

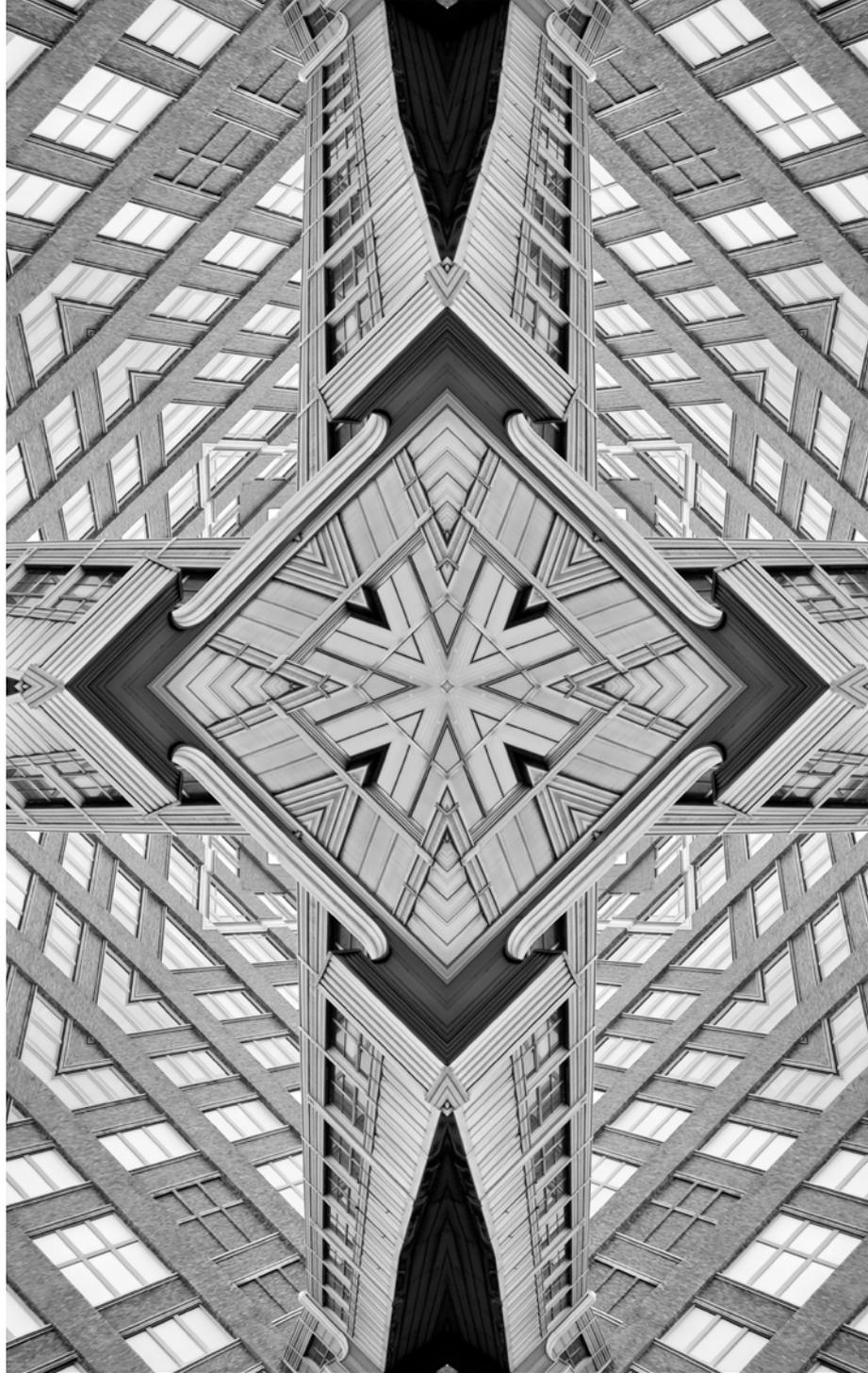
# Issue

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# Brief

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**ISSUE NO. 519**  
**JANUARY 2022**



# The Case for a ‘Links, Not Dependencies’ Approach to EU Engagement in the Indo-Pacific

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## **Abstract**

Over the past year, the European Union (EU) increased its efforts to develop a more holistic approach to its engagement with the Indo-Pacific. Specifically, the EU has signalled a more concrete intention to integrate defence and security considerations into the policymaking process, with the publication of a regional strategy of engagement in September 2021. This brief aims to tie existing threads of EU diplomatic, developmental, and security practices in the Indo-Pacific together with newly developed European objectives. It uses the case of anti-piracy initiatives in Somalia to illustrate how past failures can be turned into future successes. It argues that the natural point of policy convergence between the EU’s capabilities, intentions, and limitations is connectivity—to foster cooperation, create access to opportunities, and build long-term security.

The release of the European Union’s (EU’s) full Indo-Pacific strategy in September 2021 marked a pivot in the common defence and security policy of the EU, which has historically struggled to carry a substantive weight outside of the bloc’s neighbourhood. In her State of the Union Address, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen celebrated the launch of the new strategy as a milestone for Europe as it aspires to become a global player, and announced the launch of a new EU connectivity initiative called the ‘Global Gateway’.<sup>1</sup> Von der Leyen has been clear in describing the Global Gateway as a direct response to China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in the Indo-Pacific and the larger global South.<sup>2</sup> Her speech placed emphasis on the qualitative differences that set Brussels’s approach to infrastructural development apart from Beijing’s: the EU is seeking to create “links, not dependencies”.<sup>3</sup> In rhetoric at least, the address represented the boldest attempt yet at formulating a comprehensive and uniquely European approach to engagement in the Indo-Pacific. It also acknowledged the inherent strategic implications of EU foreign policy and development initiatives in the region.

The following statement, in particular, underlined the past shortcomings of EU policy: “We are good at financing roads. But it does not make sense for Europe to build a perfect road between a Chinese-owned copper mine and a Chinese-owned harbour.”<sup>4</sup> These words easily reveal a willingness to finally engage with the security side of the security–development nexus. Von der Leyen went further, pointing to the EU’s comparative advantage—*financing*—and its limitations of just financing, rather than *building*. If the EU truly aspires to be a globally relevant security actor, it needs to play to its strengths of being an economic and developmental superpower, and overcome its weaknesses—security-blind and short-sighted investment practices.

Von der Leyen’s address contains all the conceptual elements that could comprise a meaningful vision for the EU as an influential player in the Indo-Pacific: the need for a common defence strategy, the emphasis on connectivity, the recognition of the strategic and competitive dimension, and the acknowledgement of mistakes that need rectifying. This brief aims to understand how these issues can be effectively arranged into an operational security and developmental agenda that EU policymakers can feasibly implement in the region. The brief argues for making connectivity the centre of an EU engagement policy in the Indo-Pacific, and for an *achievable* strategy that is *qualitatively*, not quantitatively, different from those of other actors in the region.

# Practices of the EU in the Indo-Pacific

The September Strategy reflects a substantive evolution in the EU's Indo-Pacific policy as it is the first time that such a document articulated a cohesive and integrated approach to engagement in the region. It addresses both developmental and security issues, acknowledging the cross-cutting nature of the EU's priority areas. For instance, it describes the resilience of supply chains and the success of the green socio-economic transition—typically economic concerns—as being dependent on ensuring maritime security and freedom of navigation.<sup>5</sup> The strategy, therefore, is welcome. However, the pursuit of its objectives necessarily remains situated in the existing practices of the EU as a diplomatic, developmental, and security stakeholder; it can also realistically only exist in continuation with them, at least in the mid-term.

The EU has had to redefine the way it projects power in the world without disposing of autonomous military means. Specifically, Europe has been described as seeking “power over opinion” and over the definition of the “normal”, which is ultimately the power to define what is acceptable in international relations and what is not.<sup>6</sup> This behaviour has given rise to the view of the EU as a norm-constructing diplomatic actor in international politics, most commonly known under the denomination of “Normative power Europe”.<sup>7</sup> As transfer of norms is contingent on maintaining constant diplomatic exposure; the EU has sought participation in international forums and organisations, including in the Indo-Pacific.

Even in the area of development, the EU has stayed true to its predilection for exerting indirect influence, rather than overt power. Although the EU prides itself on being the largest provider of international aid globally, its presence on the ground has so far been rather limited, as Brussels itself admits. Gunnar Wiegand, managing director at the European External Action Service (EEAS) for Asia and the Pacific, has said that when it comes to European connectivity initiatives in the Indo-Pacific, “We do not have to think in terms of classic development projects.”<sup>8</sup> Instead, the battle of connectivity is understood by European institutions as a “battle of standards”—meaning one that is fought on “rules, sustainability and local benefits and ownership” of connectivity initiatives.<sup>9</sup> Combined with its all-encompassing approach to trade and investment agreements, this qualifies the EU as a standard-setting developmental actor in the Indo-Pacific; it achieves its objectives “by helping partners to put in place a regulatory and policy environment that will attract private and public investment, level the playing field, ensure the fulfilment of sustainability criteria and the adoption of international standards and principles”.<sup>10</sup> In the Indo-Pacific, this has been manifested in what is known as ‘soft connectivity’— of which the most visible examples are connectivity partnerships with Japan (2019) and with India (2021), and of a connectivity strategy to be implemented in coordination with ASEAN.

# Practices of the EU in the Indo-Pacific

Finally, the EU still has little to show in what is probably the boldest segment of the September Strategy—i.e., security and defence. The majority of the security initiatives that Brussels has promoted can be categorised as capacity-building missions. They are aimed at strengthening the operational, monitoring and defence capabilities of security forces of the recipient country, which retains ownership, as well as imparting a normative understanding of “how such capacities should best be employed, managed and governed against a wider canvas of good governance, state-building and reform”.<sup>11</sup> Admittedly, the EU has found in capacity-building an instrument well-suited for the pursuit of its strategic objectives, describing it as “an essential factor for the quality of our projects and programmes”.<sup>12</sup> In the specific context of the EU, capacity-building obviates the coordination problems that arise from not disposing of its own military and from having to rely on the sum of what member states are willing to commit.

On a perhaps less cynical note, the EU can also be said to have embraced its identity as a capacity-building security actor due to an ideological affinity between the post-imperial, post-Cold War idea of “local ownership” and its understanding of its own position in the world.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, EU capacity-building in the Indo-Pacific has been fairly sporadic, and it has overwhelmingly been concentrated in the westernmost portions of the region, with the exception of the Aceh Monitoring Mission, a capacity-building mission conducted in Aceh, Indonesia, in 2005.<sup>14</sup> Since then, the EU has only been active in the Indian Ocean Rim—namely, in Afghanistan, Mozambique, and along the eastern coast of Africa.<sup>15</sup>

Specifically, it is off the Horn of Africa that one can find the most extensive and significant instance of EU security action in the Indo-Pacific: the combination of intertwining initiatives and missions deployed in and around Somalia to ensure free and secure navigation. The following section discusses the European response to Somali piracy as a case study of EU security practices. The aim is to showcase the virtues and shortcomings of the current strategy.

“EU capacity-building in the Indo-Pacific has been sporadic, and overwhelmingly concentrated in the westernmost parts of the region.”

# Anti-Piracy Initiatives in the Western Indian Ocean

Piracy has been a persistent reality in the waters surrounding the Horn of Africa since the breakdown of the Somali Democratic Republic and the disbandment of its naval forces in the 1990s. The problem originated when foreign vessels, exploiting the institutional vacuum, started illegally entering and intensively fishing in Somalia's exclusive economic zone (EEZ), pushing the members of local fishing communities towards a more lucrative activity: seizing ships traversing the Gulf of Aden and their cargo for ransom.<sup>16</sup>

This remained a localised issue until, in the second half of the 2000s, the Gulf of Aden saw a sharp and sudden spike in the number of attacks, an increase in the operational range of pirates—who began venturing into international waters—and an evolution in their criminal techniques, which now included abductions for ransom and not only looting.<sup>17</sup> These developments soon caused alarm around the world, as the maritime trade routes traversing the region were, and still are, crucial arteries of global commerce. European threat perception, and the consequent decision to intervene, was driven by a series of compounded interests: the physical safety of its citizens, the preservation of its economic, energy and national security, as well as the humanitarian commitment to ensuring the delivery of seaborne World Food Programme (WFP) aid to the Somali population.<sup>18</sup>

Motivated by this constellation of interests, in 2008, Brussels launched the first and so far the only joint EU military operation in the Indo-Pacific: *Operation Atlanta*, also known as European Union Naval Force (EUNAVFOR) Somalia. The operation, which is still ongoing, has consisted of maintaining a constant naval presence in the Somali EEZ and surrounding international waters where pirates operate. Its core missions are the deterrence of piracy and the protection of vessels bearing WFP aid. Its mandate includes patrolling the waters, monitoring suspicious activity and detaining individuals found to be engaging in maritime criminal activities and who are subsequently transferred to national judicial systems.<sup>19</sup> However, the operation was designed from the start as a purely *responsive* one, therefore lacking a *preventive* component. To fill this gap, the EU has developed over the years a corollary of training and capacity-building missions that are supposed to empower the authorities of East African countries to eventually manage incidents of piracy themselves.

*Operation Atlanta* has succeeded in significantly reducing the number of European and international ships falling prey to Somali pirates. It boasts a 100-percent success rate with WFP vessels. However, even a constant European naval presence around the Horn of Africa can only provide partial, temporary and surface-level response to the issue of piracy. Indeed, a purely military solution would require a more substantial deployment of resources, estimated by

# Anti-Piracy Initiatives in the Western Indian Ocean

experts to be between 700 and 800 vessels—a number far greater than what the EU has committed to or would ever be willing to commit.<sup>20</sup> The awareness that a naval operation will be unsustainable and insufficient has been the primary reason why Brussels has developed capacity-building missions with a long-term perspective. Nevertheless, there are strong reasons to believe that these attempts at securitisation have fallen short.

First, these efforts have been designed around EU bureaucratic needs, resulting in self-contained, rigid and time-limited initiatives.<sup>21</sup> Linked to that, the EU has favoured working with bureaucracies in a top-down manner to ensure programme delivery. However, in a context of crippling political fragmentation, such as that in Somalia, this has essentially translated into the negation of true “local ownership”. National institutions and authorities are too fragile to develop capacities independently from donors, on which they end up being fully reliant for the enforcement of security.<sup>22</sup> Consequently, there has been a profound disconnect between the security practices and the security needs of local communities, and those promoted by the EU. On the institutional side, European capacity-building missions have not dared to engage with Somalia’s non-State institutions, namely Somali clans, which have continued to operate in a rather orderly manner in the absence of a central State.<sup>23</sup>

In its programmes, Brussels has also not involved the often more stable regional authorities, such as those of Puntland,<sup>24</sup> because of the legitimacy questions attached to traditional security-building. When it comes to local needs, the EU has also failed to target the roots of piracy, as articulated by the Somalis themselves. Specifically, Operation Atlanta and the EU capacity-building initiatives have not addressed the staggering lack of economic opportunity and, particularly, widespread international illegal exploitation of the Somali EEZ<sup>25</sup> that have forced many fishermen into piracy, which is perceived as a legitimate and necessary economic alternative for locals.<sup>26</sup>

The EU response, focused almost exclusively on capacity-building, has not provided Somalia and the Horn of Africa with the promised security, precisely because it has failed to connect with ground realities. A new, “links, not dependencies” approach should focus on securitisation alongside the meaningful improvement of access to economic opportunities, resources and markets for Somali communities, beyond State vs. non-State dichotomies. However, before articulating the specific nature of such a strategy, its ‘budget constraint’ must be defined, based on the political appetite of the EU and its member states.

# Towards a Realistic Approach

The EU has yet to realise an agreement on the modalities of engagement in the Indo-Pacific. Instead, initiatives are often a patchwork of the different interests and intentions of EU institutions and of member states, most of which have only recently shifted their gaze eastwards. A realistic approach should therefore be rooted in a political consensus among all the relevant veto players with regards to the specific priority areas of engagement in the Indo-Pacific.

As expected, within the EU, there exist significant divergences of both qualitative nature—those that concern the philosophies and finalities of engagement—and quantitative, i.e., related to the size and allocation of contributions. With regard to the first type, the largest discrepancies can be traced along the East–West Europe divide. A survey conducted in September 2021 by the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) has found that policymakers in the Eastern bloc are prone to see EU Indo-Pacific engagement not as a meaningful policy on its own merits, but rather as a way to maintain Europe’s relationship with the US and, in turn, Washington’s commitment to the continent’s defence vis-à-vis Russia.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, it is mostly large, Western European nations that prioritise traditional strategic and security interests in the Indo-Pacific, while smaller EU member states are more concerned with emerging issues such as cyber security.<sup>28</sup>

There are also significant divergences over the extent of their commitment: only two European countries, Germany and Spain, are willing to increase their own military presence in the region, alongside Belgium, and the Netherlands which would at least send warships to the Indo-Pacific.<sup>29</sup> The ECFR concludes that “there is a clear preference for limiting involvement to non-military activities. The EU will continue to lack credibility on ‘hard security’ in the region”.<sup>30</sup> The prospects of Europe as a security actor in the Indo-Pacific are thus far looking bleak.

However, from the same ECFR survey, it also emerges that European countries are equally eager to increase their economic ties to the Indo-Pacific, which most of them see as bearing huge economic opportunities. Indeed, the region is the second largest destination for EU exports and is home to four of its top ten trading partners.<sup>31</sup> Commercial and investment agreements are a priority across the majority of member states, especially with India and the ASEAN bloc. Connectivity in particular is identified by a large group of European countries as a viable means to expand their economic presence in the Indo-Pacific, as they believe that financially sustainable connectivity initiatives will create access to important commercial opportunities for European companies.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, there is consensus on the modalities of engagement, which for most of the EU are inherently multilateral and collaborative.<sup>33</sup>

# Towards a Realistic Approach

These trends are reflected in the individual strategies of regional engagement released by Germany, the Netherlands, and France. The German document emphasises “open shipping routes, open markets and free trade, a level playing field, digitalisation, connectivity and human rights.”<sup>34</sup> The Dutch strategy similarly centres on development and mutually beneficial growth, with references to cooperation at the EU and international level as a way to ensure the stability of the Indo-Pacific.<sup>35</sup> France, for its part, has made economic and digital connectivity as one of the four pillars of its strategy, alongside multilateralism, security, and climate change.<sup>36</sup> Overall, there is notable convergence around priority areas of development, connectivity, and multilateral security-building.

The EU’s internal calculation of its own interests is matched by an external perception of the bloc as a trade and investment superpower, with whom all key Indo-Pacific stakeholders are eager to cooperate on issues of standard-setting and creation of economic opportunities. Indeed, according to a 2017 survey by Carnegie Europe—Australia, China, India, Japan, South Korea, and the US believe trade to be their priority in their relations with the EU. Other areas which they consider important are climate and energy, and security and defence.<sup>37</sup>

This suggests that a European strategy that could both build internal consensus and meet the demands of potential partners in the region should prioritise economic and developmental partnerships; it should also integrate aspects of security and climate change into their cooperation. With this in mind, the case of anti-piracy initiatives in the Horn of Africa should be re-examined and used as a blueprint for a new approach to EU security-building in the Indo-Pacific, one with infrastructural investment and connectivity at its core.

“A European strategy that could both build internal consensus and meet the demands of potential partners in the region should prioritise economic and developmental partnerships.”

# Connectivity as Cooperation, Access, and Security

The announcement of the Global Gateway, in conjunction with the new Indo-Pacific strategy, represents a unique opportunity for Brussels to exceed the limitations of its current practices. Specifically, the potential of connectivity as an instrument of international engagement resides in the fact that it can build on and eventually transcend the three identities of Europe, discussed earlier in this brief, as a norm-constructing, standard-setting, and capacity-building actor in the Indo-Pacific. This can be achieved using the case of anti-piracy efforts.

The EU has struggled with effectively implementing programmes in the Horn of Africa because of its blind and detrimental preference for State bureaucracies as partners. This institutional bias has prevented true norm diffusion among Somali and regional authorities, as the stability necessary for building diplomatic ties simply does not exist. Connectivity offers a chance for renewed, widened, and holistic cooperation. The EU should search for new partners horizontally, along the template of the connectivity partnerships it has signed with Japan and India. These two countries have themselves spearheaded an ambitious connectivity initiative known as the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor, signalling a flourishing interest in regional collaboration on infrastructural development.<sup>38</sup> Connectivity is, in and of itself, an enhancer of diplomatic integration, because it fosters deeper social and economic linkages.<sup>39</sup>

More importantly, cooperation should be pursued vertically: the EU should engage with supranational and subnational entities to address security challenges. Opportunities already exist, such as the Somalia Infrastructure Fund (SIF), set up by the African Union and the African Developmental Bank, to which the European Union has pledged a contribution of 42 million euros, which have yet to be disbursed.<sup>40</sup> More active participation is needed. Infrastructural development assistance would provide a channel to Somali subnational entities, such as the semi-autonomous regional government of Puntland and local clans, a seat at the table, as it is a viable but “subtle way[s] to bolster those parts of Somalia that are working”.<sup>41</sup>

The mounting demand for connectivity in the developing world is motivated primarily by its proven positive relationship to growth.<sup>42</sup> Infrastructural and digital linkages between different regions create access to economic opportunities, markets, services, and knowledge. A study conducted for the implementation of the Road Infrastructure Programme (RIP) in Somalia estimates that the outcomes of an efficient and reliable transport network between the interior and the coastal regions of the country would include “access to health and education services and markets for neighbouring communities; reduced travel times and costs; increased economic productivity; employment opportunities; regional

# Connectivity as Cooperation, Access, and Security

integration; and enhanced institutional capacity.”<sup>43</sup> Digital connectivity bears even more ample promises of growth, and it is sorely needed in Somalia which has one of the lowest rates of internet usage in the continent.<sup>44</sup>

The EU would in turn benefit greatly from integrating Somalia into the Western Indian Ocean market, and then again strengthening its own trade linkages to the region through the improvement of telecommunication, railway, port and airway infrastructure. Investment can and should be tied to compliance with the EU’s labour, sustainability, and environmental benchmarks. Indeed, direct involvement in ‘hard’ connectivity projects represents an opportunity for Brussels to boost its standard-setting power in the Indo-Pacific, by offering emerging economies a competitive alternative to, for instance, less sustainable Chinese initiatives.

Finally, connectivity can be a security-building instrument for the EU in the Indo-Pacific. As previously discussed, piracy off the Horn of Africa is rooted in widespread poverty and in the illegal exploitation of Somalia’s fishing waters by foreign vessels. In other words, it is largely motivated by lack of access to opportunities and by the fragmentation of the local and national economy. Repairing the link between Somali communities and their resources would constitute a non-military, development-centred, and long-term solution to the security issues related to piracy. Thus, the promotion, design, and funding of regional connectivity initiatives would address the fundamental causes of the crisis in a way that capacity-building missions or *Operation Atlanta* never have, while simultaneously satisfying Europe’s preference for economically focused action in the Indo-Pacific. It would also incorporate the strategic, competitive dimension acknowledged by President von der Leyen in her State of the Union address, by attempting to fill the vacuum that is currently occupied by China and the BRI.

“The mounting demand for connectivity in the developing world is motivated primarily by its proven positive relationship to growth.”

# Conclusion

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“In the field of connectivity, the EU is a superpower,” wrote High Representative Josep Borrell in 2021. “Popular perception and reality are two very different things ... In the six years, between 2013 and 2018, the EU provided 410 billion euros in official development assistance world-wide compared to China’s 34 billion euros in the same period.”<sup>45</sup> Indeed, the problem for the EU does not lie with the volume of resources committed, nor with the absence of vision *per se*, but rather with a lack of strategic consistency and direction to its diplomatic, developmental, and security efforts.

Using the case of anti-piracy initiatives, this brief has argued that a successful European Indo-Pacific strategy should begin with rearranging existing practices around its areas of comparative advantage: fair trade, inclusive growth, sustainable development, and connectivity. These priorities are viable because they sit at the intersection of the objectives that EU member states want to advance, and the issues on which Indo-Pacific players want to cooperate with Brussels.

A ‘links, not dependency’ approach to the region uses connectivity as a mean to foster multidimensional cooperation, to ensure access to economic opportunities and regional markets, and to promote locally owned, context-specific, and long-lasting security. This is how the EU can match the influence of other powers in the Indo-Pacific while making a qualitatively different and much needed contribution to the prosperity and stability of the region. 

“An EU Indo-Pacific strategy should begin with rearranging practices around its areas of comparative advantage: fair trade, inclusive growth, sustainable development, and connectivity.”

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