate actor in the following areas of governance: trade, monetary policy, and environmental standards. The EU member states have delegated some powers to the EU, strengthening its internal legitimacy. 2) The external recognition of the EU is recognised as a substantial actor in international relations. It has a formal diplomatic mission in several countries and maintains formal diplomatic relations with countries and international institutions such as the United Nations and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), as well as informal groupings such as the Group of Seven (G7) and the Group of Twenty (G20). The EU also maintains strategic partnerships with the United States, Japan, Canada, Russia, India, and China. It also supports development, cooperation, and political dialogue with countries in the Mediterranean, the Middle East, Asia, Latin America, Eastern Europe, Central Asia, and the Western Balkans (European Parliament, 2024; European Commission, 2024; European Commission, 2024a).

The EU has exclusive policy competence and decision-making mechanisms, respectively, in trade policy, customs union, foreign policy, security, and defence. In areas like trade and regulation, decisions are made centrally, and individuals act autonomously. The EU is an economic power due to having a single market that allows the free movement of goods, services, capital, and people; these are its key strengths. This is the reason that the EU has significant leverage for trade negotiations and bargaining to have the capacity of the world's largest trading bloc, where it plays an impactful economic diplomacy. The EU is a torchbearer in ambitious and comprehensive trade liberalisation, advocating for the elimination of tariffs and non-tariff trade barriers. As stated in the European Commission's "Trade for All" strategy paper, liberalisation goes far beyond tariffs to include investments,

regulatory standards, public procurement, and services. Simultaneously, the EU expresses strong support for multilateral institutions such as the World Trade Organisation. To demonstrate its commitment to multilateralism, the EU Commission prioritises external partnerships with regional organisations (Meissner, 2019; Simão, 2022; Pintsch & Rabinovych, 2023).

Sources of capabilities derived from the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) as the main component to drive the European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP), which enables the EU's "action to take a leading role in peacekeeping operations, conflict prevention, and in the strengthening of international security. It is an integral part of the EU's comprehensive approach towards crisis management, drawing on civilian and military assets" (European External Action Service, 2021). The CSDP is the primary policy framework through which Member States can foster a European strategic culture of security and defence, address conflicts and crises collectively, safeguard the Union and its citizens, and advance international peace and security. As a result of the tense geopolitical atmosphere, the CSDP has been one of the most rapidly evolving strategies during the previous decade. Since February 24, 2022, Russia's assault against Ukraine has served as a geopolitical reset for Europe, providing additional momentum for the formation of an EU Defence Union (Krentz, 2024). The EU has been seeking to strengthen its ability to act independently, particularly in security and defence. This effort has become increasingly critical due to geopolitical factors such as Brexit, the war in Ukraine, and the changing interests of old allies like the US.

Most of the EU states are also members of NATO. Meanwhile, Denmark's decision to renounce its opt-out from the EU security and defence policy, as well as Finland and Sweden's membership in NATO, are encouraging developments in terms of European security and defence policy coherence. The ECFR's (European Council on Foreign Relations) new European Sovereignty Index presents an evidence-based evaluation of how different EU member states contribute to European sovereignty. It grades EU member states on their ability and commitment to collaborative action in six "terrains": climate, defence, the economy, health, migration, and technology. In doing so, it identifies Europe's "leaders", "strivers", "one-hit wonders", and "underperformers" in the construction of a more sovereign union (Loss & Puglierin, 2022).

Russia's war in Ukraine enabled the EU to proactively strengthen its European defence ambitions due to unique challenges and opportunities. Now, the EU is acting more as a political actor and its 'guiding principles in a complex world' (Vogt & Pukarinen, 2022). This transition was assisted by a series of events that sparked a new European defence impetus. Contributing factors include the geopolitical pressures of Brexit, an untrustworthy transatlantic partner in the United States (due to Trump's policy and again supposed to come into power), concerns within European defence industries about dwindling national defence budgets and fierce global technological competition in

high-tech areas, and the European Commission's growing supranational role in security and defence. These changes have the potential to transform the EU into a more capable and strategically independent global defence technological actor (Csernatoni, 2021).

According to the European External Action Service (EEAS, which is the EU's diplomatic service), "currently, some 3,500 military personnel and 1,300 civilian personnel are deployed around the world. Since the first CSDP missions and operations were launched back in 2003, the EU has undertaken over 40 overseas operations, using civilian and military missions and operations in several countries in Europe, Africa and Asia. As of today, there are 24 ongoing EU CSDP missions and operations, including 13 civilian, 10 military and 1 civilian and military initiative. A Regional Advisory and Coordination Cell in the Sahel completes EU CSDP presence in the world" (European External Action Service, 2023).

The EU's regulatory power also contributes to global standards that influence international affairs. The EU pursues regulations like data protection (GDPR), labour laws, environmental standards, and consumer protection (Bharti & Aryal, 2023). Moreover, the EU is frequently referred to as a "normative power, civilian power in Europe, institutional power, and soft power, development policy and its role as ODA donor" which means it aims to shape international norms and values, particularly those concerning human rights, democracy promotion, environmental preservation, and the rule of law. The EU frequently promotes these ideals through diplomatic channels such as political dialogue, development assistance, and trade agreements, especially FTAs. The EU's actorness competencies are complex, and these are combined with economic, diplomatic, and normative power that is continuously growing (Akbaba, 2009; Čmakalová, K., & Rolenc, 2012; Simão, 2022; Kołodziejczyk, 2022; European External Action Service, 2023).

5. Transferability of the EU's actorness to the Indo-Pacific Region

On April 19, 2021, the council approved conclusions on the 'EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific'. Later, on September 16, 2021, the Commission and the High Representative presented a Joint Communication on the 'EU's Indo-Pacific Strategy'. The EU and the Indo-Pacific region are extremely intertwined and highly important. The EU is already the Indo-Pacific area's largest investor, development cooperation partner, and commercial partner. Together, the Indo-Pacific and Europe account for more than 70% of global trade in goods and services, as well as more than 60% of foreign direct investment. The EU's actorness is required due to the current dynamic in the Indo-Pacific region. Intense geopolitical competition is on the rise, escalating tensions in trade and supply chains, as well as in the technological, political, and security arenas. The EU prioritised seven areas

of action: 1) Sustainable and inclusive prosperity; 2) Green transition; 3) Ocean governance; 4) Digital governance and partnerships; 5) Connectivity; 6) Security and defence; and 7) Human security. The EU partnered to 'address common challenges together, uphold international law, and defend values and principles' (European Commission, 2021).

Furthermore, by adopting the Indo-Pacific as a geographical term of reference, the EU has signified its endorsement of the strategic competition paradigm, which is supported by certain of its member states and major allies. While the EU has aspired to be regarded as a geopolitical actor before, this is the first time it has attempted to act so far from the European continent. This has, in turn, prompted concerns about its priorities and capabilities, especially in light of the intensification of the conflict in Ukraine (Grgić, 2023a). According to Josep Borrell (High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy / Vice-President of the European Commission), 'in recent years, the EU has worked steadily to improve its cooperation with the region, most notably by becoming a strategic partner of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 2020, launching its Indo-Pacific strategy in 2021, hosting a successful EU-ASEAN Summit in 2022, and ratifying the Samoa Agreement with Pacific countries in 2023. The EU plans to speed up the process in 2024 (Borrell, 2024).

The rule of law is a core principle for the EU; it is always put forefront before signing any documents with partners. It's similarly applicable while conducting international affairs, whether it's a matter of security doctrine or the strategic compass. China's ambitious BRI is considered assertive expansionism and has its security implications in the Indo-Pacific region. In response to China, the EU brought the Connectivity, Global Gateway strategies, and the Indo-Pacific Strategy, which also includes a strong security element. However, the EU does not consider its strategy directed against China but rather wants 'one cooperation' in the Indo-Pacific region. The EU mainly engages in following the 'shared principles, values or mutual interest'. The EU is committed to being a reliable defender of human rights and democracy, employing all instruments at its disposal, including political and human rights dialogues and consultations, trade preferences, and the incorporation of human rights considerations into all EU policies and programmes. (European Commission, 2021; Reiterer, 2023). Grgić (2023) argued that the EU is 'balancing cooperation with assertiveness, particularly with China, in order to maintain LIO. Although the Indo-Pacific region bids trade prospects and 'balances economic, security, and normative concerns'. But multilateral defence cooperation also hinders the EU's competitiveness.

Europe has gradually emerged as the prime trade and investment partner for the majority of Indo-Pacific countries, and it has been working to strengthen its footprint in the region by forging

bilateral alliances with significant actors and growing participation in regional organisations and security arrangements. Between 2014 and 2020, the EU funded over €800 million in various Asia-focused programmes (Mohan, 2020). Aside from growing European naval involvement, the EU and its member states are promoting capacity building in Indo-Pacific countries concerned with maritime safety and security, as well as maintaining the rules-based multilateral order (Pugliese, 2022).

The EU has advanced away from a "third way" and towards tighter alignment with the United States and other Indo-Pacific players, including Australia and Japan. There are also attempts to separate the strategic motives behind the EU's endorsement of the Indo-Pacific concept, beginning with a recognition of the idea's composite definitions, which were initially distinctly geopolitical (Pugliese, 2024). The study also found the transferability of the EU's strategic autonomy in the region because of its alignment with the US. So, in this sense, the EU's capacity for strategic autonomy remains limited in the Indo-Pacific region. The EU's actual measures in the Indo-Pacific area thus far fall short of the ambition outlined in its Indo-Pacific policy. However, there is potential for the EU to better pivot towards the Indo-Pacific and achieve strategic autonomy outside of Europe in the future (Song & Yang, 2024).

In the time of global repositioning, the EU is increasingly regarded as a tool for border protection, citizen welfare, and security, rather than a transformative force in international politics. Long a proponent of an open and free trading system, the EU has increasingly opted for bilateral agreements. The EU has incorporated a degree of 'soft mercantilism' into its trade and economic relations under the guise of 'free trade', which is unique to the latter. The Union has implemented regulatory standards, sectoral exclusions, anti-dumping measures, and limits on foreign investment in 'strategic' sectors to reduce imports and protect important assets (Alcaro, 2018).

Historically, the EU has always supported the US-led LIO, but Trump's 'America First' policies posed challenges and opportunities for the world. The trade war with China emerged as the return of geopolitics in the contested Indo-Pacific region. All these challenges and the above-discussed crisis enable the EU's time-tested actorness to strengthen strategic autonomy and elevate defence activities. But scholars assessed that transatlantic relations are the backbone of the LIO, which is a deep and complex economic, security, institutional, political, and cultural interconnectedness. The 'Trump effect accelerated the conclusion of a bilateral EU-Japan Economic Partnership Agreement instead of a US-Japan trade agreement'. This is an example of EU leadership acceptance by other actors in the Indo-Pacific (Didier, 2021).

6. Conclusion

Examining the EU's actorness, we considered the two dynamics where it can act: 1) internally (domestic affairs and institutional level engagement in Europe); and 2) it has a wide range of policy areas that give it the power to act externally. If we talk about the EU's actorness in an external capacity, it has trade negotiation power to act and influence trade in any part of the world. In the past years, the EU's actorness has strengthened, where EU acts are recognised by other actors, notably trade, development, climate change, and foreign and security policy.

The transferability of the EU's actorness has been notably seen since it adopted the Indo-Pacific Strategy, which is one of the first supranational actors to do so. According to Bretherton and Vogler (2013), EU actorness and effectiveness can be applicable in the following scenarios: 1) presence, 2) opportunity, 3) capability, and 4) availability of policy instruments. Based on these four actorness abilities, the EU's actorness has been a positively effective instrument in the Indo-Pacific region. As per the concept of presence, the EU has an active presence in the region, and the EU's naval security can act. Denoting its international reputation, the EU's actorness is recognised by the other Indo-Pacific actors with whom it has a strategic partnership, e.g., Australia, ASEAN, Japan, South Korea, India, and the US. The EU has the capabilities to capitalise on the opportunity with its strong presence and timely response to the challenges that it has faced with the adoption of the strategy, where many actors still cannot do so. The EU is a champion of policy formulation and its instrumentalisation.

On one hand, the EU has all the capacity of an actor, but it has still not used it to its full potential. On the other hand, the EU is still engaged in the Ukraine war, which is not completely allowing it to act in the Indo-Pacific with full potential to protect the integrity of the LIO. So, the EU has to bring a solution to Ukraine and then rule-based integrity to 'enhance coordination and cooperation in support of a free and open Indo-Pacific'. Therefore, for full transferability to the Indo-Pacific, the EU's actorness can be drawn based on: 1) strategic interests are crucial for global trade and security in order to promote rule-based international order, security architecture, and sustainable development; 2) the EU has its own growing partnerships and engagement in the region; 3) there are challenges for the EU's China's violation of the rule and monopoly, especially against small states, and still it needs more balancing between other actors.

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