

Prospects & Perspectives



It is made clear within the Dutch Guidelines that cooperation in the Indo-Pacific will be values-based. Democratic countries with free markets will be prioritized as the EU is eager to help uphold liberal values and norms in a region in which they are increasingly being contested.

Picture source: News Platform, June 29, 2021, *News Platform*, <https://newsplatform.in/2021/06/29/russia-accused-of-threatening-dutch-warship-on-patrol-with-britains-hms-defender/>.

The Netherlands and the Indo-Pacific: Inclusive but Not Value-Neutral

By *Maaïke Okano-Heijmans & Kayle Van't Klooster*

Introduction

The Netherlands has been an active participant in current efforts to develop a more coherent and engaged European approach to the Indo-Pacific. Just as the Netherlands was a frontrunner in developing an updated, improved



policy towards China — released in 2019 — it is also among the first European countries to set out a broader vision for the Indo-Pacific. The *Dutch Indo-Pacific Guidelines*, released in November 2020, reflect the evolving Dutch international outlook and the government’s intention to influence the formation of the upcoming EU Indo-Pacific strategy. The rising power and influence of China have caused anxieties to the Netherlands and Europe generally, prompting a change in direct China policies, but also in indirect policies. The *Indo-Pacific Guidelines* are intended to place China’s rise within a region-wide, comprehensive response that is inclusive, but not value-neutral.

It is increasingly clear that the Netherlands, and Europe as a whole, cannot sit on the sidelines and risk destabilizations in what is increasingly the world’s primary economic growth region. The *Dutch Indo-Pacific Guidelines* are intended to help partners in the region successfully navigate increasing geopolitical tensions by providing a third partner, between the U.S. and China, to cooperate with on a range of key issues. Two niche areas which the Netherlands is uniquely able to contribute to are maritime security cooperation and digital connectivity. In doing so, the Netherlands seeks to actively safeguard free and open trade, stand up for human rights, and preserve the rules-based international order. These goals, shared by many like-minded partners in the region, underline the Dutch policy.

Renewed Commitment to Security and Stability

International law violations in the South China Sea and other threats to open and free maritime trade are crucially important for the Netherlands as a trading nation, but also to the continued growth and stability of the EU as a whole in the coming decades. Whether it is in cooperation with the Quad, or potentially through the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the *Dutch Indo-Pacific Guidelines* indicate that the Netherlands has become increasingly willing to be directly involved in security cooperation. This willingness extends to a range of security issues, from freedom of navigation to the preservation of crucially important undersea cables. The *Dutch Indo-Pacific Guidelines* use assertive language and references to *realpolitik*, a significant departure from the language previously used.

A significant manifestation of this willingness is the decision by Dutch policymakers to engage in “naval signaling” in conjunction with the U.K. As



part of a mainly British aircraft carrier strike group centering around the HMS *Queen Elizabeth*, a Dutch frigate — the HNLMS *Evertsen* — sailed into the South China Sea in July 2021. On its way to Japan, the group performed an exercise with Singapore. The deployment of a Dutch frigate was a clear sign that Western countries and their partners in the Indo-Pacific would not tolerate increasing challenges to free navigation in the critically important shipping lanes running through the contested waters.

However, the move was controversial even at home in the Netherlands for being potentially provocative and unnecessarily antagonistic towards China. The *Evertsen's* voyage demonstrates that the newly assertive posture of the Netherlands is more than just policy rhetoric. A Dutch military naval presence in the region is likely to continue to be rare, however, and Dutch efforts “to guarantee safe passage and maritime security” will likely focus on other types of action. As stated in the *Indo-Pacific Guidelines*, this includes capacity building for experts in the area of the international law of the sea, both in the region and in coordination with international (legal) institutions in The Hague. Also, the Netherlands may consider dispatching a naval presence for conflict prevention, disaster relief and capacity building, both maritime and on land.

Enhancing Digital Connectivity

Currently, the Dutch government envisions a European Indo-Pacific strategy that enables each member state to be intensely involved in the policy area which fits its capabilities the most. As such, digital connectivity and the cyber domain is a niche area which the Netherlands intends to prioritize. Building on the EU Connectivity strategy, the Netherlands hopes to encourage further cooperation on digital technologies, enable the increased integration of our digital economies and address the rising threat of cyber attacks. Already, the Netherlands has been engaged in cyber security capacity building, having started a cyber dialogue aimed at capacity building for experts from ASEAN countries.

As countries in the Indo-Pacific comprise some of the fastest growing digital economies, the potential for increased cooperation is immense. By increasing support for European start-ups, engaging in efforts such as the Gaia X project (which seeks to develop common requirements for an open, transparent and secure European data infrastructure and encourage the growth



of European champions), Europe can present an alternative to American and Chinese products. The key advantage is that Europe has taken a human-centered approach to digital regulations which prioritizes privacy and fairness. Increased economic clout will enable European companies to push for democratic standards in digital technology. Already the EU has proven itself to be a regulatory power in this domain with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), which has become a global standard as many countries around the world have used it as a starting point for devising their own digital regulations. The Netherlands believe that Europe can build on this success and intends to lead the way in this domain.

Conclusion

The emerging EU policy towards the Indo-Pacific, to be released in the coming months, is uniquely the result of member states pushing for a more cohesive posture from the EU. The *Dutch Indo-Pacific Guidelines* were meant to encourage and shape debate across Europe on the content of the upcoming EU Indo-Pacific strategy as well as within the Netherlands, since the political commitment to follow through on the proposed actions requires significant political buy in. Broadly, they are also intended to encourage further Dutch and European cooperation and engagement with the region on key issues.

It is also made clear within the Dutch Guidelines that cooperation in the Indo-Pacific will be values-based. Democratic countries with free markets will be prioritized as the EU is eager to help uphold liberal values and norms in a region in which they are increasingly being contested.

The *Dutch Indo-Pacific Guidelines* are evidence of a changing geopolitical outlook in the Netherlands and the EU. As great power conflict intensifies in the Indo-Pacific, EU and its member states must be active in pursuing their interests in the region. Fortunately, this increasingly active posture is being welcomed by many states and policymakers in the Indo-Pacific region. Cooperation with ASEAN member states, as well Japan, South Korea, Australia and other like-minded states will ensure that the Indo-Pacific region remains free and open, despite the global political turbulence, in the coming years.

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