HEINRICH BÖLL STIFTUNG
SOUTHEAST ASIA

# Whose Indo-Pacific?

## Civil Society Perspectives from Southeast Asia and Strategic Recommendations for EU and German Human Rights Engagement

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**By Khoo Ying Hooi**

## Content

# Executive Summary

Civil society organizations (CSOs) across the Indo-Pacific[1] are operating in a tightening space shaped by funding volatility, securitized governance, and intensifying great-power competition. Interviews with practitioners and scholars from Thailand, the Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia and regional networks show that while most non-governmental organizations (NGOs) remain focused on domestic advocacy, their room to maneuver, and even their survival, now hinges on geopolitical dynamics they neither initiated nor have the power to. These geopolitical currents reshape not only the themes they must prioritise, such as digital rights, climate justice, or maritime security, but also the funding landscapes and diplomatic pressures surrounding them. For the European Union (EU) and Germany, this moment is both a risk and an opening: measured, principled support can steady critical civic infrastructures and keep human rights at the centre of a region increasingly defined by strategic rivalry.

**WHAT'S CHANGING.** First, donor dependence has become a structural vulnerability. Many groups tied to United States Agency for International Development[2] (USAID) or U.S.-linked instruments experienced abrupt retrenchment, forcing layoffs, program closures, or a turn to volunteerism. Nordic and some EU member-state funds have buffered a few networks, but overall resources are thinner and less predictable, exacerbated by Europe's budget re-prioritizations and global crises. Philanthropic alternatives, such as regional venture philanthropy and private foundations, remain too small to replace public aid at scale.

Second, the "Indo-Pacific" frame is widely recognized in government and think-tank circles but is still seen by many NGOs as an external, sometimes polarizing label. Civil society leaders caution that adopting it uncritically can expose organizations to accusations of partisanship or anti-China positioning, especially in contexts where foreign-funding sensitivities run high. Several respondents therefore advocate an "Asian-owned democracy narrative" that centers universal rights while avoiding geopolitical proxy battles.

Third, securitization is expanding. Governments portray protest, migration, environmental defense, or Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, Gender Expression, and Sex Characteristics (SOGIESC) advocacy through security lenses, tightening controls and stigmatizing CSOs as "foreign agents". Regional fora such as Association for Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) provide only limited formal space for civil society participation; in many cases, engagement becomes possible only when sensitive rights-based agendas are recast in neutral or policy-oriented

1 The term "Indo-Pacific" is used in this paper with critical awareness. It reflects prevailing policy discourse rather than an endorsement of its geopolitical framing, which many civil society actors in the region find limiting or exclusionary.
2 Joseph Gideon & Robert Tait, Trump administration to cut all USAID overseas roles in dramatic restructuring. The Guardian. 11 June 2025. https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/jun/10/trump-fires-usaid-overseas-employees

terms; for example, presenting SOGIESC work as public-health programming or environmental justice as climate-adaptation support. At the same time, digital risks from state surveillance to coordinated online harassment continue to raise protection costs for defenders.

Fourth, substitute patrons are not straightforward. Japan's cooperation agencies prioritize infrastructure and capacity building technical assistance rather than rights-oriented support; China's regional financing privileges connectivity and state-to-state projects, with weak social safeguards and little space for independent CSOs. Multilateral lending remains influential, with the Asian Development Bank (ADB) more prominent than the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), but its civic impact depends on the strength and enforcement of social and environmental standards, which are unevenly applied.

**WHAT WORKS.** To remain resilient, CSOs increasingly diversify revenue including mixing grants, fee-for-service, corporate social responsibility (CSR) partnerships, and community crowdfunding, co-create agendas with affected communities to reduce perceptions of foreign orchestration, and anchor advocacy in universities and regional networks to retain legitimacy and evidence depth. Targeted European support to small, at-risk NGOs, plus flexible core funding to regional platforms can have strong impact, provided procedures are light and protection resources such as legal aid, relocation, and digital security are built in.

## What the EU and Germany should do

1. Embed civil society as a strategic pillar in Indo-Pacific engagement, not a peripheral add-on.
2. Shift from projectized, short-cycle grants to multi-year, flexible core support, with simplified compliance for small organizations.
3. Fund protection measures, for instance rapid-response legal aid, safe housing and relocation, psychosocial care, and digital security toolkits.
4. Underwrite region-wide platforms and cross-border coalitions to pool capacity and reduce duplication.
5. Invest in narrative capacity so partners can advance locally grounded, universalist democracy frames without being boxed into great-power binaries.

Backed by these measures, EU and German engagement can keep civic space open where it is closing fastest, safeguard human dignity amid geopolitical flux, and lend durable ballast to democratic resilience across the Indo-Pacific.

# Introduction

This policy paper is the outcome of an almost a year-long research project that began in January 2025 and concluded in October 2025. It benefited from the generous contributions of colleagues and institutions in Southeast Asia and beyond and is grounded in extensive interviews with civil society actors, academics, and practitioners across the region. The project set out to understand how geopolitical shifts, particularly the rise of China and the recalibration of U.S. foreign policy, are reshaping the environment for civil society in the Indo-Pacific. At a time when Western governments are issuing new Indo-Pacific strategies, this policy paper argues that civil society deserves more direct attention in policy debates that are still dominated by state-to-state relations, trade, and security cooperation.

The Indo-Pacific has become the central arena of global contestation. In this policy paper, the term "Indo-Pacific" refers to the interconnected region linking the Indian and Pacific Oceans, with particular analytical focus on Southeast Asia as the region where great-power logics and civil society dynamics converge. The U.S. frames its vision around a "free and open Indo-Pacific[3]," seeking to strengthen alliances and contain China's influence. China, in turn, has consolidated its role through the Belt and Road Initiative[4] (BRI) and the AIIB, projecting power through connectivity, trade, and infrastructure. Other Asian states such as Japan[5], India, and South Korea[6], have articulated their own variations of the Indo-Pacific vision, often aligned with but not identical to Washington's. Key extra-regional partners, notably Australia[7] have likewise advanced Indo-Pacific frameworks shaped by their strategic positioning and alliance relationships. In Europe, individual states such as Germany[8], France[9], and the United Kingdom (UK), alongside the EU[10], have also issued policy documents highlighting their interests in the region, motivated primarily by the rise of China and its challenge to the rules-based international order.

Civil society in Southeast Asia is caught in the middle of these dynamics. Local organizations are deeply engaged in promoting human rights, environmental protection, social justice, and inclusive governance. They operate as watchdogs of

3 U.S. Department of States, A free and open Indo-Pacific: Advancing a shared vision. November 4, 2019. https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Free-and-Open-Indo-Pacific-4Nov2019.pdf
4 The Belt and Road portal. https://eng.yidaiyilu.gov.cn/ztindex.htm
5 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. https://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/page25e_000278.html
6 Ministry of Foreign Affairs Republic of Korea. https://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/wpge/m_26382/contents.do
7 Australian Government. 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper. https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/minisite/static/4ca0813c-585e-4fe1-86eb-de665e65001a/fpwhitepaper/foreign-policy-white-paper.html
8 Federal Foreign Office. Policy guidelines for the Indo-Pacific. August 2020. https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/resource/blob/2380514/f9784f7e3b3fa1bd7c5446d274a4169e/200901-indo-pazifik-leitlinien--1--data.pdf
9 Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs. France's Indo-Pacific strategy. 2025. https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/france_s_indo-pacific_strategy_2025_cle04bb17.pdf
10 European Union. EU Indo-Pacific strategy. 30 Jan 2024. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu-indo-pacific-strategy_en

government power and as bridges between grassroots communities and regional or global norms. Yet their space is shrinking. Restrictive laws, securitization of dissent, and harassment of activists have become common features across the region. Governments increasingly portray NGOs as foreign agents, especially when they receive external funding. The donor landscape itself is shifting, with U.S. retrenchment under the Trump 2.0 administration leaving many organizations scrambling for alternatives, while European and Nordic support, although important, is limited in scale and also decreasing[11]. China's financial reach in the region is immense, but it has not opened meaningful channels for independent civil society.

The research on which this policy paper is based relied primarily on semi-structured interviews with 32 respondents from across Southeast Asia, and a small number of key experts from outside the region whose work focuses on broader geopolitical dynamics, complemented by secondary data including scholarly work and documents. Interviews were conducted both in person and online, with participants ranging from leaders of regional human rights and democracy networks to academics and practitioners with long-standing experience in the field. This design allowed for a triangulated approach: capturing the lived experiences of NGOs, analysing donor and government strategies, and situating these within the broader scholarly and policy debates on the Indo-Pacific. Thailand, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia were selected to capture variations in political systems, donor engagement, and civic traditions. These countries also feature comparatively vibrant civil societies, offering valuable insights into the dynamics of human rights and advocacy in the region.

The objectives were fourfold. First, it sought to map how Indo-Pacific geopolitics influence civic space and organizational sustainability in Southeast Asia. Second, it aimed to assess the strengths, vulnerabilities, and adaptive strategies of civil society actors in different national contexts. Third, it explored the entry points for European engagement, particularly through Germany and the EU, that could align with both local needs and broader strategic priorities. Finally, it developed policy recommendations to enhance the resilience and legitimacy of CSOs amid growing pressures.

What emerged from the interviews is a picture of civil society at a crossroads. Many activists acknowledged that the term "Indo-Pacific" remains abstract and externally imposed, with little relevance to their everyday work. Nevertheless, it increasingly shapes which forms of civil society activity are funded, how projects must be framed, and which actors gain visibility, often privileging strategic, technocratic agendas over long-term grassroots rights and protection efforts.

11 Erin Hale. Southeast Asia's foreign assistance to fall more than $2bn next year. Al Jazeera. 21 July 2025. https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/7/21/southeast-asias-foreign-assistance-to-fall-more-than-two-billion-next-year

Organizations dependent on U.S. aid have had to cope with abrupt cuts, forcing some to shut down or rely on unpaid volunteers. European donors have stepped in selectively, but often with burdensome requirements that small NGOs struggle to meet. Meanwhile, Chinese investments continue to reshape local economies, on issues such as eroding labor and environmental safeguards, without creating parallel spaces for civic engagement[12].

At the same time, civil society has demonstrated remarkable adaptability. Some organizations have diversified their funding through philanthropy, corporate partnerships, or community-based support. Regional networks have strengthened solidarity across borders, developing shared narratives such as the call for an "Asian-owned democracy" that asserts democracy as a universal principle while resisting its reduction to a geopolitical tool. Universities and academic networks have played a bridging role, providing legitimacy and evidence that complement activist language. Despite shrinking space, civil society remains creative, resilient, and determined.

For European policymakers, particularly in Germany and the EU, the challenge is to recognize that civil society is not peripheral but central to the region's future. The EU's Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific (2021) and Germany's Policy Guidelines for the Indo-Pacific (2020) emphasize multilateralism, connectivity, and a rules-based order, but they often treat NGOs as secondary actors rather than as strategic partners. This policy paper argues for a recalibration. By embedding civil society into their Indo-Pacific engagement, European actors can help sustain democratic resilience, strengthen accountability, and ensure that their engagement reflects not only state interests but also people-centred governance.

The timing of this study is significant. With the return of Donald Trump to the White House in early 2025, U.S. policy has become more unpredictable and, in many respects, more transactional. This creates uncertainty for Southeast Asian CSOs who had long relied on American democracy assistance. Meanwhile, Europe faces its own pressures, with resources diverted to crises in Ukraine and the Middle East. China continues to expand its economic and political influence, while ASEAN, despite its rhetoric of centrality, remains constrained by non-interference. In this environment, civil society is simultaneously more vulnerable and more vital than ever.

12 Frost, S. (2004). Chinese outward direct investment in Southeast Asia: how big are the flows and what does it mean for the region?. The Pacific Review, 17(3), 323-340; Frost, S., & Ho, M. (2005). 'Going out': The growth of Chinese foreign direct investment in Southeast Asia and its implications for corporate social responsibility. Corporate Social Responsibility and Environmental Management, 12(3), 157-167.

This policy paper therefore seeks to fill a gap in both scholarship and policy by foregrounding civil society in geopolitics debates. It contributes to ongoing discussions by amplifying the voices of activists who are rarely heard in high-level strategy papers but who live with the consequences of geopolitical rivalry in their everyday work. The findings are not meant to be exhaustive but illustrative of broader trends and challenges. By integrating empirical insights with policy analysis, the paper offers concrete recommendations that can help EU and German policymakers craft strategies that are both principled and pragmatic.

Ultimately, the Indo-Pacific is not only a strategic theatre for great-power competition. It is also a civic space where human rights, democracy, and social justice are contested, defended, and reimagined. Civil society is central to this story, and how it is supported, or neglected, will shape the trajectory of the region in the years to come.

## Literature and Evidence: What Do We Know, What Do the Data Tell Us, and Where Are the Gaps?

The concept of the Indo-Pacific has undergone significant transformation in both scholarly and policy debates. Traditionally, the region was understood as a hub of civilizational exchange and commerce linking South Asia, Southeast Asia, and East Asia. Early historical writings highlight the role of India and China as anchors of this order, emphasizing patterns of mutual recognition and exchange[13]. These dynamics were disrupted by colonial expansion and later by Cold War rivalries, which fragmented connectivity and replaced cooperative networks with ideologically divided blocs. The end of the Cold War reopened the region to globalisation and regionalism but also introduced new asymmetries of power that underpin contemporary Indo-Pacific discourses.

Over the last decade, the Indo-Pacific has shifted from a descriptive geographic term to a strategic construct reflecting competing visions of international order. The U.S. and its allies advanced the idea of a "free and open Indo-Pacific", emphasising freedom of navigation, rules-based trade, and security cooperation as counterweights to China's rise[14]. Japan and Australia reinforced these principles with a focus on connectivity and maritime security, while India leveraged the Indo-Pacific framework to project influence across maritime and continental

13 Acharya, A. (2025). From Southeast Asia to Indo-Pacific: Culture, identity and the return to geopolitics. Penguins Random House SEA.

14 Dupont, P. (2021). The United States' Indo–Pacific Strategy and a Revisionist China: Partnering with Small and Middle Powers in the Pacific Islands Region. Issues & Insights, 21(2), 1-40; He, K., & Feng, H. (2023). After hedging: Hard choices for the Indo-Pacific states between the US and China. Cambridge University Press.

Asia[15]. China, however, has rejected the Indo-Pacific concept as exclusionary and as a thinly veiled attempt to contain its BRI[16]. Scholars increasingly view the Indo-Pacific as polycentric and contested, shaped not only by great-power rivalry but also by the agency of middle powers such as Indonesia, Vietnam, and South Korea[17].

This duality highlights both continuity and change. Continuity lies in the Indo-Pacific's longstanding function as a nexus of exchange, while change reflects intensified strategic competition, new minilateral frameworks such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) and The Trilateral Security Partnership Between Australia, UK and U.S (AUKUS), and increasingly complex governance mechanisms[18]. ASEAN has sought to assert "centrality" through the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP), but the non-interference principle continues to limit its role[19]. Importantly, most of this literature remains state-centric, with far less attention to CSOs or grassroots actors.

The EU's engagement has evolved in parallel. For many years, the EU relied on the term "Asia-Pacific," emphasizing trade liberalization and economic diplomacy. The 2016 EU Global Strategy explicitly linked Europe's prosperity to Asia's security, marking a turning point. The 2021 EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific[20] further underscored the region's significance not only as an economic hub but also as a theatre of geopolitical competition. The EU's stakes are substantial: Member states have crafted their own strategies, with France highlighting its overseas territories and naval presence, Germany stressing diversification and multilateralism, and the Netherlands focusing on supply chain resilience[21]. While these strategies pushed EU to take a stronger stance, they also expose persistent fragmentation, reinforcing what has long been termed the EU's "capability–expectations gap[22]". Scholars point out that while the EU often references

15 Liu, H., & Jamali, A. B. (2021). India's Indo-Pacific Strategy: A Pragmatic Balancing between the United States and China. Pacific Focus, 36(1), 5-39; Vashisht, P. (2023). Indo-Pacific strategies: What do they entail for India?. Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs, 6(3), 109-128.

16 Jaknanihan, A. A. (2022). Beyond Inclusion: Explaining China's Rejection on the Indo-Pacific Regional Construct. Global: Jurnal Politik Internasional, 24(1), 35-62; He, K., & Feng, H. (2023). After hedging: Hard choices for the Indo-Pacific states between the US and China. Cambridge University Press; Nagy, S. R. (2022). US-China strategic competition and converging middle power cooperation in the Indo-Pacific. Strategic Analysis, 46(3), 260-276.

17 Abbondanza, G. (2022). Whither the Indo-Pacific? Middle power strategies from Australia, South Korea and Indonesia. International Affairs, 98(2), 403-421; Koga, K. (2023). Struggle for coalition-building: Japan, South Korea, and the Indo-Pacific. Asian Politics & Policy, 15(1), 63-82; Thuong, N. L. T., & Oanh, N. T. (2021). Vietnam in the Indo-Pacific Region: Perception, position and perspectives. India Quarterly, 77(2), 129-142.

18 Koga, K. (2025). Tactical hedging as coalition-building signal: The evolution of Quad and AUKUS in the Indo-Pacific. The British Journal of Politics and International Relations, 27(1), 109-134.

19 Paribatra, M. P. (2025). The "Indo–Pacific" Order: A Southeast Asian Perspective. Asian Politics & Policy, 17(3), e70031.

20 European Union. EU Indo-Pacific strategy. 2021. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eu-indo-pacific-strategy-topic_en

21 Pugliese, G. (2024). The European Union and an "Indo-Pacific" Alignment. Asia-Pacific Review, 31(1), 17-44; Cannon, B. J., & Hakata, K. (Eds.). (2022). Indo-Pacific strategies: Navigating geopolitics at the dawn of a new age. Routledge.

22 Lai, S., Bacon, P., & Holland, M. (2023). Three decades on: Still a capability–expectations gap? Pragmatic expectations towards the EU from Asia in 2020. JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies, 61(2), 451-468.

democracy, human rights, and the rule of law in its Indo-Pacific documents, these values are frequently subordinated to trade and security interests[23]. Very few studies examine how EU policies concretely support CSOs in the region.

These geopolitical developments set the wider strategic environment in which Southeast Asian civil society must now operate. While states recalibrate their approaches to the Indo-Pacific, the consequences are felt most directly by CSOs. Against this backdrop, this policy paper also examines the pressures, adaptations, and agency of CSOs in Southeast Asia. The literature on civil society in Southeast Asia is more developed but still uneven across the Indo-Pacific. Researchers highlight a broader pattern of authoritarian resilience, in which states refine their governance tools to preserve political control rather than transition toward greater openness. This includes tightening civic space through sedition laws, expansive security legislation, and digital regulation to manage public discourse and suppress dissent[24]. Data sources confirm this picture. The 2024 CIVICUS Monitor categorizes most Indo-Pacific states as "obstructed" or "repressed," with only Japan, New Zealand, and Taiwan assessed as open[25]. Freedom House and other institutes similarly report declines in civil liberties across Southeast Asia. UN Special Rapporteurs and human rights NGOs document patterns of intimidation, harassment, and violence, particularly against environmental defenders.

At the same time, CSOs demonstrate adaptability. Scholars note that CSOs rely on transnational networks, regional solidarity, and digital activism to maintain their relevance[26]. Regional platforms provide legitimacy and cooperation opportunities, though they remain donor dependent. Digital activism has mobilized younger populations but has also increased risks of surveillance and harassment[27].

Environmental activism has emerged as a particularly significant field. Pacific Island states are often described as frontline actors in climate justice debates,

23 Li, H. (2022). The "Indo-Pacific": intellectual origins and international visions in global contexts. Modern Intellectual History, 19(3), 807-833; Kuik, C. C. (2023). Shades of grey: riskification and hedging in the Indo-Pacific. The Pacific Review, 36(6), 1181-1214.

24 Lorch, J., & Sombatpoonsiri, J. (2023). COVID-19 and civil society in Southeast Asia: beyond shrinking civic space. VOLUNTAS: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations, 34(3), 613-625; Hansson, E., & Weiss, M. L. (2023). Routledge Handbook of civil and uncivil society in Southeast Asia. Taylor & Francis; Rodan, G. (2022). Civil society in Southeast Asia: Power struggles and political regimes. Cambridge University Press.

25 CIVICUS Monitor. 2024. https://monitor.civicus.org/search/countries/

26 Cheng, E. W., Lui, E., & Fu, K. W. (2024). The power of digital activism for transnational advocacy: Leadership, engagement, and affordance. New Media & Society, 26(11), 6416-6439; Avenell, S., & Ogawa, A. (2022). Transnational civil society in Asia. London: Routledge; Hansson, E., & Weiss, M. L. (2023). Routledge Handbook of civil and uncivil society in Southeast Asia. Taylor & Francis; Khoo, Y. H. (2023). Civic Space in the Time of COVID-19: The Case of Maritime Southeast Asia. In The Geopolitics of Health in South and Southeast Asia (pp. 120-138). Routledge.

27 Lim, M. (2023). " Everything Everywhere All At Once": Social Media, Marketing/Algorithmic Culture, and Activism in Southeast Asia. Georgetown Journal of International Affairs, 24(2), 181-190.

given their acute vulnerability to rising sea levels[28]. In Southeast Asia, environmental CSOs campaign against extractive industries and infrastructure projects associated with ecological degradation[29]. This landscape has become even more complex with countries such as Indonesia and the Philippines emerging as major hubs for critical raw materials. These minerals now underpin global supply chains not only for electric vehicles and renewable energy systems, but also for sensitive security sectors, most notably the production of military-grade technologies such as drones, surveillance equipment, and advanced weapons systems[30]. Reports such as 2023 Global Witness show that the Philippines, Indonesia, and Thailand are among the most dangerous places for environmental defenders. While EU and German Indo-Pacific strategies strongly foreground climate and environmental resilience, funding opportunities sometimes require the CSOs' work to be framed primarily through climate-related themes, even when community concerns centre on land rights, livelihoods, or civic space. This thematic narrowing raises important questions about whether external agendas ultimately support or constrain the full spectrum of local environmental and social activism.

Other major powers, and middle powers add another layer of complexity. India's Foreign Contribution Regulation Act has severely restricted external funding for NGOs, shaping regional debates about sovereignty and foreign influence[32]. Indonesia restricts and suppresses activism in Papua through a combination of legal constraints, securitisation, and coercive state practices[33]. Australia, meanwhile, provides selective funding for Southeast Asian CSOs, illustrating how middle powers act as both patrons and gatekeepers of civic engagement.

From this literature, several gaps stand out. Despite abundant work on the Indo-Pacific, scholarship remains heavily state-centric, rarely exploring how CSOs experience and respond to geopolitical competition. There is limited analysis of how donor interventions, including those from the EU and Germany, affect the sustainability and independence of CSOs in semi-authoritarian environments. The interaction between local priorities and external donor agendas remains poorly understood. Finally, while environmental activism is increasingly visible, its intersection with repression and donor politics is underexplored.

28 Enari, D., & Viliamu Jameson, L. (2021). Climate justice: a Pacific Island perspective. Australian Journal of Human Rights, 27(1), 149-160.
29 Harris, P. G. (Ed.). (2024). Confronting environmental change in East and Southeast Asia: eco-politics, foreign policy and sustainable development. Taylor & Francis.
30 Zamanillo, E., & Rivera, M. (2025). Mining Is Dead. Long Live Geopolitical Mining: How China's Critical Minerals Strategy Is Reshaping the New World Order. QM Books.
31 Global Witness Annual and Financial Report 2023. Challenging polluters, championing people. https://gw.hacdn.io/media/documents/Global_Witness_Annual_Report_2023_haehfIo_NcVQjop.pdf
32 Chaudhry, S. (2022). The assault on civil society: Explaining state crackdown on NGOs. International Organization, 76(3), 549-590.
33 McRae, D., Quiroga, M. D. M., Russo-Batterham, D., & Doyle, K. (2022). A pro-government disinformation campaign on Indonesian Papua. Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review, 3(5), 1-20.

In sum, the Indo-Pacific is widely recognized as a contested and multipolar region where economic and security considerations dominate both scholarly and policy discussions. Research confirms the shrinking of civic space and the resilience of CSOs, while highlighting the risks faced by activists, especially environmental defenders. Yet the evidence base remains thin on how great-power rivalry and European engagement specifically shape civil society. Addressing these gaps is crucial if EU and German policies are to move beyond rhetorical support toward concrete, sustainable engagement with grassroots actors.

# Case Studies

Civil society in the Indo-Pacific faces a spectrum of challenges, ranging from shrinking democratic space to geopolitical pressures that shape funding, legitimacy, and survival. The following case studies, namely Malaysia, the Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand, and a broader regional overview of Southeast Asia, highlight the complexity of civic activism in the current geopolitical climate. Each case demonstrates how domestic struggles intersect with international dynamics, and how local organizations perceive and navigate the implications of the Indo-Pacific narrative.

## Malaysia: Between Silence and Subtle Resistance

In Malaysia, CSOs operate within a political environment that is formally democratic yet tightly bounded by legal and political constraints. Respondents consistently noted that the Indo-Pacific as a geopolitical concept feels distant to many NGOs, who are more preoccupied with national issues such as corruption, governance, ethnic relations, and human rights. A practitioner explained that in Malaysia, overt reference to the Indo-Pacific rarely appears in everyday NGO discourse; it is more often encountered in the speeches of political leaders or in donor documents.

The government's official stance of non-alignment, reflected in public statements by leaders who avoid overt criticism of China or the U.S., creates a cautious environment for NGOs. Some respondents argued that the risks of engaging openly with Indo-Pacific narratives are high, as discussions can be politicized or weaponized domestically. For instance, framing advocacy in "anti-China" terms could easily be cast as undermining national unity or pandering to Western agendas, particularly given Malaysia's ethnically diverse population.

Yet, civil society actors acknowledge that geopolitics is not irrelevant. Several respondents admitted that funding opportunities, especially from Western donors, are increasingly framed within Indo-Pacific discourse. Some NGOs are reluctant to confront this openly, fearing that acknowledgment of dependence on Western resources could undermine their legitimacy at home. This silence, however, may

leave Malaysian civil society unprepared for sudden shifts in donor priorities. A civil society leader noted that European reallocation of aid to crises in Ukraine and the Middle East has already disrupted some long-term projects in Malaysia, underscoring the vulnerability of organizations reliant on external support.

Despite these constraints, Malaysian CSOs remain resilient. They have pursued alternative strategies such as partnerships with universities, collaborations with regional networks, and limited engagement with private philanthropy. Respondents emphasized that while geopolitics shapes the context, the immediate struggles such as freedom of expression, association, and assembly remain paramount. The Indo-Pacific is acknowledged as part of the broader environment, but it is rarely the explicit language through which Malaysian NGOs articulate their work.

## The Philippines: Donor Dependence and Contesting Narratives

The Philippines represents one of the most donor-dependent civil society environments in Southeast Asia. Respondents repeatedly underscored the centrality of U.S. funding, particularly through USAID, in sustaining CSOs engaged in service delivery, advocacy, and human rights work. Decades of reliance on American assistance have created both capacity and dependency: organizations have been able to professionalise and expand, yet they remain vulnerable to shifts in U.S. foreign policy. When funding was cut or redirected during the Trump 2.0 administration, some NGOs faced severe reductions in staff and programs, exposing the structural fragility of their reliance on Washington.

Civil society actors in the Philippines are also more directly exposed to the Indo-Pacific discourse. Respondents described how the concept has become a familiar part of official and donor language, particularly in relation to democracy promotion, maritime security, and human rights. While some welcomed the visibility, others expressed unease about being drawn into narratives that position civil society as proxies in great-power rivalry. One respondent stressed that human rights advocacy should not be reduced to a geopolitical tool; rather, it should be pursued as an intrinsic commitment.

Universities and academic networks play a critical role in the Philippines by providing intellectual legitimacy and connecting civil society to broader regional debates. Respondents noted that collaborations between CSOs and scholars have been effective in countering authoritarian discourse and strengthening advocacy with evidence-based arguments. However, the risks remain high. Activists described being "red-tagged" or accused of communist sympathies, a practice that has intensified under counter-terrorism legislation. This securitisation of dissent highlights how both domestic politics and international narratives combine to restrict civic space.

Respondents also commented on the limited alternatives to Western donor funding. Philanthropic sources such as regional venture philanthropy networks or private foundations provide some support but are insufficient to sustain the scale of civil society operations in the Philippines. China, while highly visible as an investor in infrastructure, does not extend resources to NGOs, and many respondents noted that Beijing's presence is associated with shrinking rather than expanding civic opportunities. The Philippine case thus illustrates both the opportunities and the dangers of donor dependence: NGOs benefit from long-standing ties to Western support but are also deeply exposed to its volatility and politicisation.

## Indonesia: Between Democratic Traditions and Rising Pressures

Indonesia presents a more complex picture, as the world's third-largest democracy with a vibrant history of civic activism but also with intensifying restrictions. Respondents highlighted the paradox of Indonesia's civil society: it has been a beacon of democratic participation since the 1998 Reformasi era, yet in recent years, the state has increasingly securitised activism, particularly in relation to Papua, environmental protests, and labor mobilisation.

The Indo-Pacific narrative is more visible in Indonesia than in many neighbouring states. Respondents observed that international conferences, donor programs, and think-tank dialogues frequently use the language of the Indo-Pacific to frame cooperation on democracy, development, and rights. For some, this has opened opportunities for Indonesian NGOs to connect with regional and global networks. Yet others worried that the emphasis on geopolitics risks overshadowing the domestic struggles that remain the core of civil society work. One participant commented that civil society should resist being co-opted into donor-driven geopolitical framings and instead insist on locally grounded agendas. Indonesia's recent entry into BRICS is another geopolitical development that may become relevant for civil society, although its implications remain uncertain.

Funding emerged as a recurring theme. Respondents acknowledged that while Indonesia benefits from a wide range of donor partnerships, including European governments, Nordic foundations, and multilateral institutions, there is still significant reliance on external support. Some NGOs have experimented with alternative financing models such as social enterprises and community-based fundraising, but these remain small in scale. China's expanding economic influence, especially through BRI projects, was described as a major challenge: infrastructure development often proceeds without adequate safeguards, leaving communities and environmental defenders vulnerable. CSOs find themselves mobilizing against projects with limited leverage, while donor support for environmental activism remains inconsistent.

Despite these constraints, respondents emphasized Indonesia's regional importance. As a middle power with democratic credentials, Indonesia shapes narratives on rights and democracy in Southeast Asia. CSOs play a critical role in maintaining this influence, even as they navigate shrinking space at home. For external partners, supporting Indonesian civil society means reinforcing a cornerstone of Southeast Asia's democratic landscape while acknowledging the risks of increased repression.

## Thailand: Shrinking Space and Experimentation

Thailand's civil society illustrates how domestic political upheaval intersects with international donor trends. Respondents described how NGOs working in rural communities and refugee assistance were severely affected by funding cuts, particularly when U.S. assistance was reduced during the Trump 2.0 administration. The impact was immediate: programs closed, staff were laid off, and organisations scrambled to find new revenue streams. This dependence on foreign aid revealed the structural vulnerabilities of Thai civil society.

The Indo-Pacific narrative is visible in Thailand through regional conferences and donor discourses. Respondents recalled meetings where the term was used repeatedly by international actors to frame democracy and rights promotion. While some saw this as a positive sign of sustained attention, others worried that excessive framing through geopolitics risks instrumentalizing democracy promotion. Several respondents stressed that democracy should be pursued as a value in itself, not merely as a counterweight to China.

The domestic environment in Thailand remains restrictive. Respondents described how protest movements are met with legal actions, surveillance, and restrictive enforcement practices. Yet NGOs and activists continue to adapt. Some former NGO staff have experimented with startup enterprises and corporate social responsibility initiatives, blurring the boundaries between activism and entrepreneurship. Respondents suggested that these innovations reflect a search for sustainability and autonomy in a hostile environment. External donors, including German and other European foundations, remain important, though respondents observed that their engagement has become more cautious.

Thailand's case underscores the fragility of civil society amid democratic backsliding and shifting donor priorities. It also highlights the creativity of activists who seek new forms of engagement to survive and remain relevant.

## Southeast Asia: Regional Networks and Broader Dynamics

Beyond individual countries, regional networks and broader Southeast Asian dynamics illustrate both the resilience and the vulnerabilities of civil society. Respondents from regional organisations described how Indo-Pacific narratives are increasingly present in donor dialogues, but NGOs often avoid using this language directly. Instead, they seek to frame their work around universal values and community needs. One respondent noted that civil society cannot afford to appear as a proxy in U.S.–China rivalry; doing so risks delegitimising their work in the eyes of domestic constituencies.

Regional networks however play crucial roles in sustaining cross-border collaboration. Respondents highlighted that these platforms facilitate concrete forms of support, including emergency legal advice, shared security protocols, joint advocacy strategies, and informal relocation or rest-and-respite arrangements for at-risk activists. For organisations operating in highly restrictive environments, regional networks also serve as channels for discreet information-sharing and collective risk mitigation. However, funding remains a major challenge. The redirection of European donor resources toward urgent crises such as Ukraine has forced some regional NGOs to scale back operations. This demonstrates how distant geopolitical crises can have immediate consequences for Southeast Asian civil society.

Environmental activism emerged as a recurring theme in the regional discussions. Respondents described how Chinese-funded infrastructure projects often proceed without safeguards, while Western donors impose their own conditionalities. Environmental defenders, particularly in the Philippines and Indonesia, face high levels of risk, including criminalisation and violence. Regional organisations have sought to amplify their voices in global climate justice movements, but resources remain limited.

LGBTQ and gender rights networks face challenges. Respondents recalled how funding cuts from U.S. agencies undermined LGBTQ advocacy, while European donors scaled back support. Some activists described seeking new alliances with Global South partners, including Latin American countries, to sustain their work in the face of both domestic hostility and declining Western assistance.

Smaller states such as Laos and Timor-Leste add further nuance. In Laos, respondents highlighted how even modest European support, such as from Luxembourg, has sustained fragile civic projects in a highly restrictive environment. In Timor-Leste, where civic space remains relatively open, respondents saw opportunities for regional leadership but also recognized that integration into ASEAN and Indo-Pacific frameworks could create new pressures.

Taken together, the regional overview shows a pattern of adaptation and resilience. Civil society across Southeast Asia recognizes the growing salience of the Indo-Pacific but resists framing their work in terms dictated by great-power competition. They face funding volatility, securitisation, and delegitimization, yet they continue to innovate through cross-border solidarity, co-creation with communities, and diversification of resources.

## Analysis

The case studies from Malaysia, the Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand, and the wider Southeast Asian region reveal important commonalities in how CSOs experience and navigate the Indo-Pacific context. While the Indo-Pacific is often presented as a state-centric strategic construct, the realities on the ground show that it also shapes the environment in which civic actors operate, even if they rarely use the term themselves. Civil society across the region is affected not only by domestic constraints but also by the geopolitical rivalry between the U.S. and China, the shifting priorities of European donors, and the growing prominence of issues such as digital governance and climate change. These dynamics create both opportunities and risks for organizations advocating for human rights, democracy, and environmental protection.

Respondents consistently noted that the Indo-Pacific narrative is not their language, it does not reflect how CSOs articulate their missions, or advocacy priorities, yet its consequences are unavoidable. In Malaysia and Thailand, NGOs admitted that donor calls and government policies increasingly reference Indo-Pacific strategies, even if activists themselves do not frame their work in those terms. In the Philippines and Indonesia, the discourse is more explicit, with respondents describing conferences and funding streams that directly invoke the Indo-Pacific as a justification for democracy assistance. While this visibility may sustain donor interest in civic actors, many cautioned against the instrumentalization of democracy and human rights as tools of great-power competition. For local organisations already accused of being "foreign agents," adopting geopolitical framings risks further delegitimization. The Indo-Pacific, in this sense, represents a paradox: it sustains external support but can simultaneously undermine local credibility.

The most striking cross-cutting theme is the continued shrinking of civic space. Governments across the region employ legislation on sedition, national security, and digital regulation to silence dissent and curtail NGOs. Activists are surveilled, harassed, and in some cases prosecuted under counter-terrorism laws. In the Philippines, respondents spoke of "red-tagging" as a common tactic to stigmatize human rights defenders. In Thailand, legal actions and restrictions on protest

movements remain prevalent. In Indonesia, civic space is constrained particularly around Papua and environmental activism. In Malaysia, constraints take a subtler form but remain deeply rooted in restrictive laws that inhibit freedom of assembly and association. The pattern is consistent: governments increasingly securitize dissent, often borrowing from the global discourse of counterterrorism or sovereignty to justify repression.

Yet within this shrinking space, civil society continues to adapt. Respondents described a variety of creative strategies: in Thailand, former NGO staff turned to startup enterprises and CSR initiatives to sustain their work; in the Philippines, partnerships with universities offered legitimacy and a platform for evidence-based advocacy; in Indonesia, NGOs combined advocacy with service delivery and social enterprises to diversify revenue streams; and in Malaysia, activists sought safety in alliances with regional networks and academic institutions. These strategies reflect a determination to persist even under restrictive conditions. However, respondents acknowledged that adaptation has limits. Burnout, fragmentation, and dependency remain persistent challenges. The constant need to adjust to donor volatility and state repression leaves little space for long-term planning.

Funding volatility is perhaps the clearest way in which geopolitics directly impacts civil society. In the Philippines, respondents recalled how cuts in U.S. assistance forced NGOs to reduce staff and shut down programs. In Thailand, refugee and rural development projects collapsed when American funds dried up. In Malaysia and Indonesia, European reallocation of aid to crises in Ukraine and the Middle East disrupted long-standing partnerships. Even regional organizations have been affected, with some forced to close offices due to resource shortages. This volatility underscores the fragility of donor-dependent civil society. Respondents pointed out that while philanthropic alternatives and community-based fundraising exist, they are insufficient in scale. China's expanding role in infrastructure and finance has not filled the gap, as Beijing channels its support through state-to-state mechanisms and offers little for independent NGOs. Middle powers such as Australia, Japan and South Korea provide targeted assistance, but not at the scale needed to substitute for U.S. or European resources.

Environmental activism reveals the sharpest intersection of geopolitics, rights, and civic vulnerability. Respondents in multiple countries described how large-scale infrastructure projects, often Chinese-funded under the BRI, but also sometimes backed by Western development banks, proceed with minimal safeguards. Communities that resist these projects face intimidation, criminalisation, or worse. Environmental defenders in the Philippines and Indonesia are particularly exposed, with violence and killings reported alongside legal harassment. Respondents noted that while Western donors often promote sustainability,

their funding tends to prioritise high-profile infrastructure over grassroots environmental organizations. This double burden referring to repression at home and misaligned donor agendas abroad leaves environmental CSOs struggling to survive. Regional climate justice movements have provided some solidarity, but respondents stressed that without stronger and more consistent international backing, environmental defenders remain dangerously vulnerable.

Despite these challenges, regional networks play an indispensable role in sustaining resilience. Respondents emphasized that regional coordination platforms ranging from issue-based coalitions to human rights consortia and informal practitioner networks enable cross-border cooperation. These spaces, often convened by regional NGOs or thematic alliances allow civil society actors in restrictive environments to remain connected to global advocacy and to access resources that would otherwise be unavailable. They also provide opportunities for collective narrative-building, such as promoting the idea of an "Asian-owned democracy." This framing does not imply a different or alternative model of democracy. Rather, it is a way of challenging the recurring portrayal of democracy as a Western export and emphasising that democratic values such as participation, accountability, rights protection, have long-standing local roots and histories in Asia. In this sense, "Asian-owned" refers to reclaiming the narrative, not redefining the principles. Yet these networks are not immune to the broader funding crisis. Respondents noted that some have had to close offices or scale back programs due to donor reallocation, threatening their capacity to continue serving as regional anchors.

Taken together, the evidence from the case studies points to a critical tension. Civil society in Southeast Asia is indispensable for advancing human rights, democracy, and environmental justice, yet it remains structurally fragile, dependent on volatile donor support, and vulnerable to state repression. The Indo-Pacific narrative amplifies this tension. On one hand, it ensures that Southeast Asia remains central to global strategic debates, which can keep civil society on the radar of donors and international organisations. On the other hand, it risks reducing civic actors to pawns in great-power rivalry, exposing them to delegitimization and domestic backlash.

The implications are profound. Human rights defenders are increasingly stigmatised as foreign agents, democracy promotion is portrayed as a geopolitical tool, and environmental activism collides with both authoritarian repression and the global infrastructure race. Civil society actors are acutely aware of these risks and actively seek to resist instrumentalization. Their strategies such as diversification of funding, narrative reframing, regional solidarity demonstrate agency and creativity. Yet respondents also warned that resilience has limits, such as the sustained political pressure, financial insecurity, and security threats are

contributing to growing burnout among activists and human rights defenders. Without sustained and flexible external support, many of these organisations remain at risk of erosion.

For policymakers in the EU and Germany, this analysis suggests that supporting civil society in the Indo-Pacific cannot be treated as an add-on to state-centric strategies. Civil society is not only a victim of geopolitical rivalry but also a potential agent of resilience, capable of holding governments accountable, defending rights, and advancing inclusive governance. To be effective, external support must avoid reproducing the instrumentalization that respondents warned against. It must instead focus on strengthening local ownership, providing flexible and long-term resources, and amplifying regional platforms that give voice to grassroots struggles. Only then can civil society continue to defend democracy, human rights, and environmental protection in a region increasingly defined by strategic competition.

# Recommendations

The interviews show that civil society in Southeast Asia is navigating a paradox. On one hand, the Indo-Pacific framework has increased donor and governmental attention to the region, bringing new resources and opportunities. On the other, respondents consistently problematised the term itself. Many see it as externally imposed, overly state-centric, and linked to the rivalry between the U.S. and China. Activists stressed that this language rarely reflects their own priorities, and that overt alignment with Indo-Pacific narratives risks delegitimising their work at home. EU and German policymakers must therefore support civil society without instrumentalising it as a proxy for strategic competition. The following recommendations address immediate needs, medium-term stabilisation, and long-term structural resilience.

## Short-Term Recommendations

### 1. Flexible emergency funding for at-risk CSOs

NGOs in Thailand and the Philippines described collapsing when U.S. funds dried up or when European donors redirected resources. Refugee programs and rural initiatives shut down within months, leaving communities unserved. To prevent this, EU and German actors should establish flexible emergency funding pools that provide quick disbursements for staff salaries, rent, and essential operations. These should have simplified requirements, ensuring accessibility for small grassroots groups, not only large professional NGOs.

## 2. Building cross-regional coalitions beyond the great power-frame

Many respondents worried that civil society risks being co-opted into U.S.–China rivalry. EU and German actors can mitigate this by cultivating partnerships with Global South states with diverse and contested democratic trajectories. Civil society exchanges, fellowships, and joint campaigns with these partners would show that democracy and rights are global commitments, not simply Western agendas.

## 3. Protection mechanisms for defenders

Civil society respondents in the Philippines and Indonesia repeatedly emphasised the dangers of "red-tagging," surveillance, and even physical violence, especially for environmental defenders. EU and German policymakers should expand protection mechanisms that cover legal aid, emergency relocation, psychosocial care, and digital security. Existing European initiatives, such as ProtectDefenders.eu, already collaborate closely with several regional organisations but could be adapted further to Southeast Asia's context, expanding support not only to individual defenders but also directly to smaller organisations that face collective risk, rather than relying solely on intermediary networks.

## 4. Targeting grassroots groups, not just elite actors

A Filipino respondent working with partners in Laos highlighted that even modest European funding, such as that provided by Luxembourg, had a disproportionately positive impact, as it reached fragile grassroots organizations otherwise cut off from resources. As a short-term corrective measure, funding should be earmarked specifically for community-based organisations, indigenous groups, and youth movements. Application procedures should be simplified, and intermediary partners in the region empowered to redistribute funds more equitably.

## 5. Human rights clauses in trade and connectivity deals

CSOs in Malaysia and Indonesia expressed concern that European connectivity and trade initiatives risk sidelining rights. To address this, the EU and Germany should integrate enforceable human rights and labor clauses into trade and connectivity agreements, anchored in business and human rights due-diligence frameworks. Crucially, monitoring mechanisms must involve civil society, not only state actors, so NGOs can hold governments accountable for violations.

### 6. Support for digital resilience

Activists described an increasingly hostile online environment, with surveillance, harassment, and disinformation campaigns targeting NGOs. Short-term measures should include digital security training, provision of secure communication tools, and support for counter-disinformation initiatives. EU and German assistance can provide both technical expertise and financial resources, helping NGOs operate safely in digital spaces.

### 7. Acknowledging Indo-Pacific scepticism

In the short term, European actors should be explicit that their support for civil society is not contingent on adopting the Indo-Pacific label. Respondents warned that aligning too closely with this discourse exposes NGOs to accusations of foreign alignment. EU and German policymakers should frame their engagement in terms of universal values including rights, democracy, sustainability, while making space for NGOs to use their own language and locally grounded narratives.

## Medium-Term Recommendations

### 1. Multi-year core funding

Civil society's greatest fragility lies in its dependence on short-term, project-based funding. Respondents in the Philippines and Thailand spoke of staff burnout and organisational collapse when grants ended. The EU and Germany should institutionalise multi-year, flexible core funding arrangements that cover salaries, infrastructure, and strategic planning. This enables NGOs to retain expertise and focus on long-term goals rather than survival.

### 2. Stabilising regional networks

Respondents emphasised the central role of regional human rights and democracy networks in sustaining cross-border solidarity. These platforms ranging from regional advocacy coalitions to training consortia and research-based networks enable activists in highly restricted environments, including Laos and Cambodia, to remain connected to broader movements and access resources. Yet several of these networks have been forced to reduce staff or close offices due to donor reallocations. Medium-term support should stabilise these networks through institutional grants, structured partnerships with European think tanks, and capacity-building initiatives, ensuring that regional solidarity is not disrupted.

### 3. Dedicated environmental justice funding

Environmental defenders face the most acute risks, especially in the Philippines and Indonesia. Respondents highlighted that donor funding often supports large infrastructure projects while leaving grassroots organisations underfunded. EU and German policymakers should establish dedicated environmental justice funds that support community-based activism, litigation, and evidence-based advocacy. Partnerships with universities and research institutes can reinforce CSO capacity to contest unsustainable projects.

### 4. Institutionalising civic roles in ASEAN–EU cooperation

ASEAN's elite-driven processes limit civic participation, but respondents noted that the EU has leverage to open space. Medium-term measures should include official CSO side forums at ASEAN–EU dialogues, funding for joint EU–ASEAN–CSO workshops, and structured civil society consultation in areas such as digital governance and climate change. By embedding civic input, the EU can gradually normalise CSO participation in interregional cooperation.

### 5. Supporting alternative financing models

Respondents in Thailand described turning to CSR and startup models when foreign funds disappeared; Indonesian NGOs experimented with social enterprises. EU and German engagement should encourage these innovations by creating regional philanthropic platforms, offering tax incentives for CSR contributions, and training NGOs in revenue and funding diversification. These measures would gradually reduce dependence on volatile foreign aid.

### 6. Engaging critically with Indo-Pacific language

In the medium term, the EU and Germany should clarify that Indo-Pacific strategies are not purely security documents but also frameworks for inclusive development and civic resilience. This would require explicitly naming civil society as strategic actors within policy papers, while acknowledging that local NGOs may resist the term itself. By reframing Indo-Pacific strategies to highlight universal values, European actors can reduce the perception of instrumentalization.

## Long-Term Recommendations

### 1. Building civic infrastructure for resilience

Respondents called for more durable support than project grants. In the long term, EU and German policymakers should invest in permanent civic infrastructure: human rights centres in universities, activist training academies, independent media platforms, and digital libraries for civic knowledge. These institutions would provide continuity even as donor priorities shift.

### 2. Institutionalising protection for defenders

Emergency relocation and ad hoc aid are insufficient. Long-term European engagement should establish permanent protection pathways, such as fellowships, scholarships, and psychosocial support embedded in regional institutions. Respondents imagined systems where threatened activists could find predictable support without begging for temporary fixes. Embedding such mechanisms in EU and German frameworks would make protection sustainable.

### 3. Supporting narrative sovereignty

Civil society actors repeatedly warned against the Indo-Pacific narrative being imposed upon them. Long-term support should therefore focus on helping CSOs develop their own frames, whether "Asian-owned democracy" or other locally resonant narratives. Funding for independent research, regional media platforms, and locally driven campaigns would reinforce narrative sovereignty, reducing vulnerability to accusations of being Western proxies.

### 4. Mainstreaming civic participation across policy fields

Finally, respondents insisted that civil society must not be siloed into human rights programs alone. Over the long term, EU and German strategies should embed CSOs into all cooperation domains: trade agreements monitored by labor rights NGOs, climate policies implemented with environmental groups, digital governance shaped with civic watchdogs, and security dialogues informed by human rights networks. Mainstreaming civic participation across sectors would secure their relevance and resilience for the decades to come.

# Conclusion

The Indo-Pacific has emerged as both a geographic construct and a political vision, representing the shifting power equations that are transforming the regional and global order. As a mega-region, it encompasses some of the world's most dynamic economies and most complex security challenges. As a vision, it embodies competing narratives of how the rules-based order should be defended, redefined, or replaced. It is precisely this dual character that makes the Indo-Pacific simultaneously a space of opportunity and contestation. For Southeast Asian civil society, the Indo-Pacific is less a concept to embrace than a context to navigate an environment where geopolitical rivalry, donor volatility, and normative debates directly affect their ability to function, survive, and contribute to human rights, democracy, and environmental protection.

A consistent theme in the interviews was the problematisation of the Indo-Pacific term itself. Many activists described it as an external framing that does not resonate with local realities. For them, the Indo-Pacific often carries the imprint of U.S.–China rivalry and risks casting NGOs as proxies for Western agendas. While donors and governments use the language freely, civil society actors often avoid it, fearing delegitimization or accusations of foreign alignment. Yet they cannot ignore its consequences: funding streams, donor priorities, and regional policy dialogues are increasingly shaped by Indo-Pacific strategies. The challenge, then, is how to ensure that civil society benefits from international attention to the region without being instrumentalised by it.

The case studies of Malaysia, the Philippines, Indonesia, and Thailand, along with broader Southeast Asian perspectives, demonstrate that civil society is under pressure but remains remarkably adaptive. Governments continue to restrict civic space through legislation, securitization, and harassment. Environmental defenders are criminalised, human rights advocates are red-tagged or surveilled, and NGOs are delegitimised as "foreign agents." Donor volatility compounds these pressures: organisations dependent on U.S. or European support are destabilised by funding cuts or reallocation, while China's expansive economic footprint offers little for independent civil society. Against this backdrop, activists are finding new ways forward through partnerships with universities, experiments with social enterprises, community-based fundraising, and regional solidarity platforms. These strategies show agency, but resilience alone cannot guarantee survival.

The analysis makes clear that civil society is indispensable for the future of the Indo-Pacific. These organizations are not marginal players; they are central to ensuring that human rights are protected, democracy is sustained, and environmental challenges are addressed. Without them, authoritarian consolidation will deepen,

community grievances will go unaddressed, and environmental degradation will accelerate unchecked. Civil society provides the connective tissue between citizens and institutions, between local struggles and global norms. Their role is therefore strategic, not incidental, in shaping the trajectory of the region.

For the EU and Germany, the implications are profound. Current Indo-Pacific strategies remain largely state-centric, emphasising trade, connectivity, and maritime security. Human rights and democracy are mentioned but often subordinated to economic and strategic priorities. Civil society is referenced only in passing, treated as an accessory rather than as a partner. Yet the evidence from Southeast Asia shows that supporting civil society is not simply a matter of values, it is a matter of strategic necessity. Civil society strengthens accountability, reduces instability, and provides legitimacy for inclusive governance. In the context of geopolitical rivalry, it is one of the few actors capable of articulating people-centred alternatives to state-driven agendas.

The recommendations outlined earlier, ranging from short-term protection mechanisms and rapid-response funds to long-term investments in civic infrastructure and narrative sovereignty, provide a roadmap for European engagement. They are not abstract ideals but grounded in the lived experiences of activists across the region. Civil society actors asked for flexible funding, not just rigid project grants; for recognition of their narratives, not just the imposition of Indo-Pacific discourse; for protection systems that extend beyond relocation to include psychosocial care and long-term security; and for the ability to play roles not only in human rights programs but also in trade, climate, and digital governance. These requests are both practical and transformative.

The EU and Germany can act on these fronts by rebalancing their Indo-Pacific engagement. In the short term, this means addressing urgent vulnerabilities: defenders under attack, organisations at risk of collapse, and communities facing environmental harm. In the medium term, it requires stabilizing regional networks, supporting alternative financing, and embedding CSOs into ASEAN–EU dialogues. In the long term, it calls for systemic change: embedding civil society as a pillar of Indo-Pacific policy frameworks, institutionalizing protection mechanisms, and supporting narrative sovereignty so that democracy and rights are seen as locally grounded and universally valid, not foreign impositions.

Importantly, European policymakers must recognize that the Indo-Pacific term itself is contested. CSOs do not need to use it to deserve support. EU and German engagement should therefore avoid requiring NGOs to adopt this language and instead prioritize universal values and community-driven agendas. This will reduce the perception of instrumentalization and protect the legitimacy of civic actors in their home contexts. By adopting a flexible, pluralistic approach to narratives,

European engagement can strengthen both the credibility of civil society and the authenticity of democracy promotion.

Ultimately, the Indo-Pacific is not just a strategic space for states; it is also a civic space where people fight for dignity, justice, and sustainability. If European engagement remains limited to naval deployments, trade deals, and high-level dialogues, it will miss the opportunity to contribute meaningfully to the resilience of the region. But if the EU and Germany place civil society at the heart of their Indo-Pacific strategies, they can help ensure that the region's future is not defined solely by great-power rivalry but also by people-centred governance and sustainable development.

Southeast Asian CSOs are vital partners in addressing the region's human rights challenges, environmental crises, and democratic struggles. By empowering these organizations through targeted support, collaborative initiatives, and long-term engagement, EU and German policymakers can help shape an Indo-Pacific that is not only geopolitically significant but also normatively grounded in democracy, human rights, and sustainability. This alignment of strategic interest with universal values is not only possible but essential if Europe's Indo-Pacific engagement is to be credible, transformative, and durable.

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