



The Coordinated Maritime Presences concept and the EU's naval ambitions in the Indo-Pacific

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Abstract

Since the launch of the first-ever EU naval operation in 2008, the ongoing Operation Atalanta off the Horn of Africa, EU naval forces have operated primarily in Europe's vicinity or in regions in which great-power tensions have been low. Yet, the Union has also begun to seek a naval role for itself in more sensitive regions, namely the Indo-Pacific, via the new Coordinated Maritime Presences concept. This article analyses the EU's plans to play a more visible naval role in the Indo-Pacific, and argues that the extension of this concept to the region would raise the EU's level of ambition as a naval actor. However, the EU's ability to be a meaningful maritime security provider in the Indo-Pacific depends on the EU countries coming closer to seeing eye-to-eye on how the Union should approach China, and on their willingness to send vessels to the Indo-Pacific.

Keywords

EU, CSDP, Maritime security, Indo-Pacific, Coordinated Maritime Presences, Strategic Compass

Introduction

Since the creation of the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), the Union has launched three naval operations in this framework. These are Operation Atalanta, which has protected maritime traffic off the Horn of Africa from Somali pirates since 2008;

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This article was written before the EU Council decided to extend the CMP concept in the North-Western Indian Ocean on 21 February 2021, and before it approved the EU's Strategic Compass on 21 March 2022. It therefore reflects realities that preceded these two events.



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Operation Sophia, which sought to disrupt the business model of human smugglers and traffickers in the Central Mediterranean from 2015 to 2020; and Operation IRINI, which has contributed to the implementation of the UN's arms embargo on Libya since 2020.

The EU's past and present naval activities are impressive considering that the CSDP's original *raison d'être* was to provide the EU with the capacity to conduct land-based military operations in its neighbourhood following its failure to deal with the wars of Yugoslav succession in the 1990s (Howorth 2007, 207). In fact, Atalanta, Sophia and IRINI show that EU security and defence cooperation has acquired a significant naval dimension. Since the late 2000s, this dimension has also become increasingly visible in EU documents such as the 2014 EU Maritime Security Strategy and the 2016 EU Global Strategy, both of which express the Union's desire to become a more effective naval actor globally.

At the time of writing, the EU is considering extending its new Coordinated Maritime Presences (CMP) concept to the Indo-Pacific, increasingly a centre of geopolitical competition. In this area China's rise and ambitions are challenging the regional rules-based order and established principles of international law, such as the freedom of navigation. The CMP concept is a flexible, non-CSDP tool that can be implemented in any maritime area of the world that the Council of the EU decides to designate as a Maritime Area of Interest (MAI) (EEAS 2021a). Establishing an MAI would not, however, create a CSDP naval operation like Atalanta; rather, it would enhance coordination between EU countries' vessels, which would remain under their national chains of command. The EU has been conducting a pilot of the CMP concept since January 2021 to coordinate its member states' national naval deployments in the Gulf of Guinea, which has become the world's number-one hotspot for maritime piracy. If the Gulf of Guinea pilot is successful and the CMP concept is extended to the Indo-Pacific, EU vessels might eventually contribute to ensuring freedom of navigation and open sea lines of communication in the region, and conduct joint naval exercises and port calls with the Union's partners.

This article argues that the EU's plans to have a naval presence in the Indo-Pacific via the CMP concept suggest that the Union is seeking to raise the level of ambition of its naval dimension to narrow the gap between its maritime rhetoric and what it does in practice. Depending on the geographical scope of a possible Indo-Pacific MAI, having an EU naval presence in China's backyard could put the Union in a situation in which it has to deal with the vessels of an unfriendly great power if it wishes to contribute to the freedom of navigation and open sea lines of communication in the region. This would be unexplored territory for the Union's security and defence policy. The rest of this article is divided into three sections. The first explains what the CMP concept is and what it does. The second analyses the EU's plans to extend the CMP concept to the Indo-Pacific, provided that the Gulf of Guinea pilot is successful. The third and final section concludes the article.

The CMP concept

The EU is working on more flexible ways of conducting naval operations in response to growing demand, both from within the EU and from the outside world, for the Union to be a maritime security provider in various parts of the globe. To this end, the Union has

developed the CMP concept, which began to emerge in 2019 (EEAS 2019). It can be implemented in any maritime area of the world that the Council of the EU decides to designate as an MAI to the Union (EEAS 2021a). It uses, on a voluntary basis, EU countries' naval assets that are already deployed to or passing through a specific MAI.

The idea is that EU countries will volunteer their naval assets to perform additional tasks in the MAI that have a specific EU dimension, while keeping those assets under national chains of command. The CMP MAI Coordination Cell, which has been established within the EU Military Staff, will coordinate the activities of these naval assets, and share analysis and information between them. It uses the Maritime Surveillance network, a solution developed by the European Defence Agency that allows dialogue between European maritime information systems to create a common 'Recognised Maritime Picture' (EDA 2021). In a nutshell, the CMP concept relies on enhanced coordination of EU countries' national naval assets to ensure a more permanent and more visible European maritime presence in the MAI. It is therefore a tool for information exchange between the participating EU countries and for enhancing complementarities and synergies between their national naval assets (Bosilca and Riddervold 2021).

On 25 January 2021, the EU launched a pilot of its new CMP concept in the Gulf of Guinea and established the region as an MAI. The Gulf of Guinea is a strategic region in West Africa that encompasses 17 countries from Senegal to Angola. It is rich in natural resources (i.e. hydrocarbons, minerals and fisheries) and critical to African maritime traffic: it contributes 20% of that traffic and has nearly 20 commercial ports. Due to these attributes and the region's high unemployment and corruption levels, criminal activity has surged in the Gulf of Guinea: it suffers *inter alia* from illegal and unreported fishing, drugs and arms trafficking, and maritime piracy. The Gulf of Guinea is currently the world's number-one piracy hotspot: in the first quarter of 2021, it accounted for 43% of all reported piracy incidents in the world (ICC Commercial Crime Services 2021).

The Gulf of Guinea was chosen for the pilot of the CMP concept because there is a need to improve maritime security in the region. In addition, the EU is familiar with the Gulf of Guinea as it has been monitoring maritime security in the region for years (Germond 2015, 186). It also has an established a presence there—the Union is undertaking multiple multi-million-euro programmes and projects to improve the capacities of the littoral states in areas such as maritime security and fisheries governance (EEAS 2021a). The CMP pilot seeks to further enhance the EU's maritime presence and political influence in the Gulf of Guinea, to promote international cooperation at sea and to contribute to the Union's broader integrated approach towards the region (Council of the EU 2021c). The idea is that those member states that have naval vessels deployed in or transiting through the EU's Gulf of Guinea MAI will voluntarily assume additional tasks that have a specific EU dimension. The CMP concept is expected to have important positive ramifications for the region's security environment and for transatlantic cooperation too, given that the US also has a presence in the Gulf of Guinea (Borges de Castro 2022). In February 2021, the European External Action Service informed the European Parliament that it was expecting two Spanish, two Italian, two Portuguese and up to three French naval vessels to be present in the Gulf of Guinea and available to patrol the Union's MAI

in 2021 (European Parliament Multimedia Centre 2021). However, the CMP is not a CSDP operation; it is a flexible Common Foreign and Security Policy tool that does not have a command-and-control structure. It seeks to increase the coherence of the member states' national naval presences in the Gulf of Guinea, which remain under national chains of command, and to improve their access to information. This makes it similar in character to the EU's naval coordination action, which sought to facilitate the availability and operational action of EU member states' naval assets in the fight against maritime pirates off the coast of Somalia before the launch of Operation Atalanta in 2008. The Council will review the CMP pilot in February 2022, after which the concept might be extended to additional regions.

The EU's naval ambitions in the Indo-Pacific

In June 2020, the EU began to develop a 'Strategic Compass' for its security and defence policy.¹ The aim of the Strategic Compass, which is scheduled to be adopted in March 2022, is to enhance implementation of the Union's existing level of ambition in security and defence, and to develop new goals and targets to guide development in this field. These goals and targets will be organised within four thematic baskets: act (crisis management), secure (resilience), invest (capabilities) and partner (partnerships). Each will have implications for the EU's naval ambitions (Fiott 2021).

In spring 2021, the Strategic Compass process focused on strategic dialogue, during which EU member states put forward more than 20 non-papers and organised over 50 events to develop proposals that could be included in the final document. As that process has advanced, EU member states have discussed *inter alia* how to develop CSDP naval operations and the CMP concept to improve the EU's operational readiness; how to respond to geopolitical tensions in the maritime domain to ensure that the Union can protect its interests; the possibility of organising EU naval exercises to enhance the interoperability of the member states' navies; and how to show support for the Union's partners, enhance maritime capacity building and improve joint maritime situational awareness.

Many of the maritime-security-related discussions that have taken place in the context of the Strategic Compass process have focused on the CMP concept and boosting the EU's partnerships with countries in the Indo-Pacific, which the Union defines as 'the geographic area from the east coast of Africa to the Pacific Island States' (Council of the EU 2021a, 3). This is due to the Indo-Pacific's economic importance to Europe, the growing geopolitical tensions in the region and the increased attention given to it by individual European countries. France, Germany and the Netherlands have published national Indo-Pacific strategies since 2018 and they have also pushed the EU to pay greater attention to the region. France views itself as a resident power in the Indo-Pacific due to its overseas territories in the region,² and believes that a 'whole-of-EU' approach to the Indo-Pacific would complement its national strategy and enhance the visibility and impact of its national naval deployments (Pajon 2021).

Some guidelines have already been set for the EU's naval ambitions in the Indo-Pacific. On 19 April, the Council adopted conclusions on the EU's Indo-Pacific strategy,

which the Commission and the European External Action Service then presented on 16 September. The conclusions and the new Indo-Pacific strategy itself contain two notable points about the Union's naval ambitions in the region. First, the EU will explore the possibility of replicating its Critical Maritime Routes in the Indian Ocean (CRIMARIO) II activities in the Southern Pacific (Council of the EU 2021a, 8). Launched in April 2020, CRIMARIO II is an EU-funded project. It has a budget of €7.5 million and is managed by Expertise France, a French agency for international technical cooperation (CRIMARIO 2021).³ The project seeks to contribute to a safer and more secure maritime domain through cross-sectoral, inter-agency and cross-regional cooperation. The Union has already extended the geographical scope of CRIMARIO II from the Indian Ocean into South and South-East Asia to contribute to safer sea lines of communication, and is now looking to extend it even further.

Second, the EU will assess the possibility of establishing an MAI in the Indo-Pacific in the framework of the CMP concept, provided that its pilot in the Gulf of Guinea is successful. According to the Council, the objectives of an MAI in the Indo-Pacific could be, *inter alia*, to cooperate with partners' navies and build their capacities where relevant, to establish comprehensive monitoring of maritime security and freedom of navigation, and to take action to ensure environmental security in the area (Council of the EU 2021a, 9). The Council further stated that the CMP concept 'could contribute to addressing the existing security challenges in the region', and that EU member states 'acknowledge the importance of a meaningful European naval presence in the Indo-Pacific' (Council of the EU 2021a, 9).

The extension of the CMP concept to the Indo-Pacific would strengthen the EU's role in the region. First, it would 'amplify' the impact of the member states' national naval assets when they are deployed in the region (Morcos 2021). France is currently the EU country with the largest naval presence in the Indo-Pacific, with 10 ships there, including 4 frigates (Barry and Decis 2021). Germany is also seeking to play a small naval role in the region by deploying the frigate *Bayern*, which set sail for the Indo-Pacific in August 2021 for a six-month mission to uphold the freedom of navigation in international waters and express support for Germany's partners (Sprenger 2021). The CMP concept would help coordinate such national deployments and increase information sharing between vessels.

Second, the extension of the CMP concept to the Indo-Pacific would allow the EU to enhance its partnerships with countries such as India, Japan and South Korea, *inter alia* through joint naval exercises, port calls and greater information sharing (Fiott and Lindstrom 2021, 44; Desmaele et al. 2021, 41). It would therefore 'concretely translate' the key importance of the Indo-Pacific for the EU's foreign and security policy (Jourdain 2021) and show the Union's partners that the EU is committed to contributing to their security.

Third, the extension of the CMP concept to the Indo-Pacific would raise the concept's overall level of ambition: it would mean that the EU would have a permanent naval presence in a sensitive region where its vessels might have to deal with vessels from China, a great power with significant geopolitical ambitions in the Indo-Pacific.

Due to the sensitivity of the Indo-Pacific as an area of operation, the EU is unlikely to deploy a CSDP naval operation there. Despite the EU's cautious political alignment with the US on China in 2021 following the G7 summit in Cornwall and the EU–US summit in Brussels (G7 2021; Council of the EU 2021b), the Union continues to be divided on how it should approach China and how it should deal with Beijing's territorial ambitions in the Indo-Pacific. Although the European Commission labelled China as 'a systemic rival promoting alternative models of governance' in 2019 (European Commission 2019, 1), there continue to be significant differences of opinion between EU countries on what the Union's tone vis-à-vis Beijing should be: recent EU statements on China's actions in the South China Sea and in Hong Kong have been either vetoed or watered down by several member states which have developed close ties to China (Von der Burchard and Barigazzi 2021). The main thing that EU countries agree on is that freedom of navigation and open sea lines of communication should be maintained in the Indo-Pacific in accordance with the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. Thus, given that the EU can deploy naval power only by consensus (Germond 2015, 101–2), it is unlikely that the Council will find the unanimity needed to launch a CSDP naval operation in the Indo-Pacific anytime soon: the political sensitivity of such a deployment would be far greater than that relating to criticism of Beijing's human rights record. In addition, developments in the Indo-Pacific do not pose an existential threat to the EU (Pejsova 2019, 4), which is why the Union is likely to play only a limited role in the region.

From an EU perspective, the CMP concept provides the Union with a more flexible and less sensitive way to have a naval presence in the Indo-Pacific. Given that it does not create a CSDP operation and the participating countries' vessels remain under national chains of command, it might be easier for the Council to extend the concept to the Indo-Pacific. The April 2021 Council conclusions on the EU's Indo-Pacific strategy and the discussions that were held in the framework of the Strategic Compass process in spring 2021 certainly suggest that the Union is moving in this direction. A permanent naval presence in the Indo-Pacific would enable the Union to protect its interests in the region more effectively by ensuring that international law is respected in the maritime and other domains, thereby contributing to the security of its regional partners and acting in cooperation with the US. Some have even argued that developing the CMP concept in the Indo-Pacific could eventually constitute a credible deterrent to China in the South China Sea (Tyrrell 2021). However, China may not see the difference between the CMP concept and a CSDP naval operation, which means that extending the concept to the Indo-Pacific could cause EU–China relations to deteriorate further (Pacheco Pardo and Leveringhaus 2021, 26–7).

However, there are questions marks over the EU's ability to play an effective naval role in the Indo-Pacific via the CMP concept. First, the vetoed and watered-down EU foreign-policy statements on China point to a reluctance in some EU capitals to agree to proposals in the Council that might offend Beijing and negatively affect their bilateral relationships with China. Although this reluctance is unlikely to torpedo the extension of the CMP concept to the Indo-Pacific entirely, given the current momentum, it is likely to influence the geographical focus of a possible EU MAI in the region. It could be that such an MAI would cover the Indian Ocean, which is already familiar territory for the

EU due to Operation Atalanta, while more sensitive areas such as the East and South China Seas would remain outside of it due to differences among EU capitals.

Second, there is the question of resources: only France has a long-standing naval presence in the Indo-Pacific. Although Germany, Italy and the Netherlands have the capacity to play a greater naval role in the region, they would have to commit more resources, which could only happen gradually due to tight military budgets, competing security challenges closer to Europe (e.g. Russia) and existing operational commitments (Crabtree 2022). Some experts have therefore argued that Germany should focus its diplomatic and military activities on the North Atlantic and the High North regions, and rely primarily on diplomatic and economic instruments in the Indo-Pacific, which they see as sufficient to assure partners in the region of Berlin's sustained interest (Paul and Swistek 2021, 42). Most other EU countries still lack national Indo-Pacific strategies and remain unwilling to engage militarily in the region (Koenig 2021). The fear of China's response might also deter some EU countries from contributing vessels, particularly if the EU's Indo-Pacific MAI also covered East and South-East Asia and/or involved cooperation with the US (Pacheco Pardo and Leveringhaus 2021, 26).

It is therefore necessary to wait for the outcome of the review of the CMP pilot in the Gulf of Guinea and the conclusion of the Strategic Compass process in March 2022 to see more clearly where the EU is heading in the Indo-Pacific as a naval actor.

Conclusion

At the time of writing, the EU is planning to establish a permanent naval presence in the Indo-Pacific using the CMP concept, provided that the Gulf of Guinea pilot is successful. This has been indicated by both the Council and the EU's new Indo-Pacific strategy. It has also been discussed in the framework of the Strategic Compass process, which will conclude in March 2022.

The discussions that have been held in the framework of the Strategic Compass process and the EU's new Indo-Pacific strategy suggest that the Union is seeking to raise the level of ambition of the naval dimension of its security and defence policy. Although extending the CMP concept to the Indo-Pacific would not create a CSDP naval operation, it would nevertheless mean that the EU would have a more-or-less permanent naval presence in China's backyard. The participating countries' vessels might, for example, conduct freedom of navigation operations and contribute to open sea lines of communication in the region. Having such a presence would be unexplored territory for the EU, given the high geopolitical tensions in the Indo-Pacific due to China's behaviour in the East and South China Seas.

It is possible that the EU's plans to extend the CMP concept to the Indo-Pacific will be hampered by the specific sensitivities of certain member states. With regard to the Indo-Pacific, these sensitivities will be expressed as a reluctance among these member states to support EU actions that might offend China. In the past, we have seen that several member states that have developed close political and economic ties to Beijing have vetoed or watered down EU statements critical of China's actions. If the EU lacks the political

cohesion to criticise China when most of its member states deem such criticism necessary, it is unlikely to have the political capacity to agree to having a meaningful—from the perspective of its partners—naval presence in the Indo-Pacific. Although extending the CMP concept to the Indo-Pacific would not create a CSDP naval operation, doing so would nevertheless require unanimity among the member states due to the EU's decision-making rules in its foreign policy and CSDP. It is therefore possible that the EU will not be able to achieve that unanimity, despite the rhetoric that is coming from Brussels regarding the need to boost the EU's effectiveness as a global maritime security provider.

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Notes

1. The Strategic Compass is a German idea that emerged in the run-up to Germany's autumn 2020 EU Council Presidency. Germany could see that there was a gap between the EU's existing level of ambition in security and defence, and what the Union does in practice in this field. Germany could also see that there was a need to provide greater political direction to the EU's security and defence policy following the launch of new initiatives such as Permanent Structured Cooperation and the European Defence Fund.
2. These are French Polynesia, New Caledonia and Wallis-et-Futuna.
3. More specifically, CRIMARIO II seeks to (1) enhance information exchange and analysis, and crisis/incident management; (2) strengthen inter-agency cooperation in maritime surveillance, policing, investigation and judicial matters; and (3) facilitate the implementation of international legal instruments and regional arrangements.

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