

FISH AND SHIPS: CHINESE FISHING AND EUROPE'S INDO-PACIFIC STRATEGY

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SUMMARY

- The fisheries sector has become a central geopolitical issue in the Indo-Pacific.
- China is a major cause of the problems in the industry, thanks to the size of its fleet and the tonnage of its captures.
- China also contributes to the erosion of ocean governance through its participation in illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing.
- Beijing instrumentalises its fishing fleet for geopolitical gain, as evidenced by its policy on the South China Sea.
- These predatory fishing activities threaten Europe's geopolitical and geo-economic interests, as well as its attempts to protect marine biodiversity.
- Europe cannot be a bystander on the issue; it should develop a more proactive policy on fisheries.

Introduction

The fisheries sector has gradually become a central geopolitical issue in the Indo-Pacific. Out of the 84.4m tonnes of fish caught in seas across the world in 2018, around 61.4m tonnes came from the Indian and Pacific oceans. Although the intensity of fishing varies across regions, the depletion of fishery resources is a growing problem everywhere. China, which catches more fish than any other nation, vastly contributes to this problem with not only its fleet size and the tonnage of its catches, but also its fishing practices – which include illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing – and, above all, a fisheries policy that exports its environmental problems and thereby protects its own national marine areas. Moreover, China instrumentalises fishing to serve its revisionist agenda and its strategic interests more broadly, signalling its willingness to use traditional economic activities for geopolitical gain.

The specific problem of China's fisheries policy exacerbates the broader one of a global decline in fish stocks, which are being exploited at unsustainable levels for one-third of all affected species. In recent decades, fish consumption has risen at an annual rate twice that of population growth, from 9kg per person in 1961 to more than 20kg per person in 2016. While the global tonnage of fish caught has been relatively stable since the 1990s, the past 50 years have seen a clear downward trend in the share of fish stocks that are at sustainable levels, from 90 per cent in 1974 to 65.8 per cent in 2017. However, the sustainability level varies across different zones of the Indo-Pacific. It is at 54.5 per cent in the south-eastern Pacific; between 78 per cent and 87 per cent in the north-western Pacific, the eastern central Pacific, the western central Pacific; and at 73.5 per cent in the eastern Indian Ocean and 67 per cent in the western Indian Ocean – which, as a consequence, have become attractive hubs for Chinese fishery.

The European Union has included the governance of fisheries and the fight against IUU fishing on the agenda of its future strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific. If the agenda is partly normative – as suggested by the negotiations at the Intergovernmental Conference on the Marine Biodiversity of Areas Beyond National Jurisdiction – the EU's Indo-Pacific policy should prioritise the reinforcement of fisheries management capacities in the region. This would help China's neighbours regain control of their exclusive economic zones (EEZs). The EU has a remarkably strong position in all areas that would help it structure an effective and lasting system of fisheries management – from its influence on the norms of control to its export of ocean surveillance equipment, expertise, and capacity building.

At a time when the EU is trying to contribute to maritime security more effectively, it has an opportunity to take an inclusive and non-politicised approach to fishery. Such an approach is sure to

have a strategic impact, through the creation of effective multilateral coalitions that focus on these issues.

This paper examines the reasons and policies that led China to become a threat to marine biodiversity, as well as its role in IUU fishing. The paper also analyses China's use of its fishing fleet to achieve its strategic objectives and examines the overall impact of Chinese fisheries policies on Europe's interests. Finally, it identifies some potential directions for a proactive European policy on fisheries in the Indo-Pacific.

China's threat to national marine biodiversity and plunder of foreign waters

With the largest population of any nation, China far outstrips other countries as the world's top fish producer (including fishery and aquaculture). China's fishery activities rose by 15.6 per cent between 2005 and 2016. It accounts for 15 per cent of global marine captures, while the second-biggest producers, Peru and Indonesia, account for 8 per cent of the captures each. China operates the largest fleet of trawlers globally and heavily supports it with subsidies, 94 per cent of which comprise fuel subsidies. This enables Chinese industrial trawlers to fish in all the world's oceans, including the Atlantic and Indian oceans – where, legally and illegally, the fishing industry provides a way for Beijing to establish a presence on the African coast. The fleet has expanded considerably in the past few years, whereas that of other major fishing countries has stabilised or declined. The added stress on fish stocks can, therefore, be partially attributed to China's expansion.

Paradoxically, China's commitment to preserving and restoring its own fish stocks has made it a threat to the sustainable management of fishery resources around the world. The period from Mao Zedong's assumption of power to the early 1980s was characterised by absurd levels of overfishing of Chinese fish stocks, which showed signs of depletion as early as the 1950s. In the early 1980s, there was a collapse in the populations of certain commercially fished species in these stocks. A decade of reforms followed, marked by the joint implementation of proactive policies for the protection and restoration of coastal resources, as well as the promotion of distant-water fishing. The former included the creation of closed areas and seasons in which fishing was banned; fishing moratoriums; the delimitation of protected areas; limits on the maximum size of nets; and minimum size requirements for meshes, to prevent nets from catching juvenile fish. The latter provided opportunities for Chinese trawlers to sell a part of their catch in foreign markets, buy diesel at subsidised prices, and benefit from a change in capital depreciation rates and various fiscal incentives. China has expanded each of these policies over time; for instance, subsidies for distant-water fishing

rose considerably, peaking at \$6.5 billion in 2013 and remaining steady (in principle) until 2015. The situation changed somewhat in 2016 with the announcement of the 13th Five-Year Plan.

This dichotomy between seas under Chinese sovereignty and distant waters only increased with China's incorporation of international environmental standards into its national legislation. With Beijing's responsibility stopping at the limits of its EEZ, the process served its national goals without restricting Chinese activities abroad.

In 1996 the State Oceanic Administration published 'China's Ocean Agenda 21', which incorporated: the principles on the sustainable development of fish stocks enumerated in 'Agenda 21', which was issued at the conclusion of the 1992 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development Conference in Rio; and those enunciated in 1995 by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization in its 'Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries'. The same year, China extended its environmental standards to its EEZs. In 2000 the country bolstered them by establishing quotas and expanding the fishing vessels licensing system it had set up in 1979.

The implementation of these internal restrictions inevitably had a negative impact on China's fisheries and its fishermen's livelihoods. This led the State Council to launch the 'Programme of Action on Conservation of Living Aquatic Resources' and to establish 'National Fisheries Five-Year Plans', which emphasised food security and encouraged Chinese fishing enterprises to seek and exploit economic opportunities abroad. Nonetheless, these steps did not allow China to achieve its objectives with regard to supply, as much of the catch was sold off on foreign markets. The simultaneous introduction of these constraints led to, among other things, a reduction in the total volume of catches from 15m tonnes in 2016 to 10m tonnes in 2020. (The constraints involved the establishment of administrative systems for managing marine resources, prioritising sustainable use, conserving fishery resources, and protecting biodiversity).

However, it is important to assess the fishery measures China initiated under the 13th Five-Year Plan from the viewpoint of their outcomes. During the first nine months of 2017, 'domestic' catches fell by 11.9 per cent, while those of distant-water fishing rose by 14.2 per cent; the total catch fell by 7.7 per cent over the whole year. In reality, while China seems to have considerably reduced subsidies for domestic fishery, it has not reduced those for distant-water fishing. China committed to reducing its domestic fishery subsidies by 40 per cent in 2020, but declared that up to 3,000 vessels could be involved in deep-sea fishing, and (like Russia) continued to oppose the expansion of marine protected areas. As the Chinese fleet numbered around 2,500 vessels, the new limitation amounted to a de facto authorisation of an increase in its size.

China's illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing

In this context, the massive scale of China's IUU fishing operations is a consequence of the dichotomy between domestic and distant-water fishing, and the depletion of national resources forcing Chinese fishermen to turn to deep-sea fishing. As a 2015 Greenpeace report stated, overfishing on the high seas and in foreign EEZs was a common practice for Chinese vessels. Indeed, numerous incidents in the South China Sea, the Indian Ocean, the East China Sea, and the South Atlantic Ocean testify to this. In the three main categories of 'The Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated Fishing Index' published in January 2019 – vulnerability, prevalence, and response – China ranked in place first place globally.

Although Chinese researchers acknowledge this problem, they hold the fishermen – who are often poorly trained and unable to communicate with foreign authorities – partly responsible. They point to the progress China has made in training crews (including on the Law of the Sea and various regulations governing fishing), providing vessels with electronic equipment, and raising fines for violations of the rules. They do not deny the weakness of China's management mechanisms, which erode the credibility of its efforts in these areas.

However, one cannot absolve the Chinese state of its responsibilities. In 2016 Beijing officially strengthened sanctions for the contravention of international fishing regulations, and envisaged a revision of its fishing laws to add a system for blacklisting vessels involved in IUU fishing. Furthermore, in July 2018, China signed a partnership agreement with the EU on global governance of the oceans that involved combating IUU fishing (and which enabled China to export its fishery production to the European market). However, China is yet to join the Port State Measures Agreement, which was signed in 2009 and came into effect in 2016. Countries that sign the deal are required to check the registration of vessels before allowing them to dock; conduct inspections and take all necessary measures to ensure that these ships are not transporting illegally caught fish; and share information on all this between port states in real time, thereby casting an electronic net over pirate ships.

Moreover, several major fishing agreements China has signed with African states call into question its sincerity about addressing these problems. They seem to indicate that Beijing primarily seeks to build a facade of legality around practices whose motives and consequences remain unchanged. According to Greenpeace, Chinese fishing companies – which are dependent on the state – regularly underreport the size of their vessels, sometimes by as much as 60 per cent, to obtain cheaper licences. This also enables them to haul in much larger volumes of fish than permitted and to carry on fishing in areas formally reserved for smaller ships.

The Chinese fishing fleet as a surrogate of the People's Liberation Army Navy

China's fisheries policy shapes a strategic landscape in which appropriating resources is as important as protecting sea lanes. There is nothing new in states' use of fishermen as occasional – and more or less willing – instigators of territorial conflicts. Nonetheless, China has gone much further than most by making its fleet of trawlers a weapon that serves its revisionist agenda. To this end, China uses its flotilla of fishing vessels as an unofficial militia, with its navy's backing, and subsidises fishing in disputed waters – often those with scant fish stock – to assert its territorial claims. A series of incidents in the South China Sea since mid-2019 illustrates this:

- In June 2019, despite its strong relationship with Beijing, Manila accused China of having capsized and sunk one of its trawlers.
- On 30 December 2019, Jakarta officially protested to Beijing after Chinese coastguard ships and around 63 trawlers violated Indonesia's EEZ around the Natuna archipelago. The incident was not limited to diplomatic measures; on 7 January 2020, the Indonesian authorities deployed eight warships and four combat jets to the area. After being chased away, the Chinese coastguard vessels lingered just outside Indonesian waters. The Indonesian president, Joko Widodo, visited Natuna on 8 January 2020. The Chinese flotilla finally left the zone the following day.
- In early March 2020, a Chinese navy ship rammed a Vietnamese trawler and sank it off the Paracel Islands – confirming that, even as the covid-19 pandemic was accelerating, the old disputes in the region had not completely disappeared.
- In mid-March 2021, the Philippines discovered that the Whitsun Reef, 170 nautical miles west of Palawan in the northern parts of the Spratly Islands, was being occupied by around 220

Chinese fishing vessels. Manila protested to Beijing and demanded that China recall the vessels, sending a naval task force to patrol the area. China's claim that its boats were taking refuge from rough seas were soon met with photographic evidence to the contrary. Most remained in the area for weeks without engaging in any fishing activity. In fact, a significant number of them had been in the area since February. A month later, most of the vessels had left the reef – but a few stayed.

These incidents cast a new light on the South China Sea's importance to international security. Added to the various classic issues on the delimitation of EEZs is the competition for an increasingly rare resource. Although the South China Sea accounted for 12 per cent of global catches in 2015, more than 50 per cent of the global fishing fleet operated in this region.

As such, this competition transformed – with striking swiftness – the strategic maritime landscape into one in which economic actors, the fishermen, are no longer just instigators of territorial conflicts but unofficial sea militias. As one of Beijing's main weapons in its disputes in the South China Sea, these militias receive support from the Chinese navy only when they need backup. Put another way, China uses its fishing fleet as the third arm of its navy. The massive presence of trawlers around the Chinese outposts of Subi and Mischief in the Spratly Islands reflects this new role. Indeed, the Pentagon declared in its 2017 'Annual Report to Congress on Military Developments in China' that the country is "building a state-owned fishing fleet for its maritime militia force in the South China Sea". By sending its fishing fleet into disputed waters, China can use these vessels as an excuse to deploy its coastguard and warships to defend its fishing vessels and back its territorial claims.

China's distinction between domestic waters, which must be protected, and international ones, which can be plundered, combine with its claim to almost 80 per cent of the South China Sea. As other South China Sea littoral states recognise, China uses its measures to preserve fish stocks as instruments to bolster these claims. In 1999 China unilaterally decreed a seasonal fishing moratorium in this zone. All other littoral states understood the move as China's attempt to assert its sovereignty over these waters, and hence rejected the moratorium.

In this context, these states see the presence of the US Navy in the region as an important security guarantee, given that most of them do not individually possess the assets necessary for confronting the Chinese navy if the situation escalated over fishing disputes. But the US presence also increases strategic polarisation and the risk of conflict in the region, as all sides may see escalation as easier to manage than in classic territorial disputes involving only state actors and their naval assets.

The impact on European interests

Many European states could be tempted to consider China's fisheries practices as a regrettable yet distant phenomenon with little or no impact on their interests. Yet control of fisheries is, as discussed, part of a new strategic landscape in which the appropriation of resources combines with the rapid militarisation of the oceans. As such, this has direct and indirect consequences for European interests.

Indirectly, the predatory nature of China's fishing could destabilise many regions along the sea lines of communication that are vital to European trade. Piracy off the Somali coast between 2005 and 2012 resulted from overfishing in Somali waters and fishermen's need for an alternative source of income as the Somali state collapsed, before evolving into a form of organised crime. China was not responsible for the depletion of fish stocks in Somali waters, but reports by the Madagascar Regional Maritime Information Fusion Centre regularly raise Chinese IUU fishing off the coast of Africa and in the Indian Ocean generally. Moreover, China seized the opportunity created by the chaos in Somalia to establish a presence on the strait of Bab al-Mandeb, through the construction of a huge military base in Djibouti.

The current fishing-related tensions in the South China Sea contribute to an atmosphere of strong political and strategic polarisation, as well as Indo-Pacific states' very real concerns about food security. They illustrate the potential for China's fisheries policy to generate conflict in and around the chokepoints between the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea.

In Africa, the stakes may be different given that China has no direct territorial claims, but fishing plays no less of a strategic role – particularly in light of the country's assertion of its presence in the Mozambique Channel, whose importance partly stems from the vulnerabilities of the Suez Canal (as recently highlighted by the stranding of the container ship *Ever Given*). The risk here is that China will gradually gain control of the African coast, which is of growing international importance due to the continent's status as a future centre of economic growth.

Some European states are more vulnerable than others, due to their territorial presence in parts of the Indo-Pacific. In Madagascar, Chinese fisheries policies directly threaten French interests in the region. In the Pacific, the indirect effects of China's overfishing in the South China Sea, which pushed Vietnamese fishermen to seek their livelihoods in the waters of New Caledonia, are well documented. One can see the effects of this today: China's fishing has spurred a wave of protests in French Polynesia, with demonstrators accusing Chinese vessels of operating illegally and demanding that they be banned from catching tuna. More broadly, China has shown a willingness to dilute France's

presence and influence in both the Indian and Pacific oceans.

Lastly, it is possible that China will directly implement its strategy of occupying terrain with its fishing flotilla in other fish-rich regions in the Pacific. China's fisheries policy is in direct opposition to Europe's aims to protect biodiversity, particularly marine biodiversity, and creates precedents of a Chinese presence that the country can later use for political and strategic purposes.

A proactive European policy on fisheries in the Indo-Pacific

Of course, China is not the only state to push its fleets to engage in illegal fishing or to contribute to overfishing. Nonetheless, it has done so on the largest scale by far. China is one of the very few countries to have made fisheries part of the public sector and, above all, to have established a fishing arm of its navy to serve its strategic interests. China has profoundly transformed the maritime strategic landscape and complicated the nature of the potential response by positioning fishermen – commercial actors – to face the armed forces of states that dispute its claims to various economic zones.

Moreover, China's importance in the fishing industry has made it both a vital actor in any attempt to regulate the sector and a major obstacle to the extension of conservation measures, such as those to protect marine areas. The scale of China's violations of existing regulations calls into question the sincerity of its commitment to them and the scientific and economic rationale for its actions, since it has simultaneously encouraged the protection of its national resources and the plunder of foreign waters.

These considerations call for responses that vary across geographical areas but are all designed to help smaller Indo-Pacific states regain control of their territorial waters. The key problem in the Indo-Pacific is less the lack of regional organisations specifically dedicated to fisheries (or a broader purpose) than an inability to enforce existing regulations. This regrettable situation opens up considerable space for fisheries management. Europe can contribute to such management by delinking negotiations on international fisheries – and, more broadly, marine biodiversity protection, in which China is a legitimate and vital actor – from those on measures to enforce states' sovereignty over their territorial waters.

Replicate the Coordinated Maritime Presence Mechanism in parts of the Indo-Pacific.

As the EU is a leader on marine biodiversity issues and a source of expertise on satellite and radar technology, as well as ocean governance, it is ideally placed to play a defining role on fisheries. Indeed, the bloc understands the need for the sustainable use of marine biological resources in the Indo-Pacific. On 16 April 2021, the European Council stated that the “EU strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific” should include “EU membership and active participation in relevant fisheries bodies, including Regional Seas Conventions and Regional Fisheries Management Organisations, and the creation of Sustainable Fisheries Partnerships ... and by tackling Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) Fishing”. This should, in turn, “contribute towards improved fisheries governance and coastal development in ... partner countries”.

However, it remains to be seen whether member states will provide the resources required to translate this statement of intent into actual policy. The EU already has an international fisheries policy that falls within the ambit of the Directorate-General for Maritime Affairs and Fisheries (DG-MER). However, it lacks a significant presence in the Indo-Pacific. The EU conducts training for coastguards in the South China Sea with Vietnam and Indonesia. It also combats IUU fishing by conditioning access to its market on compliance with regulations on this matter. Moreover, its maritime surveillance programmes CRIMARIO I and II (Critical Maritime Routes in the Indian Ocean) in the south-western Indian Ocean and the Bay of Bengal respectively make it a credible actor in regional fisheries management. And EU member states engage in regional cooperation to combat IUU fishing. The Netherlands works with Thailand to this end.

Nonetheless, there is a declining number of bilateral agreements on fishing between the EU and Indo-Pacific countries. Comoros, Cook Islands, Kiribati, Madagascar, Micronesia, Mozambique, Seychelles, and Solomon Islands benefited from such agreements until 2010, which enabled them to receive fisheries development aid in exchange for granting EU countries the right to access their EEZs. As of today, only the protocols signed with Seychelles and Cook Islands remain valid.

Moreover, the EU lacks a law enforcement mechanism in the region. On 25 January 2021, the EU launched its Coordinated Maritime Presence (CMP) mechanism, a concept designed to create a permanent presence in – and prompt outreach to – maritime areas of interest, share information and analysis on these areas, and promote international cooperation and partnership at sea. The CMP mechanism was launched as a pilot project in the Gulf of Guinea, and there is a French proposal to replicate it in the Indian Ocean – where it would have been an effective instrument for enforcing IUU

fishing regulation. But, so far, the idea has met with significant reluctance from several member states. And the mechanism would only be effective if there was some form of cooperation between the European External Action Service (whose responsibility for maritime security would put it in charge of the CMP) and DG-MER (which oversees fisheries policy). At times, the institutional cultures of the two bodies seem irreconcilable.

Place fisheries management on the agenda of European maritime security dialogues

It would also make sense to systematically include fisheries management on the agenda of the EU's maritime security dialogues with its Indo-Pacific partners. As stated earlier, sovereignty over EEZs is central to the issue of IUU fishing. Indeed, control of fisheries is part of a new strategic landscape in which the appropriation of resources combines with the rapid militarisation of the oceans.

This approach would facilitate better coordination between Europe and its partners in international negotiations related to, or directly or indirectly affecting, fisheries. It would have the same effect on capacity building in littoral states of the Indo-Pacific. No EU member state or like-minded partner has the resources to single-handedly conduct the various forms of training this would require (maritime surveillance, coastguard activity, and customs). Therefore, it makes sense for them to coordinate with one another to avoid duplication of effort. The EU could then amplify these actions in all relevant regional organisations in which it intended to make its presence felt.

It would be relatively easy to include fisheries management in these dialogues, because the resources employed for the purpose are essentially the same as those for other sectors of maritime security. This is especially true of maritime surveillance, which European states are already working to expand to other countries.

Add the fishing industry to Europe's cooperation agenda

Given the importance of fisheries management to South China Sea littoral countries – in terms of sovereignty as much as economic development or food security – this issue could be a major theme for the EU to focus on in talks with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. The union should include the development of fisheries on the agenda of its initiatives for Indo-Pacific cooperation.

China's attempts to dominate fisheries in the region often rely on the management of strategically important areas of the market (such as supply chains). By helping local stakeholders regain control of these areas, the EU would reduce China's influence. It would also allow for a more comprehensive

definition of maritime security and, consequently, for more EU member states to contribute to the effort in line with their own capacities.

Boost scientific cooperation on fisheries

The EU should incorporate scientific collaboration into this cooperation with Indo-Pacific states. Many of these countries lack the means to assess their fish stocks or account for the need to preserve this resource in the framing and implementation of their fisheries policies, particularly those for issuing licences. The gradual extension of scientific cooperation to new partners would help the EU establish its legitimacy and influence in this field, by placing it at the core of this mechanism.

Increase transparency and publicise illegal activity

It would also be astute of the EU to increase the transparency of fisheries management by supporting the relevant international NGOs. These organisations monitor compliance with the international norms governing fisheries as an aspect of maritime environmental protection and, above all, do not have the inhibitions of states in speaking up about China's or others' violations. This support could take the form of high-profile international conferences in which, alongside all major stakeholders in the fishing industry, they would be given space to express themselves.

With the same outlook, the EU should encourage Indo-Pacific littoral states to make their activities on fisheries part of the Fisheries Transparency Initiative. This global initiative endeavours to bring together governments, the fishing industry, and civil society organisations to verify and publish complete data on the fisheries sector (including terms of access agreements, details of payments made by ships and foreign investors, information on new investments, and data on catches). The publicity provided by these assessments would help civil society groups— such as fishermen's professional organisations —protect their interests from foreign states' predatory behaviour, adding weight to their arguments on the larger issue of China's violation of international regulations.

Include fisheries (and aquaculture) on the agenda of all forums that address biodiversity

Though fisheries management (and aquaculture) is vital to the preservation of marine biodiversity, it does not appear on either the agenda of COP15 or the conference of the International Union for Conservation of Nature. If fishery is important enough to be dealt with by the EU and key international measures such as World Trade Organization subsidies, it is logical to include the issue on the agendas of biodiversity conservation organisations. This would allow NGOs, among others, to

join the debate.

Conclusion

The good governance of fisheries is a crucial element of a global order based on adherence to international law, particularly the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. But, as reflected in French initiatives in the Indo-Pacific, it is also important to protect the fishery resources of overseas territories and, through these, the EU's sovereign interests and strategic positioning.

Europe cannot be a bystander on this issue just because China is a rising military power in the region. Not only is the predatory nature of Chinese fishing policies in direct opposition to European objectives to protect marine biodiversity, but control of the Mozambique Channel – and the need to prevent political and strategic polarisation in the region similar to that in the South China Sea – is vital to European interests. Moreover, Europeans cannot ignore the potentially destabilising effects of China's fisheries policy on Indo-Pacific littoral states. Europe paid most of the cost of the fight against piracy off the coast of Somalia, which was a consequence of overfishing before it became an organised crime issue. Beijing took advantage of this to legitimise its presence in the Indian Ocean and establish a military base in Djibouti. China is now contributing to overfishing along the entire eastern and southern African coast. And its role in anti-piracy operations was limited to the protection of Chinese ships. In other words, China is creating the conditions for the reappearance of piracy while pushing the costs of it onto Europeans.

Furthermore, the EU should show that cooperation with China as part of negotiations on biodiversity can complement pressure on the country to change its behaviour in the fisheries sector. Biodiversity negotiations would yield international norms that made it easier for the EU to hold Beijing to account for this behaviour, as Chinese decision-makers would be involved in drawing up agreements produced by the talks. European capacity building in Indo-Pacific littoral states would help them ensure that China complied with the resulting norms, thereby helping protect the EU's interests.

This would also create an opportunity to mobilise states around a common interest – whose importance will only grow as food insecurity rises, and which has ramifications far beyond the fisheries sector itself. By forming coalitions on fisheries management, the EU could develop an approach to China that turns on not just political considerations but also the common interests that may arise in the field. The union could develop these coalitions to help bind China with a series of technical constraints that the country helped create. This would, in turn, help the EU not only sustain its influence in the Indo-Pacific but also redefine the terms of its discussions with China while avoiding confrontation.

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