

Perceptions of the EU's Indo-Pacific Policy in the Philippines

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
<p>Date received: 08 March 2025 Revision date: 20 July 2025 Date published: 20 August 2025</p> <hr/> <p>Keywords <i>European Union;</i> <i>Philippines</i> <i>Indo-Pacific;</i> <i>Strategy</i> <i>Foreign Policy;</i> <i>Perceptions;</i> <i>Liberalism</i></p> <hr/> <p>Correspondence Email: pziegenhain@president.ac.id</p>	<p>The rise of the Indo-Pacific region as a key strategic and economic area has prompted the European Union (EU) to increase its engagement there. The EU, whose foreign policy approach is closely related to the liberalism macro theory in International Relations (IR), has thus developed a robust strategy to work more closely with Southeast Asian countries, such as the Philippines. The research question of this study is how the political elites and the general public in the Philippines perceive the EU's efforts in Southeast Asia. The research findings are that the EU is perceived positively, but awareness of the EU's foreign policy initiatives among the political elites and the general public remains relatively low. Academics and local experts underline the potential benefits of EU partnerships beyond the military dimension, which is in accordance with a traditional liberal foreign policy. However, there is criticism of the EU's perceived moral stance and capabilities in the region, with doubts about its willingness to engage militarily in regional conflicts, which would stand in contrast to a liberal foreign policy approach. Overall, while the Philippine government and general public welcomes the EU's commitment to a rules-based order in the face of Chinese encroachment, skepticism remains about the EU's strategic relevance and practical impact in safeguarding Philippine interests.</p>

INTRODUCTION

Significant strategic shifts are taking place at the global level, as evidenced by the challenge posed by China's rise, the escalation of Sino-American rivalry, and the emergence of the Indo-Pacific region as a major driver of global economic growth, accounting for nearly 40 percent of the world's economy. One global player that has often been overlooked in the academic study of the conflicts in the Indo-Pacific region is the European Union (EU), a political and economic union in Europe that currently has 27 member states.

It began as an economic community with six member states in the 1950s and has grown into the world's largest trading block with a single market and a common currency, the euro. Since the Maastricht Treaty in 1993, the European Union is not only an economic union but also a political union with the aim of creating "an ever-closer union of the peoples of Europe". In recent years, however, deeper European integration has been blocked by the governments of its member states and by several referenda since the early 2000s. Europe, for a long preoccupied with its own challenges (Euro crisis, mass immigration, Brexit) has now finally reacted and is trying to pay more attention to the Indo-Pacific region.

However, if the geopolitical pivot to the Indo-Pacific was a race, then the European Union risks being left behind at the turn (Ruyt 2022). As a result, the European Union and its member states have increased their engagement in East Asia, South Asia, Southeast Asia and the Pacific, a world region now called Indo-Pacific. National Indo-Pacific strategies have recently been developed in different ways by France, Germany and the Netherlands. They have provided the impetus for the EU's efforts to develop a more forceful strategy for the region. This work culminated in the publication of the European Council Conclusions on the "EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific" in April 2021. In recent years, the EU has also become more active in the Indo-Pacific region through strategic partnerships (e.g., with Japan, South Korea, India, ASEAN), maritime security missions (such as CRIMARIO II, which supports maritime domain awareness in the Indian Ocean) and inter-regional cooperation on non-traditional security threats like cyber security, climate change, pandemics, terrorism, etc.

However, the extent to which all these EU initiatives in the Indo-Pacific are accepted by the countries concerned in the region has not yet been well researched by scholars (Abbondanza/Wilkins 2024). For the purposes of this article, I would like to focus on the ASEAN region and, more specifically, on one country: the Philippines. The archipelagic state is a major Southeast Asian country with a population of more than 100 million, and it is a very appropriate case study because it is neither a military or economic superpower nor a rather insignificant small country. Because of its geostrategic location, its central role in the South China Sea dispute, and its position as a key U.S. treaty ally in the region, the Philippines is crucial for understanding the political dynamics of the Indo-Pacific.

My two research questions, which are closely related to each other, are: How is the EU's new attention to the Indo-Pacific perceived among the political elites and the general public in the Philippines? Do the national government and the general public appreciate the EU's efforts or not? In a first step, I will briefly introduce the aforementioned EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific of April 2021, its intentions and its close ideological connection to liberal theories of International Relations (IR). In the next step, I will outline the overall foreign policy of the Philippines in the recent past and especially highlighting the impact of the superpower rivalry between the US and China on the archipelago in order to better understand the influence of the EU on Philippine foreign policy. This is followed by the main analytical part of this paper, where I will draw some preliminary conclusions on the main research question of how the EU's Indo-Pacific cooperation strategy has been perceived in the Philippines.

This study fills a critical gap in academic literature. While there have been several publications on the EU's Indo-China policy (such as Grare/Reuter 2021 or Tan/Lin 2024), none have explicitly examined perceptions from the Philippines. Moreover, this research provides valuable insights into the foreign policy perceptions of a relevant ASEAN member country, the Philippines, thus contributing to a deeper understanding of international relations in Southeast Asia.

RESEARCH METHOD

Methodologically, I relied primarily on a thorough desktop review of academic and non-academic literature. This included gathering and organizing a wide range of materials such as academic articles, book chapters, and newspaper reports. In a next step, I critically analyzed the collected materials, evaluated the quality of sources and synthesized them to answer the research questions. In addition, I conducted a semi-structured online interview with Dr. Richard Heydarian, Senior Lecturer at the Asian Center of the University of the Philippines. He is one of the most reputed

foreign policy scholars in the Philippines. The interview was conducted in English language and took place on July 26, 2023. It lasted about an hour. I prepared a list of themes and open-ended questions for the interview. Furthermore, I asked occasionally follow-up questions to probe deeper into the interviewee's responses. A few days later, I sent a draft of the article to Dr. Richard Heydarian, who replied that he agreed with my quotations in this article.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The fundamental interests of economic development have long shaped Europe's perception of the Indo-Pacific. This is not surprising, given that the EU began as an economic community in the 1950s, and economic issues (including the single market, the customs union, and the common monetary policy) are at the heart of Europe's regional organization. Economically, the EU is deeply integrated and can speak almost with one voice. This is not the case with the common foreign and security policy, which is still an intergovernmental affair. Concerns about defense and security issues have long been absent from European decision-making (Bongardt/Torres 2023).

It is important to note that the European Union's foreign policy is closely related to the macro theory of liberalism in IR. The EU's foreign policy is compatible with liberal theory because of its preference for multilateralism and diplomacy. The EU promotes the resolution of international problems through international institutions and dialogue rather than unilateral action or force (Moravcsik 1997). It works closely with the UN, NATO, and the WTO, and supports international treaties (such as the Iran Nuclear Deal and the Paris Climate Agreement).

The EU's Indo-Pacific strategy emphasizes respect for international law, including the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). It also supports peaceful resolution of disputes — such as over the South China Sea — through legal and diplomatic means, not military force. This is in line with liberalism's faith in international law and norms (Slaughter 2004).

In addition, as a value-based community, the EU supports democracy and human rights. This reflects liberalism's view that democracies are peaceful and cooperative. Instead of competing for dominance (as in realist theories), the EU promotes shared problem-solving on global and regional issues such as climate change, maritime security, and health. Liberalism holds that institutions and cooperation lead to peace and stability (Doyle 1986).

In recent years, in response to China's growing power and assertiveness vis-à-vis its smaller and weaker neighbors in Southeast Asia, the EU has shifted its strategy from focusing on its traditional economic power to defending the rules-based multilateral order and ensuring peace in the region (Ruyt 2022). This includes freedom of navigation and overflight, as well as stability within and between the major powers in the region. The strategic relationship between European countries and the Philippines is likely to grow in importance as both sides recognize the Philippines' strategic geographic location and the importance of countering China's increasing military activity near Taiwan and the South China Sea (Hutt 2023).

To underline the credibility and the seriousness of its ambitions, some European Union member states have deployed warships in Southeast Asian waters. Germany for example, has sent a frigate called "Bayern". "We will be trying to step up our naval presence," EU Special Envoy for the Indo Pacific Richard Tibbels, when asked what steps the EU was prepared to take to help uphold freedom of mobility and international law in the disputed waters of the South China Sea and added: "We will be trying to encourage and coordinate our member states to continue such naval visits, even

joint exercises should that be possible. Such deployments would be 'relatively modest' but could be done regularly given the capabilities of the bloc's member states" (Gomez 2023). In addition, the Philippines has become a partner country of the EU's Enhancing Security Cooperation in and with Asia (ESIWA) project. ESIWA will facilitate peer-to-peer dialogues between EU and Philippine maritime experts to share knowledge and expertise on managing and addressing maritime challenges (Santoro 2024).

The EU as a regional organization (representing a large majority of the European countries) has a long and intensive relationship with its Southeast Asian counterpart, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), which represents all ten Southeast Asian countries. In 2021, the Philippines took over a three-year role as the coordinator of dialogue relations between ASEAN and the EU, making it the first point of contact for Brussels in its dealings with ASEAN (Almodiel-Luteijn and La Viña 2022: 63).

In this sense, the idea of supporting the ASEAN-led regional architecture makes strategic sense from the EU's point of view, because the European Union (in line with the liberal IR theory) clearly favors a multilateral approach to foreign policy. Most European governments also prefer a regional approach rather than dealing with individual members of ASEAN such as Indonesia, Vietnam, and the Philippines (Grare and Reuter 2021: 8). This contrasts with the foreign policy approach of China and even the United States of America (USA), which focuses on bilateral relations and agreements.

Foreign Policy of the Philippines Before and After the 2022 Elections

Most articles on Philippine foreign policy focus heavily on the US-China relationship and barely mention the EU or ignore the regional organization completely (e.g., Castro 2023b, Gill 2023, Heydarian 2022). As mentioned before, the role of the European Union in East and Southeast Asian security affairs has received very little scholarly and journalistic attention (Abbondanza/Wilkins 2024), even though Europe is a major trading power in the region. In economic terms, "the EU is as important as the US in East Asia" (Casarini 2020: 79).

Among Southeast Asian countries, the Philippines is particularly threatened by China. For more than twenty years, China has been building military fortifications on rocks and reefs near the Philippines, claiming that these are areas traditionally belonging to China. The Philippines protested and filed a case with the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague. In July 2016, the court issued its ruling in the arbitration case between the Philippines and China. The decision made clear that China's extensive claims to maritime features within the so-called 'nine-dash line' are inconsistent with the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and are therefore invalid. The tribunal also emphasized that none of the features claimed by China qualify as "islands". China strongly contested the ruling, declaring it 'null and void' and questioning the legitimacy of the tribunal itself.

In terms of foreign policy, the Philippines has been an official treaty ally and major non-NATO ally of the United States since independence after World War 2. However, the traditionally strong security ties between the two countries have been challenged during the presidency of Rodrigo Duterte, who served as president of the Philippines from May 2016 to May 2022.

In February 2020, for example, he terminated the Philippines' Visiting Forces Agreement with the US after one of his secretaries, Ronald de La Rosa, was denied a US visa due to his

involvement in human rights abuses. Since taking office in May 2016, Duterte has been at odds with the US administration, announcing that he would forge "new alliances" with China and Russia.

Russian President Vladimir Putin has been praised by Duterte as his "idol" and "favorite hero" (Heydarian 2022). Duterte, who has described China as the Philippines' "protector", has courted economic and military support from both China and Russia as tensions with the West over democracy and human rights have grown. The Philippine president has repeatedly softened his stance on the South China Sea disputes, even going so far as to agree with Beijing's stance on the aforementioned arbitral tribunal ruling that largely invalidated China's expansive claims in the neighboring waters. He also downplayed the 2019 Reed Bank incident, in which a suspected Chinese militia vessel allegedly drowned a Philippine fishing boat (Heydarian 2022).

Relations between the EU and the Philippines have also soured under President Duterte, not least because of his 'war on drugs' campaign. Amnesty International's report claims that more than 27,000 extrajudicial killings have taken place during Duterte's years in power. The EU has been outspoken in its concerns about the high death toll in the Philippines, as well as the serious deterioration in human rights, due process and the rule of law. In fact, during their visit to Manila in 2017, the International Delegates of the Progressive Alliance based in Europe put pressure on Manila to immediately end its drug war or risk losing a preferential trade agreement allowing more than 6,200 Philippine products duty-free entry into the European Union (Shahadah 2022).

Duterte described the EU's response as an attempt to interfere in the Philippines' internal affairs, called the Union "stupid" and warned that he would not remain silent in the face of Western criticism of his anti-drug campaign. He also threatened to cancel joint EU-Philippine projects and expel European diplomats (Shahadah 2022). However, Duterte's anti-EU and anti-US stance was not very popular with the general public and political elites in the Philippines. As a result, in the campaign for the 2022 presidential elections, in which Duterte was constitutionally barred from running, all the candidates promised an overhaul and closer ties with the US and the EU. Even the opposition candidate and then Vice-President, Maria Leonor "Leni" Robredo, called for "robust and closer security relations with the Philippines' traditional Western security partners" (Castro 2023a).

Current President Ferdinand Marcos Jr, who won the presidential elections in May 2022, has a much friendlier attitude towards the US and the EU. Unlike Duterte, he has reaffirmed the finality of the South China Sea arbitral tribunal ruling and stated categorically that he will not compromise it in any way over the nation's 'sacred' territorial and maritime rights. Marcos Jr. also abandoned a defense deal with Russia in favor of American substitutes. In addition, he put on hold a number of expensive infrastructure projects with China because of worries about high interest rates and a lack of funding. Marcos Jr. has developed a more critical stance towards China and has praised America's stabilizing presence in the Indo-Pacific as "something that is greatly valued by all the countries in the region, and the Philippines particularly" (Heydarian 2022).

In his first State of the Nation Address, President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. underscored that his administration would continue to be a "friend to all and enemy to none" (PhilStar 2022). Philippine foreign policy expert, Renato Cruz de Castro, explained that while pursuing closer security cooperation with the United States, President Marcos follows a balanced foreign policy that emphasizes efforts to advance economic cooperation with China. His strategy is to divide labor between China and the United States, with China providing public funding for Philippine infrastructure development and the export market, and the USA providing a safety net for security. The objective is to gain tangible benefits from both China and the United States. It is also intended

to provide the Philippines with diplomatic and strategic breathing room between the two major powers.

The delicate balancing act could easily be upset by a combination of internal and external factors, such as an unintentional conflict between the United States and China in the South China Sea or a clash between mainland Chinese and Taiwanese forces involving the USA. In such a scenario, the Philippines could suffer serious negative consequences (Castro 2023b). Marcos appears keenly aware of this possibility. "I learned an African saying," he said in an interview during the World Economic Forum Annual Meeting in Davos in January 2023. "When elephants fight, the only one that loses is the grass. We are the grass in this situation; we do not want to get trampled" (Castro 2023b).

Perception of the EU Foreign Policy in the Philippines

People in the Philippines have a generally positive perception of the EU as a strong and influential global actor, according to a 2017 survey by the Social Weather Stations research institute. According to the survey, 40 percent of respondents had a high level of trust in the EU, while only 21 percent had a low level of trust. The respondents' educational background had an impact on their level of trust in the EU; those with a higher level of education were more knowledgeable about the EU and the Philippines' relations with Europe (Almodiel-Luteijn/La Viña 2022: 52).

Overall, however, knowledge of EU foreign policy and the EU's Indo-Pacific strategy is limited. Richard Heydarian, Senior Lecturer at the Asian Center of the University of the Philippines, agreed in an online interview in June 2023 that the EU Indo-Pacific Strategy is not well known in the Philippines and said that the EU is not good at selling its policies. The EU needs to have bigger PR moments, high-profile investments and create some projects that stand out. He also said that there is a lack of public diplomacy and engagement with thought leaders in the ASEAN region. Very few people there pay attention to EU policies and the details of the EU's strategic presence in the region.

According to Heydarian there are very vocal people (among them many Americans) in the region who have a negative view of the EU's foreign policy capabilities. They say the EU should not pretend to have strategic influence in the region and should focus on its own backyard, including the current war in Ukraine. The perception of a divided and conflict-ridden Europe is widespread in Southeast Asia (Tan/Lin 2024). This also feeds skepticism about the EU, with many in ASEAN saying that even if the EU wants to play a greater role in this part of the world, it does not have enough capacity and does not invest enough in military equipment.

As Nicola Casarini of the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies at the European University Institute in Florence has written, "the EU is unable to play power politics in the Far East, partly because of its diminishing capabilities and deepening fragmentation. In fact, it is mainly perceived as a civilian actor with an impressive set of soft power capabilities" (Casarini 2020: 79).

Manuel Everga III, Director of the European Studies Programme of the Ateneo de Manila, highlighted the importance of the European Union's engagement in the Indo-Pacific region. According to him, the benefits for the Philippines lie outside the traditional hard power or military areas, where the Philippines can cooperate with the EU on economic cooperation and the environment (PhilStar 2022).

The beforementioned statements all align with the Liberal Theory of IR, which emphasizes cooperation, interdependence, and the importance of non-military issues in shaping relations between states. The statements view the relationship between the Philippines and the EU through a lens of mutual benefit and collaboration on global issues, which is a cornerstone of the liberal theory of IR. It rejects the purely military or power-centric view of international relations often associated with (Neo-)Realism.

Laura Quiambao-del Rosario, who served as Undersecretary for International Economic Relations at the Department of Foreign Affairs under the Aquino administration (2010-2016), said that with the European Union's more active presence in the region, the former diplomat added that this opens up opportunities for the Philippines to move beyond a "binary approach" in foreign policy (PhilStar 2022). As a result, the EU's active involvement in the region gives the Philippines more room to maneuver in its foreign policy by not focusing solely on the two superpowers, the US and China.

Richard Heydarian went in the same direction when he stated that there needs to be a much more nuanced emphasis on why the EU presence is important over the years. The EU presence is crucial because it punctures the Chinese and pro-China narrative that tensions in the region are simply a product of the US-China superpower rivalry and that other countries should stay out. Heydarian disagrees with this view because the EU emphasizes that China's actions in the South China Sea and adjacent waters are a violation of international law. They violate the rights of smaller countries like the Philippines. Consequently, these actions are not just about superpower rivalry, but about upholding a rules-based international order. The EU is therefore very important for Southeast Asia.

This seems to be the view of the current President of the Philippines, Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos Jr, who has called on the European Union to help effectively implement the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and reduce maritime disputes and geopolitical competition in the Indo-Pacific region. The President called for "closer maritime cooperation" between ASEAN and the EU in his speech at the ASEAN-EU Summit in December 2022 (Corrales 2022).

In a press conference following the summit, Marcos claimed that the EU's "strategic support" would enable Southeast Asian states to enforce maritime rules in the South China Sea and put ASEAN and the Philippines in a "very, very strong position" to negotiate maritime disputes. "Any action that could be taken to object to or highlight a possible violation of UNCLOS is much stronger if it comes from a group of nations like ASEAN. If the EU, now with our strategic partnership, is able to add its voice to that, then it will be much stronger in terms of actually being able to enforce what UNCLOS is all about," he said (Corrales 2022).

Victor Andres Manhit, President of the European Union's Stratbase ADR Institute, stated the EU's Indo-Pacific strategy reflects and supports the Philippines' approach to foreign policy in a multipolar world. He said that the more friends that can support the national interests of the Philippines in terms of shared values, in terms of a rules-based international order, the best thing for the country and to expand that kind of cooperation and collaboration will make its foreign policy stronger (PhilStar 2022).

Journalist Jerry Tundag recommended a further engagement of the Philippines with the European Union. According to him, the country's foreign policy must involve Filipinos' most trusted countries and blocs, including the European Union. He added that the EU is heavily involved in the

Indo-Pacific through its EU Indo-Pacific Strategy for Cooperation and through the EU-ASEAN Strategic Partnership. These multilateral strategies also enhance bilateral relations with the Philippines (Tundag 2023). In addition, the EU has proven to be a credible partner for the Philippines, notably in its expressed support for the Philippines' arbitration victory in the West Philippine Sea. For the past six years, the EU has been an indispensable ally through its consistent call for a rules-based maritime order in accordance with the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (Tundag 2023).

But the EU should not be overconfident in trying to develop security ties, said Joshua Bernard Espena, a resident fellow at the International Development and Security Cooperation, a Manila-based think tank. It will take more investment and sustained interest from the Europeans, as well as development in non-military areas, he said in an interview: "Humility matters to earn the trust of countries like the Philippines in crafting what direction they should take amidst geopolitical uncertainty" (Hutt 2023).

Criticism of the EU's approach to the Indo-Pacific in general and the Philippines in particular can also be heard. In the aforementioned online interview, Richard Heydarian argued that the EU should be less preachy, as many of its leaders tend to give moral advice in a tedious or self-righteous manner. The countries of Southeast Asia and the Philippines certainly need help and even guidance, but not from the top down and from a supposedly morally superior position.

Journalist Jerry Tundag wrote that he felt uncomfortable when then EU's special representative for the Indo-Pacific, Richard Tibbels, spoke to Philippine officials about shared values, democracy and the rule of law: "It is difficult and painful listening to such platitudes from our former colonizers. ... Rule of law becomes a sham when the EU jumps on the back of the Philippines, screaming into its ears how its judicial institutions must do their jobs" (Tundag 2023). These statements refer to the EU's criticism of human rights abuses, the so-called war on terror and the lack of an independent judiciary in the Philippines, particularly during the Duterte era. Voices like these could also be heard across the Philippines when the International Criminal Court arrested Duterte (with the tacit support of President Marcos Jr. and his administration) and brought him before the court in The Hague in early 2025.

The perceived hypocrisy which some of the beforementioned Philippine individuals expressed toward the EU and its foreign policy is a major critique of liberal IR theory. It challenges the idea that a shared commitment to liberal values is a consistent and reliable basis for international relations. Instead, it suggests that even liberal international organizations such as the EU act on the basis of self-interest, much like realist theory would predict.

Despite this criticism, the EU's engagement in the Indo-Pacific is generally seen as positive, but many observers see difficulties in implementing its ambitious goals. Richard Heydarian notes that the EU's Indo-Pacific strategy has all the right notes, but the symphony is not coming together. There are also doubts about whether the Europeans will really go to war if the Philippines is attacked by a hostile power, most likely China. Or will the European regional organization stay out of regional conflicts in Southeast Asia that are not primarily related to Europe, as French President Emmanuel Macron said in a press conference after a visit to the People's Republic of China in 2023. On this occasion, Emmanuel Macron declared that "it is not the continent's business to get involved in crises that are not ours". In the name of "strategic autonomy", he said, Europe should not be a "follower" of America in a crisis like Taiwan" (The Economist 2023).

Even in Europe, some experts are questioning whether it is right for Europe to become more active in the Indo-Pacific. Jonathan Holslag, professor of International Politics at the Free University of Brussels and the NATO Defense College, where he teaches Geopolitics and International Politics, wrote that since the end of colonialism Europe is no longer an Indo-Pacific power and it will not become an Indo-Pacific power in the near future. He warned that if Europe continues to overstep its geopolitical ambitions, Europe may lose its credibility as a power altogether (Holslag 2021). He added that Europeans should pay more attention to their own neighborhood, meaning North Africa, the Middle East and Eastern Europe/Russia, where many conflicts and challenges are close to Europe's borders. Holslag wrote that “geography tells you where to prioritize. For Europe, that's not in the Indo-Pacific, but its backyard” (Holslag 2010).

CONCLUSION

From the Philippine perspective, the two most important foreign policy actors are the two superpowers: the United States and China. The European Union is still largely seen as a trading bloc with a limited strategic and security role for the Southeast Asian region. However, the EU's new engagement on these issues, manifested in the EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, has been widely welcomed in the Philippines. Several actors, including current President Ferdinand Marcos Jr, have stressed that the EU supports the Philippines' position on the territorial integrity of the country in the face of Chinese territorial claims based on the so-called nine-dash line. Both the Philippines and the EU and its member states share the idea of a rules-based international order (including UNCLOS) and free trade through the South China Sea.

Since May 2022, EU-Philippines relations have improved after years of turbulence under the Duterte administration. President Ferdinand Marcos Jr has made clear at various occasions that his administration supports the EU's Indo-Pacific strategy. But there are legitimate doubts about the EU's willingness to get involved in potential wars and spend large chunks of its budget on security operations in faraway Southeast Asia. Dr. Nur Shahadah binti Jamil recommends that in order to improve the strategic cooperation with the Philippines the EU should consider implementing a visible and viable institutionalization of its Indo-Pacific strategy in the Philippines in the short term. In addition, in the medium term, the EU should develop its maritime security assets, i.e. deploy more military vessels and equipment to the region. In the long term, the EU should consolidate its relations and connectivity with both the Philippines and ASEAN (Shahadah 2022).

While some in the Philippines may view an increased EU military presence as a solution to regional security concerns, this approach fundamentally contradicts the liberal IR framework that has largely defined the EU's role on the world stage thus far. Does the EU have any other real option besides increasing its military power to be taken seriously as an international actor? Since Donald Trump became President of the United States in early 2025, the world has become less and less oriented towards a rules-based international order. Foreign policies based on liberal theories of IR have become rare, and EU member states have increased their military budgets. The EU's approach to the Indo-Pacific region, and the Philippines in particular, is worth analyzing more closely in the near future. These analyses should consider not only strategic perspectives, but also IR macro theories.

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