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An Emerging Player in the Indo-Pacific

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This article is based on ***“The EU’s role in the Indo-Pacific”*** which was published in The Hindu on 15/11/2021. It talks about the way ahead for the European Union to set a strong foothold in the Indo-Pacific region with India as an ally against China.

The world’s economic and political centre of gravity has been shifting towards the **Indo-Pacific** for years. The region has **acquired striking salience with the U.S.-China strategic contestation** becoming sharper than before.

Speedy development of the **Quad**, the emergence of **AUKUS partnership** and the emergence of several other minilateral tie-ups themselves provide recognition to the **increasing significance of the Indo-Pacific region**.

With China playing an increasingly dominant role in everything from trade to military power to technology and the **declining American supremacy**, it **becomes crucial for the European Union to step-in** whose economic future and geopolitical relevance is inextricably linked to developments in Asia.

What India can do is **welcome the entry of the EU in the region and jointly address its common concerns** of increasing competition, power rivalry etc. with the latter.

EU’s Emerging Interests in the Indo-Pacific

- **Age-Old Connection of Europe and Indo-Pacific:** Europe’s Asia-connection is **old, strong and multi-layered**. Asia is viewed and evaluated through national and regional perspectives.

At least since 2018, countries such as France, the Netherlands, Germany and the U.K. announced their specific policies towards the Indo-Pacific.

- **EU's Present Relations with Asia and Pacific:** Brussels sees the EU and the Indo-Pacific as “**natural partner regions**”.
 - The EU is already a significant player in the Indian Ocean littoral states, the **ASEAN** area and the Pacific Island states.
 - **EU's recent Indo-Pacific strategy** also aims to enhance its engagement across a wide spectrum.
- **Interests Behind Engagement:** The European Union (EU) is in the process of coping with:
 - The **rise of China and other Asian economies**
 - The **tensions due to China's aggressiveness** along its periphery
 - **Economic consolidation** through the **Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership**, and the **Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership**.
- **EU's Recent Initiatives for Indo-Pacific:** The announcement by the Council of the **European Union** of its initial policy conclusions in April, 2021 followed by the unveiling of the **EU strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific** in September, 2021 are notable.
- **Vision for Indo-Pacific:** EU's future progress in the region is based on the principles of “**rules-based international order**”; **promoting a level-playing field for trade and investment, Sustainable Development Goals** & multilateral cooperation; and protecting human rights & democracy.

It also envisages **cooperation in green transition**, ocean governance, **digital governance and partnerships**, connectivity, **security and defence**, and human security.

Challenges Associated

- The European Union's **security and defence capabilities are quite limited**, as compared to those of the U.S. and China.
- The EU suffers from marked **internal divisions**; Many states view China as a great economic opportunity, but others are acutely conscious of the full contours of the China challenge.

They believe that neither China's dominance in Asia nor bipolarity leading to a new Cold War will serve Europe's interests.
- The risks faced by the EU are varied; the immediate neighbour **Russia is a more traditional threat**. It is increasingly on China's side.

Hence, the EU should find it easy to cooperate with the Quad. However, the recent **AUKUS partnership has disappointed France**, an important EU member.

Way Forward

- **Strengthening Economic Capabilities:** To obviate an imbalance (against US and China) in favour of economic links, EU will need to **give adequate space and support to France** and other EU nations **which have sizable assets and linkages with the Indo-Pacific.**
- **New Alliances:** It also must **forge strategic coordination with the U.K.** as the latter prepares to expand its role in Asia as part of its **‘Global Britain’ strategy.**
 - As a major economic power, the EU has an **excellent chance of success in its trade negotiations with Australia,** Indonesia and New Zealand; in concluding **discussions for an economic partnership agreement with the East African Community.**
 - To achieve all this and more, the **EU must increase its readiness to share its financial resources** and new technologies with partners.
- **India-EU Cooperation:** India has reasons to be pleased with the EU’s policy as its **pivotal position in the region necessitates a closer India-EU partnership.**
 - The recent **renegotiation of the India-EU Comprehensive Trade Agreement** and a standalone investment protection agreement are major steps towards improving bilateral ties.
 - **Cooperation in Industry 4.0 technologies is also desirable.**
 - **Consolidating and upgrading defence ties** with France, Germany and the U.K. should also remain a significant priority.
 - With an enhanced focus on their strategic relations and engagement with other like-minded regional players, India and EU can play a significant role in **preserving an open, free, inclusive and rules based order in the Indo-pacific.**

Conclusion

- The EU can create a vantage position for itself in the Indo-Pacific by being more candid with itself, more assertive with China, and more cooperative with India.
- Increasing convergence of interests and shared values offer scope for deepening India-EU cooperation in the region to secure global commons, maintain stability and support economic prosperity in a cooperative manner and together shape a stable multipolar order.

Drishti Mains Question

“With increasing Chinese dominance and declining American supremacy in the Indo-Pacific, the European Union offers a potent ally for India to collaborate in the field of shared interests and concerns”. Comment