

EU'S STRATEGIC SHIFT IN THE ASIA-PACIFIC AND ITS IMPACT ON EU-CHINA RELATIONS

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ABSTRACT

A significant change from trade-focused negotiation to a far more complex strategy integrating security and defence has been reflected in the European Union's (EU) changing position towards the Asia-Pacific. In order to maintain a rules-based international order and balance of power in the context of increasing Chinese power and authority, the EU's Indo-Pacific Strategy strongly emphasises deepening the alliance and cooperation with Asian partners, including Japan, India, and ASEAN. This paper critically explores the core reasons for the EU's turn, including the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and South China Sea safety concerns and their effects on EU-China ties. An analysis of policy documentation and earlier studies indicates that the EU seeks strengthened strategic independence and lessening its economic reliance while handling regional stability matters. China views the EU's security transition as aligned with U.S.-supported limitations, which may intensify regional hostility, fostering interaction on climate change. By promoting stability and carefully managing its economic relations with China, this cycle puts the EU in an appropriate stance in the multipolar Asia-Pacific region. In this potential scenario, the EU has that point to redefine EU-China ties in a geopolitical environment that is shifting quickly by having both resiliency and pragmatic interaction.

Keywords: *Asia-Pacific strategy, EU-China relations, Belt and Road Initiative, and Geopolitical competition*

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INTRODUCTION

The Asia-Pacific region has gained prominence in global power due to the strategic interests of major world powers such as the United States, China, and, lately, the European Union (EU). Previously, the EU was exclusively involved in regional trade and economic affairs. However, its latest moves for defence and security interaction indicate a significant shift in the EU's geopolitical approach. This study discusses the growth of the European Union's Asia-Pacific strategy, which has recently focused on regional stability and possible connections in EU-China relations (Crabtree, 2022). The paper employs neorealism as a theoretical framework to assess the impact on EU-China ties and gives an overview of the variables that led to this transition.

Apart from being three of the most significant economies in the world—China, Japan, and India—the Indo-Pacific peninsula and the European Union pose the most impressive exchange figures. Such nautical trade routes are prone to stronghold rivals, coastal maritime criminal activity, and climate-related concerns, given that the Straits of Malacca, Ombai, and Lombok remain points of contention that make them costly and challenging to stay out of. Operations in the Red Sea in past years differ, an acute example of the significance of ocean routes for Europe's trade-heavy GDP (Sicilia, & Banson, 2024).

The Indo-Pacific region is rapidly developing an epicentre for technological production, having substantial opportunities for biodiversity naturals are minerals. Democracies, considering themselves allies, fret that Beijing might surpass them during their quest for vital breakthroughs. Using the Key Materials for Manufacturing Act, the European Devices Act, and the Net Zero Emissions Sector Act, the European Union has attempted to diversify its supply production foundation, lessen its dependability, and foster a circular market. Concerning these changing diplomatic circumstances, industries have begun using the comprehensive 'China + 1' plan of action, which refers to a logistics method that

broadens beyond geographies to lessen the reliance on the People's Republic of China (Xuxu, 2023).

Even though the member states of the EU and Indo-Pacific states have maintained diplomatic and transnational links for quite some time, the European Union's first formal view of the Pacific area emerged in 2016 following the issuance of the European Union Global Plan (EUGP) (EU, 2021). The EUGP agrees that to resolve mutual political, economic, and social problems, coalitions across the Indo-Pacific Rim and East Asian regions need to be reinforced. Promoting the rule of law globally, upholding democratic ideals and rights for humanity, defending global combating terrorism initiatives, maintaining liberty in routing, and ensuring financial links represent some of their particular objectives (Hutt, 2022). However, the European Union's plan of action, particularly to stress cooperation to enact global laws, continues to be mainly reactive. Further, the European Union remains concerned about carrying out steps, which might operate despite its vow to uphold a free market and endanger bodies such as the WTO. Internal disputes and inadequate military resources keep hindering the European Union from carrying out a more decisive leadership role, regardless of the context of constant discussions over the EU's security position (Hongjian, 2022).

LITERATURE REVIEW

A political paradigm to support an emerging naval security initiative in the context of the dynamic geopolitical stability of the Indo-Pacific and a more significant strategy of the EU towards its parameters and China's rise is a relatively new strategic formation (Luthra, 2021). Likewise, scholars such as Olli Pekka Surosa (2021) argued that the EU's media initiatives towards the Asia Pacific were shaped to capitalise on Asia's giant economic marketplace. This bloc was a giant step in strengthening multilateral institutions such as the WTO to ensure a free trade marketplace in the centre of Asia. His book has left a lasting effect on the upcoming scenario of the EU's strategic interest in the security perspective and growing emphasis on defence

collaboration, cybersecurity and naval concerns. Doshi Rush (2021) indicates in a brief overview in his book that the EU has a divergent shift of interest in the Asia-Pacific region, and this inclination sought a balanced alignment with the policies of China. His literature employs a neo-realist theoretical framework to underpin the strategic shift and attributes of the EU for the commitment to multilateralism and a basic rule-based order as key normative factors, including human rights, climate change in shaping the EU's policies for Asia-Pacific and its massive impact on EU-China ties in the long run.

Similarly, Men-Jeing (2023) specifically analysed that the EU could face many challenges in maintaining a consecutive approach to economic collaboration and geo-political competition with China. At the same time, the EU has to adopt a deepening and evolving narrative around the EU's Asia-Pacific strategy and its impact on the ties between the EU and China. There, they have to converge the concerns of security matters and new dynamics that might significantly influence the global governance and balance of power in this region for peace-building measures for other countries, too. Another researcher, Cui Hongjian (2022) one of his articles explores that the EU's adoption is a key step towards foreign policy. He further exhibited how this strategy has integrated the security concerns and maritime linkages with the allies, ultimately leading to a framework for sustaining the geopolitical peace with China. The literature identifies the long-term ties between the EU and China as a focal point in developing Asia-Pacific reconciliation. Significantly, the EU's win is basically underneath the collaboration of internal divisions, strengthening partnerships with core allies of the Asia-Pacific region and adopting a consistent and swift strategy towards China for future developments and growth in security and governance matters.

This literature comprehensively reviews the EU's strategic pivot in the Asia-Pacific and its impact on EU-China ties. By analysing all the materials, it could be easily justified that economic interdependence is central. The EU's primary focus on security and normative layouts indicates significant reconsiderations of the global role in considering

the long-term sustainability of this compact global policy for economic and security concerns.

Historical Evolution of the EU's Asia-Pacific Strategy

The closeness of the economics and the shared worldwide concerns make the destinies of the European Union and the Indo-Pacific region seem indivisible. Apart from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), which continues to be a more vital partner for EU nations, the region additionally contains seven G20 countries attendees: Australia, China, India, Indonesia, Japan, the Republic of Korea, and the Republic of South Africa, among others. In addition to contributing 60 per cent of the world's gross domestic product and being responsible for two-thirds of the economic expansion before the outbreak, this part of the world is the place for three-fourths of the global populace. It leads the transition to a digital economy.

A crucial aspect of the EU's vision for the Indo-Pacific zone is engaging with countries and territories across its territorial limits and yet legitimately associated with its Representative States (Hongiiian, 2022). The upturn is dependent on supply chains that are durable and enduring. By solidifying and deepening bilateral relations, operating in effect trade deals, wrapping up negotiations regarding tariffs, and building association in significant domains, including supply chain strategic dependencies, the EU will collaborate with its Indo-Pacific zone counterparts to shore up the supply chain. For instance, it intends to work alongside allies such as the islands of Taiwan, Japan, and the government of Korea on economic and trade matters. In order to prevent world trade against illicit activities involving enforced passing on technology, economic compulsion, corporate grants, and misuse of intellectual property, the European Union will be working alongside its allies to boost current laws and regulations.

Europe's main route for accessing the Indo-Pacific peninsula economies is through the Indian Ocean. For this reason, rigidity and flexibility of motion have been essential. Across the Indian Ocean, the

European Union bloc looks forward to assisting its allies in managing an array of issues, notably the severe damage caused by a warming climate, marine contamination, the decline of biodiversity, and illicit, unnoticed, and unauthorised fishing. The EU has developed an extensive system of agreements that can assist them in achieving these objectives (Bradford, 2022).

In the past, the European Union's (EU) interactions with the Asia-Pacific region have been influenced by economic diplomacy. Building strong trade networks, facilitating market access, and encouraging reciprocal economic growth were the goals of this strategy. In the 1980s and 1990s, EU strategy was mainly concerned with building strategic economic relationships with China and strengthening trade and investment linkages with significant Asia-Pacific economies, including South Korea, Japan, and ASEAN nations (ASEAN Report, 2019). EU influence expansion was facilitated by bilateral and multilateral trade agreements that prioritised regulatory cooperation, open markets, and tariff reduction. Under the premise that reliable economic ties would advance regional peace and development, the EU, as an economically interdependent entity, has used its economic might to support stability and growth. The EU's approach, according to researchers, was based on the idea that economic integration would reduce the likelihood of conflict and, thus, the need for security operations (Luthra, 2021). China, for instance, is now one of the EU's main economic partners after the economic layout between the two countries grew dramatically. However, as the economic alliances grew, the EU encountered many challenges, like trade disparities, market access problems, and concerns about dependence on Chinese supply chains, particularly in the manufacturing and technology industries.

Several unexpected changes constitute a part of the EU's overall strategy. It is striking due to its assertive discourse about China, while its bare monotony emphasises its obligation to create new coalitions that maintain the regulatory multilateral system. While stressing that the entire area is grappling with a substantial strategic formation,

mainly through China, it also contains a nod to the dangers posed by financial compulsion, which is meant for China.

The EU policy encompasses seven disciplines, particularly security and military. However, the revised plan is also intriguing, precisely its willingness to investigate heightened nautical rotations. The process will require developing a fresh 'oceanic zone of preference', following a prior attempt in the Pacific Ocean whereby numerous European armies collaborated in their manoeuvres. The bloc's emblem will be guarded among prominent nations that comprise the EU, adopting an approach designated as The Team Europe (Bradford, 2022).

At the nexus of security, political interaction, and maritime economic considerations, member countries of the EU, including Italy, are headed in the exact pattern outlined in this research. The potential initiatives might involve parallel conjunction developments based on its national competence and more capacity development, such as retraining military members and, specifically, the Marine Corps and law enforcement agencies. Italy is pursuing that pattern in association with collaborating countries India Japan (Embassy of Italy—Tokyo Citation, 2021).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper discusses the shifting link between China, the EU, and Asia-Pacific countries applying neorealism theory. According to neorealism, balances of power and concerns about security assess the global structure by laying a more excellent value on its essential components than on the objectives of nations as a whole. In the framework of EU-China connections, neorealism sheds light on the EU's complete evolving strategy in reaction to global factors such as China's regional objectives, the US effect, and Asia-Pacific security issues. According to this theory, the EU's move needed to happen to ensure peace and security in the region, whereby strong powers' confrontations are dominant. In order to deal with international dangers irrespective of partners, including the US, the European

Union places an extreme value on operational freedom, especially brought out via neorealism. This change corresponds with the neorealist point of view that maintains the states' strict policies—or, in the present scenario; international entities like the EU—need to boost their influence and finances, mainly to defend themselves amid expanding worldwide rivalry (Nugraha, 2022).

The EU seeks to actively exert dominance within the Asia-Pacific region, particularly indicated via its Indo-Pacific Peninsula Strategies, which feature significant value for alliances involving nations in the region, notably Australia, India, and Japan. This conceptual framework reveals that both the EU's Asia-Pacific region agenda and its influence-based EU-China cooperation are backed through mutual obligations rooted in principles and considerations carried out by the authority (Hutt, 2022). It could be illustrated that with such varied action plans, the European Union can uphold its values, define its sovereignty, and advocate for a very bipolar Asia-Pacific region despite managing an uncertain, internationally significant scenario.

METHODOLOGY

This research is qualitative. First-hand knowledge is collected through the official EU policy documents, reports, and strategy papers on Asia-Pacific and Indo-Pacific strategies and their impact on China. The primary source gives a transparent scenario of the EU's regional strategies concerning China's influence. The secondary source includes reviewing all the academic literature, think tank reports, and media sources.

Research Questions

- Q-1. How did the EU's Asia-Pacific strategy go from economic engagement to militarism, and what caused it?
- Q-2. How will the EU's new Asia-Pacific policy affect its economic and geopolitical relations with China?

Changing Dynamics of the EU's Asia-Pacific Strategy

The EU has revisited its central economic policies in the Asia-Pacific region as the geopolitical situation has changed. China's military actions in the South China Sea and its increasing power via the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) have been the reason for the EU to shift its emphasis on maintaining its strategic needs due to increasing concerns about security. Most Concerns regarding China's political influence and economic reliance have been expressed in the EU as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which aimed at boosting infrastructure and investment throughout Europe. As per ongoing research, this shift reflects the EU's drive for "strategic autonomy," which aims to lower its dependency on external variables while strengthening its position as an active player in international security worldwide (Chun & Tianyu, 2022).

The actual shift in strategy was made possible by the releasing the 'EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific' in 2021, which ultimately marked the beginning of a new era in EU-Asia-Pacific ties. The policy's emphasis on sustainable development, territorial stability, and a regulatory structure indicated that the EU aims to be involved in security matters (Huxley & Schreer, 2021). Throughout this period, the EU's stance on the Asia-Pacific region has changed from primarily focused on economics to considering financial sustainability, geopolitical independence, and security aspects.

There are concerns about Europe's Asian goals regarding resources and commitment. Coordination with its member nations is necessary to strengthen the EU's presence in the Asia-Pacific because it lacks its navy. Only France has maintained a regional security presence for a long time, but Germany, Italy, and the Netherlands, among others, may be able to play a more significant regional role (Casarini, 2022). It makes sense that these members would need to contribute more funds for any improved EU policy to be successful. The EU actively seeks mutual assistance to participate in joint naval exercises and maintain diplomatic ties with critical regional partners such as Australia, India, and Japan (MOFA, Japan). As stated in most policy

models, such steps build the European Union's commitment to maintaining basic principles like marine security, freedom of navigation, and an international order founded on norms (EC, 2021). Such collaborations are vital to expanding joint security measures and forging a unifying response to unilateral deployments of dominance by any state entity.

Europe indeed stepped up its involvement in the Indo-Pacific region before 2021. The European Union has maintained a solid regional trade policy, signing free trade agreements with South Korea, Japan, Singapore, and Vietnam. EU countries have already established more than 40 strategic alliances in the region. The European Union and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) have developed a complex collaboration that extends beyond the economic sphere and addresses topics ranging from maritime security to higher education and climate change (Suorsa, 2021). In December 2020, both organisations collaborated by becoming a 'strategic alliance'. Beginning with France, which has a long history in the Indo-Pacific, EU member states also strengthened their regional engagement at the national level. The groundwork for an EU strategy in the Indo-Pacific was laid more recently when Germany and then the Netherlands developed their guidelines (EU, 2023).

The six avenues of action the EU member states have established can be classified into three distinct looms: security, economic, and diplomatic. A stable Indo-Pacific region founded on 'democracy, the rule of law, human rights, and international law' is what Europeans demand in the diplomatic sphere. With tensions between Beijing and Brussels rising, the European Union intends to take a stronger stance concerning China by supporting this Indo-Pacific agenda. The Comprehensive Agreement on Investment is the sole citation to China in the decisions, even though Europeans note the importance of promoting collaboration with countries that share their standards, beliefs, or mutual interests (Hongjian, 2022). Continuing with ASEAN, the European Union would likely expand its association with global players, including the Pacific Islands Forum and the

Indian Ocean Rim Association (EU, 2023). The primary goal of Europeans is to promote normative multilateralism to deal with various issues, including ocean governance, risk mitigation, epidemic control and preventative measures, climate change, and biodiversity.

Impact on EU-China Relations

The engagement that was once just an economic alliance has grown more profound due to the EU's strategic shift in the Asia-Pacific. The EU's move to a security approach emerges from a more vital balance of power with China. The EU intensely emphasises international cooperation and democratic governance, which coincides with China's military and economic strength and territorial dominance. Europe has long centred its approach to the Indo-Pacific on trade and investment, shaping its interactions with regional nations (EU, 2023). Is Europe interested in becoming a strategic partner for these states after its awakening in the Indo-Pacific? How significant will trade be in their interactions?

According to the survey, most EU member states still primarily see the Indo-Pacific as an area with economic potential. Deglobalisation trends, however, are becoming more noticeable globally as the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the dangers of globalised markets and supply chains. Thus, the research reveals that Europe primarily considers the internationalisation debate as an attempt to reconcile national and international interests better while dealing with risk. This leads to discussions about how to upgrade domestic manufacturing sectors and, frequently, about outsourcing the reindustrialisation of Europe (Crabtree, 2023). Some countries intend to gain from proximity by a few leading European producers, such as Germany, that might opt to relocate their production facilities from China and other Asian countries to regions closer to home (Hutt, 2022). Such discussions may sometimes be cynical. However, the analysis finds that trade expansion is a far more significant point of discussion in Europe than restructuring manufacturing facilities. The difficulty of shifting production away from China contributes to this. This is also because there will be more and more customers near the

production site due to the growing demand for products in South and Southeast Asia (Hongjian, 2022).

China has been taking a cautious approach to the EU's growing security presence in the Asia-Pacific, viewing this as a viable alignment with the policy of containment advocated by the United States. China considers the EU's Indo-Pacific Zone Policy a threat to its regional power (Babar & Khan, 2022). In contrast, their diplomatic remarks frequently stress its national sovereignty and denounce outside meddling in Asia-Pacific affairs (Doshi, 2021). To mitigate the effects of the EU and the US, China has also been working to reinforce its neighbouring collaborations, expanding economic cooperation with ASEAN countries and engaging extensively with entities like Russia.

There has been a wider geopolitical influence since the EU's presence in Asia-Pacific security will shift the balance of power that the region used to be ruled by in contention between the United States and China (Kuik, 2021). A multipolar shift appears by this modification, where the EU portrays itself as a third geopolitical power capable of settling crises and maintaining stability despite firmly backing either China or the United States. Meanwhile, Chinese scholars point out the significance of China and the European Union's historically being diplomatic and economic affiliates, with these relationships consistently functioning as a source of stability in Sino-EU ties. China's leading trading accomplice and most significant supplier of technological innovation has remained the European Union. Both entities engage effectively throughout the international chain of value (Men, 2023).

Future Projections of EU's Strategy in the Asia-Pacific and China Relations

The ongoing militancy involvement of the EU in the Asia-Pacific region has had a lasting impact on connections, with China being the subject of concern. A way forward towards a specific security part is being offered by the EU's rising militarisation in the region of the

Asia-Pacific involving defence alliances and greater naval force. In the long run, a far more delicate connection between the EU and China might occur, where this rivalry over strategy and financial dependence interact, which could be a possibility for this sudden change (Kuik, 2021). According to analysts, China might make more decisive moves to preserve its interests as the EU deepens its association with Asia-Pacific strategic systems, heightening regional stress (EC, 2023).

By prioritising regional adaptability and growth, the EU could monetarily lower its dependence on China and reinforce its relations with ASEAN, Japan, and India. This shift in dynamics could lead to a chain of collaborations that contribute to regional peace and security while undermining China's regional interests (Crabtree, 2023).

Regarding connectivity, the European Union will struggle to compete with China's Belt and Road Initiative. The European Union financed approximately 8 billion euros in connectivity projects in Asia from 2014 to 2020. Although the European Union will be able to increase the impact of its funding if it can better mobilise private investment and concentrate on projects with high-added value and visibility, these resources still fall well short of the determined 1.3 trillion euros required per year to satisfy the growing demand for systems through the Asia-Pacific region (ASEAN, 2022). Regarding maritime security, the same is true. European militaries have declined significantly in recent years, and Europeans tend to confront issues when responding to local security threats. Europeans will inevitably seek to be practical and work together to maintain an efficient operational presence in the Asia-Pacific.

The EU has been expanding its pivotal role in the Asia-Pacific region. However, it depends on rising strategic parameters. In the future, the next move for EU-China relations might cover conflict, cooperation, or competition from many perspectives to deal with the global structural forces in the regions. If China responds strongly to the EU's security ties with those states that back the United States, eventual disputes might arise. Nonetheless, there are still possibilities for

interaction in those domains where both sides could have overlapping goals, such as international trade, sustainable growth, and climate change (China Chamber of Commerce to the EU, 2023).

As Brussels outlined in the EU-Asia connectivity policy, the goal of connection is to strengthen ties between nations, people, and societies. Closer interpersonal and professional ties are expected to result from it. In order to improve cross-border trade, 'soft' connection involves people-to-people interactions and the harmonisation of institutional standards; 'hard' connectivity involves creating physical barriers, electrical transmission networks, and info exchange facilities (Luthra, 2021). One of the main ways the EU may boost cooperation and expand its bonds with the Indo-Pacific region is through maritime connectivity. Moreover, China's role will be more prominent in resisting and employing such targets where the EU could maintain its limitations without being pressurised and develop a sustainable position in the region with a stronger motivation (Sicilia, 2024).

Regarding defence and security, member states urge the EU to 'do its role' to combat the growing Indo-Pacific security threats, which involve counterterrorism, non-proliferation, cybersecurity, and maritime security. Europeans emphasise preserving 'free and open' marine lines of connections by international law regarding maritime security. Through CRIMARIO II, an information-sharing network whose coverage area will be stretched from the Indian Ocean to South and Southeast Asia, member states would like to bring about greater involvement between European and Asian navy vessels and improved maritime domain awareness. The European Commission acknowledges the evident limits in its plan of action. As a result, the strategy puts a greater focus on softer maritime issues than naval power, such as defence diplomatic effort, ocean policy for the long-term preservation of marine assets and conservation of biodiversity, and capacity building, mainly in the areas of coastal realm alertness, combating pirates' actions, and the border cross-offences (Bradford, 2020).

Policymakers should carefully consider the many domestic and international factors that are continually changing in order to determine the Indo-Pacific region's destiny. The initial efforts of this new partnership of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific Policy have focused on initiatives that provide infrastructure-based growth and support, which is thus not unusual. Josep Borrell, who is the vice president of the European Commission and the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, made the declaration official when he stated that Based on trading and investing in accessibility, climate change mitigation, and safety, Europe has a significant interest in the Indo-Pacific and ought to play our bit to maintain the regional framework broad and based on rules. With this announcement, the EU finally took a global stance on the Indo-Pacific, ending a protracted strategic lapse. Some have argued that China's economic involvement in the EU through the Belt and Road Scheme (BRI) 79 is one of the root reasons for this European symmetry.

The Chinese Belt and Road Initiative, usually known as chequebook diplomacy, may have posed the most significant barrier to a rise of local interest in building a national plan to counterbalance the Asian superpower. It follows that the countries that voiced concern about the integration of China into Europe, particularly France and Germany, were likewise the first to put forward a distinctive national strategy to be part of an unusual link with China in future to restore regional stability by combining all the strategies within (Chun & Tianyu, 2022).

The shifting connection between the EU and China may symbolise a tactical contest through partnership, whereby strategic rivalry and mutual dependence overlap. Voluntary partnerships on international issues could mitigate competitiveness in the EU-China partnership since the EU has built its place in the Pacific region (Suorsa, 2021).

The EU's position could strengthen the region by fostering accountability, collaboration, and an order based on rules addressing unconventional security issues such as global warming and nautical

safety. However, the shift into militancy additionally has the potential to result in a security paradox that makes nations throughout the region tempted to strengthen barriers, which could ultimately contribute to a rise in hostilities.

CONCLUSION

The transition beyond the EU's essential commitment to the economy marks a more profound vision encompassing stability and security, which has been seen in the geopolitical change in the European Union towards the Asia-Pacific. It can be analysed that the EU's turn is a strategic response to altering international facts driven by China's bold rules and concerns over regional peace and its longing for strategic detachment. The transformation made EU-China ties aspects more competitive, offering prospects for direct collaboration in domains of common interest. This research entails a study of the perspective in Asia-Pacific based on tranquillity while splitting the entire region that might have been nurtured via the EU and, in the meantime, weighing economic and security concerns. Considering this, the fresh approach the EU has adopted for the Indo-Pacific advancement is a positive beginning. These results, which all members have broadly supported, indicate Europe's commitment to take an active part in the region by leveraging its multiple initiatives and strengthening interaction with allies who reflect its beliefs.

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