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# Brief

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# Locating India and Taiwan in the EU's Geostrategic Adjustment

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## **Abstract**

China's failure to condemn the Ukraine war raised concerns on the future of the rules-based international order not only in the European Union (EU), but also in India and Taiwan. While their respective relationships with China and Russia are characterised by different complexities, the EU, India, and Taiwan are all vulnerable to authoritarian threats. All three recognise that China's continued rise will have strategic implications for their security. The EU is in a learning process in its cooperation with Taiwan and is reinforcing ties with India. The EU should now step up efforts to strengthen its strategic engagement with both, as it is de-risking its China policy and upgrading its approach to the Indo-Pacific. It should seek to link its engagement with Taiwan in the field of economic resilience and connectivity with its growing cooperation with India.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 forced the European Union (EU) into a geopolitical adjustment. China's alignment with Russia, at least in rhetoric, accelerated the process. In her policy speech on the state of EU-China ties in March 2023, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen spoke unambiguously: "How China continues to interact with Putin's war will be a determining factor for EU-China relations going forward."<sup>1</sup> By using force against the territorial integrity and political independence of Ukraine, Russia violated a central tenet of the UN Charter. China's failure to condemn the war raised concerns on the future of the rules-based international order not only in Brussels, but also in Delhi and Taipei.<sup>2</sup>

While their respective relationships with China and Russia are characterised by different complexities, the EU, India, and Taiwan are all vulnerable to authoritarian threats. The EU considers India and Taiwan its like-minded partners with whom it shares a commitment to the rules-based international order. The three have voiced interest, albeit to varying degrees, in reinforcing the strategic dimension of their cooperation. All three recognise that China's continued rise will have strategic implications for their security. The EU is in a learning process in its cooperation with Taiwan; it still has to better structure the emerging debate on how to upgrade ties. In response to the increasing great-power competition, the EU is reinforcing ties with India.<sup>3</sup>

The EU should now step up efforts to strengthen its strategic engagement with both, as it is de-risking its China policy and upgrading its approach to the Indo-Pacific. Going forward, the EU should think of ways to link its engagement with Taiwan in the field of economic resilience and connectivity with its growing cooperation with India.



# The Indo-Pacific and the Trade-Security-Democracy Nexus

**H**ome to three-fifths of the world's population and producing 60 percent of global GDP, the Indo-Pacific has become the centrestage of global geopolitics. At the forefront of the digital economy, the Indo-Pacific is also the region where China's display of belligerence has been most acute. Australia, the Republic of Korea, Japan, Taiwan have all been the subjects of China's acts of economic aggression—in turn causing a shift in their strategic thinking.<sup>4</sup> More than 35 percent of all European exports go to Asia-Pacific markets, and a majority of those transit through the sea lanes of the Indian and Pacific Oceans.<sup>5</sup> In its Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, Brussels recognised that the futures of the EU and the Indo-Pacific are inextricably linked.<sup>6</sup>

By emphasising that the display of force and increasing tensions in regional hotspots such as the Taiwan Strait may have a direct impact on European security and prosperity, the EU linked its security to trade within the region. The EU is the largest foreign investor in Taiwan, with bilateral trade continuing to expand despite rising regional tensions.<sup>7</sup> The EU as a whole and its member states today view Taiwan as a like-minded partner in the Indo-Pacific on its own merit, beyond EU-China relations. Taiwan is capitalising on its successful 'Taiwan Model' of development which has helped it in projecting itself in contrast with China—capable and ready to manage the public health crisis with a transparent, trust- and technology-based approach.<sup>8</sup>

Taiwan has been clear that it stands ready to contribute to solving global problems. Despite Beijing's efforts to shrink its international space, Taiwan's growing global profile has internationalised it—a process that EU member states have supported by, for example, including Taiwan in the EU's Indo-Pacific Strategy.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, the EU is expanding cooperation with democracies in the region to reinforce value chains by diversifying trade relations and developing cooperation in strategic sectors, in line with its 2030 Digital Compass and the Global Gateway adopted in 2021.<sup>10</sup> The EU has connectivity partnerships with Japan (2019) and India (2021), and is conducting dialogues on digital economy with Korea, China, ASEAN, Taiwan, Japan and India. Since 2019, the EU and Taiwan have been engaged in a Dialogue on Digital Economy and since 2022 in a Trade and Investment Dialogue.<sup>11</sup> For the third year in a row, in 2023, the EU organised the EU-Taiwan Investment Forum, which has helped upgrade its approach to Taiwan.<sup>12</sup>



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To help coordinate their response to China's tendency toward aggression in the region, countries around the Indo-Pacific have embraced minilateral groupings while promoting a shared vision of rules-based multilateralism. For India, expanding its engagement in the region has been a priority to leverage partnerships and address the requirements of a new strategic environment.<sup>13</sup> It has sought to maintain a balance between its partnerships with the West and geopolitical competition with China. At the same time, shaped by a high degree of strategic trust, over the past decades Delhi has cultivated warm ties with Moscow, ties which Russia's invasion of Ukraine have put to test, with Delhi seeking to balance.

While Beijing's aggression has changed India's historically non-aligned stance, Delhi remains wary of aligning too closely with Washington. That it considers China a national security threat—a fear stemming from long-standing territorial disputes along the Himalayan border—has helped coordination with the US and the EU. India is also more at ease with participating in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, or Quad along with Australia, Japan and the US, and joined Joe Biden's 14-member Indo-Pacific Economic Forum in 2022. As some analysts have noted, which way India leans, when and why, could help decide whether the US or China dominates Asia, and who prevails in great-power competitions around the world.<sup>14</sup>

Perceptions that multilateralism has failed to tackle the biggest global challenges have supported enhanced democratic coordination in the Indo-Pacific. At the Raisina Dialogue in Delhi in March 2023, the EU's High Representative Josep Borrell acknowledged the reality of a multipolar world facing an acute crisis of multilateralism.<sup>15</sup> The EU is not willing to act as a hegemonic power, he added, but is linked with many countries of the Global South. The European Parliament has also urged working towards effective, values-based and inclusive multilateralism.<sup>16</sup> After India assumed the presidency of G20 this year, External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar spoke of India's duty to become the voice of the Global South, which, in his words, was looking at New Delhi with high hopes.<sup>17</sup> However, under Xi Jinping, China has also made significant inroads into the developing world, promoting an alternative for a multipolar global governance, including what it calls “democracy that works”, seeking to shape dynamics in various domains including health, internet governance, climate change, and development finance.<sup>18</sup>

# Brussels and the China Factor

Convergence to rebalance cooperation with China is growing across the EU, but the China policies of member states are not aligned. Beijing's information manipulation to undermine democracy throughout the COVID-19 pandemic was just one factor among many that had pushed Europeans to act—or rather, to react and boost democratic resilience.<sup>19</sup> According to a report by the European External Action Service (EEAS), since Russia started the war against Ukraine, Chinese state-controlled media channels have amplified selected pro-Kremlin conspiracy narratives, and, on occasion, provided a platform for sanctioned Russian media outlets.<sup>20</sup>

Overall bilateral relations have deteriorated due to a growing number of irritants, including the 2019 crackdown on Hong Kong or human rights violations in Xinjiang and Tibet, where the two sides have deep differences. Beijing's increased focus on security, whether military, tech or economic, increased EU member states' sense of urgency to rethink relations with China. A core concern remains the CCP's pursuit of a systemic change to the international order with China at its centre.<sup>21</sup> Nonetheless, while in 2019 Brussels labeled China a “systemic rival”, it has not dropped engagement altogether.<sup>22</sup>

Some EU member states, like Germany, insist on continued cooperation with China. The German coalition government is reviewing its China policy, seeking to reduce dependency for raw materials and commodities such as batteries and semiconductors.<sup>23</sup> At the same time, just as Chancellor Olaf Scholz opposed US-led efforts for a decoupling from China, in 2022 the German economy's stakes in China continued to grow, with a record 10 billion euros in new investments.<sup>24</sup> In November 2022, Scholz travelled to China in what was the first visit of a G7 leader to the country since the start of the pandemic; Scholz was also the first European leader to visit since the 20<sup>th</sup> National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party in 2022. In their meeting, Xi reassured Scholz of working for a “future-oriented all-round strategic partnership” and called on Germany “to follow a positive China policy.”<sup>25</sup>

Similarly, in 2019, French President Emmanuel Macron said the relationship between the EU and China “must not be first and foremost a trading one, but a geopolitical and strategic relationship.”<sup>26</sup> Yet, in April 2023, he failed to make strategic use of his trip to Beijing and instead undermined the unity he claimed to support. Against this backdrop, whether Berlin and Paris can secure a truly “European” policy on China remains to be seen. In the short-term, the more



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urgent question might be whether they can woo Beijing away from Moscow and convince Xi to drop his pro-Russia neutrality and play a constructive role in ending the war.<sup>27</sup> For the medium- and long-term, however, the challenge for the EU will be to rebalance economic cooperation and reduce strategic dependencies on China, in particular in critical raw materials (CRM), which are vital to the production of semiconductors, solar panels and 5G, and therefore indispensable to the EU's digital transition and quest for global competitiveness.

Going forward, Beijing's willingness to leverage its market dominance over rare-earth metals could accelerate the EU's efforts to diversify and secure supply of CRM, as part of its de-risking strategy. Considering that the EU relies on China for 98 percent of its rare-earth supply, Beijing's July 2023 announcement that as of 1 August 2023 it would restrict the export of some CRM, namely gallium and germanium, put the EU on high alert.<sup>28</sup> In this regard, the European Economic and Security Strategy, proposed by the European Commission just weeks before Beijing's ban and still to be debated among member states and the European Parliament, could serve as helpful guidance for the EU's geostrategic adjustment.<sup>29</sup> Ultimately, however, it will be up to EU member states to go beyond their differences, and be willing to diversify to minimise risks.

The divergence of member states' positions on China extends beyond Berlin and Paris. Feeling sidelined from shaping the EU's China policy, in 2012 the 'new' Central Eastern European (CEE) EU member states joined the 16+1 cooperation format with China, hoping this would both boost their infrastructural development and give them the kind of access to China that most of the 'old' member states have enjoyed for decades.<sup>30</sup> However, while Beijing sought to divide the EU further, ironically it brought the CEE countries some leverage in shaping a common China policy that pursues a tougher stance, and in consolidating the emerging European approach to Taiwan. Vilnius has driven a more Taiwan-friendly approach in Europe. In 2021, it left the cooperation format and two years later, its Baltic neighbors followed suit.<sup>31</sup>

Beijing's economic coercion of Lithuania followed the opening of a 'Taiwanese office' (rather than 'Taipei office') in Vilnius in 2021. It came in sharp contrast to the warmth that Xi has extended to Berlin and Paris. Lithuania also urged the EU to get serious about China, in particular if Xi chooses to "befriend a war criminal."<sup>32</sup> The day after being elected as president in 2023, Czechia's Petr Pavel had a phone call with Taiwan's President Tsai Ing-wen and noted how the

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two shared values of democracy and human rights—it was indicative of a pivot toward Taiwan, away from China.<sup>33</sup>

China's willingness to use economic coercion against an EU member state has turned it into an unreliable partner, pulling Taiwan closer to Europe. Despite internal differences, a common understanding has emerged: that the EU is ill-equipped to defend its interests. Beijing's retaliation against Lithuania has accelerated this process, with EU member states reaching a provisional agreement on an EU-level anti-coercion instrument, designed to de-escalate and induce discontinuation of coercive measures through dialogue and to act as a deterrent against economic bullying.<sup>34</sup>

“The divergence of EU member states' positions on China extends beyond Berlin and Paris.”



# India and Taiwan, the EU's Partners in the Indo-Pacific

**R**e-conceptualising its partnerships is part of the EU's geopolitical adjustment. The EU still lacks a common strategic vision on how to build up its own power that will enable it to engage in autonomous action on the global stage. Indeed, the pursuit of “strategic autonomy” has divided the bloc even further following French President Macron's comments after his Beijing visit, when he urged Europe to reduce its dependency on the US and avoid getting dragged into a confrontation between China and the US over Taiwan.<sup>35</sup> The EU claims, however, that it wants to respond to global challenges by working to strengthen the international system where countries can compete and cooperate.<sup>36</sup>

In its *Strategic Compass*, a document released in 2022 that outlines its foreign and security policy, the EU said it would seek “tailored partnerships” that are mutually beneficial and will serve the EU's interests and support its values, “in particular when there is a shared commitment to an integrated approach to resilience.”<sup>37</sup> The EU shares this commitment with India and Taiwan. Energy, critical raw materials, semiconductors, health, digital technology are all areas where the EU is seeking to reduce its dependencies—issues also high on Taipei's and Delhi's agendas. In fact, the EU has been seeking to build up its strategic autonomy in important policy areas. However, the intensification in global threats has made coordination with like-minded partners indispensable, as the Commission president stressed in Beijing—a view seemingly not shared by the French President.

Meanwhile, India's ‘Make in India’ initiative aims to make the country more autonomous and carve itself a stronger regional role. Aware of its vulnerabilities and dependencies, Delhi is now focusing more on defense diversification and indigenisation and is seeking deeper partnerships with like-minded Western partners. Delhi is aiming to preserve its strategic autonomy, while growing closer to Brussels in shared concerns related to an aggressive China. Concerning Taiwan and its trade dependence on China, expanding its international space through diversification has also been a core objective. China has been Taiwan's largest export destination and more than half of Taiwan's outbound investment still goes to China, making Taiwan highly vulnerable.<sup>38</sup> With Taiwan's presidential elections scheduled to take place in January 2024, willingness to weaponise this dependence in Beijing will likely increase.

# India and Taiwan, the EU's Partners in the Indo-Pacific

A low corporate tax rate, skilled workers, and access to a big market have made India a top priority location for Taiwanese companies, with major producers already present in the country. According to some analysts, Taiwan's Foxconn, Winstron and Pegatron are creating a de facto Taiwan cluster around Bengaluru and Chennai.<sup>39</sup> In July 2023, Taiwan's Foreign Ministry announced it would open an economic and cultural center in Mumbai, its third representative office in the country, in order to further deepen exchanges in science and technology, education, culture and people-to-people in particular under Taiwan's New Southbound Policy.<sup>40</sup> Speaking of the expansion in bilateral exchanges, former Indian ambassador to China, Ashok Kantha, said India was pragmatic and transparent, not deviating from India's larger China policy.<sup>41</sup>

Nonetheless, concerning the political dimension of India-Taiwan ties, there has been some progress in mutual awareness. Following Beijing's disproportionate response to then US House of Representatives Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan in August 2022, the spokesperson of the Indian Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a statement calling for "exercise of restraint, avoidance of unilateral actions to change the status quo, de-escalation of tensions and efforts to maintain peace and stability in the region."<sup>42</sup> Just days later, India accused China of "militarization of the Taiwan Strait."<sup>43</sup> Taiwan, in return, issued a statement to convey "sincere gratitude to the executive branches and parliamentarians of over 50 countries – including India – which have called on all sides to exercise restraint, de-escalate, avoid unilateral actions to change status quo and maintain peace and stability in the region."<sup>44</sup>




Taiwan, India and the EU have shifted to a more assertive foreign policy and are prioritising discussions on economic security. Mindful of their own dependencies, as partners they should now invest in each other's democratic and economic resilience. Part of this effort must be to better counter Beijing's information manipulation that claims that any democratic coordination is "anti-China." It is vital that Brussels, Delhi and Taipei leave no space for such disinformation. To effectively contribute to democratic resilience, the three should coordinate transparent, easily accessible, and consistent political messaging that protects their democratic governance systems. This will also support awareness of their strategic relevance to each other.

Mindful of internal differences concerning China across the bloc, the EU must seek practical solutions to constraints concerning Taiwan, such as the EU's 'One China' policy, according to which the EU officially recognises the PRC as the sole legitimate government of China even as it pursues economic and cultural cooperation with Taiwan. Beijing has stepped up efforts to impose its 'One China' principle which claims that Taiwan is part of China even though the PRC never ruled Taiwan, and deny the EU its right to engage Taiwan as a cooperation partner. This was most visible in Beijing's reaction to Lithuania's turn toward Taiwan, which the CCP's mouthpiece, *Global Times*, described as the Baltic state being "a crazy, tiny country full of geopolitical fears", pursuing an "anti-China path".<sup>45</sup> The EU must proactively assert its right and push back against Beijing's disinformation which falsely claims that the EU's cooperation with Taiwan violates its relations with the PRC.

Brussels' shift in perceptions has already enabled an upgrade in Taiwan's profile, reflected through a Taiwan-friendly EU narrative which co-exists with an assertive stance on China. India is one of the world's fastest growing economies, seeking to strengthen technological ties with the EU and also Taiwan. Expanding existing bilateral cooperation frameworks into trilateral formats can help identify opportunities to learn to both think and do together. Given existing constraints and sensitivities, creating new frameworks can run into political hurdles or duplicate ongoing efforts. Nonetheless, India, Taiwan and the EU could consider initiating an informal economic resilience dialogue with a focus on digital connectivity in the Indo-Pacific, including cyber security. This could help the EU and India to better structure their debates on Taiwan and identify areas for practical cooperation.

The EU has already moved to deepen ties with India in strategic sectors by establishing the Trade and Technology Council (TTC), less than one year after the one with the US.<sup>46</sup> The TTC is to deepen strategic engagement in three working groups, including strategic technologies, green and clean energy technologies, and trade and resilient value chains. Delhi and Brussels could consider inviting Taiwanese partners—from industry, private sector and government agencies—to explore ways in which Taiwanese expertise could contribute to the work of the TTC. This would benefit the digital transition needs of all sides.

The EU and Taiwan have a Dialogue on Digital Economy which has facilitated talks on economic resilience.<sup>47</sup> Inviting relevant partners from India in the next iteration would allow Brussels and Taipei to go beyond the bilateral and explore the regional dimension. The development of blockchain-related industries, for example, could help expand trilateral cooperation in blockchain governance, standards and infrastructure development, and help include India in the working groups of the EU's platform of International Association for Trusted Blockchain Applications (INATBA), in addition to Taiwan which is already a member.<sup>48</sup>

Linking the EU's Global Gateway and Taiwan's New Southbound Policy with India's strategic priorities, namely Digital India, could help identify ways to understand each other's connectivity visions. In the words of Taiwan's President, the primary goal of her government's New Southbound Policy (NSP) is "to bid farewell to our past overreliance on a single market."<sup>49</sup> Discussions with Taiwanese officials suggest the NSP is Taiwan's Indo-Pacific strategy.<sup>50</sup> Delhi and Brussels can be partners in bolstering Taiwan's security and economic ties with partners across the region and beyond. 

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