



RESEARCH ARTICLE

The EU's evolving leadership role in an age of geopolitics: Beyond normative and market power in the Indo-Pacific

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Abstract

In the last two decades, the European Union (EU) has forged an international role as a 'force for good' and a champion for democracy, human rights, multilateralism, free trade, climate change action, and sustainable development. However, as the international context has grown more competitive and turbulent, it has become more challenging for the EU to uphold this global role. Subsequently, the EU has pursued more proactive policies to confront urgent challenges to the rules-based international system and global governance norms. This paper explores what the EU's evolving geopolitical foreign policy role actually entails and how it is compatible with the Union's understanding of itself as a global leader as expressed as a Normative Power, Market Power, and Security Power. Utilising the Indo-Pacific Strategy of 2021 and subsequent communications as illustrative examples, it examines how the EU is upscaling its plans and partnerships into a broader, sustainable connectivity strategy that fits into the context of a reoriented EU foreign policy and its leadership goals. In conclusion, it finds that the credibility of the three powers that the EU proclaims to play will be dependent on the coherence of the role set and the extent to which the EU can achieve these roles.

Keywords: EU global leadership; Indo-Pacific Strategy; Market Power Europe; Normative Power Europe; role theory; Security Power Europe

Introduction

The last decade's fundamental changes to the international system and weakening of the international order have profoundly affected the European Union's (EU) self-understanding and global leadership aspirations. The ongoing geopolitical shift has prompted the EU to adapt its foreign policy to respond to Russia's military aggressiveness and China's disregard for the norms and principles of the international rules-based system. For the EU, which has built its international actorness on the premises of a multilateral rules-based system and the promotion of liberal norms and principles, the geopolitical shift challenges its existing foreign policy roles and its ability to lead in areas of global governance. Without underestimating the significance of Russia's flagrant breach of international law and norms in the war against Ukraine, the antagonistic position of China in the international order is arguably more challenging and certainly more complex for the EU to handle. As the Asia-Pacific region¹ is becoming at once the economic hothouse of the world and the focal point for USA–China rivalry, the EU has been prompted to take a stance to protect its interests in

¹For a long while, the EU referred simply to Asia to denote its policies towards countries in central, eastern, and south-eastern Asia; as relations with New Zealand, Australia, and some small Pacific island states grew more robust, references to the Asia-Pacific region became more common. In 2021, the EU published the Indo-Pacific Strategy, referring to a

the region while at the same time charting a careful road forward to avoid being dragged into the pitfalls of endemic great power competition.

In this paper, we investigate the boundaries of the EU's international roles in the Indo-Pacific region in the shadow of increasingly antagonistic relations with China and critically assess how these roles are conducive to the global leadership ambitions of the EU. To trace this development, we explore how the EU depicts its growing involvement in the Asia-Pacific region through the Indo-Pacific Strategy and the Global Gateway Initiative of 2021.² By comparing the strategy with its precursor, the 2018 EU–Asia Connectivity Strategy, and subsequent statements of high-ranking EU officials, we are able to identify and trace how the EU's foreign policy roles have developed since the EU began to act on the challenges posed by the ongoing geopolitical shift. Based on our analysis, we find that the perceived need to stand up for the rules-based international system and liberal norms has paved the way for the articulation of a new security power role for the EU to shore up and strengthen its ability to act as a leader but whose acceptance by other states is still uncertain.

The Indo-Pacific Strategy and the Global Gateway Initiative offer an illustrative case to explore the EU's evolving geopolitical foreign policy role in a geographical area seen as an essential arena for the EU's efforts to counter Chinese influence. The EU's strategic entry into the Indo-Pacific amounts to a significant bid on behalf of the EU to set up itself as an actor in a region where it traditionally has had a modest presence, at least in strategic terms. We investigate these developments by conducting a theoretically guided qualitative content analysis of the primary source documents and high-level speeches to explore how the EU is attempting to construct and enact its geopolitical leadership roles.³ The policy documents and speeches can be analysed to identify the common themes and portrayals that form the basis of the EU leadership roles. Because these initiatives have representational meaning, they provide a window into how the EU perceives its position in the social order being shaped in the region by enacting two existing roles, Normative Power Europe and Market Power Europe, and laying the ground for a new role: Security Power Europe.⁴

Our paper seeks to contribute to Role Theory by investigating the implications of the ongoing shift in the international system on foreign policy roles and how an actor – in this case, the EU – combines the enactment of roles with the quest for leadership in a specific geostrategic context. Our paper focuses on the EU's ego expectations by analysing its role portrayals, communications, and enactment efforts. We also trace the interactive process of role enactment through four different modes of leadership, perceived as techniques of influence.⁵

The depicted role enactment allows us to explore how the EU's role-taking process and attempts to project leadership through the Indo-Pacific Strategy and the Global Gateway are being pursued in a particular social process with others.

We also reflect on the nature of the interactive process of role achievement in a context where the EU has no strong prior role position and its ability to enact leadership is curtailed by limited material and immaterial resources. To this end, we draw on Role Theory and leadership scholarship

huge part of the world encompassing the Indian and Pacific oceans and the countries along their shores and on the Asian landmass.

²European Commission and HR of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security, 'The EU strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific', JOIN 2021/24 final, Brussels, 16 September 2021; European Commission and HR of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security (2021), 'The Global Gateway', JOIN 2021/ 30 final, Brussels, 1 December 2021 (Brussels, 2021).

³Marijke Breuning, 'Role theory research in International Relations: State of the art and blind spots', in Sebastian Harnisch, Cornelia Frank, and Hanns W. Maull (eds), *Role Theory in International Relations: Approaches and Analyses* (New York: Routledge, 2011), pp. 16–35; James Drisko and Tina Maschi, *Content Analysis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

⁴European Commission and HR of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security, 'The EU strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific'.

⁵Oran Young, 'Political leadership and regime formation: On the development of institutions in international society', *International Organization*, 45:3 (1991), pp. 281–309; Charles F. Parker and Christer Karlsson, 'Leadership and international cooperation', in Paul 't Hart and R.A.W. Rhodes (eds), *Oxford Handbook of Political Leadership* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 580–94.

to make a conceptual link between the identity and performative dimensions of international roles, including the alter dimension, i.e. role conceptions, role enactment, and the dynamics of role-taking – respectively, with the EU's projection of global leadership.

This paper is organised in the following manner: after an introduction to the EU's engagement in the Indo-Pacific, we lay out the EU's international leadership roles. Next, we explore Role Theory and its contribution to understanding foreign policy from both the identity and action dimensions. We then proceed to create a conceptual link between role enactment and leadership. On this basis, we investigate continuity and change as expressed in the Indo-Pacific Strategy as it relates to the EU's two long-established leadership role conceptions of the EU as Normative Power and Market Power, but also in the articulation of a new emerging role for the EU as a Security Power. Finally, we conclude by discussing the EU's prospects to project leadership in the Indo-Pacific through the four modes of leadership it plans to deploy in the enactment of its roles as a Normative, Market, and Security Power.

The development of the EU's engagement in the Asia-Pacific region

In November 2019, Ursula von der Leyen, European commission president-elect, promised in a speech to the European Parliament before the vote of investiture that under her reign the Commission would become 'geopolitical'.⁶ This statement was in line with the EU's 2019 Strategic Outlook on China, in which a three-pronged basis for its relations with China was announced. Henceforth, depending on the policy area, the EU would engage with China as 'a cooperation partner with whom the EU needs to find a balance of interests, an economic competitor in the pursuit of technological leadership, and a systemic rival, promoting alternative models of governance'.⁷ This strategy, which heralded a more hard-nosed stance towards China, recognised that the EU would need to forge a comprehensive approach to face the challenges to liberal norms and the principles of the international rules-based system that China is posing, built on principled pragmatism and flexibility, at the same time as being encompassing and effective. The triptych – partner, competitor, and rival – signalled a new approach of the EU where it would defend its interests and norms in the world against antagonistic states, breaking with its previous stance of a self-professed normative power. By staking out their stance on China, the EU institutions, chiefly the European Commission and the European External Action Service (EEAS), announced that the EU's approach to external relations was about to transform the conduct, content, and orientation of its foreign policy. Such a significant shift prompted questions regarding how the EU would defend its traditional role positions of Normative and Market Power in an international order shifting towards geopolitics. It also threw into doubt its leadership in areas of global governance, such as global climate change.

As part of a reassessment of its relations with China, the EU has since 2020 endowed itself with several legal instruments with the aim of addressing some of the challenges posed by China. They include the foreign investment screening mechanism of 2019,⁸ the anti-coercion regulation adopted in October 2023,⁹ and the EU's human rights sanctions regime of 2020.¹⁰ In parallel,

⁶Ursula von der Leyen, 'Speech in the European Parliament Plenary Session', 27 November 2019, available at: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_19_6408.

⁷European Commission and HR of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security, 'EU–China – A strategic outlook', JOIN (2019) 5 final, Strasbourg, 12 March 2019, no page number.

⁸European Union (EU), 'Regulation (EU) 2019/452 of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing a framework for the screening of foreign direct investments into the Union', Brussels: Official Journal L 79I, 19 March 2019.

⁹European Commission, 'Proposal for a regulation on the protection of the Union and its Member States from economic coercion by third countries', COM(2021) 775 final 2021/0406 (COD), Brussels, 8 December 2021; Council of the EU, 'Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council on the protection of the Union and its Member States from economic coercion by third countries', 2021/0406 (COD), 23 October 2023, Brussels.

¹⁰Council of the EU, 'Regulation concerning restrictive measures against serious human rights violations and abuses', 2020/1998L 410 I/1, 7 December 2020 (Brussels: Official Journal, 2020).

the EU has launched several internal policy initiatives with a direct impact on its relations with external parties, chief among them the carbon border adjustment mechanism, which was proposed by the European Commission in 2021 as part of the European Green Deal and approved by the EU Council in 2022.¹¹ These initiatives herald a willingness to exercise its Market Power to protect the European internal market from perceived unfair competition from abroad in a more systematic and targeted manner than ever before, prompting scholars to denote the EU's transition to a geopolitical actor.¹²

At the same time, on the external front, in its role as a Normative Power leader, the EU has chosen to engage more systematically with partners in Asia to boost its presence in the region to create stable relations and to project international norms, such as sustainable development, digitalisation, good governance, the rule of law, and human rights. These norms and objectives are the cornerstones of the strategic partnerships concluded with states and organisations in the Asia-Pacific to seek closer economic and political cooperation with like-minded states and organisations, including Japan, South Korea, New Zealand, and ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations).¹³ Moreover, this multidimensional diplomatic approach was embedded in the Global Gateway Initiative and Team Europe. The former was launched as the financial assistance package of the Indo-Pacific Strategy with the aim to strengthen coordination within the area of development, while the latter emerged as a common-sense strategy to pool the EU's and EU member states' diplomatic resources and capabilities around the world. Together, the Global Gateway Initiative and Team Europe have come to encompass most EU action abroad and are the focal point for its international presence.¹⁴

The EU's awakening to the challenges posed by China in the Indo-Pacific region as part of the geopolitical turn in international politics was sudden. In 2018, when the EU launched the first overarching strategy aimed at Asian countries – the EU–Asia Connectivity Strategy – it was open-minded about cooperation with China, taking a more traditional developmental approach focusing on sustainable infrastructure investment directed at all interested countries in the central Asian landmass and east and south-east Asia.¹⁵ Nevertheless, the strategy still amounted to a response to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) by offering investment to these countries based on an alternative developmental model, including norms such as rules of law, human rights, and good governance. However, the document made no references to security or strategic aims, as a soft version of norm diffusion was envisaged through cooperation on sustainability, good governance, and rules-based connectivity. In 2021, the EU launched the Indo-Pacific Strategy, which expanded the geographical vision of the EU's engagement to a vast and geopolitically crucial region stretching

¹¹European Commission, 'Proposal for a regulation establishing a carbon border adjustment mechanism', COM(2021) 564 final 2021/0214 (COD), 4 July 2021 (Brussels, 2021); European Commission, 'European Green Deal: Agreement reached on the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM)', Press release, 13 December 2022, available at {https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_22_7719}.

¹²Kim B. Olsen, 'Diplomatic realisation of the EU's "geoeconomic pivot": Sanctions, trade, and development', *Policy Reform: Politics and Governance*, 10:1 (2022), pp. 5–15; Sophie Meunier and Kalypso Nicolaidis, 'The geopoliticization of European trade and investment policy', *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 57:S1 (2019), pp. 103–13; Sieglinde Gstöhl, 'The geopolitical Commission: Learning the "language of power"?', College of Europe Policy Brief February, 2020.

¹³Ursula von der Leyen, 'Speech on EU–China relations', Brussels, 30 March 2023, available at: {https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_23_2063}.

¹⁴European Commission and HR of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security, 'The Global Gateway'; Alexei Jones and Katja Sergejeff, 'Half-time analysis: How is Team Europe doing?', European Center for Development Management (ECDPM), Maastricht and Brussels (2022), available at: {<https://ecdpm.org/work/half-time-analysis-how-team-europe-doing/>}; Anna Michalski, 'Diplomatic practices beyond Brussels: The EU delegations and the coordination of EU foreign and security policy', in Niklas Bremberg, August Danielson, Elsa Hedling, and Anna Michalski (eds), *The Everyday Making of EU Foreign and Security Policy: Practices, Socialization and the Management of Dissent* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2022), pp. 113–48.

¹⁵European Commission and HR of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security, 'Connecting Europe and Asia: Building blocks for an EU strategy', 19 September 2018.

from the Asia-Pacific to the Indian Ocean.¹⁶ In the Indo-Pacific Strategy, the EU displays a more strategic approach regarding the significance of this region for its security and economic competitiveness and does not shy away from recognising international competition over norms and rules in investment, development, and global governance. Significantly, this strategy only briefly mentions cooperation with China and juxtaposes it to a pledge that the EU will 'continue to protect its essential interests and promote its values while pushing back where fundamental disagreement exists with China, such as on human rights'.¹⁷

The Indo-Pacific Strategy was followed up through the Global Gateway Initiative in December 2021, which promised to support partner countries' development by offering much larger funding opportunities and connected it to the Team Europe initiatives for a more joined-up projection of European diplomacy.¹⁸ The Indo-Pacific Strategy was followed by the EU's Strategic Compass of March 2022, which set out the EU's stance towards China, making no secret that it sees China's continued global promotion of standards incompatible with EU preferences as a threat contributing to economic competition and systemic rivalry over international norms and rules.¹⁹ The President of the European Commission further underlined the necessity of a common European approach to 'de-risk' economic dependency on China as well as stemming Chinese attempts to change the rule-book of international cooperation and the foundations of the international order by engaging in a diplomatic de-risking strategy.²⁰ Moreover, the de-risking strategy towards China, suggested by the European Commission, can be seen as an attempt by the EU to stake out an independent role in the Indo-Pacific region different from the more aggressive US policy of perceived anti-China measures such as cutting off access to sensitive technology.

The EU's global power conceptions

As discussed above, the EU conceives the shifting geopolitical landscape and the subsequent erosion of the rules and principles of the multilateral system as a threat to its worldview and understanding of the principles of interaction among actors in the international system. We posit that the EU's conceptualisation of the consequences of the geopolitical shift impacts its self-understanding as a global actor and how it attempts to position itself as an influential international leader. Consequently, the EU's leadership objectives have prompted it to adapt the content and conduct of its foreign policy, which, in extension, will influence its ability to project power through leadership strategies and the manner in which it will attempt to do so. We substantiate this argument by developing a conceptual link between international roles (role conceptions), foreign policy conduct (role enactment), and leadership strategies.²¹ Therefore, the way that the EU can exercise leadership in an increasingly geopolitical world will be a function of the interplay between the enactment of its foreign policy roles and the recognition of its leadership bids by others. In this, we align both with the literature on Role Theory and leader-oriented foreign policy²² as well as the literature that highlights (internal) demands and uncertainties regarding the EU's global leadership as a response

¹⁶European Commission and HR of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security, 'The EU strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific'.

¹⁷European Commission and HR of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security, 'The EU strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific', p. 4.

¹⁸European Commission and HR of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security (2021), 'The Global Gateway'; Team Europe Initiatives, available at: {https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/policies/team-europe-initiatives_en}.

¹⁹High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security, 'A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence', Council of the European Union, Brussels, 21 March 2022, p. 18.

²⁰Ursula von der Leyen, 'Speech on EU–China Relations'.

²¹Rikard Bengtsson and Ole Elgström, 'Conflicting role conceptions? The European Union in global politics', *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 8:1 (2012), pp. 93–108.

²²Leslie Wehner and Cameron Thies, 'Leader influence in role selection choices: Fulfilling role theory's potential for foreign policy analysis', *International Security*, 23 (2021), pp. 1424–41.

to external challenges and threats.²³ However, unlike those who treat leadership at the individual level, we follow those who examined the leadership of collective actors such as the EU.²⁴ In addition, we draw on the scholarship of the EU as a climate leader to explore the necessity of followers for leadership, which we combine with the interactionist approach to Role Theory.

With our approach, we conceive of the EU as a collective unitary actor, which unavoidably makes light of the difficulties of internal cohesiveness of the EU's foreign and security policy, but without which our system-oriented approach would become difficult. The advantage of the approach adopted here is that we can combine analytical concepts from Role Theory with the scholarship on EU leadership to create a conceptual link between foreign policy role enactment and global leadership. Doing so enables us to empirically explore the geopolitical shift playing out in the Indo-Pacific region and the threat that the EU perceives to its leadership roles from China's attitude to liberal norms and challenge to the rules-based international system, as well as the uncertainties regarding the EU fully achieving its roles.

Foreign policy roles and national role conceptions

Foreign policy roles are the social positions that states hold in relation to other states, which together structure the international social order.²⁵ National role conceptions (NRCs) originate from a collective understanding of a state's history, values, and place in the world.²⁶ NRCs can be understood as 'the images that foreign policy-makers hold concerning the general long term function and performance of their state in the international system.'²⁷ They build on 'the policy-makers' own definitions of the general kinds of decisions, commitments, rules and actions suitable for their state' and the functions that the state should perform 'in the international system.'²⁸

Role enactment refers to 'how well a social actor performs a given role', i.e. the degree of congruence between an actor's foreign policy conduct and role expectations.²⁹ It relates to the expectations that the actor holds about its own performance in the international system as well as the expectations held by others. In reality, however, an actor's conduct of foreign policy does not always correspond to the role expectations. A departure from the expected behaviour will have consequences because when an actor behaves out of character, it can result in reputational loss, affect its status among other actors in the international system, or lead to a loss of trust from allies and friends. Role enactment has, in other words, to do with an actor's conduct on the international scene, both regarding how it behaves – i.e. its role performance based on decisions and actions – and on what basis it acts – i.e. the content of the NRCs in terms of both material and ideational aspects of foreign policy. When action is aligned with declared role conceptions, and the state

²³European Union (EU), 'Shared vision, common action: A stronger Europe. A global strategy for the European Union's foreign and security policy', June 2016; Lisbeth Aggestam and Markus Johansson, 'The leadership paradox in EU foreign policy', *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 55:6 (2017), pp. 1203–20.

²⁴Ole Elgström, 'The European Union as a leader in international multilateral negotiations – a problematic aspiration?', *International Relations*, 21:4 (2007), pp. 445–58; Berti Kilian and Ole Elgström, 'Still a green leader: The European Union's role in international climate negotiations', *Cooperation and Conflict*, 45:3 (2010), pp. 255–73; Charles F. Parker and Christer Karlsson, 'The European Union as a global climate leader: Confronting aspiration with evidence', *International Environmental Agreements*, 17:4 (2017), pp. 445–61.

²⁵Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Naomi Bailin Wish, 'Foreign policy makers and their national role conceptions', *International Studies Quarterly*, 24:4 (1980), pp. 532–54.

²⁶Breuning, 'Role theory research in International Relations'; Ole Elgström and Michael Smith, 'Introduction', in Ole Elgström and Michael Smith (eds), *The European Union's Roles in International Politics* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), pp. 1–10.

²⁷Lisbeth Aggestam, 'A European foreign policy? Role conceptions and the politics of identity in Britain, France and Germany' (Diss. Stockholm: Stockholms universitet, 2004), p. 77.

²⁸Kalevi Holsti, 'National role conceptions in the study of foreign policy', *International Studies Quarterly*, 14 (1970), pp. 233–309 (pp. 245–6).

²⁹Sebastian Harnisch, 'Role theory. Operationalization of key concepts', in Sebastian Harnisch, S. Cornelia Frank, and Hanns W. Maull (eds), *Role Theory in International Relations: Approaches and Analyses* (New York: Routledge, 2011), pp. 7–15; Cameron Thies, *The United States, Israel, and the Search for International Order: Socializing States* (London: Routledge, 2013), p. 31.

enjoys a high status ‘correlated to legitimate power and social esteem’,³⁰ others will more likely recognise an actor’s leadership vision as legitimate and purposeful, which can lead to trust among states, facilitating alliance-building and partnership. Hence, the link between role enactment and leadership goes through a set of dimensions comprising identity, status, capacity to act, the cohesiveness of purpose, and material and strategic resources. However, role enactment has a distinct external dimension, as it is simultaneously a process of social interaction on the international level as other actors, whether friends and foes, enable or hinder the realisation of a foreign policy role by granting or withholding their acceptance of a desired role location. Only after the ego and alter side of a role’s enactment is in place can the role be considered as being achieved.³¹

The corresponding notion regarding the achievement of a leadership role is when an aspiring leader is able to attract followers, or, put differently, when an actor’s leadership is acknowledged and in demand by allies and partners. By combining Role Theory with leadership, the social dimension of roles is accentuated and reinforces the alter influence in that a role enactment which is not acknowledged has also not resulted in leadership. Nonetheless, as the modes of leadership indicate, the process of pursuing the role of a leader can take different forms depending on the type of influence mechanisms at work. While our analysis concentrates on the EU’s ego expressions of its roles and the modes of leadership it has pursued to achieve its goals, in the penultimate section of the article, we do consider some preliminary evidence of the alter expectations and reception that will ultimately shape the EU’s geopolitical leadership role in the region.

Conceptualising Role Theory and global leadership

In combining Role Theory with leadership, we depart from the notion of roles as hierarchical positions in a social order of states.³² From this viewpoint, states embody roles that align with their material resources, culture, and traditions.³³ Roles also provide policymakers with norms, guidelines, and standards that shape foreign policy decision-making.³⁴ Roles are, therefore, to be regarded as ‘representations of state identity, interests and behaviour in foreign policy’,³⁵ setting boundaries for what is desirable conduct from the viewpoint of state identity (the ego perspective) as well as what is expected from others (the alter perspective) given the state’s position in the social order of international politics.

Leadership in interstate relations is best understood as a social role shaped by the process of role expectations and role performance of an actor. From this perspective, leadership is shaped by the possibilities open for a state’s role enactment and, therefore, its relations with other actors in the system.³⁶ The interactionist approach draws attention to the acceptance (or support) of others for a role. Consequently, a role holder seeking to develop a leadership position needs to persuade others of the attractiveness of this role (as in its conception), its enactment, and subsequent performance to occupy the position as a leader.

In this paper, we conceive a link between an actor – the EU – which aspires to achieve global leadership concerning some policies, for instance, climate change, or goals, such as defending the international rules-based system and liberal norms. Our conceptualisation builds on two dimensions: one related to identity and the other to performance (action), which makes leadership possible. Accordingly, a role conception that is congruent with deeply held worldviews prescribes

³⁰Theodor R. Sarbin and Vernon L. Allen, ‘Role theory’, in Gardner Lindsay and Elliot Aronson (eds), *The Handbook of Social Psychology*, vol. 1 (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1968), pp. 488–567 (pp. 551–2).

³¹Marijke Breuning and Anna Pechenina, ‘Role dissonance in foreign policy: Russia, power, and intercountry adoption’, *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 16 (2020), pp. 21–40.

³²Alexander Wendt, ‘Anarchy is what states make of it: The social construction of power politics’, *International Organization*, 46:2 (1992), pp. 391–425.

³³See Breuning, ‘Role theory research in International Relations’.

³⁴Stephen Walker, *Role Theory and Foreign Policy Analysis* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1987).

³⁵Wehner and Thies, ‘Leader influence in role selection choices’, p. 1426.

³⁶Aggestam and Johansson, ‘The leadership paradox in EU foreign policy’, p. 1204.

certain actions which, when enacted, legitimise the role holder by fulfilling internal and external expectations that enhance the actor's role performance and status. Congruent role content and coherent role enactment constitute a fertile ground for leadership as other actors are motivated to recognise, emulate, follow, create alliances, act, or otherwise enter into arrangements with the leader, thereby validating the leadership role with followers (or more likely in international politics, trustworthy partners and allies). The leadership literature suggests that the EU has built a leadership position in global climate change,³⁷ using different leadership modes – idea-based, directional, instrumental, or structural – which it has developed to tailor its leadership styles to partners' expectations. Thus, we argue that coherent role performance is the basis for legitimacy and trust, enabling an actor to take leadership positions. We emphasise that leadership and its techniques of influence and statecraft take many forms, as the modes suggest, and require the presumptive leader to persuade and cajole others into positions of support and partnership – as leadership is not synonymous with hegemony or dominance. In fact, many of the leadership modes employed by the EU are derived from its soft power. Moreover, because we regard leadership as an inherently social concept, we see EU leadership as being formed in the interplay with other actors and followers, as expressed in the leadership literature.³⁸

Challenges to the EU's established role conceptions: Normative Power Europe and Market Power Europe

Since the early 2000s, the EU has attempted to act as a normative power that influences what is considered normal in the international system simply by what it represents.³⁹ The role conception of Normative Power Europe (NPE) was popularised by Ian Manner's influential 2002 article.⁴⁰ Still, it was readily adopted by the EU institutions, as it epitomised the EU's role in promoting norms in the framework of EU enlargement, the EU's neighbourhood policy, and its support for human rights on the international level. The NPE role is a vital component of the EU's identity, as it provides the EU with a *raison d'être* and a logic for action, prescribing what the EU *can* and *should* do in international politics.

An equally strong role conception is Market Power Europe (MPE).⁴¹ Similarly to NPE, MPE is derived from the competencies the founding treaties endow upon the EU and its institutions. However, the EU's market power is also premised on its vast internal market, which acts as a pole of attraction for economies around the world for market access for goods, services, and investment. MPE is also leveraged in bi- and plurilateral free trade negotiations and multilateral fora, primarily the World Trade Organization (WTO), where it constitutes a pillar for the EU's action. Another essential dimension of MPE is its ability to influence international rule-setting through regulation, i.e. the formulation of rules and standards often originating from the EU's market-making or responding to external pressure, for instance in the framework of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). These regulatory frameworks have critical international implications regarding global rule-setting because of the size of the EU's internal market – i.e. through the so-called Brussels effect, companies voluntarily adhere to EU rules and standards to gain access to the European international market. The EU is also

³⁷ Charles F. Parker, Christer Karlsson, and Mattias Hjerpe, 'Assessing the European Union's global climate change leadership: From Copenhagen to the Paris Agreement', *Journal of European Integration*, 39:2 (2017), pp. 239–52.

³⁸ Karoliina Hurri, 'The roles they play: Change in China's climate leadership role during the post-Paris era', *Globalizations*, 20:7 (2023), pp. 1065–82; Charles F. Parker, Christer Karlsson, and Mattias Hjerpe, 'Climate change leaders and followers: Leadership recognition and selection in the UNFCCC negotiations', *International Relations*, 29:4 (2015), pp. 434–54.

³⁹ Lisbeth Aggestam, 'Introduction: Ethical power Europe?' *International Affairs*, 84:1 (2008), pp. 1–11; Helene Sjørnsen, 'The EU as a "normative" power: How can this be?', *Journal of European Public Policy*, 13:2 (2006), pp. 235–51.

⁴⁰ Ian Manners, 'Normative power Europe: A contradiction in terms?', *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 40:2 (2002), pp. 235–58.

⁴¹ Chad Damro, 'Market power Europe', *Journal of European Public Policy*, 19:5 (2012), pp. 682–99; Sophie Meunier and Kalypso Nicolaidis, 'The European Union as a conflicted trade power', *Journal of European Public Policy*, 13:6 (2006), pp. 906–25.

an influential norm-setter in international standardisation bodies and multilateral negotiations where global climate change mitigation and sustainable development norms are established. On these grounds, researchers concur that the EU's regulatory power is significant enough to classify the EU among the 'regulatory great powers' and that its role as a market power leader is perhaps the most influential, maybe even the only 'real', source of leverage vis-à-vis other actors on the international level.⁴²

Severe criticism has been levelled against both role conceptions regarding their actual effects and impacts. In this vein, NPE has been seen as disingenuous in that the EU proclaims to be a normative power while acting according to its self-interest with little regard for other, presumably weaker, actors.⁴³ Another strand of criticism frequently levelled against NPE and MPE concerns the EU's ability to take decisions and the (lack of) cohesiveness among its members, which risk undermining the EU's actorness and hence its powers.⁴⁴

The geopolitical turn has consequences for the EU's international roles as a normative power and market power for three main reasons. The first concerns the self-identity dimension of the EU's power, when antagonistic powers, such as Russia, China, and Turkey, but also potentially the USA, not least under the Trump administration, push back on the EU's quest to promote liberal norms as well as the rules and principles in bilateral or multilateral settings. Revisionist powers do not accept the EU's normative power leadership role. By rejecting or refusing to recognise the norms and rules the EU promotes, they contest the EU's role enactment, for instance, by altercasting, making the NPE role more fragile and less relevant.⁴⁵ Their opposition to NPE challenges the constitutive aspects of the EU's role conception, threatening its ability to exercise directional leadership.

The second concerns the EU's ability to shape what is considered 'normal' in global governance in policy areas where the EU has a strong interest in spreading norms such as sustainability and green conversion by enforcing of common rules and standards. One area where the EU has received pushback was its vision for sustainable global development, for instance, in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) negotiations, where prior to Paris, China and the USA resisted binding commitments to climate change mitigation.⁴⁶ Also, the EU's ability to influence the agenda and reform of international organisations such as the World Health Organization and the WTO has been curtailed by the reluctance of China, Russia, and, at times, the USA to consistently commit to the founding principles concerning the organisations' competencies and capacity to make member states comply. This challenges the EU's ability to fulfil its normative and market power roles, consequently affecting its role enactment. It also undermines its ability to provide idea-based leadership.

The third concerns the structure of the international system, as the international rules-based system and its social order have an overall influence on power relations in the international system. As principles concerning the respect of international law and state sovereignty in the international system have moved towards a system where 'might makes right' and geopolitics in connection to the access to raw materials, transport routes, and other global public goods, the EU struggles to uphold the rules-based order for which it is dependent for international status as a norm-promoter and rule-setter. The advent of an international geopolitical system amounts to an existential challenge to the international rule of law and multilateralism and, therefore, to the EU's role position

⁴²Alistair R. Young, 'The European Union as a global regulator? Context and comparison', *Journal of European Public Policy*, 22:9 (2015), pp. 1233–52.

⁴³Richard Young, 'Normative dynamics and strategic interests in the EU's external identity', *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 42:2 (2004), pp. 415–35.

⁴⁴Adrian Hyde-Price, "'Normative" power Europe: A realist critique', *Journal of European Public Policy*, 13:2 (2006), pp. 217–34.

⁴⁵Anna Michalski and Niklas Nilsson 'Resistant to change? The European Union and its troubled relations to Russia and China', *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 15:3 (2019), pp. 432–49; Anna Michalski and Zhongqi Pan, 'Role dynamics in a structured relationship: The EU–China strategic partnership', *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 55:3 (2017), pp. 611–27.

⁴⁶Charles F. Parker, Christer Karlsson, Mattias Hjerpe, and Björn-Ola Linnér, 'Fragmented climate change leadership: Making sense of the ambiguous outcome of COP-15', *Environmental Politics*, 21:2 (2012), pp. 268–86.

in the international order. A geostrategic world undermines the EU's ability to provide structural and instrumental leadership as well as its directional and idea-based leadership.

Together, these challenges to the EU's role conception and role enactment will likely lead to an adjustment of the EU's international roles and attempts to exercise leadership. Given the nature of the challenges as well as the worldviews and ambitions of the other global protagonists, the EU is being forced to respond to the new geopolitical circumstances, visible not least in the raft of new measures in its foreign policy toolbox. According to our analysis of the EU's recent foreign policy strategies, such as the Indo-Pacific Strategy, in addition to responses that are in accordance with its international identity as a normative and market-oriented leader, we contend that a new role conception – the EU as a Security Power – is emerging. This security power role is based on a willingness to defend European interests, norms, and values as well as its territorial and moral integrity. It also builds on the EU's efforts to protect its position by upholding the rules-based international system. However, we emphasise that it does not imply that the EU is becoming a security actor in the conventional understanding of the term or that it will somehow merge with NATO. Rather, as shown in the analysis below, we contend that, as the EU's foreign and security policy puts greater emphasis on defending its interests and worldview, recognising the EU's emerging role as Security Power leader is crucial to understanding its foreign policy orientation and conduct.

Opportunities and challenges for EU global leadership in a geopolitical era

We define leadership as an actor's intentional effort to direct and motivate others for a purpose and towards common goals and outcomes.⁴⁷ As we show here, the EU is enacting a 'role making' process as it responds to both profound geostrategic shifts in the external global environment and the role expectations of other countries and transnational actors regarding the role the EU ought to play. The EU has long promoted itself as a global leader in solidifying and defending the rules-based international order in a variety of issue areas. For example, the EU has persistently attempted to exercise leadership in the realms of trade, finance, forestry, endangered species, security, disarmament, the environment, and climate change, among others.⁴⁸ The EU engages in these efforts for multiple purposes, including agenda-setting, goal attainment, legitimacy, follower mobilisation, and the promise of shaping an international system that aligns with the EU's values and vision.

The EU typically utilises four leadership strategies to influence and guide the behaviour of others in the pursuit of collective objectives: idea-based, directional, instrumental, and structural leadership.⁴⁹ Idea-based leadership consists of problem naming and framing, agenda-setting efforts, and discovering and proposing joint solutions to collective problems. Directional leadership is based on leading by example and holding oneself up as a model that illustrates the feasibility, value, and superiority of specific policy prescriptions. Instrumental leadership rests on an actor's ability to bring together coalitions to solve problems and build bridges facilitating deals. Finally, structural leadership is based on the capacity to deploy power resources that create incentives, costs, and benefits to motivate others to adopt particular policies or act in specific ways.

⁴⁷ Gayle C. Avery, *Understanding Leadership* (London: Sage, 2004); Joseph S. Nye, *The Powers to Lead* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Parker and Karlsson, 'Leadership and international cooperation', p. 582.

⁴⁸ Elgström, 'The European Union as a leader in international multilateral negotiations'; Kilian and Elgström, 'Still a green leader'; Lisbeth Aggestam and Elsa Hedling, 'Leadership in foreign policy: Performing the role of EU High Representative', *European Security*, 29:3 (2020), pp. 301–19; Oriol Costa, 'The unexpected EU leadership on landmines: The influence of the Ottawa Convention on the EU', *European Security*, 18:3 (2009), pp. 245–61; John Vogler, 'The European contribution to global environmental governance', *International Affairs*, 81:4 (2005), pp. 835–50; Parker and Karlsson, 'The European Union as a global climate leader'.

⁴⁹ Young, 'Political leadership and regime formation'; Arild Underdal, 'Leadership theory: Rediscovering the arts of management', in William Zartman (ed.), *International Multilateral Negotiation* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1994), pp. 178–200; Raino Malnes, "'Leader' and 'entrepreneur' in international negotiations: A conceptual analysis', *European Journal of International Relations*, 1:1 (1995), pp. 87–112; Parker and Karlsson, 'Leadership and international cooperation'.

In its 2018 connectivity initiative to Asia, the EU primarily attempted to utilise ideational (the promotion of a sustainable rules-based order), directional (the promotion of the ‘European Way’ and the example of EU internal connectivity as a model), and instrumental leadership (energy, transportation, and digital connectivity partnerships).⁵⁰ However, as we will show below, in response to the changing geopolitical environment, with both words and deeds – as is revealed by comparing the Union’s Indo-Pacific Strategy with the EU–Asia Connectivity Strategy – the EU is increasingly emphasising structural leadership,⁵¹ in the form of trade resources and hard military capabilities, in addition to the other three types of leadership.

In the following section, we aim to identify and analyse the primary modes of leadership that the EU is utilising concerning the three main roles – normative power, market power, and security power – that the EU is striving to project in the region. In our view, the deployment of particular leadership modes is an integral dimension of role enactment.

The EU and its evolving roles in the Indo-Asia-Pacific region

The EU’s normative power and market power roles are visible in the Indo-Pacific Strategy, as is a new security power role. Both the Indo-Pacific Strategy and the Global Gateway Initiative contain explicit expressions of the Union’s leadership vision. In these documents, the EU promotes itself as a defender of multilateralism, good governance, human rights, and the universally agreed commitments to achieve the goals of the Paris Agreement on Climate Change and the Sustainable Development Goals.⁵² In this section, we examine how the EU conceptualises its normative, market, and security power roles along with modes of leadership through the prism of its Indo-Pacific Strategy and the Global Gateway Initiative, which replaced the previous Asia–EU Connectivity Strategy. We also refer to pronouncements of leaders in central EU institutions regarding its relations with Asian countries and organisations, primarily ASEAN, as they set about to enact the EU’s existing and new roles in the Indo-Pacific region and, in the process, seek to attract new partners to support its leadership bid. In doing so, we focus on the continuity and evolutionary change in the EU’s role conceptions and the tools it emphasises for enacting these roles by attempting to create followership through partnering with like-minded states.

Normative power

The EU’s envisioned role as a normative power, expressed through its idea-based and directional leadership, is highly visible in the Indo-Pacific Strategy. European Commission president Ursula von der Leyen stated on its launch that ‘the Indo-Pacific Strategy is a milestone’ and ‘a template for how Europe can redesign its model to connect the world’.⁵³ The message of centrality regarding the Indo-Pacific was further underlined by Josep Borrell, High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/Vice-President of the Commission for a Stronger Europe in the world (HR/VP), writing that ‘the EU has a big stake in the Indo-Pacific region and has every interest that the regional architecture remains open and rules-based’, further underlining that the EU wants ‘to work with many partners [in Asia] to promote fundamental values and principles that we share’.⁵⁴

In pursuit of its vision, the EU has elaborated its idea-based leadership by specifying seven priority areas in the Indo-Pacific Strategy – sustainable and inclusive prosperity; green transition;

⁵⁰ European Commission and HR of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security, ‘Connecting Europe and Asia: Building blocks for an EU strategy’, JOIN(2018)31final, Brussels, 19 September 2018, pp. 2, 3, 13.

⁵¹ European Commission and HR of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security, ‘The EU strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific’, pp. 1–2, 6–7, 13–15, 17.

⁵² *Ibid.*, pp. 2–3; European Commission and HR of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security, ‘The Global Gateway’, pp. 1–3.

⁵³ Ursula von der Leyen, ‘State of the Union 2021’, Strasbourg, 15 September 2021, available at: https://state-of-the-union.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-12/soteu_2021_address_en.pdf.

⁵⁴ Josep Borrell, ‘The EU needs a strategic approach for the Indo-Pacific’, blog (12 March 2021), available at: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu-needs-strategic-approach-indo-pacific_en.

ocean governance; digital governance and partnerships; connectivity; security and defence; human security – that it puts on the agenda with the goal of shaping the norms, rules, and practices that it wants to see prevail in these areas. The EU also uses the Indo-Pacific Strategy to express its conception of connectivity as being based on links, not dependencies, and as a means to ‘reinforce cooperation’ with partners and to ‘promote the rules-based international order and access to open markets and ensure a stable trading environment.’⁵⁵ In particular, the EU is attempting to exercise instrumental leadership by establishing strategic alliances with like-minded actors, particularly Japan and South Korea, and ASEAN, with which it has had a strategic partnership since December 2020, ‘to strengthen our bonds and profile the EU as a trusted partner ... and pursue our political and economic interests.’ We can also see the EU deploying its instrumental leadership through its use of altercasting, in which it portrays Japan, South Korea, and ASEAN as partners in the quest to defend the rules-based international system and support global paradigmatic goals of climate change mitigation and sustainable development, as well as defending shared values, such as democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. These initiatives combine features of both idea-based (the promotion of its preferred values, norms, and rules in the seven priority areas it has selected) and instrumental leadership (through its connectivity plans and partnerships).

There is much continuity with the normative power role portrayed here compared with the 2018 EU–Asia Connectivity Strategy, which also emphasised sustainable prosperity, the green transition, and the importance of connectivity. In this vein, the HRVP Josep Borrell labelled the EU ‘a Connectivity super power’ by making a virtue of its ability to ‘set standards that are globally relevant.’⁵⁶ There is also continuity in how the EU uses directional leadership to buttress its normative power role through the strategy by promoting its status as a bastion of democracy, human rights, and prosperity and holding up the success of the EU internal market, which it argues has led to increased productivity and competitiveness while simultaneously reducing the impact of greenhouse gases.

Market power

The EU’s envisioned role as a market power leader, expressed through trade-based structural and instrumental leadership, is also highly visible in the Indo-Pacific Strategy enacted through the Global Gateway Initiative. As discussed above, it is through trade and aid that the EU enacts its role as a market power. European Commission President von der Leyen promoted the Indo-Pacific Strategy as an initiative ‘to deepen trade links, strengthen global supply chains and develop new investment projects on green and digital technologies.’ She also ensured the EU’s readiness to build ‘Global Gateway partnership’ because the EU ‘wants investment in quality infrastructure, connecting goods, people and service around the world’ in order to turn ‘the Global Gateway into a trusted brand around the world.’⁵⁷ HRVP Borrell went further, stating that ‘connectivity is a buzzword in globally and in South-East Asia there is a “battle of offers” going on, one in which the EU must develop ‘distinct and principled stance that is attractive to partners.’⁵⁸

The EU remains the world’s largest market, the largest exporter, the most generous aid donor, and the largest foreign investor, making it well positioned to offer economic, technological, and diplomatic incentives. Moreover, the EU’s dynamic internal market underpins all Union action with a valuable resource, providing a powerful bargaining chip and an excellent means for potentially creating and altering incentives. This is why in the Indo-Pacific strategy, the EU has committed itself to implement and enforce the comprehensive association and trade agreements

⁵⁵ European Commission and HR of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security, ‘The EU strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific’, p. 1.

⁵⁶ Josep Borrell, ‘The EU’s commitment to the Indo-Pacific region’, *The Strait Times* (21 October 2021), available at: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu%E2%80%99s-commitment-indo-pacific-region_en.

⁵⁷ Von der Leyen, ‘State of the Union 2021’.

⁵⁸ Josep Borrell, ‘Opening speech at the Indo-Pacific Forum’, 28 November 2022, available at: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/indo-pacific-opening-speech-high-representativevice-president-josep-borrell-brussels-indo-pacific_en.

it has reached with Japan, the Republic of Korea, Singapore, Vietnam, and New Zealand and the Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) with the Pacific States, in addition to its 2020 strategic partnership with ASEAN.⁵⁹ The strategy also makes clear the EU's ambition to finalise trade agreements with Australia, Indonesia, and the East Africa Community and it foresees revived trade talks with India and pursuing trade and investment agreements with Taiwan.⁶⁰ We also see in that there is continuity between the EU's NPE and MPE leadership roles, as the MPE also engages in directional and idea-based leadership by holding itself up as an exemplar and defender of the rules-based international trading system.

Regarding its use of trade-based structural leadership, the EU mobilised several investment platforms, private–public partnerships, transport networks agreements, and a host of other agreements, many of which originated in the EU–Asia Connectivity Strategy. These various partnerships are invariably orientated towards green conversion and sustainability goals, for example, the International Platform on Sustainable Finance, the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI), and the Horizon Europe research programme.⁶¹ The EU is also mobilising private investment in pursuit of its Indo-Pacific connectivity goals through instruments, such as InvestEU, and, with the help of the European Investment Bank (EIB) and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), finance projects in countries that align with the EU's interest in green conversion.⁶² However, in contrast to the earlier connectivity strategy, the Indo-Pacific Strategy lifts the centrality of the financial package, the Global Gateway Initiative, and its mobilisation of investment of up to 300 billion euros until 2027 'to boost smart, clean and secure links in digital energy and transport ... to tackle the most pressing global challenges and boosting competitiveness and global supply chains.'⁶³ The Global Gateway is enacted by the EU's Team Europe approach, which aims for a more joined-up implementation of the Indo-Pacific Strategy, bringing together EU member states, with European financial and development institutions, primarily the EBRD and the EIB.

Furthermore, in pursuit of its environmental and green goals, the EU is concluding Green Alliances and Partnerships with Indo-Pacific partners to fight against climate change and ecological degradation.⁶⁴ The EU is also enlarging its network of digital partnerships with Indo-Pacific partners.⁶⁵ The EU is using the Indo-Pacific as a means to combine its market power role with instrumental and trade-based structural leadership through connectivity in multiple prioritised issues areas.

Security power

A new element in the EU's role portrayal of itself and its attempts to enact those roles through the Indo-Pacific Strategy is a heightened emphasis on its security power role expressed through its structural and instrumental leadership. In response to the new geopolitical environment, and in contrast to the 2018 EU–Asia Connectivity Strategy, the EU has made security and defence an explicit priority area and has made building and spotlighting partnerships in this realm a new point of emphasis in its efforts to secure, defend, and protect its and its partners' interests. According to the EU, it 'seeks to promote an open and rules-based regional security architecture, including secure sea lines of communication, capacity-building and enhanced naval presence in the

⁵⁹European Commission and HR of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security, 'The EU strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific', p. 7.

⁶⁰Ibid., pp. 6–7, 17.

⁶¹Ibid., p. 8.

⁶²Ibid., p. 12.

⁶³European Commission, 'Global Gateway: Up to €300 billion for the European Union's strategy to boost sustainable links around the world', press release, Brussels, 1 December 2021.

⁶⁴European Commission and HR of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security, 'The EU strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific', pp. 7–9.

⁶⁵Ibid., pp. 10–11.

Indo-Pacific in accordance with the legal framework established by the UNCLOS.⁶⁶ HRVP Borrell confirmed the EU's expansion into a security power role in the Indo-Pacific by noting that 'people see a geo-strategic Europe emerging. One that is less naive, ready to pay the price to defend core security principles. Many Asians like this.'⁶⁷ He also confirmed that 'Europe and Asia have a direct stake in each other's security. ... The EU is committed to enhance its security cooperation in and with Asian partners.'⁶⁸ According to Borrell, three fundamental considerations necessitate security cooperation between the EU and Asian partner states: (1) The USA–China competition impacts all areas: economic, security, technology, and ideology. Neither Europe nor south-east Asian countries want to be forced to pick a side and therefore need to protect their independence; (2) the strategic continuum makes it impossible to stay parochial regarding their respective security challenges; and (3) the trend towards a geo-economic paradigm requires de-risking and resilience.⁶⁹

Hard power capabilities in the area of security and defence is a new emphasis in the EU's structural leadership portfolio as it highlights its worldwide civilian and military missions, increases its naval presence, and engages in maritime security capacity-building. In the Indo-Pacific Strategy, the EU notes that the 'region hosts major waterways that are of vital importance to EU trade, including the Malacca Straits, the South China Sea, and the Bab el-Mandeb Strait.'⁷⁰ To protect these interests, the EU has been conducting joint naval activities with partners such as Japan, Pakistan, India, and Djibouti and plans to conduct more in the future to fight piracy, protect freedom of navigation, and reinforce EU naval diplomacy in the region.⁷¹ In this vein, one of the pillars of the EU–ASEAN Strategic Partnership of 2021 concerns security cooperation, including maritime, cyber, and climate security.

These hard power elements are compatible with the measures being laid out in the EU's Strategic Compass, which acknowledges that in an increasingly 'hostile security environment' the EU must accomplish a 'quantum leap forward' in making the EU a 'stronger more capable security provider.'⁷² However, even in the security realm, the EU's structural leadership is being complemented by instrumental leadership as the EU seeks to enhance connectivity through partnerships with key actors in the region, such as Japan, Pakistan, India, and Djibouti. Pursuing security and defence goals with strategic partners is also prominently visible in the Strategic Compass plans. These plans call on the EU to strengthen its cooperative ventures with NATO and the UN and collaborate with regional partners such as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), African Union (AU), and ASEAN. The EU also aims to forge strong bilateral partnerships and provide military assistance to partners through the European Peace Facility.

The limits of role enactment and leadership: Alter expectations and role acceptance

As seen in the Indo-Pacific Strategy, the EU is projecting roles as a normative, economic, and security actor in the Asia-Pacific region. These roles depict the EU as a power capable of securing its interests and projecting the norms and principles necessary for performing leadership on the international scene. The EU's role-taking process in the Asia-Pacific region involves an internal

⁶⁶European Commission & HR of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security, 'The EU strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific', p. 13.

⁶⁷Josep Borrell, 'Opening speech at the Brussels Indo-Pacific Forum'.

⁶⁸Josep Borrell, 'What can the EU do as security tensions rise in Asia?', blog (9 June 2023), available at: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/what-can-eu-do-security-tensions-rise-asia_en.

⁶⁹Josep Borrell, 'What can the EU do as security tensions rise in Asia?'.

⁷⁰European Commission and HR of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security, 'The EU strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific', p. 2.

⁷¹European Commission and HR of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security, 'The EU strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific', p. 13.

⁷²High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security, 'A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence', p. 7.

dimension of role coherence, avoidance of role dissonance, and an external dimension of moving from ascribed roles to achieved roles.⁷³

The coherence of the role set is essential both to avoid role dissonance and to enhance an actor's status and credibility vis-à-vis other actors. The EU has frequently been the target of two kinds of criticisms regarding its role enactment, especially of the Normative Power Europe. The first is an accusation that there is a disconnect between what the EU says it is, i.e. a normative actor, and what it does, i.e. seeking to maximise its interests regardless of the interests of others.⁷⁴ The second regards the EU's (in)ability to implement its roles through concrete policies, where any shortfalls create capability–expectation gaps.⁷⁵ Whether the three roles projected by the EU are internally consistent and thereby make up a coherent role set is complex. At first blush, the NPE might appear inconsistent with the new security role as it concerns the ontological foundations of the roles and their content in terms of the civilian norms and principles which constitute them. However, the Security Power role set can be seen as coherent and complementary in the sense that it is justified and deployed to act in defence of the norms and principles of the NPE, even if the action necessitates military or otherwise antagonistic forms. If the Security Power role and its goal of promoting an open and rules-based security architecture is implemented through enhanced defensive capabilities, it might partially alleviate the perception that the EU suffers from a capability–expectation gap and boost the EU's leadership ambitions by augmenting its standing and reputation.

Because there is an external dimension of role-taking, role fulfilment takes place as part of a social process that requires the acknowledgement and acceptance of the roles by other actors. An actor's standing in the international order influences the likelihood of its roles being accepted. Simply put, the role of a great power receives less scrutiny unless there is an obvious mismatch between the actor's material and ideational resources and its claims for great power status. In contrast, smaller or weaker actors often have roles at least partly ascribed to them.⁷⁶

There is also temporal socialisation aspect to role fulfilment in that an ascribed role, whether by the actor itself or others, can develop into an achieved role as the actor learns to enact the role and others come to accept it. In the Indo-Pacific Strategy, the EU has ascribed the roles of normative, market, and security power to itself. It is unclear whether other international actors will accept these roles for the EU in the Asia-Pacific region and even whether its own member states will allow the EU to enact a geopolitical role in this region. However, Germany, France, and the Netherlands all welcomed the EU's strategy as a complement to their own strategies for the Indo-Pacific region.⁷⁷

Although the external dimension and alter expectations were not the paper's primary focus, there are some preliminary indications that several key Indo-Pacific countries do see a role, and, in some cases, even a leading one, for the EU in their region. The recent 2023 EU Indo-Pacific Ministerial Forum held in Stockholm was attended by some 60 foreign ministers from the Indo-Pacific region and the EU, providing a venue for social interaction and opportunities for alter expectations to be voiced.⁷⁸

At the meeting, India's external affairs minister, for example, welcomed the EU's presence in the Indo-Pacific, lauded the EU's 'appreciation of multi-polarity', called for 'more intensive

⁷³Marijke Breuning and Anna Pechenina, 'Role dissonance in foreign policy: Russia, power, and intercountry adoption', *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 16 (2020), pp. 21–40; Thies, *The United States, Israel, and the Search for International Order*.

⁷⁴Young, 'Normative dynamics and strategic interests in the EU's external identity'.

⁷⁵Christopher Hill, 'The capability–expectations gap: Conceptualizing Europe's international role', *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 31:3 (1993), pp. 305–28.

⁷⁶Cameron Thies, 'Role theory and foreign policy', in Robert A. Denmark (ed.), *The International Studies Encyclopedia* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2010), pp. 6335–51.

⁷⁷Anna Stahl, 'What will the EU's Indo-Pacific strategy deliver?', policy position, Hertie School, Jacques Delors Centre, 12 September 2021.

⁷⁸EU Indo-Pacific Ministerial Forum 2023, 'Strengthening partnership and advancing dialogue' (24 April 2023), available at: <https://swedish-presidency.consilium.europa.eu/en/news/eu-indo-pacific-ministerial-forum-2023-strengthening-partnership-and-advancing-dialogue/>.

engagement' by the EU in the region, and described itself as a willing 'like-minded' partner with the EU.⁷⁹

Singapore's minister for foreign affairs went further and endorsed the EU's role as a market power leader, describing the EU as 'a champion for multilateralism, a rules-based trading system and economic integration' and calling on it 'to play a leading political, intellectual, and philosophical role ... to maintain this open, rules-based global trading system' in the Indo-Pacific region.⁸⁰

Japan's foreign minister, while he did not explicitly refer to the EU as a leader, did welcome the EU's 'increasing engagement' in the region and promised to 'enhance cooperation with the EU on sustainable connectivity and quality infrastructure', as it was 'essential to enhance cooperation with the EU in the area of economic security'. He also told the audience that Japan was encouraged by the EU's increasing security role 'including the expansion of its Coordinated Maritime Presences', and pledged to 'set out new directions for security and defence cooperation' with the EU.⁸¹

While these are prominent examples of important Indo-Pacific actors that endorse a role for the EU in the region, future, systematic research is needed to carefully analyse if other countries in the region find it appropriate for the EU to assume a normative, economic, and security leadership role in the region. It is also premature to determine whether the partnerships and trade deals the EU has reached with countries in the Indo-Pacific can be counted as followership and goal attainment, which are traditional indicators to evaluate a would-be leader's influence.

So, what does the EU need to do to further enact its preferred roles and show leadership? Currently, the EU is developing several measures to enhance its presence in the region and strengthen leadership through role performance. It is utilising existing relations with like-minded states to strengthen partnerships in areas with direct relevance to its policy aims, such as climate mitigation action or digitalisation, and to norms, such as good governance, the rule of law, and human rights, also encompassing areas such as labour law, climate change protection, and privacy concerns in a digital era. This performative dimension of roles is directly linked to its leadership ambitions. In this area, the EU has strengthened its diplomatic presence and visibility to project common content, i.e. to communicate the same rationale for EU policies and EU political standpoints on international affairs, as well as common practices based on EU and member states' diplomats acting in unison in third countries.⁸² The Team Europe and the EU Green Diplomacy Network are concrete examples of an emerging European community of practice.⁸³

Conclusions

In an increasingly turbulent and complex geopolitical environment, the EU increasingly finds its vision for a rules-based multilateral order that promotes democracy, human rights, free trade, climate change action, and sustainable development challenged or outright rejected by rivals such as China and Russia. For example, China seeks to reorder the world by maximising and leveraging its influence with a growing number of countries through its Belt and Road Initiative and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Russia, through its illegal military invasion of Ukraine and its use of energy as a weapon, also seeks to undermine the rules-based international order while using its economic, energy, diplomatic, and military assets to influence other countries. Moreover, while EU cooperation with the Biden administration has been productive, continuing political

⁷⁹ Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, 'Concluding remarks at the EU–Indo-Pacific Ministerial', 13 May 2023, available at: <https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/36548>.

⁸⁰ Vivian Balakrishnan, Opening intervention at the roundtable 'Building more sustainable and inclusive prosperity together', available at: <https://www.mfa.gov.sg/Newsroom/Press-Statements-Transcripts-and-Photos/2023/05/20230514fmvsweden>.

⁸¹ Hayashi Yoshimasa, 'Keynote speech', 13 May 2023, available at: https://www.mofa.go.jp/erp/ep/page6e_000355.html.

⁸² Michalski, 'Diplomatic practices beyond Brussels'.

⁸³ Niklas Bremberg, August Danielson, Elsa Hedling, and Anna Michalski, *The Everyday Making of EU Foreign and Security Policy: Practices, Socialization and the Management of Dissent* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2022).

instability in the USA means the EU does not have the luxury of reliably counting on US support or cooperation in the future.

As we have examined here, the EU has responded to these challenges by recognising it will have to embrace interstate strategic competition and forge connectivity partnerships to make its vision for world and regional order a reality. By analysing the Indo-Pacific Strategy of 2021 and considering how things have evolved compared to the EU's 2018 EU–Asia Connectivity Strategy, we are able to map three main roles – normative power, market power, and security power – the EU is utilising to promote its values and protect its interests. The normative and market power leadership roles are long-time role conceptions for the EU. However, security power is a new and emerging role the EU has only recently started to emphasise. We also showed how the EU is attempting to use the Indo-Pacific Strategy to express and enact the three roles through a combination of idea-based, directional, instrumental, and structural leadership. In addition, we see the Indo-Pacific Strategy as part and parcel of a suite of strategies and actions the EU has taken through the launch of its 2021 Global Gateway Initiative and the Strategic Compass of March 2022, in which all three roles are visible.

While we found a considerable degree of continuity in the priority areas and leadership strategies the EU uses to pursue foreign policy goals, we did detect an evolution in the scope and scale regarding the EU's ambition. The most significant change we found was the increased prominence of Security Power Europe and the increased emphasis on security and defence goals expressed through the hard power of EU structural leadership but still combined with the familiar tools of EU's instrumental leadership through cooperative partnerships to secure, defend, and protect major waterways crucial to global and regional trade and to fight piracy.

The Indo-Pacific Strategy was published in 2021; however, events since 2022, chiefly the war in Ukraine, the weaponising of Europe's energy dependence on Russia, and the bolstering of the close alliance between Russia and China, further highlight the need for the EU to defend its worldviews, values, and collective interests. As a result, the congruence of the EU role conceptions as a normative, market, and security power has been strengthened, excepting Hungary, as a collective defence against autocratic states and challengers of the rules-based order. As long as belligerent powers openly challenge the EU, internal division over its leadership roles, including as a security power, may be quite low. Nevertheless, domestic politics in EU member states may change the situation, requiring adjustments to role conceptions and leading to role contestation.⁸⁴

Nevertheless, to be seen as a coherent world actor, the enactment of the three roles needs to be cohesive and based on workable leadership strategies drawing on the EU's ability to muster material and ideational resources, credibility as an actor, and legitimacy vis-à-vis important external audiences, including political and economic elites. It also needs followers in the form of partners and allies. As discussed earlier, an actor's roles cannot be fully accomplished until the other actors in the system accept them, hopefully even support them. The EU's long-standing roles as a normative power and market power are, as we argue above, broadly accepted, at least to a degree, by the EU's partner states, some of which are enticed by the EU to do so. They will also probably accept the EU as a security power, as this role conception is based on a broad definition of security. The antagonistic forces, however, which contest the EU's attempts to defend the rules-based international order and spread liberal norms and values, will, for the same reasons, be unlikely to accept the EU's role as a security power. This role will be contested even more than the two long-standing ones. This dispute will further perpetuate dissension in world politics and may hamper the effectiveness of the EU's role enactment on the world stage. It also risks undermining its credibility as an actor in its own right.

The EU's recognised leadership in global climate action is based on the ability to deploy a panoply of leadership modes. In a geostrategic era and in vital strategic regions far from Europe, the EU's leadership does not automatically meet with recognition and acceptance. However, as the

⁸⁴Juliet Kaarbo and Cristian Cantir, 'Contested roles and domestic politics: Reflections on role theory in foreign policy analysis and IR theory', *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 8:1 (2012), pp. 5–24.

four leadership strategies show, leadership can be exercised in many different ways and take various forms. The EU's role as a normative and market power leader is more long-standing, although this does not ensure that the EU will be able to exercise influence even in these dimensions. Much will depend on the EU's capacity to convince, provide solutions, and entice states to adopt the same goals. Directional leadership will go some way to induce other states to adhere to the same policy goals as the EU, support a rules-based international system, and support liberal norms and values. Structural leadership, through carrots and sticks, will also be necessary to persuade some partner countries to embrace the same worldview.

The EU's enhanced security power role is less coherent and established. Therefore, the challenge for the EU will be to build leadership in the security realm despite not being a formal military alliance. Nonetheless, by promoting a comprehensive understanding of security and enhancing its security capacities and activities, the EU will be better able to build partnerships to counteract the destructive forces of geopolitics working against the rules-based global order it champions.

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