華陽海洋研究中心
Huayang Center for Maritime Cooperation and Ocean Governance

# Global Maritime Security Report

## 2025-2026



Huayang Center for Maritime Cooperation and Ocean Governance
November 2026

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# Global Maritime Security Report 2025-2026

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# PREFACE

Wu Shicun, Chairman of Huayang Center for Maritime Cooperation and Ocean Governance; Chairman of Academic Committee of National Institute for South China Sea Studies

Maritime security has become one of the most revealing lenses through which to read the changing strategic environment of the Indo-Pacific and beyond. The maritime domain is no longer shaped by naval capabilities and territorial disputes alone. Coast guards now do work that navies once did, and legal instruments are deployed as readily as ships. As geopolitical competition among major powers intensifies, regional states adjust their strategies and policies in response, developments in one stretch of water carry consequences far beyond a single dispute or subregion.

The South China Sea offers a case in point. Here, competing maritime claims intersect with wider strategic rivalries, reshaping the regional maritime order and influencing strategic calculations across the Indo-Pacific and beyond. In recent years, the United States and its allies have expanded their military presence and security involvement in and around the South China Sea. Some European countries have become more active in the Indo-Pacific maritime security, while Australia and Southeast Asian states have adjusted their maritime strategies in line with their respective interests and priorities.

During 2025-2026, the South China Sea has remained generally stable and manageable with regional dialogues and cooperation continuing to advance. Nevertheless, maritime conflicts and disturbances persisted and maritime security risks continued to mount. On the one hand, the growing involvement of extra-regional forces, increasing unilateral actions by some claimants, and the continuing repercussions of the 2016 South China Sea arbitral award, have made these risks more difficult to manage. On the other hand, China and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) have pressed ahead with consultations on the *Code of Conduct in the South*

*China Sea* (COC). China has also promoted practical cooperation in the region and pursued ocean governance guided by the vision of building a maritime community with a shared future. These efforts have helped manage differences at sea and sustain peace and stability in the region.

Against this backdrop, we invited nine maritime experts from think tanks in China, the United States, Belgium, Sweden, Australia, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Sri Lanka to contribute to the *Global Maritime Security Report 2025-2026*. Taking the South China Sea as its starting point, the report examines how developments in the region affect global maritime security and what they mean for ocean governance. Drawing on perspectives from major powers, treaty allies, middle powers, and small coastal states, the report seeks to show how the same strategic environment can be read very differently depending on where one sits.

The collection begins with a contribution from **Yang Li**, who reads China's 2025-2026 posture as strategic patience rather than escalation. Beijing relies on the China Coast Guard (CCG) to maintain a persistent presence around flashpoints such as Huangyan Dao (Scarborough Shoal), reinforcing its claims through baselines, nature reserves. Meanwhile, China has maintained its position of rejecting the 2016 South China Sea arbitral award. In managing disputes, China continues to pair bilateral handling of specific disputes with ASEAN negotiations on COC. The aim is to defend sovereignty while keeping the neighborhood stable and conducive to economic integration.

**Nong Hong** argues that Washington pursues its Indo-Pacific strategy primarily through sustained maritime operations rather than individual decisive actions. The United States regularly deploys naval vessels and military aircraft across the Indo-Pacific, conducts military exercises and Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs), and employs technological capabilities to enhance maritime domain awareness (MDA). These activities, supported by bilateral alliances and cooperative frameworks, including the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) and the Australia-United Kingdom-United States (AUKUS) security partnership, serve to

preserve operational access, deter coercion below the threshold of war, and bind allies. She further notes that although the United States has not ratified the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), it advances its reading of the law of the sea through operational practice rather than formal legal reform.

Two essays address Europe. **Alec Caruana** argues that Brussels continues to read the Indo-Pacific through interests closer to home—its economic dependence on China, its concern over the China-Russia relationship, and its uncertainty about the durability of U.S. commitments. The result is calibrated support for Manila and Hanoi and bloc-to-bloc engagement with ASEAN, pursued without binary alignment. Europe is becoming an autonomous actor, he concludes, propelled less by design than by the accumulated pressure of events it did not choose.

**Yifei Zhu** and **Niklas Swanström** move from declaratory policy to observable behavior, grouping European actors by capacity and willingness to project force. Britain and France deploy hard power; Germany prefers non-kinetic means; Italy and the European Union (EU) engage functionally. Measuring 2025 against the documents published since 2020, they find the stated ends intact but the means markedly harder, with carrier strike groups deployed to the region. Shifts in U.S. posture, they warn, will force another recalibration.

The perspectives of regional and middle powers form the core of the volume. **You Ji** suggests that Australia's departure from its traditional neutrality on the South China Sea was driven less by the dispute itself than by the alliance with Washington—an unavoidable premium for a country whose strategic culture rests on securing an external guarantor. Canberra has backed non-Chinese claimants through defense agreements, exercises, and support for the 2016 arbitral award, while avoiding entrapment. The dispute is not a vital Australian interest, and both capitals have worked to compartmentalize it.

**Sumathy Permal** sets out Malaysia's response to a region where coast guards and militia vessels assert claims while staying below the threshold

of open conflict. Astride the busiest sea lanes, Kuala Lumpur faces encroachment in its exclusive economic zone (EEZ) alongside piracy, illegal fishing, and trafficking. Its answer is deliberately non-confrontational: stronger enforcement coordination through the Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency (MMEA), investment in domain awareness, and cooperation such as the Malacca Strait Patrol (MSP).

**Shafiah F. Muhibat** traces Indonesia's shift from the Global Maritime Fulcrum (GMF) to a doctrine of maritime sovereignty, its defense plans constrained by budget and industrial capacity. More consequential, she suggests, are efforts to develop Indonesian Maritime Security Agency (Bakamla) into a civilian coast guard, letting Jakarta assert its rights in the North Natuna Sea through white hulls rather than grey. Not a claimant to sovereignty over the disputed South China Sea islands, Indonesia champions ASEAN centrality while addressing gaps in its maritime capabilities through minilateral patrols.

The volume then looks beyond the South China Sea. **Jayanath Colombage** writes from the vantage of a littoral state. Houthi drones and anti-ship missiles have forced merchant traffic to reroute and raised the cost of global trade, while Hormuz, Bab-el-Mandeb, and Malacca remain chronically exposed. The United States, India, and other powers are extending their strategic reach through the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy, the Quad, AUKUS, and India's Mutual and Holistic Advancement for Security and Growth Across Regions initiative (MAHASAGAR), contributing to what he calls a "maritime cool war". Smaller states such as Sri Lanka are pressed to choose sides when their priority is development.

Taken together, the eight studies demonstrate that contemporary maritime security competition extends well beyond traditional naval confrontation. Beyond naval power, states now draw on a wider range of instruments: coast guard hulls, baselines and nature reserves, arbitration and its rejection, joint patrols and capacity-building. Yet these measures may also generate new risks, even as they serve to protect maritime interests or strengthen security cooperation. More frequent maritime law enforcement activities

can increase encounters and friction at sea, and legal measures may harden competing readings of international law.

This volume therefore offers no single answer to the future of maritime security. Rather, it brings different perspectives into conversation, revealing differences in strategic calculations, national interests, and approaches to ocean governance, while offering a comprehensive understanding of global maritime security and its possible trajectories. Whether the coming years produce greater stability or further fragmentation will depend not only on the distribution of capabilities, but on the ability of states to manage maritime differences and incidents, maintain dialogue, and pursue practical cooperation despite their disagreements.

# 1. CHINA'S STRATEGY AND APPROACH TO THE SOUTH CHINA SEA IN 2025

Yang Li, Executive Director, Institute for China-Europe Studies (ICES)

In these years China continued to play an important role in shaping the maritime security environment of the South China Sea (SCS). Rather than pursuing a dramatic escalation, Beijing relied on a calibrated strategy combining persistent operations, legal and administrative consolidation, and proactive diplomacy. This paper analyzes China's strategic objectives, policies, and behavior in the South China Sea since 2025. It argues that China's approach could be best understood as a long-term effort to maintain its claims while managing dispute escalation and shaping regional narratives.

This paper begins by outlining the strategic context and principal objectives underpinning China's SCS policy. It then examines how Beijing has adapted to a changing international environment before analyzing its operational activities and the major maritime flashpoints. The paper subsequently explores China's diplomatic, legal, and other official initiatives, followed by an examination of Beijing's continued rejection of the 2016 SCS Arbitral Award and the rationale underlying that position. It concludes by assessing the defining characteristics and broader strategic implications of China's approach to SCS dispute management.

## 1. Introduction

The SCS is one of the most strategically consequential maritime regions in the world. It is a vital artery for global trade, a region rich in marine resources, and a central arena for overlapping territorial and maritime claims as well as great power competition.

For China, as a major coastal state, the SCS holds significant strategic, political, and economic value. China claims a large area of territorial and maritime space in the region, and considers it as a key theater for its

national defense and maritime security. In addition, the sea lanes of communications crossing the SCS carry a large proportion of China's imports and exports, particularly energy supplies. Moreover, the region is also believed to contain abundant living and non-living resources and to possess rich marine biodiversity.

## 2. The Strategic Context of China's SCS Policy

China's SCS policy, while subject to periodic tactical adjustments, has consistently focused on asserting sovereignty over archipelagos and their surrounding waters. Dozens of islands, reefs, and other maritime features claimed by China are currently occupied by other coastal states, such as Vietnam, the Philippines, and Malaysia, and China's claimed maritime zones overlap with those of more SCS littoral states.

Beijing is aware that these complex territorial and maritime disputes are difficult to resolve in the short term. Consequently, China tends to place the issue within the broader framework of its "peripheral diplomacy," referring to Beijing's policies toward its neighboring countries which emphasize economic integration and regional stability.

Within this framework, China tends to live with the status quo of the disputes on the condition that its territorial claims and maritime rights are not jeopardized before any final settlement could be found. Beijing aims to ensure that it would not recognize or acquiesce in other claimants' existing occupation of disputed features or control of maritime zones under overlapping claims. At the same time, it strives to prevent any additional seizure of features by any claimants and expansion of disputes into areas currently not contested.

To manage the SCS disputes and prevent their escalation, China has long been advocating a "dual-track" approach that combines bilateral negotiations between the directly concerned parties with regional mechanisms, e.g., the ASEAN.[1] The latter component of this approach is

1 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 'Wang Yi: Handle the South China Sea issue through the "dual-track" approach' (9 August 2014), https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/gjhdq_665435/2675_665437/2747_663498/2749_663502/202406/t2024

best reflected by initiatives such as the 2002 *Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea* (DOC) and the ongoing negotiations on COC by China and all the ASEAN member states, both of which aim to maintain stability, build confidence, and establish rules for containing the disputes.

At the same time, China is increasingly concerned about growing strategic competition with the United States, especially in the Indo-Pacific region, including the SCS as a critical theatre. From Beijing's perspective, U.S. activities in the SCS undermine both China's national security and stability of its external environment, particularly in its immediate neighborhood.

However, interpreting China's SCS policy primarily as part of the efforts to compete against or expel the U.S. from the Western Pacific is overly simplistic. Such views often overlook the fundamental context shaping China's behavior in the region: China has been implicated by the long-lasting territorial and maritime disputes with its neighboring states.

China, therefore, seeks to balance three major policy objectives in the SCS: safeguarding its sovereignty and maritime rights, maintaining stable relations with its Asian neighbors, and ensuring national security against the military presence of the U.S. and its allies, while avoiding direct military confrontation. All these objectives are built around such a strategic context where territorial and maritime disputes persist, without which China's approach toward the SCS would have been very different.

## 3. Adjusting to a Changing International Environment

China's SCS policy since 2025 largely reflected a continuation of the above long-term strategy goals. Furthermore, it also formed part of Beijing's broader response to a rapidly changing international environment.

Donald Trump's return to the White House in early 2025 triggered a series of shockwaves across the world, the scale of which had rarely been seen since the end of World War II. From China's perspective, these

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developments signal a period in which instability and uncertainty in international affairs grow significantly.

Whether these changes present opportunities or challenges for China, the world's second-largest economy, is debatable. From Beijing's perspective, they may represent both.

On the one hand, global geopolitical uncertainty has provided China with an opportunity to reinforce its outreach as a predictable and reliable international stakeholder. Some countries—including traditional U.S. allies—have sought to diversify their partnerships by strengthening ties with China. In response, Beijing has worked to deepen relations with major world powers and countries in the Global South, while strengthening emerging multilateral platforms such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and BRICS. At the same time, Beijing is careful not to project an image of directly competing with the U.S. for global dominance, and maintaining a stable, manageable relationship with Washington remains an important foreign policy priority. The Sino-U.S. agreement reached in May 2026 to build a constructive, strategically stable relationship acknowledges the existence of competition between the two powers, while simultaneously demonstrating a shared will to managing that competition to prevent it from escalating out of control. It remains to be seen what specific impact this consensus will have on the SCS.

On the other hand, China faces considerable challenges brought about by the shifting world order, particularly in its immediate neighborhood. Compared with the U.S. or other major world powers including the EU, China operates in a more complex geopolitical settings, since the country is surrounded by a large number of land and maritime neighbors, including both major global and regional powers, and its relations with most of these countries are shaped by complex historical legacies and contemporary disputes. To sustain and expand diplomatic engagement, as well as economic and trade relations with other countries, China requires a peaceful and stable international environment—a condition increasingly threatened by the uncertainty and instability of the changing global

dynamics.

Against this backdrop, China has been recalibrating and updating its peripheral diplomacy. In April 2025, Beijing convened the first top-level meeting in the history of the People's Republic of China focusing specifically on relations with neighboring countries, emphasizing that the neighborhood remains a top diplomatic priority even approached from a broader global perspective. The conference stressed that China's vast territory and long borders make its neighborhood crucial for development, national security and foreign relations. Beijing intends to pursue regional security by seeking common ground while shelving differences, using dialogue and consultation as key tools of conflict prevention, and views proper handling of disputes with neighboring countries as an indispensable condition for a stable and peaceful regional environment. Therefore, the pursuit of economic connectivity and high-level integration continue to be Beijing's priorities, while territorial and maritime disputes, particularly those in the SCS, are still to be managed with stability as the primary objective.[1]

## 4. Operations at sea

China's operational pattern in the SCS since 2025 remained broadly consistent with the posture it developed over the previous decade, which was characterized as reactive and responsive, despite the fact that China now possesses a larger set of tools at its disposal due to its strengthened capabilities both in terms of military operations and maritime law enforcement. China's current SCS operations focused on routine presence and control across the full extent of China's claimed area, while paying particular attention to key flashpoints. These localized actions are leveraged to shape the broader strategic picture for the entire region.

The CCG remained the principal operational instrument, conducting shadowing, blocking, water-cannon use, and exclusion operations. The

1 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 'The Central Conference on Work Related to Neighboring Countries Held in Beijing Xi Jinping Delivers Important Speech' (9 April 2025), https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xw/zyxw/202504/t20250410_11592755.html.

People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN), although not directly involved in daily standoffs, continued to provide implicit deterrence and escalation dominance should tensions intensify.

According to the study of the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) for 2025, the PLA conducted 163 operations in the South China Sea in that year, including a record number of live-fire exercises. It was noted that on October 16, 2025, China announced a military training zone southwest of Scarborough Shoal (Huangyan Dao) for exercises scheduled on October 17, coinciding with the final day of the U.S.-Philippine Sama Sama naval exercises.[1]

Meanwhile, China, after completing the land reclamation, continued upgrading infrastructure on features under its control in the Spratly Islands. Although these developments received less attention than law enforcement activities by its coast guard, improvements were reportedly made to facilities related to signals' intelligence, electronic warfare, and defensive capabilities.[2]

Vietnam, however, appeared to be accelerating its own land reclamation activities in the Spratlys, potentially surpassing China in scale.[3] These activities drew diplomatic protests from Beijing, despite closer and more cordial relations between the two countries.

## 5. The China-Philippines Flashpoints

China's primary operational focus since 2025 was its disputes with the Philippines, one of the claimants to the SCS. Such a focus is generally perceived as an implication that Beijing is targeting a U.S. ally as part of a

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1 Bonny Lin, Brian Hart, Leon Li and Truly Tinsley, 'Tracking China's Increased Military Activities in the Indo-Pacific in 2025', *China Power Project*, *Center for Strategic and International Studies* (5 February 2026), https://chinapower.csis.org/china-increased-military-activities-indo-pacific-2025/.

2 Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, 'China's Spratly intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) and electronic warfare (EW) Upgrades', *Center for Strategic and International Studies* (2 December 2025), https://amti.csis.org/chinas-spratly-isr-and-ew-upgrades/.

3 Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, 'No Islet Left Behind: Vietnam Reclaims Land at Every Remaining Spratly Outpost', *Center for Strategic and International Studies* (22 August 2025), https://amti.csis.org/no-islet-left-behind-vietnam-reclaims-land-at-every-remaining-spratly-outpost/.

broader strategy against Washington. However, this interpretation may again be an oversimplification. From Beijing's perspective, while U.S.-China competition does provide a broader backdrop, the more immediate cause of rising tensions between China and the Philippines lies in the hardline policies of the Marcos Jr. administration to the SCS disputes. In Beijing's eyes, Manila's antagonism toward China has extended beyond the contested waters between the two countries, as it started to intervene in the Taiwan issue, which is emphasized by Beijing as a more fundamental core interest for China. China also criticizes the Philippines' support of the U.S. deployment of mid-range and anti-ship missile systems in northern Luzon and the Batanes area, describing it as provocative and dangerous.[1] Furthermore, the Philippines' growing security cooperation with the U.S. and its allies, including expanded joint military exercises involving Japan, Australia and several European countries[2], is also raising Chinese concerns. Beijing thinks that these developments undermine regional security and stability. In 2026 China made an unusual decision to sanction the Filipino Defense Minister Gilbert Teodoro on the ground of his fallacious remarks concerning China which harmed China's interests and undermined China-Philippines ties.[3]

Under such circumstances, Beijing was prompted to adopt more forceful countermeasures against the Philippines. Maritime incidents between China and the Philippines intensified, occurring almost monthly, if not daily. Compared with previous years, the focus of tensions shifted somewhat: while Second Thomas Shoal (Ren'ai Jiao) continued to attract attention, the Scarborough Shoal reemerged as the primary flashpoint.

It was reported that the CCG more than doubled its presence around

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1 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 'Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Guo Jiakun's Regular Press Conference on February 12, 2025' (12 February 2025), https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/xw/fyrbt/lxjzh/202502/t20250212_11553791.html.

2 Philstar.com, 'Balikatan 2025: 4 European Nations Join as Observers for the First Time' (21 April 2025), https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2025/04/21/2437323/balikatan-2025-4-european-nations-join-observers-first-time.

3 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, '外交部发言人宣布中方对菲律宾国防部长特奥多罗及其亲属实施制裁' (11 June 2026), https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/fyrbt_673021/dhdw_673027/202606/t20260611_11942746.shtml.

Scarborough Shoal in 2025 compared with the previous year,[1] and such patrols in 2026 have further increased significantly.[2] The CCG conducts regular surveillance and enforcement operations at the Scarborough Shoal and the waters nearby. Four major incidents in 2025 were reported by this maritime law enforcement body, including one involving the overflight of a Philippine reconnaissance aircraft. The CCG responded by usual measures, including verbal warnings, blocking maneuvers, and the use of water cannons according to circumstances.[3] In 2026, such pattern continues, while in June a diplomatic rift between China and the Philippines happened over the former's installation of a structure in the Shoal. China reaffirmed its sovereignty over the feature and its legitimate rights to conduct activities there and identified the structure as temporary facility for scientific research. The research was completed on June 17 and the structure was confirmed to be removed.[4]

China's declaration of territorial sea baselines around the Scarborough Shoal in November 2024 provided a fresh impetus as well as clearer legal guidance for the CCG's routine patrols in the area, as the Philippines increased its activities around the Shoal.

Other major places of friction between China and the Philippines since 2025 include Sandy Cay (Tiexian Jiao), Sabina Shoal (Xianbin Jiao) and Iroquois Reef (Houteng Jiao), involving fishing and scientific research activities for some cases. At Sandy Cay, incidents reportedly involved

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1 Bonny Lin, Brian Hart, Leon Li and Truly Tinsley, 'Tracking China's Increased Military Activities in the Indo-Pacific in 2025', *China Power Project*, Center for Strategic and International Studies (5 February 2026), https://chinapower.csis.org/china-increased-military-activities-indo-pacific-2025/.

2 Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, 'Occupational Risk? Chinese Presence Surges at Scarborough Shoal', *Center for Strategic and International Studies* (2 July 2026), https://amti.csis.org/occupational-risk-chinese-presence-surges-at-scarborough-shoal/.

3 China Coast Guard, '维权执法', official website, https://www.ccg.gov.cn/wqzf/.

4 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, '2026 年 6 月 17 日外交部发言人林剑主持例行记者会' , (17 June 2026), https://www.mfa.gov.cn/fyrbt_673021/jzhsl_673025/202606/t20260617_11947482.shtml.

Hannah Tabara, Pearl Pandya, Sindy Ajara, Su Mon and Tomas Buenaventura, 'Asia-Pacific Overview: July 2026', *Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (ACLED)* (3 July 2026), https://acleddata.com/update/asia-pacific-overview-july-2026.

personnel from both sides temporarily boarding the feature.[1]

Despite mounting tensions, the 2024 special arrangement between China and the Philippines on resupply operations to the Philippine vessel BRP Sierra Madre grounded at Second Thomas Shoal has been generally observed. Overall, although incidents at sea increased in frequency and in intensity, there has been no substantial escalation of the standoffs, and China appeared confident that the SCS situation remained stable.[2]

## 6. Gray-Zone Operations and Strategic Narratives

China's strategy toward the SCS is routinely characterized by analysts as relying on so-called "grey-zone" operations—actions designed to exert pressure without triggering open military conflict.[3] Maritime militia vessels are also described as playing an auxiliary role alongside the CCG and the PLAN.

China officially denies the existence of maritime militia forces[4] and does not acknowledge the characterization of its activities as grey-zone tactics. Some Chinese scholars argue that the "grey-zone" concept itself is a narrative promoted by the U.S. to portray China negatively. They contend that similar tactics have been employed by the Philippines and the U.S. in their own actions against China in the SCS.[5]

Regardless of these differing interpretations, it appears that China still seeks to carefully control dispute escalation while trying to impose costs

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1 China Coast Guard, '维权执法', official website, https://www.ccg.gov.cn/wqzf/

2 Xinhua News, 'Chinese FM elaborates on South China Sea issue', (13 July 2026) https://english.news.cn/20250713/c49f53388f074d49a42b452c41db7b0c/c.html.

3 Emma Salisbury, *China's PLAN: Maritime Dominion Beyond the South China Sea*, Council on Geostrategy (20 May 2024), https://www.geostrategy.org.uk/all-research/chinas-plan-maritime-dominion-beyond-the-south-china-sea/.

4 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 'Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian's Regular Press Conference on April 6, 2021' (6 April 2021), https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/xw/fyrbt/lxjzh/202405/t20240530_11347018.html.

5 Xinhua News, '挑拨 威胁 谎言——域外势力插手南海问题的事实真相', (21 August 2025), https://www.news.cn/20250821/4f0b06e9bb07414fa220cfef79e1041b/c.html.

on perceived unilateral actions by other claimants and the intervention of the external powers.

## 7. Diplomacy and Regional Engagement

Diplomatic engagement and regional cooperation remain central components of China's SCS policy since 2025. Beijing also keeps stating that freedom of navigation and overflight in and above the SCS have been maintained and that regional stability has largely been preserved through joint efforts by countries bordering the SCS.

China also sought to promote a new narrative for the SCS, emphasizing peace, stability, and cooperation rather than conflict. Chinese diplomats frequently argued that international discussions on the SCS issues tend to exaggerate tensions and overlook the broader regional collective efforts to pursue stability and cooperation.

This clash of narratives reflects a strong concern from China that prevailing narratives about the SCS had long been dominated by negative descriptions highlighting tensions and disputes. In China's view, such portrayals did not accurately reflect the real situation on the ground and constituted a major obstacle to control the conflicts. From Beijing's perspective, establishing a more positive narrative could help create a favorable environment for the COC negotiations between China and ASEAN countries.

In practice, dialogues, consultations, and confidence-building efforts are going on between China and Southeast Asian claimants to the SCS. Bilateral communication channels were effectively maintained with all parties, including the Philippines. China and Malaysia held the first two working-group meetings on managing maritime issues in the South China Sea. China and Indonesia reaffirmed their political will to implement agreements on the joint development of natural resources in their contested waters.

In March, 2025, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi highlighted establishment of dialogue mechanisms with all SCS claimants as a major

achievement of China's diplomacy in the region,[1] signaling Beijing's strong interest in keeping direct channels of communication open with all other parties to the SCS disputes.

At the regional level, negotiations on the COC are also continuing. Three working-group meetings and one senior officials' meeting were held in 2025. In 2026 until September, two senior officials' meetings have been held and the working-group meetings have turned into a monthly practice. The negotiations now appear to have entered a more sensitive phase, with contentious issues, e.g., the geographic scope of the document and whether it should be legally binding, remaining on the table. Beijing is also supportive for a new target for concluding COC negotiations by 2026, although now it seems unlikely that the timeline could be achieved. However, even if the process takes longer, the negotiations per se would function as an incremental confidence-building mechanism between China and ASEAN states.

China views the U.S. military operations as the primary security challenge in the SCS. Since 2025, China's diplomatic maneuvers toward external actors—particularly the U.S., Japan, Australia, and a few European states—combined with opposition to their military intervention with repeated commitments to freedom of navigation and overflight in conformity with international law. The military buildup and presence of these external powers in China's vicinity is perceived by Beijing as an obvious threat to the country's security, therefore falling outside the legal parameter of navigational freedom. To counter these threats, Beijing employed diplomatic protests, military-to-military communication channels, and selective confidence-building measures, while refusing to recognize the legitimacy of foreign military operations in waters adjacent to China.

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1 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, '王毅谈南海问题：对达成"南海行为准则"充满信心', (7 March 2025), https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/wjdt_674879/gjldrhd_674881/202503/t20250307_11570219.shtml.

## 8. More efforts on ocean governance

China has been promoting practical cooperation in the SCS, hoping that functional collaboration—particularly in areas such as environmental protection and safety of navigation—help ease tensions and create positive conditions for eventual dispute settlement.

Since 2025, China continued to employ domestic administrative measures to reinforce its territorial and maritime claims, facilitate legal enforcement operations, and enhance the country's capacity for maritime governance. China retained and upgraded its environmental monitoring, fishery regulations, search and rescue operations, and infrastructure maintenance in the SCS. For instance, China established a national nature reserve in the Scarborough Shoal area in September 2025, and released a number of environmental assessment reports regarding several SCS features, including Scarborough Shoal, Second Thomas Shoal, Sandy Cay, and Whitsun Reef (Niu'e Jiao).

These initiatives demonstrated China's increased use of governance tools—combined with legal, administrative, and diplomatic measures—to assert sovereignty and jurisdiction while promoting practical marine cooperation with other littoral states.

It could be noted that China's SCS strategy and approach of dispute management are closely aligned with its broader policies and practices in global ocean governance. Viewing itself as both a major stakeholder in and a responsible steward of the maritime commons,[1] China has increasingly expanded its footprint in international mechanisms and processes on ocean governance. One of the late examples was Beijing's ratification in October 2025 of the *Agreement under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea on the Conservation and Sustainable Use of Marine Biological Diversity of Areas Beyond National Jurisdiction* (BBNJ Agreement) and its offer to host the secretariat of the Agreement's implementation body.

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1 Xiaowen Xu, Zhijun Zhang and Jinpeng Wang, 'The Interaction and Mutual Development of "A Maritime Community with a Shared Future" and Global Ocean Governance', *Frontiers in Marine Science*, vol. 11 (26 June 2024), article 1425673, https://doi.org/10.3389/fmars.2024.1425673.

Such initiatives are not directly connected to the SCS issues, but they provide important context for observing China's overall approach toward the region's complex interplay of disputes, governance, and practical cooperation.

## 9. Contending the 2016 SCS arbitration award

At the same time, China placed greater emphasis on legal narratives. Beijing continued to reject the 2016 SCS arbitral ruling by invoking provisions from the UNCLOS, arguing that its actions are consistent with international law.

China maintains that the arbitration lacked legal basis, violated prior diplomatic agreements, and contravened fundamental principles of international law. As far as China is concerned, the tribunal's findings—including the classification of Itu Aba (Taiping Dao) as a rock and the denial of maritime entitlements to the Spratly Islands—are legally and factually flawed.

Furthermore, from Beijing's perspective, the 2016 ruling disrupted its preferred framework for managing the SCS disputes. As discussed earlier, China's SCS strategy is grounded on maintaining the disputed status of the contested features, and pursuing negotiated settlements for the disputes while avoiding escalation. The arbitration ruling challenges this premise by redefining the legal parameters of the disputes and substantially narrows, if not eliminates, the scope for future negotiated and mutually acceptable solutions with the Southeast Asian claimants. In doing so, it has actually curtailed many policy options to manage the disputes and may induce greater uncertainty to the situation in the region. This scenario will run counter to all aspects of China's policy objectives toward the SCS.

As such, Beijing regards the Award as legally deficient and politically unviable and even dangerous.

## 10. Conclusion

China's SCS polices and actions since 2025 can be characterized by

patience, coherence, and risk management. Rather than seeking rapid or decisive outcomes, Beijing has been focusing on gradually shaping the strategic landscape in the SCS through a combination of operational presence, legal instruments, and diplomatic engagement.

This approach allows China to strengthen its position while avoiding the costs and risks associated with open conflicts. It was noted that although China is often portrayed as expansionist in the SCS, its behavior toward different claimant states varies considerably. In some cases, Beijing has adopted more accommodating approaches, depending on how it evaluates the relationship between those states' actions, China's security interests, and its international reputation.[1]

China's SCS policies are therefore mainly reactive rather than proactive, brought about by historical experiences and contemporary geopolitical pressures, including the military presence of the U.S. in Southeast Asia.[2]

China's status as a major global power is increasingly prominent. However, as it assumes a more consequential role in international affairs, it continues to be confronted with a range of unresolved territorial and maritime disputes with neighboring states, with SCS issues constituting a salient example. The complex interactions between China and other major powers and regional actors in this context play a significant role in shaping both Beijing's perception and practice of its great-power role, and will have an impact on the evolving trajectory of the world order. In this regard, deeper research on legal issues, historical evolution and diverging narratives surrounding the SCS will be helpful.

Ultimately, understanding China's SCS strategy requires careful examination of its strategic motivations and the broader context in which

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1 Ian Seow Cheng Wei, 'Rough Seas, Calm Waters: Understanding China's Varied Approaches in the South China Sea', IDSS Paper No. 116/2025, *S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies* (9 December 2025), https://rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/idss/ip25116-idss-paper-116-2025-rough-seas-calm-waters-understanding-chinas-varied-approaches-in-the-south-china-sea/.

2 Ian Seow Cheng Wei, 'Rough Seas, Calm Waters: Understanding China's Varied Approaches in the South China Sea', IDSS Paper No. 116/2025, *S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies* (9 December 2025), https://rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/idss/ip25116-idss-paper-116-2025-rough-seas-calm-waters-understanding-chinas-varied-approaches-in-the-south-china-sea/.

its policies are formulated. Only through such analysis can observers develop better understanding of these complex and evolving dynamics.

# 2. UNITED STATES AND INDO-PACIFIC STRATEGY

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## 1. Introduction

The U.S. Indo-Pacific (IP) Strategy is a whole-of-government framework through which Washington seeks to sustain what it describes as a "free and open" regional order[1]. Although the strategy spans across areas of diplomacy, economics, and security, initiatives of defense and military hold the centrality of the strategy, explaining why many of its security objectives are operationalized through maritime instruments, including sustained naval presence, militarized maritime domain awareness, and partner capacity-building, e.g., basing and war drills. This makes the maritime domain a central arena of implementation and contestation.

Much of the IP strategy's security agenda is implemented through recurrent maritime activities rather than episodic crisis responses. In practice, it is at sea—through naval deployments, coast guard operations, alliance and partner exercises, and legal-diplomatic signaling—that U.S. preferences are most consistently translated into day-to-day activity, coordinated with partners, and challenged by competitors. For Washington, the maritime domain has a particular operational appeal: it allows a sustained presence that can be calibrated in scale and visibility, offers practical venues for cooperation with allies and partners, and enables the United States to advance legal and normative positions through repeated practice rather than formal renegotiation. At the same time, America's persistent maritime operations can heighten friction, intensify action—reaction dynamics, and increase the risk of incidents. Over time, this parallel of expedient utility and potential conflict has made maritime security a principal arena in

1 The White House, *Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States* (February 2022).

which the U.S. pursue and push broader Indo-Pacific objectives.

This chapter examines how the U.S. uses maritime security to advance its Indo-Pacific objectives, the instrument mix it employs, and the implications for regional actors. Section 2 outlines U.S. objectives at sea; Section 3 maps core instruments—naval and coast guard operations, alliance and partner capacity-building, logistics and basing, and legal-diplomatic signaling; Section 4 analyzes the legal and normative dimension; Section 5 presents U.S. sub-regional patterns and episodes of actions, including those initiated in the SCS, the Taiwan Strait, and beyond; Section 6 assesses regional implications of U.S. IP pursuits for crisis stability and strategic room for maneuver; Section 7 examines risks, limits, and unintended consequences of the IP Strategy; and the chapter then concludes.

Methodologically, the chapter distinguishes between stated objectives, operational mechanisms, and observable effects. Official U.S. documents are used primarily as evidence of strategic intent and preferred policy logic, while claims about strategic effects are assessed more cautiously against operational episodes and available evidence on regional perceptions.

## 2. Strategic Objectives

At the maritime level, U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy is less about securing uncontested dominance than about preserving strategic leverage and operational freedom under conditions of long-term competition with a designated peer power. The maritime domain is essential to Washington because it enables daily combinations of presence, reassurance, and signaling while often remaining below the threshold of armed conflict. This logic aligns with the 2022 U.S. National Defense Strategy, which identifies China as the "pacing challenge" and advances "integrated deterrence" across domains and in concert with allies and partners[1]. In the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy, maritime tools are hard power instruments and repeatedly

1 U.S. Department of Defense, *2022 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America* (2022).

presented as practical delivery mechanisms, for example, expanding U.S. Coast Guard (USCG) presence and cooperation, building partners' "maritime capacity and maritime-domain awareness," and calling for funding for initiatives such as the Maritime Security Initiative[1].

Still, scholars caution that in a legally contested and politically charged maritime environment, operational assertions can produce effects other than intended, as perceptions and counter-perceptions harden over time[2]. This risk is amplified where contested jurisdictional claims and enforcement practices become entangled with sovereignty disputes, an interaction Beckman highlights in the SCS context[3].

The IP Strategy's first and most foundational objective is to preserve access to key sea lanes of communications (SLOCs), chokepoints, and operating areas, an enabling condition for crisis response, reassurance, and the credibility of U.S. commitments. In contemporary Indo-Pacific debates, "access" is less about territorial possession than about freedom of movement, logistical reach, and operational persistence. The 2022 National Defense Strategy underscores this logic by warning that competitors seek to exploit perceived vulnerabilities "by creating anti-access/area-denial environments" and "posing all-domain threats to the U.S. homeland in an effort to jeopardize the U.S. military's ability to project power and counter regional aggression," helping explain why access is treated as strategic infrastructure rather than a discretionary privilege. It is a kind of tangible military capability for maintaining geopolitical dominance.

U.S. framing often presents access as part of a broader "free and open" regional order and as the protection of widely shared maritime rights. Critics argue, however, that this narrative can sit uneasily with Washington's relationship to the formal treaty architecture of the law of the

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1 The White House, *Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States* (February 2022).

2 C. Wirth and V. Schatz, 'South China Sea "Lawfare": Fighting over the Freedom of Navigation', *GIGA Focus Asia*, no. 5 (2020), German Institute for Global and Area Studies (GIGA).

3 R. Beckman, 'The UN Convention on the Law of the Sea and the Maritime Disputes in the South China Sea', *American Journal of International Law*, vol. 107, no. 1 (2013), pp. 142–163.

sea—most notably, that the United States has not ratified the UNCLOS, even as U.S. policy and practice largely track many of its provisions and U.S. officials frequently characterize key navigational rules as reflecting customary international law[1]. This tension matters politically because it shapes how regional audiences read U.S. operational assertions: as the defense of the global commons, or as a power-backed interpretation of contested rules. When Abe uttered "open and free", he really meant to draw a line between "us and them" in bloc-forging. For the Patengon it is more practical as an expression of military superiority, i.e., for control of global water ways and un-challenged FONOPs.

A second core objective is deterrence—specifically, deterrence calibrated to operate below the threshold of open war. This logic is reflected in the emphasis on "integrated deterrence" as a cross-domain, ally-enabled approach to competing with China while reducing incentives for escalation[2]. In the maritime domain, the practical implication is a reliance on persistence, signaling, and denial rather than attempts at decisive coercion in any single episode. FONOPs, routine naval transits, and recurrent exercises are therefore used less to force immediate behavioral change than to sustain access, demonstrate resolve, and reinforce expectations about what "normal" operations look like in contested waters. This is consistent with RAND's broader finding that competition below major-war thresholds often turn on cumulative effects—gray-zone campaigns and responses "unfold gradually over time" rather than through one decisive move, and strategy focuses on shaping the environment and "dissuad[ing]… over time" rather than producing quick compliance[3]. The logic is most visible in the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait, where U.S. actions are framed to contest unilateral changes to the status quo while preserving space for crisis management. By operating persistently yet

1 L. Kuok, *The U.S. Freedom of Navigation Program in the South China Sea* (Brookings Institution, July 2016); K. Elmahmoud, 'American Pick and Choose or Customary International Law?', *EJIL: Talk!* (17 January 2024).

2 U.S. Department of Defense, *2022 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America* (2022).

3 L. J. Morris et al., *Gaining Competitive Advantage in the Gray Zone* (RAND Corporation, 2020).

predictably, Washington seeks to deter coercive actions without creating incentives for pre-emption or escalation. Yet the deterrent effect of such persistence should not be assumed: in gray-zone settings, sustained presence may reassure partners and complicate an adversary's planning without reliably preventing coercive incidents in any given episode. Therefore, in certain locations, e.g., the SCS regions, where the deterrence is exercised under the IP strategy the terminology deterrence has hidden meanings that go beyond RAND definition. Her deterrence is substantial military operations that are mounted pro-actively rather than for a narrow purpose of deterring someone from doing something. For instance, when FONOPS is launched within the 12NM of the territorial waters of the targeted country, the initiator is ready to fight in combat terms, given the high probability of accidental exchange of fire. Often such operations are not meant as deterrence than brinkmanship above the normal threshold of military conflict.

A third objective is alliance binding. Maritime security offers an unusually effective platform for alliance coordination because it is operational, visible, and comparatively modular. Naval exercises, coast guard cooperation, and MDA initiatives enable partners to contribute at different levels of capability and political risk from capacity-building and information sharing to more sensitive combined patrols. Reflecting this logic, the Biden administration's IP Strategy states that the U.S. will "prioritize our single greatest asymmetric strength: our network of security alliances and partnerships"[1].

In practice, bilateral arrangements with Japan, Australia, and the Philippines and minilateral frameworks such as the Quad often use maritime activities as a practical baseline for demonstrating cohesion without requiring full alignment on every strategic issue. This approach can also serve a political function: embedding U.S. presence within multinational exercises and joint operations may reduce the appearance of unilateralism while distributing responsibility and risk. At the same time,

1 The White House, *Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States* (February 2022).

treating maritime cooperation as a "lowest common denominator" is not cost-free. Even when easier to scale than deeper forms of integration, maritime initiatives can still heighten escalation concerns, expose burden-sharing frictions, and run into domestic political constraints across allied capitals. In the alliance politics literature, repeated operational cooperation is often treated as one mechanism through which formal commitments become routinized practices, potentially reinforcing credibility over time[1].

Finally, U.S. maritime strategy seeks to shape rules and norms not primarily through formal legal reform, but through consistent practice, a choice shaped by both strategy and constraint. Although the United States has not ratified UNCLOS, it continues to emphasize navigational freedoms and to oppose what it characterizes as excessive maritime claims. Accordingly, Washington uses operational activities—such as FONOPs, routine military transits, and law-enforcement cooperation—to advance and demonstrate its interpretations of the law of the sea. In official messaging, these operations are described as efforts "to challenge excessive maritime claims and preserve navigation, overflight, and other rights/freedoms" under international law[2]. U.S. government reporting likewise states that such challenges are intended to "reinforce international law… in a principled, unbiased manner," including by upholding "the rights, freedoms, and lawful uses of the sea"[3]. Over time, the repeated use of these practices may shape expectations about acceptable conduct, even when underlying legal interpretations remain contested.

These objectives sketch a strategy oriented toward sustained competition under political and legal constraints, but one whose applications, especially in the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait, remain contested for their signaling effects and escalation risks. The analysis therefore shifts to the concrete instruments used to operationalize these aims at sea.

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1 V. D. Cha, *Powerplay: The Origins of the American Alliance System in Asia* (Princeton University Press, 2016).

2 U.S. Navy, 'Freedom of Navigation Program', (2020), fact sheet / program description.

3 U.S. Department of Defense, *Freedom of Navigation Program Report* (FY2022) (2022).

## 3. Instruments of U.S. Maritime Strategy

U.S. maritime strategy in the Indo-Pacific is best understood as a layered toolkit rather than a single instrument. Washington combines naval forward presence, maritime law-enforcement cooperation, alliance/minilateral coordination, and technology-enabled maritime governance to pursue strategic objectives while managing escalation risks and coalition politics[1].

### 3.1 Naval power, presence, and operational signaling

Naval forces remain the most visible instrument of U.S. maritime strategy in the Indo-Pacific, shaping routine signaling, reassurance, and crisis responsiveness. Yet their strategic function is often described—both in policy and in scholarship—as less about assuming uncontested "sea control" than about sustaining access, demonstrating persistence, and calibrating deterrence in contested or politically sensitive waters. Operational assertions such as FONOPs fit within this broader pattern.

In official terms, the U.S. Department of Defense frames FONOPs as "comprehensive in scope," encompassing "all of the rights, freedoms, and lawful uses of the sea and airspace" available under international law, and implemented against what it deems "excessive maritime claims"[2]. In practice, U.S. Navy statements on specific operations often pair legal justification with strategic messaging—for example, describing an operation as upholding "the rights, freedoms, and lawful uses of the sea recognized in international law" while challenging particular restrictions or baselines[3]. At the same time, some regional actors, including China, contest not only the legal basis but also the political purpose of FONOPs, portraying them as instruments of pressure or strategic signaling rather than neutral rule-enforcement[4]. This combination helps explain why FONOPs

1 The White House, *Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States* (February 2022).

2 U.S. Department of Defense, *Freedom of Navigation Program: Fact Sheet* (March 2015).

3 U.S. Navy, 'U.S. Navy Destroyer Conducts Freedom of Navigation Operation in the South China Sea', (10 May 2024).

4 N. Hong, *UNCLOS and Ocean Dispute Settlement: Law and Politics in the South China Sea* (Routledge, 2012).

attract persistent contestation: they are presented by Washington as legal-operational routine, yet are frequently interpreted by others through the lens of strategic rivalry and coercive intent.

Naval exercises serve a related function. Major regional drills—including Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC), Exercise MALABAR, and the U.S-Philippines Exercise BALIKATAN—retain clear warfighting and interoperability purposes, but they are also widely treated as political signals of cohesion and resolve. More generally, the exercises literature suggests that such activities often serve political aims (including deterrence and reassurance), even when states rarely foreground those aims explicitly[1].

At the same time, naval-centric signaling is not cost-free. Persistent high-tempo operations and close-quarter interactions can elevate the risk of unsafe encounters and miscalculation, particularly in an environment where rival forces operate in proximity and even minor incidents can become politically salient[2]. Strategically, this creates a recurring tradeoff: naval deployments can strengthen deterrence and reassurance, but their visibility can also intensify threat perceptions and contribute to action—reaction dynamics—making escalation management a continuous requirement rather than an episodic task.

### 3.2 U.S. Coast Guard and "below-threshold" maritime governance tools

Naval power remains central, but relying on it alone can impose political and escalatory costs, especially where close encounters and public signaling are hard to control. Against that backdrop, U.S. Indo-Pacific policy has put greater weight on maritime law-enforcement and governance cooperation as a complementary line of effort. The USCG sits near the center of this toolkit because it can sustain day-to-day presence

1 J. Norberg, 'Towards a Theory of Military Exercises—Implications for Warfighting Potential', *Proceedings and Journal of the Royal Swedish Academy of War Sciences*, no. 4 (2023), pp. 53–71.

2 O. S. Mastro, 'Close Encounters with the People's Liberation Army: Regional Experiences and Implications for Deterrence', in *Encounters and Escalation in the Indo-Pacific: Perspectives on China's Military and Implications for Regional Security* (NBR Special Report, National Bureau of Asian Research, 2024).

and deliver capacity-building with partners—typically through advising, training, and joint operational support—while carrying a different political profile than front-line naval deployments.

In contested waters, however, law-enforcement activities have also elicited varied regional responses, ranging from quiet acceptance and coordination to diplomatic protests or counter-enforcement measures, depending on local threat perceptions and legal positions. At the same time, the "below-threshold" advantage is context-dependent: coast guard activity can lower friction in some settings, but it can also be read as strategic encroachment when enforcement priorities, legal interpretations, or targeting patterns are contested. Reflecting this policy emphasis, the 2022 Indo-Pacific Strategy commits to "expand USCG presence and cooperation in Southeast and South Asia and the Pacific Islands, with a focus on advising, training, deployment, and capacity-building"[1].

Strategically, this line of effort is often defended on two grounds. First, coast guard operations map onto the day-to-day contested space in which friction frequently takes the form of illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing, coercive law enforcement, and other ambiguous "gray-zone" behavior rather than overt military action. Second, they are commonly articulated through a governance vocabulary—rules enforcement, fisheries protection, safety, and monitoring—that can align with many regional states' domestic priorities and statutory mandates. At the same time, these claims are context-dependent: in disputed or politically sensitive waters, the same law-enforcement posture can be interpreted as capacity-building by some actors and as strategic pressure or claim-support by others. The USCG's Indo-Pacific strategic intent emphasizes bilateral agreements (including shiprider arrangements) and partner-facing cooperation as important enablers of this approach[2].

Operationally, USCG deployments in the Pacific and Southeast Asia are

1 The White House, *Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States* (February 2022).

2 U.S. Coast Guard, *U.S. Coast Guard: Indo-Pacific Strategic Intent* (26 November 2024), https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/2025-02/2024_1126_uscg_indopacific_strategic_intent_and_update_fy2021and_fy2023.pdf.

frequently structured to operate alongside—and visibly under—the legal authority of partner agencies, in part to foreground consent and jurisdiction. Shiprider agreements enable this model by allowing partner-state law-enforcement officials to embark and exercise coastal-state authority during patrols in their EEZs, which can make enforcement appear less like external action and more like partner-led governance. At the same time, Reuters reporting on shiprider-enabled boardings involving Chinese fishing vessels in Pacific EEZs underscores the dual dynamics at play: the stated rationale centers on fisheries compliance, but the operations can also trigger diplomatic pushback and political sensitivity in a competitive setting[1].

At the same time, scholarship cautions against assuming coast guards are inherently stabilizing simply because they are "law-enforcement" rather than "naval". In some contexts, coast guards can reduce escalation risks by channeling interactions into enforcement routines; in others, they can become instruments of coercion and rivalry—especially when legal interpretations diverge or when operational behavior blurs the line between policing and power projection[2].

These tradeoffs highlight a basic boundary: coast guard cooperation is consent- and capacity-dependent and cannot substitute for naval deterrence in high-end contingencies. Its main contribution lies in day-to-day governance and enforcement in contested spaces, though effects vary and can be politically contested.

### 3.3 Alliance and minilateral mechanisms

Alliance coordination is a central force multiplier in U.S. maritime strategy because it converts U.S. presence into shared capability and shared signaling. Rather than operating mainly unilaterally, Washington

1 K. Needham and L. Craymer, 'U.S. Coast Guard Says Boardings of Chinese Fishing Vessels in South Pacific Legal', *Reuters*, (10 April 2024), https://www.reuters.com/world/us-coast-guard-says-boardings-chinese-fishing-vessels-south-pacific-legal-2024-04-10/.

2 D. Guilfoyle and E. S. Y. Chan, 'Lawships or Warships? Coast Guards as Agents of (In)stability in the Pacific and South and East China Sea', *Marine Policy*, vol. 140 (2022), article 105048.

increasingly embeds maritime activities in bilateral alliances and smaller "minilateral" coalitions to distribute operational burden and political risk. This emphasis is explicit in U.S. strategy, which highlights treaty alliances and "modernized alliances" alongside flexible partnerships, including the Quad, as key strategic means for Indo-Pacific security[1].

At the bilateral level, maritime cooperation with allies such as Japan and Australia—and with key partners such as the Philippines—often combines exercises, access arrangements, and intelligence-sharing to improve interoperability and to operationalize political commitments. At the minilateral level, groupings such as the Quad and the AUKUS partnership add a second layer by narrowing coordination to a smaller set of participants when wider regional alignment is harder to secure. Analytically, the appeal of minilateral formats is frequently described in terms of speed and flexibility: they can concentrate resources, standardize select practices, and generate visible signaling among like-minded states. At the same time, these arrangements can introduce tradeoffs, including uneven burden-sharing expectations, ambiguity over scope, and the risk that narrower groupings are read by outsiders as exclusionary or escalatory rather than purely functional cooperation.

Alliance-based maritime cooperation is often analyzed less as a guarantee of unity than as a set of mechanisms that can shape behavior under uncertainty. Operationally, routine combined activity can widen the menu of interoperable options—common procedures, shared situational awareness, and access routines—that partners can draw on in a crisis. Politically, visible cooperation can affect attribution and messaging by distributing participation across multiple flags, even if underlying preferences are not fully aligned. Strategically, recurring joint patterns may alter an adversary's planning by introducing uncertainty about who will participate, where forces can operate, and how quickly coordination can occur. In alliance scholarship, these repeated practices are sometimes treated as one pathway through which formal commitments become more

1 The White House, *National Security Strategy* (October 2022).

credible in the eyes of observers, though the effect is contingent and can vary by context[1].

The same alliance and minilateral arrangements also impose constraints. Partners rarely share identical threat assessments or legal and operational tolerances, so coordination becomes a continuing exercise in calibration—what to do, where to do it, and how explicitly to frame it. Classic work highlights the twin risks of abandonment and entrapment, which helps explain why allies may seek reassurance while also limiting exposure to unwanted escalation[2]. Related arguments in the "chain-ganging" and "buck-passing" literature suggest that alignment can either tighten or relax crisis incentives depending on how commitments and expectations are interpreted and signalled[3]. In practice, this implies that the political packaging of maritime cooperation matters: activities framed as coercive alignment, or rhetoric that outruns domestic consent, can trigger hesitation, parliamentary scrutiny, or public backlash—dynamics that can narrow the scope and pace of cooperation even when operational channels remain open.

### 3.4 Maritime domain awareness and technology-enabled maritime governance

Technology has become a more prominent instrument in U.S. maritime strategy, most visibly through efforts to enhance MDA—the ability to detect, identify, and interpret maritime activity with shorter time lags. Satellite imagery, Automatic Identification System (AIS) data, unmanned platforms, and information-sharing networks expand the volume and resolution of maritime information available to the United States and participating partners. In policy documents, MDA is presented not only as a security enabler but also as a capacity-building line of effort linked to partner-facing governance tasks such as fisheries enforcement, maritime

1 V. D. Cha, *Powerplay: The Origins of the American Alliance System in Asia* (Princeton University Press, 2016).

2 G. H. Snyder, *Alliance Politics* (Cornell University Press, 1997).

3 T. J. Christensen and J. Snyder, 'Chain Gangs and Passed Bucks: Predicting Alliance Patterns in Multipolarity', *International Organization*, vol. 44, no. 2 (1990), pp. 137–168.

safety, and responses to illicit activity[1].

One widely cited example is the Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA) announced by the Quad, which is intended to improve the shared maritime picture and strengthen monitoring capacity across Southeast Asia, the Pacific Islands, and the Indian Ocean. Quad leaders described IPMDA as providing "near-real-time, integrated" MDA and explicitly connected it to countering "illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing" alongside broader transparency goals[2]. Analytically, such initiatives sit at the strategy—governance boundary: they can support local enforcement through data access and training, while also altering the informational conditions under which coercive or illicit behavior is observed, attributed, and contested.

Analytically, MDA is often treated as more than a stabilizing public good. Expanded information can raise the reputational and political costs of some gray-zone behavior, but it can also shift contestation onto questions of interpretation (what observed behavior should be taken to signify) and control (who collects, accesses, and authorizes the use of data). Work on maritime information-sharing suggests that transparency can therefore produce mixed effects: it may reduce uncertainty and coordination frictions for partners, yet it can also sharpen rivalry when disclosures are selective, contested, or framed as accusatory rather than evidentiary[3]. These dynamics can be especially consequential for smaller states, where concerns about dependency, data sovereignty, and institutional capacity shape whether MDA is experienced as capacity support or as asymmetrical reliance[4]. In this sense, MDA functions both as an enabling tool for cooperation and as an additional arena in which Indo-Pacific maritime

1 The White House, *Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States* (February 2022).

2 Quad Leaders, 'Quad Joint Leaders' Statement', Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, (24 May 2022), https://www.mofa.go.jp/fp/nsp/page1e_000401.html.

3 C. Bueger, 'What Is Maritime Security?', *Marine Policy*, vol. 53 (2015), pp. 159–164, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.marpol.2014.12.005.

4 D. Brewster, 'New Technologies Will Allow Indo-Pacific States to Build "Sovereign Maritime Domain Awareness"', *The Strategist*, (3 August 2023), https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/new-technologies-will-allow-indo-pacific-states-to-build-sovereign-maritime-domain-awareness/.

interactions are negotiated and disputed.

Viewed as a package, these instruments create a layered approach intended to sustain competition while managing escalation risk. The core challenge is balance: leaning too heavily on any single tool can erode legitimacy or coalition cohesion, while coordinated use can preserve access and leverage without turning routine competition into recurring crises. This tension—between effectiveness and legitimacy, persistence and restraint—sets up the legal and normative contestation examined in the next section.

## 4. Legal and Normative Dimensions

Legal and normative considerations are not merely background conditions for U.S. Indo-Pacific maritime strategy; they shape how maritime interactions are conducted, contested, and justified. Because maritime security is structured around jurisdictional boundaries, navigational rights, and competing claims to legitimacy, legal practice and normative framing operate as tools through which Washington pursues its stated objectives—preserving access, reassuring allies, and challenging rival claims—especially in maritime disputes involving China[1].

Three interrelated dimensions frame the discussion that follows: (1) the U.S. relationship with UNCLOS; (2) freedom of navigation as an operational practice; and (3) the broader contest over legal narratives and normative authority in the Indo-Pacific. The United States occupies an unusual position in the maritime legal order.

Although it has not ratified UNCLOS, U.S. policy and operational practice generally treat many of its provisions—especially those on maritime zones and navigational rights—as reflecting customary international law. This stance allows U.S. officials to invoke UNCLOS-consistent rules in diplomatic and operational settings while avoiding domestic political costs

1 U.S. Department of Defense, *Fiscal Year 2020 Department of Defense Annual Freedom of Navigation Report* (2021); R. Beckman, 'The UN Convention on the Law of the Sea and the Maritime Disputes in the South China Sea', *American Journal of International Law*, vol. 107, no. 1 (2013), pp. 142–163,

and Senate ratification hurdles[1]. Supporters portray this as a pragmatic way to preserve operational flexibility while remaining anchored in widely accepted rules; critics counter that non-ratification weakens persuasive authority by decoupling rule invocation from full treaty membership, including acceptance of the Convention's institutional and dispute-settlement architecture[2].

U.S. strategic documents link this posture to contesting what Washington labels "excessive maritime claims" and to maintaining operational mobility, including ongoing disagreement over the permissibility of certain military activities in another state's EEZ[3]. Outside the United States, however, freedom-of-navigation practice is not read through a single lens. Some actors interpret operational assertions as routine defense of navigational rights; others—most prominently China, and at times commentators in parts of the Global South—portray them as power-backed legal interpretation and strategic signaling, especially when conducted in politically sensitive waters[4]. This is therefore not only a doctrinal dispute, but a contest over what legal practice is for—clarifying rules, signaling resolve, or both—setting the stage for why operational repetition matters.

Freedom of navigation is therefore better understood less as litigation-centered "lawfare" than as a repeatable operational practice. FONOPs, naval transits, and routine presence missions advance legal positions through action rather than negotiation. The Department of Defense describes this approach as a sustained effort to challenge restrictions it considers inconsistent with international law "as reflected in the Law of the Sea Convention," and warns that acquiescence can allow contested claims

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1 Congressional Research Service, *Implementing Agreements Under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)* (19 December 2024), https://www.everycrsreport.com/files/2024-12-19_IF12578_43e1fe924ba09d0e4be155df656274b5cc3fa657.html.

2 Congressional Research Service, *Outer Limits of the U.S. Extended Continental Shelf: Background and Issues for Congress* (R47912, 2024).

3 U.S. Department of Defense, *Fiscal Year 2020 Department of Defense Annual Freedom of Navigation Report* (2021).

4 R. Beckman, 'The UN Convention on the Law of the Sea and the Maritime Disputes in the South China Sea', *American Journal of International Law*, vol. 107, no. 1 (2013), pp. 142–163.

to solidify over time[1]. In practice, these activities can signal resolve, demonstrate ongoing engagement, and render legal positions more visible through repetition. Yet the same visibility that gives FONOPs signaling value also increases exposure: in congested waters, operational assertions may be read as provocation, and under heightened rivalry, repeated demonstrations can invite countermeasures or closer shadowing rather than convergence. Whether routine operations contribute to stability therefore depends on shared expectations and interpretive restraint—conditions that strategic competition can erode[2].

Beyond specific operations, U.S. maritime strategy sits within a broader contest over legal narratives and normative authority. The United States often frames its behavior as upholding a "rules-based order" grounded in openness, predictability, and the lawful use of the sea; China, by contrast, frequently portrays U.S. operations as militarized interference that discounts coastal-state security concerns and sovereign interests. This narrative competition matters because many Indo-Pacific states prioritize crisis avoidance and political room to maneuver over formal legal adjudication. As Beckman argues in the South China Sea context, contested maritime environments can turn legal interpretation into a competitive arena—one that signals alignment, shapes perceptions of legitimacy, and narrows the space for cooperative risk management even when actors share an interest in avoiding escalation[3]. This reception problem is especially visible in Southeast Asia, where views of U.S. leadership and preferences between Washington and Beijing vary significantly across countries[4].

The legal and normative dimensions of U.S. Indo-Pacific maritime strategy point to a recurring tension. Rules and norms can help organize

1 U.S. Department of Defense, *Fiscal Year 2020 Department of Defense Annual Freedom of Navigation Report* (2021).

2 U.S. Department of Defense, *Fiscal Year 2020 Department of Defense Annual Freedom of Navigation Report* (2021).

3 R. Beckman, 'The UN Convention on the Law of the Sea and the Maritime Disputes in the South China Sea', *American Journal of International Law*, vol. 107, no. 1 (2013), pp. 142–163.

4 S. Seah et al., *The State of Southeast Asia: 2024 Survey Report* (ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2024); S. Seah et al., *The State of Southeast Asia: 2025 Survey Report* (ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2025).

expectations and justify access-related behavior, but the authority of such claims depends on how they are received—on perceived consistency, institutional participation, and the alignment between stated principles and operational patterns. Legal practice may shape expectations incrementally, yet it cannot substitute for broadly shared legitimacy in highly contested theaters. As rivalry intensifies, sustaining normative influence becomes less a question of doctrinal correctness alone than of how regional audiences assess credibility, restraint, and risk in light of observable behavior at sea.

## 5. Regional Case Studies

This section moves from the preceding framework to three case studies that show how U.S. Indo-Pacific maritime strategy operates in practice, and how its legal—normative claims are translated into observable behavior at sea. The South China Sea highlights dense day-to-day interaction where presence, legal signaling, and alliance coordination are repeatedly tested under "below-threshold" competition. The Taiwan Strait concentrates similar dynamics around a single, high-stakes sovereignty dispute, making escalation management and interpretive restraint especially salient. The Western Pacific-Indian Ocean arc then traces how these practices diffuse beyond focal flashpoints through alliance networks, partnerships, and maritime-governance tools—expanding strategic depth while raising coordination costs and political sensitivities.

### 5.1 The South China Sea

The South China Sea is one of the most sustained and operationally dense testing grounds for U.S. Indo-Pacific maritime strategy. Unlike episodic crises elsewhere, competition here is "lived" through frequent day-to-day encounters among naval forces, coast guards, maritime law-enforcement agencies, and fishing fleets—creating a steady rhythm of signaling, shadowing, and incident risk[1]. That density makes the subregion especially

1 Congressional Research Service, *China–Philippines Tensions in the South China Sea* (IF12550, 4 March 2025).

compatible with a U.S. approach that relies on persistent presence, calibrated deterrence, alliance binding, and practice-based rule shaping. In this setting, U.S. strategy is typically oriented less toward resolving sovereignty disputes than toward resisting unilateral shifts in the operational status quo while sustaining access and alliance credibility—producing continuous engagement below the threshold of armed conflict.

Official U.S. framing treats the South China Sea less as a contest over territorial entitlement than as a test of precedent and maritime order. Policy statements emphasize that the United States takes no position on competing sovereignty claims, while opposing what it characterizes as "excessive maritime claims," coercive behavior, and restrictions on lawful navigation[1]. A recurring rationale is that freedom of navigation and overflight—and the flow of lawful commerce—are linked to regional stability and the credibility of international law at sea[2]. This framing does analytical work: it helps Washington translate a sovereignty-heavy dispute into questions of rules, access, and conduct that are easier to internationalize, while also widening the audience beyond the claimants.

Within that logic, U.S. operational practice can be read as organized around three objectives, each with trade-offs. The first is preserving access by contesting restrictions Washington considers inconsistent with international law[3]. The second is deterrence-by-visibility: routine presence is used to signal that coercive behavior will be noticed and contested, particularly in areas where repeated encounters can shape perceptions of effective control. The third is normative positioning—reinforcing the proposition that disputes should be managed through law and restraint rather than force—while accepting that such signaling may be interpreted differently by others. These objectives translate into a toolkit that mixes highly visible naval assertions with lower-threshold governance

1 U.S. Department of Defense, *Freedom of Navigation Program Report (FY2022)* (2022); U.S. Department of State, 'The United States' Commitment to Maritime Security in the Indo-Pacific', (2025), statement.

2 U.S. Department of Defense, *Freedom of Navigation Program Report (FY2022)* (2022).

3 U.S. Department of Defense, *Freedom of Navigation Program Report (FY2022)* (2022).

instruments.

U.S. naval operations remain the most visible element. In operational terms, FONOPs challenge what Washington views as excessive claims, including certain baseline assertions and restrictions on military activities in an EEZ. Although presented as claim-agnostic challenges to categories of restrictions, in the South China Sea they also function as strategic signals: demonstrating a willingness to operate in politically sensitive waters despite friction and tactical risk. The same visibility that gives these operations signaling value, however, can also increase exposure—by raising the frequency of close encounters and inviting reciprocal shadowing or countermeasures.

Equally important, though often less visible, is the expanded use of "below-threshold" maritime governance tools. U.S. Coast Guard deployments, joint patrols, and capacity-building with Southeast Asian partners emphasize problems such as illegal, IUU fishing and coercive coast guard activity[1]. The strategic logic is to compete without militarizing every encounter, and to work through sovereignty-sensitive cooperation that many regional governments find politically easier to sustain. Yet persistence cuts both ways: a continuous operational rhythm reduces the likelihood that any single episode forces an immediate escalatory choice, but it can also accumulate friction, fatigue, and the probability of unsafe interactions over time.

Alliance politics have become increasingly central, particularly through the revitalization of the U.S.-Philippines alliance. Expanded access and a higher tempo of combined activities can strengthen deterrence and clarify treaty commitments; for Manila, closer alignment offers reassurance amid repeated confrontations with Chinese vessels, while for Washington it anchors presence within a clearer legal and political framework. At the same time, alliance dynamics impose constraints. Southeast Asian partners vary in threat perception, legal interpretation, and tolerance for

1 U.S. Department of State, 'The United States' Commitment to Maritime Security in the Indo-Pacific', (2025), statement.

confrontation, so U.S. strategy often relies on selective participation and modular cooperation rather than uniform alignment.

The Second Thomas Shoal episodes of 2024 illustrate both the utility and limits of deterrence-by-visibility. U.S. commitments and allied maritime activities helped reassure Manila and signaled that contested actions at sea would draw diplomatic and operational responses. Yet repeated confrontations at the shoal also showed that external presence and alliance signaling do not automatically prevent gray-zone escalation. They may raise political costs and complicate unilateral consolidation, but they can also feed an action—reaction cycle in which each side reads the other's moves as resolve or provocation.

Legal and normative argumentation remains a core feature of the competition. The 2016 arbitration in Philippines v. China—with the Permanent Court of Arbitration serving as Registry—continues to shape U.S. messaging even though Washington was not a party. U.S. statements have repeatedly treated the award as final and legally binding on the parties under UNCLOS, using it as a benchmark for criticizing certain maritime claims and behaviors. China rejects the award as "null and void" and portrays external support for it as interference, reinforcing a broader narrative contest over who speaks for "law" and "order" in the region. For U.S. strategy, the award's practical utility lies less in enforcement than in agenda-setting and legitimating effects: it offers a reference point that allies and partners can invoke without requiring U.S. adjudication. Its impact remains uneven, however, because many regional actors weigh legal preferences against political constraints, economic exposure, and day-to-day risk management.

Despite its advantages, this approach carries structural risks. Persistent presence increases the probability of incidents; gray-zone competition complicates attribution and crisis management; and over-securitization can narrow room for pragmatic cooperation on shared governance problems. The strategy is also sensitive to alliance credibility: perceived inconsistency—whether in commitment, rhetoric, or restraint—can

weaken deterrence and encourage hedging. The South China Sea therefore remains both a proving ground and a stress test for U.S. Indo-Pacific maritime strategy.

### 5.2 The Taiwan Strait

The Taiwan Strait occupies a distinctive place in U.S. Indo-Pacific maritime strategy. Unlike the South China Sea—where competition is distributed across multiple disputes and a wider set of claimants and operational arenas—the Strait is organized around a single, high-stakes sovereignty question with broader strategic implications. At the maritime-operational level, however, U.S. behavior in the Strait still reflects familiar elements of its wider approach at sea: persistent presence, calibrated signaling, alliance coordination, and an effort to keep competition below the threshold of armed conflict[1].

Rather than treating the Strait only as a contingency space activated in crises, U.S. practice increasingly treats it as an arena for routinized operations. The underlying mechanism is cumulative: repeated, ordinary-looking moves set a baseline for what is "normal", shape third-party expectations, and complicate attempts to re-label the operating environment through unilateral interpretation. In that sense, day-to-day activity is used to communicate both restraint and resolve without relying on exceptional crisis postures, consistent with stated U.S. goals of maintaining peace and stability and supporting conditions for peaceful resolution of differences[2].

From Washington's perspective, the Strait is therefore both a potential flashpoint and a credibility test. Official statements typically emphasize preserving peace and stability, maintaining navigational rights and freedoms consistent with international law, and opposing coercive changes to the status quo[3]. At the same time, U.S. signaling is bounded by its "One

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1 The White House, *Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States* (February 2022); U.S. Department of Defense, *2022 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America* (2022).

2 The White House, *National Security Strategy* (October 2022).

3 The White House, *Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States* (February 2022); The White House,

China" policy and a preference for deterrence and crisis management that seeks to avoid prematurely collapsing diplomatic ambiguity.

Legally, the Strait is a contested interpretive space, and precision matters. Much public debate turns on whether the Strait is "international waters," but several legal analysts note that this phrase is not a term of art in UNCLOS; the more relevant issues concern which maritime zones apply and what navigational regimes follow[1]. Given the Strait's geography, beyond territorial seas substantial portions are commonly treated as exclusive economic zones, where freedoms of navigation are generally understood to continue, while coastal states retain specified resource-related rights[2]. Strategic analysis further suggests that sharper disagreements often center less on whether ships can pass than on the scope of jurisdictional claims and the permissibility of certain military activities in and over those waters[3].

Within this legal-narrative environment, U.S. naval transits are the most visible operational instrument. U.S. military statements commonly describe these movements as routine operations conducted "in accordance with international law," and as demonstrations that U.S. forces "fly, sail, and operate anywhere international law allows"[4]. Operationally, routinization aims to dampen volatility: regularity reduces the signaling swing that can come from abrupt spikes or pauses, while still contesting any implication that the Strait can be treated as closed to international navigation[5]. Yet routinization also produces a different kind of risk. In a corridor characterized by proximity and repetition, friction can accumulate through small encounters—shadowing, challenges, and incremental

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*National Security Strategy* (October 2022).

1 C. Schaller, 'Navigation of Warships in the Taiwan Strait', *EJIL: Talk!* (2024).

2 C. Schaller, 'Navigation of Warships in the Taiwan Strait', *EJIL: Talk!* (2024).

3 International Institute for Strategic Studies, *Narrowing the Differences between China and the United States over the Taiwan Strait* (2022).

4 U.S. Seventh Fleet, '7th Fleet Aircraft Transits Taiwan Strait', (17 September 2024).

5 U.S. Seventh Fleet, '7th Fleet Aircraft Transits Taiwan Strait', (17 September 2024); Ryan Woo, 'US Says Navy Aeroplane Transits Taiwan Strait', *Reuters*, (17 September 2024), https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/us-says-navy-aeroplane-transits-taiwan-strait-2024-09-17/.

countermeasures—so that a tactical incident is more likely to be read as intentional messaging rather than operational noise[1].

These transits also carry dual audiences and therefore dual signals. For allies and partners, they indicate continued U.S. engagement and access. For Beijing, they communicate resistance to unilateral status reinterpretation while attempting to remain below a threshold that would trigger rapid escalation. This helps explain why U.S. public messaging often emphasizes legality and routine rather than exceptionalism or crisis language[2].

Alliance politics play a subtler but increasingly visible role in the Strait. The United States remains the primary maritime actor, but allied participation—through political statements, parallel transits, or broader regional presence—has become more salient. Reuters reporting on allied transits illustrates how such actions are routinely interpreted as political signals by all parties, even when framed as lawful passage[3]. This can complicate an adversary's calculations, but it also raises coordination burdens: if partners differ in threat perception, legal framing, or tolerance for escalation, "support" can translate into mixed messages rather than a single deterrent signal.

The narrative contest is inseparable from the legal one. U.S. framing emphasizes a rules-based order and lawful navigation; China's framing emphasizes sovereignty, security concerns, and opposition to what it portrays as "hype" or militarized interference[4]. For many regional observers, persuasion often depends less on abstract doctrine than on whether actions appear proportional, predictable, and consistent over time—especially in a corridor that is both strategically sensitive and

1 O. S. Mastro, 'How to Prevent an Accidental War over Taiwan', *Foreign Affairs* (2021); U.S. Department of Defense, *2022 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America* (2022).

2 U.S. Seventh Fleet, '7th Fleet Aircraft Transits Taiwan Strait', (2024).

3 Reuters, 'U.S. Says Navy Aeroplane Transits Taiwan Strait', (2024); Reuters, 'Canadian and Australian Warships Transit Taiwan Strait, China Media Reports', (6 September 2025).

4 Reuters, 'U.S. Says Navy Aeroplane Transits Taiwan Strait', (2024); C. Schaller, 'Navigation of Warships in the Taiwan Strait', *EJIL: Talk!* (2024).

heavily transited.

The escalation problem in the Taiwan Strait is acute. Dense traffic, proximity of forces, and political sensitivity mean that tactical incidents can rapidly acquire strategic meaning. U.S. strategy therefore places particular weight on escalation management—professional seamanship, communication channels, and avoiding abrupt posture shifts—while still sustaining routine presence. Yet restraint carries interpretive risks of its own: excessive caution may be read as declining resolve, while highly demonstrative operations may be read as provocation. Managing this tension—deterring coercion while preventing routine signaling from becoming a crisis trigger—has become a defining challenge for U.S. maritime strategy in the Strait[1].

From a maritime perspective, the Taiwan Strait thus highlights both the utility and the limits of deterrence through persistent practice. Routine presence, alliance reassurance, and legal signaling can help sustain stability without forcing decisive outcomes; however, their effects depend heavily on interpretation and on whether crisis-management practices can keep pace with a dense, repetitive operating environment.

### 5.3 Western Pacific and Indian Ocean Spillover

While the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait remain the most visible theaters of U.S.-China maritime competition, the effects of U.S. Indo-Pacific maritime strategy extend beyond these focal points. Across the Western Pacific and into the Indian Ocean, practices developed in East Asia increasingly shape alliance behavior, force posture, and regional expectations. This spillover reflects both design and momentum: once competition is routinized through regular operations, exercises, and signaling, it rarely stays contained within a single geographic "box." For the United States, spillover expands strategic depth by dispersing presence and partnerships and reinforces the view that maritime challenges are

1 O. S. Mastro, 'How to Prevent an Accidental War over Taiwan', *Foreign Affairs* (2021); U.S. Department of Defense, *2022 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America* (2022).

interconnected rather than purely local[1]. It also brings higher coordination costs and sharper political sensitivities, especially where partners' threat perceptions and domestic constraints diverge.

In the Western Pacific, strategy builds outward from the alliance core with Japan. Tokyo's larger security role since its 2022 strategic documents—paired with capability investment and closer operational coordination—has strengthened deterrence and crisis responsiveness[2]. Joint exercises, coordinated patrol patterns, and interoperability initiatives increasingly link contingencies across the East China Sea, the Taiwan Strait, and the Philippine Sea, complicating adversary planning and reducing the likelihood that pressure in one area is treated as an isolated episode[3]. The trade-off is tighter "coupling": incidents in peripheral areas can acquire alliance-wide significance, raising escalation risks. For Japan, deeper involvement brings greater influence but also greater exposure to dynamics beyond its immediate control.

Further south, the Pacific Islands have become a governance-centered arena of spillover. The region is central to sea-lane connectivity and resource governance, particularly fisheries. U.S. engagement relies on lower-escalation tools—coast guard cooperation, shiprider arrangements, fisheries enforcement, and MDA support—often framed in terms of sovereignty support and economic resilience[4]. Here, maritime governance itself becomes a site of competition: law-enforcement cooperation, information-sharing, and civil—military coordination is adapted to the Pacific context even when the language remains non-military[5]. The main

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1 The White House, *National Security Strategy* (October 2022); U.S. Department of Defense, *2022 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America* (2022).

2 The White House, *National Security Strategy* (October 2022); U.S. Department of Defense, *2022 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America* (2022).

3 U.S. Department of Defense, *2022 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America* (2022).

4 The White House, *Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States* (February 2022); U.S. Coast Guard, *U.S. Coast Guard: Indo-Pacific Strategic Intent* (26 November 2024).

5 U.S. Department of Homeland Security, *U.S. Coast Guard: Indo-Pacific Strategic Intent and Update (FY2021–FY2023)* (2024); Foreign Policy Research Institute, *Strengthening Pacific Security: U.S. Shiprider Agreements* (2025).

constraint is political perception. Pacific Island states are sensitive to external pressure and strategic instrumentalization; if cooperation is viewed primarily as serving great-power rivalry, it can generate resistance and erode trust. Sustainability therefore depends as much on partner priorities as on U.S. capacity.

Australia occupies a bridging position, linking the Western Pacific and the Indian Ocean and providing depth for logistics, basing, and sustainment. Maritime cooperation has expanded through alliance mechanisms and force-posture initiatives, described by official statements as enhancing combined capability and resilience [1] . Australia's geography and infrastructure extend operational reach and reduce reliance on the most forward—and most exposed—operating areas. Yet it also highlights spillover's political sustainability problem: deeper alignment can intensify domestic debates over costs, risk exposure, and relations with China, requiring careful burden-sharing and messaging rather than assuming automatic convergence.

The Indian Ocean represents a further extension of this arc. As "Indo-Pacific" strategy treats the maritime system as connected, U.S. influence here rests more on partnerships than treaty-style alliances. Cooperation with India and engagement with littoral states—often centered on capacity building and information sharing—signal a preference for widening the network without rigid commitments[2]. Spillover can reduce dependence on any single focal theater and complicate adversary planning by expanding the competitive space. The main constraint lies in variation across partners: diverse threat perceptions, non-alignment preferences, and differing legal interpretations can limit coordination under stress.

Overall, spillover produces a more networked—and more demanding—maritime environment. It can amplify U.S. leverage by embedding

1 Australian Department of Defence, *United States Force Posture Initiatives* (n.d.); U.S. Department of State, 'Joint Statement on Australia–U.S. Ministerial Consultations (AUSMIN) 2023', (2023).

2 H. V. Pant and A. Rej, 'Is India Ready for the Indo-Pacific?', *The Washington Quarterly*, vol. 41, no. 2 (2018), pp. 47–61; The White House, *Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States* (February 2022).

competition within a wider web of partnerships and governance practices[1]. It also increases coordination costs, heightens the chance that local incidents generate disproportionate strategic consequences, and raises partner concerns about autonomy and entanglement. Spillover is therefore both an asset and a liability: it extends strategic depth, but it also tests whether U.S. maritime strategy can remain politically sustainable and operationally disciplined across a widening Indo-Pacific geography.

## 6. Implications for Regional Actors

The regional effects of U.S. Indo-Pacific maritime strategy are uneven. Even if Washington frames its approach in terms of stability and deterrence, implementation at sea reshapes incentives, constraints, and strategic choice sets for a diverse range of actors. Maritime security has thus become a key arena in which alignment, autonomy, and risk management are continuously renegotiated.

For U.S. treaty allies, heightened maritime engagement can provide reassurance while also increasing exposure. Persistent presence, expanded exercises, and visible legal signaling may strengthen deterrence and mitigate concerns about abandonment. In the Western Pacific, deeper operational integration—especially with Japan and Australia—can also raise crisis responsiveness by improving interoperability and coordination. Australian polling illustrates this dual effect: strong support for the U.S. alliance coexists with significant concern that it could draw Australia into a war in Asia. The broader point is that reassurance and entrapment anxiety can deepen in parallel[2].

Deeper alliance integration, however, comes with trade-offs. Greater integration ties allies more closely to U.S. operational rhythms and strategic narratives, narrowing room for ambiguity. Participation in joint patrols, parallel transits, or shared intelligence can be read by competitors as endorsement of U.S. positions even when allied domestic preferences

1 The White House, *National Security Strategy* (October 2022); U.S. Department of Defense, *2022 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America* (2022).

2 Lowy Institute, *Lowy Institute Poll 2024 Report* (3 June 2024).

are more calibrated. As alliance commitments become more operationalized, burden sharing becomes a political as well as a military question—implicating risk exposure, defense spending, and escalation management. Domestic legitimacy therefore becomes part of alliance management rather than a separate constraint[1].

For regional middle powers and smaller states—particularly in Southeast Asia and the Pacific Islands—the implications are more mixed. U.S. initiatives can, under some conditions, expand options through capacity-building, MDA, and governance-oriented cooperation. At the same time, they can narrow strategic space by embedding maritime governance within a more openly competitive framework. Many of these states prioritize sovereignty, economic development, and strategic autonomy. Cooperation is often more sustainable when framed as supporting governance and local priorities rather than demanding explicit alignment. Yet as strategic rivalry intensifies, even technically oriented cooperation can be politicized, increasing sensitivity to reputational and retaliation risks. The resulting pattern is frequently selective engagement: hedging through partial participation, issue-by-issue cooperation, and careful signaling. This behavior is less a symptom of indecision than a response to limited leverage over great-power dynamics[2].

Regional survey data reinforce this point. Southeast Asian views of the United States vary sharply across countries, suggesting that cooperation is often filtered through concerns about sovereignty, economic pragmatism, and strategic autonomy[3]. This pattern creates a persistent challenge for U.S. strategy: sustaining cooperation without forcing binary choices. In practice, durability often depends on flexibility in design, sensitivity to local priorities, and restraint in rhetoric—especially where issues are framed in

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1 V. D. Cha, *Powerplay: The Origins of the American Alliance System in Asia* (Princeton University Press, 2016).

2 A. Acharya, *The End of American World Order* (Polity Press, 2014).

3 S. Seah et al., *The State of Southeast Asia: 2024 Survey Report* (ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2024); S. Seah et al., *The State of Southeast Asia: 2025 Survey Report* (ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2025).

sovereignty terms.

For China, U.S. maritime strategy presents a multi-layered set of constraints and pressures. Operationally, persistent U.S. presence and tighter alliance coordination complicate efforts to reshape facts on the water incrementally. Legally, practice-based signaling contests Chinese interpretations of maritime jurisdiction and permissible conduct. Politically, alliance and partner networking can limit China's ability to keep disputes narrowly bilateral.

U.S. actions also generate incentives for countermeasures. China has expanded maritime capabilities, increased law-enforcement activity, advanced alternative legal and normative narratives. Rather than rejecting maritime governance outright, Beijing has sought to compete within it—often framing U.S. operations as destabilizing and insufficiently attentive to coastal-state security concerns. This interaction sustains a pattern of mutual suspicion: each side tends to interpret the other's moves as strategically motivated even when justified as defensive. In Beijing's framing, U.S. maritime strategy is frequently read less as neutral rule defense than as coalition-based constraint, which can limit cooperative space and raise the stakes of routine encounters[1].

Regional institutions—especially ASEAN—operate under tightening constraints. U.S. rhetoric often affirms ASEAN centrality, yet operational dynamics frequently privilege alliances and minilateral mechanisms that can move faster and deliver clearer deterrent effects. For ASEAN members, this creates a tension between institutional preference and strategic necessity. ASEAN-led processes offer inclusivity and legitimacy but have limited enforcement capacity; minilateral maritime cooperation can deliver tangible security benefits but may fragment governance and accentuate intra-ASEAN divergence. The issue is therefore less institutional irrelevance than role adjustment: agenda-setting, norm articulation, and crisis management may matter more than operational coordination.

1 M. T. Fravel, *Active Defense: China's Military Strategy since 1949* (Princeton University Press, 2019).

Whether ASEAN can sustain coherence under intensifying maritime competition remains uncertain[1].

At the systemic level, U.S. Indo-Pacific maritime strategy contributes to an order in which competition is normalized while escalation is managed rather than resolved. Persistence, legality, and alliance coordination are intended to stabilize rivalry, yet continuous engagement also raises incident probability and misinterpretation risks. Regional actors thus operate in an environment where competitive encounters are routine but outcomes remain contingent.

This points to a shift from crisis-driven security to management-driven security. Maritime stability depends less on decisive outcomes than on shared expectations, operational discipline, and credible restraint. Whether this balance can be sustained will hinge on leadership choices, alliance cohesion, and—critically—the perceived legitimacy of observable behavior at sea.

These tensions point to trade-offs that accumulate over time. The next section therefore turns to the strategy's limits and unintended consequences—how persistence, alliance reliance, and governance-based tools can raise incident risk, strain coordination, politicize functional cooperation, and fragment legal—normative authority.

## 7. Risks, Limits, and Unintended Consequences

U.S. Indo-Pacific maritime strategy draws strength from persistence: repeated operations can preserve access, signal resolve, reassure partners, and advance legal positions through practice. Those same features, however, also generate structural risks and clear limits. As maritime competition becomes more continuous and geographically diffuse, instruments designed to stabilize behavior in the short run can also accumulate friction, narrow margins for error, and produce unintended

1 E. Goh, *The Struggle for Order: Hegemony, Hierarchy, and Transition in Post–Cold War East Asia* (Oxford University Press, 2013).

consequences over time.

A first—and most immediate—risk arises from interaction density. Continuous naval operations, law-enforcement patrols, and combined exercises raise the probability of incidents at sea even when actors describe their intentions as defensive. In congested waters such as the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait, routine encounters also carry outsized symbolic and strategic weight, increasing the chance that minor events are interpreted as tests of resolve.

The approach often places weight on predictability and professionalism to manage this exposure. Regularized transits and standardized conduct are meant to reduce surprise and signal restraint. Yet predictability does not remove danger. Under intensifying rivalry, actions previously treated as routine may be re-read through a more adversarial lens, shifting perceived thresholds and compressing decision time. The result is a smaller margin for error even when operational patterns remain unchanged.

Escalation dynamics at sea are also frequently nonlinear. Incidents involving coast guards, auxiliaries, or civilian-linked vessels can rapidly acquire strategic significance through domestic politics, media amplification, or alliance expectations. Crucially, escalation control depends not only on U.S. intent but on others' perceptions and incentives—variables that become harder to shape as competition deepens[1].

A second set of risks concerns alliance and partner sustainability. Persistent maritime strategy requires recurring contributions—participation in exercises and patrols, capacity investment, and politically visible signaling. While this can strengthen deterrence and distribute burdens, it can also generate fatigue and uneven follow-through. Deeper operational integration may increase exposure without proportionate influence over strategic outcomes, and shifts in domestic politics can tighten constraints on sustained participation or raise demands for tighter risk controls.

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1 O. S. Mastro, 'How to Prevent an Accidental War over Taiwan', *Foreign Affairs* (2021).

Coordination burdens also grow as maritime strategy becomes more networked. Divergent legal interpretations, threat perceptions, and escalation thresholds complicate collective action. Minilateral arrangements can ease this by enabling flexible participation, but they may also introduce duplication, overlapping expectations, and inconsistent signaling across coalitions. Over time, cumulative coordination costs can weaken cohesion and operational discipline—the very assets maritime strategy seeks to leverage[1].

A third risk lies in the securitization of maritime governance. Many initiatives—coast guard cooperation, maritime domain awareness, fisheries enforcement—are often framed in functional terms. As rivalry sharpens, however, even governance-oriented activity can be absorbed into strategic narratives. Over-securitization can crowd out cooperation on problems where interests partly overlap, such as environmental protection, search and rescue, and resource management. The practical consequence may be diminishing returns: more activity, but less legitimacy, narrower participation, and weaker problem-solving capacity.

Longer-term risks also arise in the legal and normative domain. Practice-based norm signaling can reinforce certain behaviors, but it can also accelerate fragmentation when major actors advance competing interpretations. As legal claims become more tightly coupled to strategic competition, space for shared understandings can narrow, and states may become more selective in invoking principles that suit immediate interests. For the United States, continued non-ratification of UNCLOS can complicate claims to normative leadership even when operational practice supports widely accepted navigational freedoms. If legal norms become widely contested, the stabilizing function of law weakens, and restraint becomes harder to justify domestically and internationally—turning legal argument into another arena of competition rather than a moderating

1 V. D. Cha, *Powerplay: The Origins of the American Alliance System in Asia* (Princeton University Press, 2016).

constraint[1].

Beyond these risks, maritime strategy has structural limits. Sustained presence requires resources, political attention, and long-horizon commitment. Competing global priorities can constrain focus and capacity. More fundamentally, maritime instruments can preserve access, shape behavior, and deter coercion, but they cannot by themselves resolve sovereignty disputes or remove strategic rivalry. Treating operational tools as substitutes for political settlement risks strategic overreach.

Sustainability is therefore the key test. A strategy built on persistence must manage fatigue, legitimacy, and escalation risk simultaneously. That requires not only capability but discipline: calibrating action, adjusting rhetoric, and tolerating ambiguity without allowing routine signaling to become a crisis trigger.

## 8. Conclusion

Maritime security has become a major arena in which U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy is operationalized, through sustained presence, maritime domain awareness, and various forms of partner capacity-building. In practice, this places day-to-day maritime activity—not only episodic crises—at the center of signaling, coordination, and contestation over how rules are interpreted and applied at sea.

The case studies indicate both utility and constraints. In the South China Sea, repeated presence and coordinated activities can affect behavior and shape expectations without resolving sovereignty disputes. In the Taiwan Strait, routine transits can serve deterrent and crisis-management purposes, while also increasing the chance that tactical incidents acquire wider political significance. As activity extends across the Western Pacific and into the Indian Ocean, dispersion may broaden the competitive space but also raises coordination burdens and local sensitivities.

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1 R. Beckman, 'The UN Convention on the Law of the Sea and the Maritime Disputes in the South China Sea', *American Journal of International Law*, vol. 107, no. 1 (2013), pp. 142–163.

For regional actors, effects are uneven. Treaty allies may experience greater reassurance alongside higher exposure and operational demands. Many middle and smaller states can gain cooperation options yet face tighter room for maneuver as functional maritime governance becomes more entangled with strategic competition. China encounters sustained contestation not only over capabilities but also over narratives and normative claims. Overall, routinized maritime competition can reduce the volatility associated with sudden shifts, but it can also increase encounter frequency, strain coalitions, and deepen legal—normative divergence. Maritime instruments may help manage rivalry and preserve access, but they do not substitute for political judgment or resolve underlying disputes; outcomes depend on how consistently actors balance presence, restraint, and legitimacy.

# 3. EU RESPONSES TO CHINESE ACTION IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

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## 1. Introduction

If the century preceding the end of the Second World War can be described as the heyday of European intervention in the political and economic affairs of the Indo-Pacific region, it can also be observed that the pendulum has now swung squarely in the opposite direction. Since the end of the Cold War and the European Union's wholesale embrace of the promise of globalisation, EU member states and the bloc as a whole have largely been peripheral actors in the part of the world, yet maneuvering diplomatically and commercially where necessary to build and preserve economic ties. Such liberal strategies were far from lacking merit—average costs of manufacturing labor at the beginning of the 21st century were up to 97% cheaper in China (a representative regional leader) compared to their European counterparts, and a ~65% average labor cost advantage persists today as the region continues to drive two-thirds of global GDP growth.[1] At the same time, the EU took confidence in the rules-based international order and the norms embedded within it, believing these would allow Europe to consistently engage economically in the region without assuming overtly revisionist political positions unilaterally.

That said, as shifts in the global economic and security environment have

1 Josep Borrell, 'The EU Approach to the Indo-Pacific: Speech by High Representative/Vice-President Josep Borrell at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)', European External Action Service (4 June 2021), https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/bangladesh/eu-approach-indo-pacific-speech-high-representativevice-president-josep-borrell-centre-strategic-and_en; Dirk Pilat, Agnès Cimper, Karsten Bjerring Olsen and Colin Webb, 'The Changing Nature of Manufacturing in OECD Economies', *OECD Science, Technology and Industry Working Papers*, No. 2006/09 (OECD Publishing, 27 October 2006), https://doi.org/10.1787/308452426871; Arendse Huld and Qian Zhou, 'China Manufacturing Industry Tracker – Key Data for 2025', *China Briefing* (updated 18 November 2025), https://www.china-briefing.com/news/china-manufacturing-industry-tracker-2024-25/; Eurostat, 'EU Hourly Labour Costs Ranged from €11 to €55 in 2024' (28 March 2025), https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/w/ddn-20250328-1.

accelerated, the EU has been slow to adapt. A combination of complacency, bureaucratic lethargy, and the growth of competitive alternative production markets abroad has contributed to extensive offshoring and a marked loss of productivity growth within the Union, particularly in core sectors such as automotive manufacturing and future-oriented industries like green energy technologies.[1] The resurgence of multipolarity and increasing volatility of regional security dynamics—most notably through Russia's invasion of Ukraine, accompanying economic security constraints following the loss of Russian supplies, and subsequent U.S. pressure on European allies to increase defence spending as a share of GDP—have further compelled a reassessment of Europe's security posture globally.[2] Finally, the growing prominence of geo-economic tools of statecraft—including tariffs, aggressive industrial subsidies by competitors, and cases of economic coercion—have prompted Europe to undertake a broader strategic recalculation of its economic footprint in the Indo-Pacific.[3]

Despite growing geopolitical frictions, the European Union has been careful to signal that it does not seek a rupture in relations with China, particularly in the economic domain. Senior European leaders have repeatedly emphasised a need to de-risk rather than de-couple, a position underscored by French President Emmanuel Macron in his remarks at the World Economic Forum where he called for "more Chinese foreign direct investments in Europe, in some key sectors, to contribute to our growth, to

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1 Rachel Millard, Alice Hancock and Nic Fildes, 'How the West Fell Behind in the Green Tech Race', *Financial Times* (12 January 2026), https://www.ft.com/content/3749b1f0-83b1-4b5e-a470-02256d4dd0cc; Rachel More, 'German Auto Industry in "Crisis" as Investments, Jobs Move Abroad, Lobby Says', *Reuters* (10 February 2026), https://www.reuters.com/business/german-auto-industry-crisis-investments-jobs-move-abroad-lobby-says-2026-02-10/.

2 Council of the European Union, 'Ending Russian Energy Imports', https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/ending-russian-energy-imports/; Olga Croitorov, Reinhard Felke, Robert Krämer and Mirko Licchetta, 'Macroeconomic Impacts of Defence Spending', *VoxEU*, Centre for Economic Policy Research (22 December 2025), https://cepr.org/voxeu/columns/macroeconomic-impacts-defence-spending.

3 European Commission, Directorate-General for Trade and Economic Security, 'Commission Accepts Price Undertaking from Chinese Electric Car Producer' (10 February 2026), https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/news/commission-accepts-price-undertaking-chinese-electric-car-producer-2026-02-10_en; Rebecca Arcesati, 'Avoiding a Race to the Bottom: How the EU Can Counter Chinese Export Controls', Mercator Institute for China Studies (29 October 2025), https://merics.org/en/comment/avoiding-race-bottom-how-eu-can-counter-chinese-export-controls.

transfer some technologies, and not just to export towards Europe."[1]

At the same time, however, the EU's broader strategic outlook toward the Indo-Pacific has begun to evolve. This was reflected first in the Union's 2021 Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, more recently updated at the end of last year.[2] Following in the footsteps of both regional and extra-regional actors (such as Japan, Australia, and the U.S.), European strategy now embraces wholesale the pivot from the previously dominant "Asia-Pacific" concept—preferred by Beijing—into a broader, trans-regional conception which links China's neighbourhood to broader economic interests in the Middle East and Indian subcontinent. While no documents hitherto explicitly advocate confrontation, both iterations of the Indo-Pacific Strategy reflect a growing awareness of the strategic implications of China's regional behaviour shaped, most proximately, by Europe's reassessment of power politics following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. In this context, implicit analogies between Europe's own security shocks and tensions in East Asia—particularly across the Taiwan Strait—have become more visible, even as the EU remains cautious about drawing explicit parallels.

Several interrelated dynamics can be identified in the EU's evolving policy responses to Chinese actions in the Indo-Pacific. First, Brussels has begun to subtly reframe developments in the South China Sea from a primarily legal dispute centred around the law of the sea into a wider geopolitical theatre with direct implications for regional stability and the credibility of international norms. Second, the EU has steadily expanded its strategic partnerships with like-minded regional actors, deepening political, economic, and security cooperation with Japan, Australia, and the Philippines while also intensifying engagement with ASEAN as a whole. At the same time, the EU has noticeably moderated its public signaling on the Taiwan issue, placing less emphasis on demonstrations of military

1 Saadet Gokce, 'China Urges EU to Take Open Approach to Investment Ties', *Anadolu Agency* (21 January 2026), https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/china-urges-eu-to-take-open-approach-to-investment-ties/3806382.

2 European External Action Service, 'EU-Indo Pacific Strategy' (20 November 2025), https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu-indo-pacific-strategy_en.

resolve and instead prioritising diplomatic language that underscores stability, deterrence, and the avoidance of escalation. Finally, the role of the United States as an assertive actor in the Indo-Pacific introduces another variable into Europe's approach to the region with different actors skewing towards the autonomist, Atlanticist, and hedging corners of an emergent strategic triangle.

Taken together, these shifts suggest not a wholesale transformation of European policy, but a gradual recalibration in which economic engagement with China is increasingly balanced against a more explicitly geopolitical reading of the Indo-Pacific security environment.

## 2. Shift from Legalism to Geopolitics in the South China Sea

For much of the post-Cold War period, the European Union approached disputes in the South China Sea through a narrowly legalistic lens, emphasizing the primacy of international law and the maintenance of a rules-based international order. This approach was most clearly reflected in the EU's consistent invocation of UNCLOS and its support for the binding nature of the 2016 ruling of the Permanent Court of Arbitration in the Philippines v. China case, invalidating expansive maritime claims.[1] While this language remains central to Brussels' official position, recent developments suggest a subtle but meaningful reframing of the SCS from a distant legal dispute into a geopolitical theatre with direct implications for European security interests and the credibility of international norms. This shift has emerged not through confrontational rhetoric, but through cumulative changes in emphasis, diplomatic engagement, and strategic signaling.

Traditionally, EU statements on the SCS were characterized by cautious neutrality, underscoring freedom of navigation and peaceful dispute resolution without directly naming or criticizing Beijing. This reflected

1 Council of the European Union, 'Declaration by the High Representative on Behalf of the EU on Recent Developments in the South China Sea' (11 March 2016), https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2016/03/11/hr-declaration-on-bealf-of-eu-recent-developments-south-china-sea/.

both the Union's limited military presence in the region and its desire to avoid jeopardizing economic ties with China. However, in the context of rising global geopolitical tensions and Europe's reassessment of power politics following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, EU policymakers have increasingly linked the preservation of maritime law in the Indo-Pacific to broader questions of regional stability and systemic competition. Notably, several member states—for example, Germany last November—have begun to explicitly argue that erosion of international legal norms in the South China Sea carries consequences not only for Southeast Asia, but also for European security and global governance more broadly.

This evolution is evident in both rhetoric and diplomatic practice. While the EU continues to affirm the binding status of the 2016 arbitral award, it has also increasingly characterized Chinese activities as destabilizing and coercive, thereby moving beyond purely legal formulations. The language used by EU institutions and senior officials now more frequently situates the SCS within a geopolitical framework, emphasizing risks to international peace and stability rather than solely to maritime law. This reframing does not represent an abandonment of legal principles, but rather an effort to embed them within a wider strategic narrative that resonates with Europe's own security experiences.

Targeted diplomatic engagement has reinforced this shift. The EU has intensified high-level interactions with regional actors directly affected by South China Sea tensions, most notably the Philippines. During a visit by EU foreign policy chief Kaja Kallas in early May, Brussels and Manila announced the launch of a new security and defence dialogue, accompanied by unusually blunt joint language describing China's actions as "illegal, coercive, aggressive and deceptive."[1] Such wording marked a departure from earlier EU caution and localized the Union's legal stance by anchoring it in concrete regional partnerships. The visit prompted formal protest from Beijing, yet the EU did not retreat from its position.[2]

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1 European External Action Service, 'The EU and the Philippines Enhance Security Cooperation' (2 June 2025), https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu-and-philippines-enhance-security-cooperation_en.

2 European External Action Service, 'South China Sea: Statement by the Spokesperson on the Recent

Instead, Brussels reiterated its core commitments later in the year following further coast guard incidents, signaling that this reframing was not episodic but increasingly institutionalized.

In this sense, the South China Sea has become a test case for Europe's broader Indo-Pacific recalibration. By embedding its legal arguments within a broader narrative of regional stability and security, the EU is seeking to enhance the relevance of its normative power while remaining consistent with its self-image as a stabilising actor. The reframing underway does not suggest Brussels is seeking confrontation. However, it does suggest a more politically conscious reading of China's regional behaviour that aligns legal principles with geopolitical awareness, and positions the EU as a more engaged, if still cautious, stakeholder in Indo-Pacific stability.

## 3. Strategic De-Risking through Increased Regional Partnerships

Parallel to its reframing of regional security dynamics, Brussels has increasingly sought to respond to China's actions in the Indo-Pacific by deepening strategic partnerships with a broad range of regional actors. In addition to deepening strategic ties with particular regional actors like the Philippines, Japan, Australia, and India, Europe has opted for a network-based approach centered on political dialogue, economic cooperation, and selective security engagement. This strategy reflects both material constraints (e.g., limited power projection capabilities) and a deliberate effort to diversify Europe's regional footprint in ways that reduce vulnerability to economic coercion while reinforcing shared norms.

At the institutional level, the EU has expanded its region-to-region engagement mechanisms, most prominently through the regular EU-Indo-Pacific Ministerial Forum.[1] These platforms serve not only as venues for

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Dangerous Actions' (15 December 2025), https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/south-china-sea-statement-spokesperson-recent-dangerous-actions_en.

1 Council of the European Union, 'Building Together a Resilient, Prosperous and Secure Future: Chair's Statement, EU–Indo-Pacific Ministerial Forum, Brussels, 20–21 November 2025' (21 November 2025), https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2025/11/21/building-together-a-resilient-prosperous-and-secure-future-chair-s-statement-eu-indo-pacific-ministerial-forum-

diplomatic exchange, but also as instruments for signaling long-term commitment to the region. The updated Indo-Pacific Strategy reaffirmed by the European Council in October 2025 marked a significant step in this direction. The revised document explicitly called for intensifying the EU's strategic focus, presence, and actions across a vast geographic arc stretching from the East African coast to the Pacific Islands. Security and defence cooperation, economic security, resilient supply chains, and critical infrastructure were elevated alongside trade and development, underscoring a more holistic understanding of regional engagement.[1]

Engagement with Southeast Asia occupies a central place in this approach, as per the Indo-Pacific Strategy. The EU's relationship with the ASEAN countries has increasingly incorporated maritime security agendas, information-sharing on critical sea lanes, and support for ASEAN-led processes such as negotiations on COC.[2] By anchoring its involvement within ASEAN-centric frameworks, the EU aims to reinforce regional multilateralism while avoiding the appearance of imposing external solutions. This approach also allows Brussels to present itself as a stabilizing partner committed to inclusivity and bloc-oriented cooperation as opposed to superpower competition.

While bloc-to-bloc cooperation appears to be the Commission's preference from a normative perspective, bilateral relations with other Indo-Pacific partners are also developing steadily. EU relations with Japan have continued to deepen since the signing of a mutual security partnership in 2024, while ongoing negotiations on a formal defence and security partnership with Australia reflect growing convergence on maritime security and regional stability.[3] Following the successful negotiation of a

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brussels-20-21-november-2025/.

1 Council of the European Union, 'EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific: Council Approves Conclusions' (20 October 2025), https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2025/10/20/eu-strategy-for-cooperation-in-the-indo-pacific-council-approves-conclusions/.

2 European External Action Service, 'The European Union and ASEAN' (27 August 2025), https://www.eeas.europa.eu/asean/european-union-and-asean_en.

3 European External Action Service, 'EU-Japan Security and Defence Partnership' (1 November 2024), https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu-japan-security-and-defence-partnership_en; Council of the European Union, 'Europe and Australia Commit to Security and Defence Partnership' (17 June 2025),

"mother of all trade deals" with India, the EU is exploring a comprehensive security and defence partnership slated for later this year encompassing maritime security, cybersecurity, counterterrorism cooperation, and annual defence dialogues.[1] These patterns illustrate Brussels' preference for integrating economic and security considerations rather than treating them as separate policy silos.

Despite the diversity of EU relationships with regional actors, Southeast Asia still appears to be the main vector of European entry into the regional security apparatus today. Following the Commission-level upgrading of ties with the Philippines, member states Estonia and Italy have recently followed suit in penning defence agreements with Manila on the sidelines of the 2026 iteration of the Munich Security Conference in February.[2] Other high-level diplomatic visits have further reinforced this posture. In addition to Commission-level engagement with the Philippines, French President Macron's visits to Vietnam, Indonesia, and Singapore last spring highlighted concerns about coercive behaviour and the need for regional stability, while Germany's foreign minister echoed similar themes during the aforementioned visit to Indonesia.[3] These coordinated messages across multiple member states suggest a growing alignment between national and EU-level diplomacy, even if variations in tone and emphasis persist.

Importantly, this expansion of partnerships is not framed as an anti-China coalition. Nevertheless, the cumulative effect of these partnerships is to embed the EU more deeply within the Indo-Pacific's multipolar strategic

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https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2025/06/17/australia-and-the-european-union-committing-to-security-and-defence-partnership/.

1 Benjamin Fox, 'EU to Clinch "Mother of All Trade Deals" with India', *EUobserver* (23 January 2026), https://euobserver.com/198527/eu-to-clinch-mother-of-all-trade-deals-with-india/; Lili Bayer, 'EU and India to Explore Defence Cooperation, Draft Document Says', *Reuters* (26 January 2026), https://www.reuters.com/world/india/eu-india-explore-defence-cooperation-draft-document-says-2026-01-26/.

2 Katrina Murphy, 'Philippines Signs Pacts with Estonia, Italy at Munich Security Conference', *Manila Standard* (15–16 February 2026; exact posting date to reconfirm), https://manilastandard.net/news/314704129/philippines-signs-pacts-with-estonia-italy-at-munich-security-confab.html.

3 Aniruddha Ghosal, 'France's Macron on a Visit to Vietnam Urges for Greater Cooperation in Defense and Trade', *Associated Press News* (26 May 2025), https://apnews.com/article/e606a0dc70ce578031d40aab6a8b9d96.

landscape, potentially increasing partners' capacity to respond collectively to coercive practices. Ultimately, by leveraging diplomacy, trade, and selective security cooperation, Brussels is seeking to mitigate strategic risks while preserving its economic interests and normative power.

## 4. Strategic Ambiguity on Cross-Straits Issues

While the European Union has gradually sharpened its geopolitical awareness in the Indo-Pacific, its approach to the Taiwan issue remains notably cautious and carefully calibrated. Unlike the South China Sea, where legal and geopolitical narratives increasingly converge, EU policy toward cross-strait relations reflects a deliberate effort to balance concern over stability with an avoidance of overt escalation. This moderation is visible both in declining demonstrations of military signaling and in the careful framing of official language, suggesting a strategic choice to prioritize diplomatic restraint while maintaining normative positions.

In recent years, European naval activity related to the Taiwan Strait has been limited and episodic. Although several European states—including Germany, France, and the Netherlands—conducted transits in 2024, these actions followed a prolonged period of inactivity and were not sustained in subsequent years.[1] EU member states have not repeated such transits since, and broader European participation has remained minimal.[2] This pattern stands in contrast to earlier expectations that Europe might incrementally increase its visible presence as part of a broader commitment to freedom of navigation. Instead, the decline in activity points to a conscious de-emphasis of military demonstrations in favour of diplomatic signaling.

This restraint does not imply indifference. EU institutions and key member

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1 Alexander Ratz, Yimou Lee, 'German Navy Makes Rare Transit of Sensitive Taiwan Strait', *Reuters*, (13 September 2024), https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/german-navy-makes-rare-transit-sensitive-taiwan-strait-2024-09-13/; *Reuters*, 'French Naval Vessel Passes Through Sensitive Taiwan Strait' (29 October 2024), https://www.reuters.com/world/french-naval-vessel-passes-through-sensitive-taiwan-strait-2024-10-29/; *DutchNews.nl*, 'China Bristles as Dutch Frigate Passes Through Taiwan Strait' (11 June 2024), https://www.dutchnews.nl/2024/06/china-bristles-as-dutch-freighter-passes-through-taiwan-strait/.

2 Taiwan Security Monitor, 'Taiwan Strait Transit Tracker', https://tsm.schar.gmu.edu/taiwan-strait-transit-tracker/.

states have consistently expressed concern about rising tensions in the Taiwan Strait and have criticized actions perceived as increasing the risk of conflict, including large-scale military exercises. Following the most recent bout of live-fire drills in the vicinity, Germany and France issued critical statements, with the EU External Action Service warning that such actions "further increase cross-strait tensions and endanger international peace and stability."[1] These responses reaffirm the EU's interest in stability and opposition to unilateral revision of the status quo, even as they stop short of endorsing deterrence through force.

A notable feature of EU policy is the divergence between institutional and parliamentary rhetoric. While members of the European Parliament have often adopted more confrontational language toward Beijing, executive-level statements from the European Commission and the European External Action Service remain carefully framed to avoid crossing China's declared "red lines."[2] This contrast suggests a lack of consensus among EU organs, leveraged by the Commission as a form of multi-layered signaling. The result is a posture of strategic ambiguity that seeks to maintain space for engagement with China while signaling opposition to destabilizing behaviour.

Taken together, the EU's moderated stance on Taiwan illustrates the broader character of its Indo-Pacific recalibration: incremental, risk-averse, and grounded in diplomatic rather than military tools. By reducing overt signaling while maintaining principled language on stability and coercion, the EU seeks to navigate an increasingly fraught issue without foreclosing economic engagement or escalating tensions. This approach may attract criticism from both ends of the spectrum for perceived undue restraint or

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1 European External Action Service, 'Spokesperson Statement on China's Military Exercise Around Taiwan' (30 December 2025), https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/spokesperson-statement-china%E2%80%99s-military-exercise-around-taiwan_en; Aurélie Pugnet, 'Europeans Voice Concern over Chinese Taiwan Blockade Drill, US Dismissive', *Euractiv* (31 December 2025), https://www.euractiv.com/news/europeans-voice-concern-over-chinese-taiwan-blockade-drill-us-dismissive/.

2 European Parliament, 'China Is Trying to Distort History and International Law in Taiwan, MEPs Warn' (24 October 2024), https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20241017IPR24739/china-is-trying-to-distort-history-and-international-law-in-taiwan-meps-warn.

provocation, but it is consistent with Europe's broader effort to balance normative commitments with pragmatic geopolitical realities in an era of heightened strategic competition.

**Table 1：Taiwan Strait Transits by European navies since 2016**

| Date of Transit | Country | Ship Class | Type |
|---|---|---|---|
| 6 April 2018 | France | FS Vendémiaire | Frigate |
| 7 December 2019 | United Kingdom | HMS Enterprise | Survey Vessel |
| 27 September 2021 | United Kingdom | HMS Richmond | Frigate |
| October 2021 | France | Dupuy de Lôme | SIGINT Vessel |
| 31 May 2024 | The Netherlands | HNLMS Tromp | Frigate |
| 14 September 2024 | Germany | FGS Baden-Württemberg | Frigate |
| 14 September 2024 | Germany | FGS Frankfurt am Main | Replenishment Ship |
| 28 October 2024 | France | FS Prairial | Frigate |
| 18 June 2025 | United Kingdom | HMS Spey | Offshore Patrol Vessel |
| 12 September 2025 | United Kingdom | HMS Richmond | Frigate |

Sources: https://tsm.schar.gmu.edu/taiwan-strait-transit-tracker/; https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/german-navy-makes-rare-transit-sensitive-taiwan-strait-2024-09-13/; https://www.dutchnews.nl/2024/06/china-bristles-as-dutch-freighter-passes-through-taiwan-strait/; https://www.reuters.com/world/french-naval-vessel-passes-through-sensitive-taiwan-strait-2024-10-29/.

## 5. The American Variable and European Triangulation

No assessment of the EU's Indo-Pacific posture is complete without accounting for the principal actor whose withdrawal of settled guarantees has done most to accelerate European strategic recalculation: the United States. The return of Donald Trump to the White House in January 2025 introduced a new layer of complexity into European calculations that cuts in multiple, often contradictory, directions simultaneously. Unlike the Biden administration, which pursued a multilateral, alliance-intensive approach to Indo-Pacific security—institutionalized through the Quad, AUKUS, and sustained emphasis on the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) framework—Trump's second term has been characterized by transactional bilateralism, aggressive tariff deployment against allies and rivals alike, and a rhetorical posture that has left European partners uncertain whether Washington views the European and Indo-Pacific theatres as complementarily linked or as competing claims on American attention.

The structural shift between Biden and Trump in the Indo-Pacific is most visible in the texture of American alliance management. Biden invested heavily in restoring the credibility of alliance commitments that Trump's first term had destabilized—through the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) burden-sharing rows, the AUKUS controversy's fallout on French relations, and the abandonment of the Trans-Pacific Partnership. The resultant multilateral architecture gave European states both a clear signal to follow and a relatively frictionless mechanism for aligning their own Indo-Pacific engagement with American strategic priorities. Trump 2.0, by contrast, has been associated with demands for European allied contributions framed as non-negotiable conditions rather than shared endeavours, and with a broader sense that Europeans should focus their strategic energies on the Euro-Atlantic rather than projecting power to distant theatres.[1]

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1 Gesine Weber, 'How Uncertainty about US Strategy Complicates Europe's Approach to the Indo-Pacific', *The Interpreter*, Lowy Institute (11 September 2025), https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/how-uncertainty-about-us-strategy-complicates-europe-s-approach-indo-pacific; Zack Cooper, 'How Should the United States Cooperate with Europe on China Strategy?', Brookings Institution (5 December 2025), https://www.brookings.edu/articles/how-should-the-united-states-

Recently, however, the Iran War and Hormuz crisis have complicated the discreet "division of labour within NATO" approach that the Trump team pushed for the first year of his second term. Operation Epic Fury—the U.S. and Israeli coordinated strikes on Iran that began on February 28, 2026—prompted Tehran to mine the Strait of Hormuz and declare it closed from March 2, reducing daily transit from over 150 ships to near zero and causing Brent crude prices to surge from under $70 per barrel to above $100 within weeks.[1] Trump's next steps included explicit pressure on NATO allies to join the maritime effort to reopen the strait—and on March 15, he publicly warned that it would be "very bad for the future of NATO" if European allies declined—thereby linking, in effect, European security commitments to the Persian Gulf in a way that no prior administration had so bluntly articulated.[2]

For European strategists, this episode made viscerally concrete what had previously been an abstract argument about the interconnectedness of regional maritime architectures. Its leaders pushed consistently for a negotiated solution throughout the war, and once the Pakistan-brokered ceasefire was announced in early April, European leaders rushed to the Gulf—Starmer to Qatar and the UAE, Kallas to Saudi Arabia and Abu Dhabi—to shape the terms of any lasting settlement. A joint European statement (alongside Australia, Japan, and Canada) committed to "contributing to ensuring freedom of navigation" while simultaneously calling for a "substantive negotiated settlement."[3] Iran's partial selective reopening of the strait allowed vessels flagged to China, Russia, India, Iraq, and Pakistan to transit while European-flagged ships remained excluded—

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cooperate-with-europe-on-china-strategy/.

1 Renée Rigdon, Hanna Ziady and Auzinea Bacon, 'Oil Surges and Stock Futures Sink as War in Iran Threatens Crude Supply', *CNN Business* (2 March 2026), https://www.kq2.com/cnn-business-consumer/2026/03/02/what-to-expect-from-oil-and-gas-prices-as-strikes-on-iran-continue/.

2 Milena Wälde, 'Trump Warns NATO (Again) of 'Very Bad Future' if Allies Don't Secure Strait of Hormuz', *POLITICO*, (16 March 2026), https://www.politico.eu/article/donald-trump-warns-nato-very-bad-future-allies-iran-strait-of-hormuz/.

3 European Council, 'Leaders' Statement on the Two-Week Ceasefire Concluded between the United States and Iran' (8 April 2026), https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2026/04/08/leaders-statement-on-the-two-week-ceasefire-concluded-between-the-united-states-and-iran/.

a demonstration that Europe's attempt to occupy a middle position had not purchased its neutrality in Tehran's eyes.[1] China's position here was characteristic: it condemned the crisis and called for "unimpeded" navigation while securing the right for some of its flagged vessels to transit freely, and worked behind the scenes with Pakistan on a joint five-point peace initiative which formed the basis of the ceasefire framework.[2] Beijing emerged from the crisis having extracted significant diplomatic capital: positioning itself as a constructive power and elevating its Pakistani ally as a key regional mediator.

The geographic logic threading Hormuz to the broader Indo-Pacific architecture is acute. The Strait of Malacca—the world's busiest shipping lane, through which virtually all Indo-Pacific energy and manufactured-goods trade transits—was exposed to serious rerouting pressure as alternatives to the Persian Gulf were exhausted.[3] The cascade ran through Diego Garcia, the British Indian Ocean Territory base that serves as the primary U.S. power-projection node between the two theatres: bases there, alongside RAF Fairford in Gloucestershire, were approved by the UK for "specific and limited defensive" use, allegedly prompting Iran to unsuccessfully target the Indian Ocean base in March.[4] This cast the Transatlantic row over British Prime Minister Keir Starmer's decision to cede sovereignty of the island to Mauritius—in line with a 2019 ruling of the International Court of Justice[5]—in new light, prompting the UK to

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1 Press Trust of India, 'India among Five Nations Granted Passage through Strait of Hormuz by Iran', *The Hindu* (26 March 2026), https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-among-five-nations-granted-passage-through-strait-of-hormuz-by-tehran/article70786984.ece.

2 Mike Brest, 'China Calls US Hormuz Blockade "Dangerous and Irresponsible"', *Washington Examiner* (14 April 2026), https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/POLICY/DEFENSE/4528125/CHINA-AMERICAN-HORMUZ-BLOCKADE-DANGEROUS-IRRESPONSIBLE/; Barak Ravid, 'China and Pakistan Present New Iran Deal: Ceasefire for Opening Hormuz', *Axios* (31 March 2026), https://www.axios.com/2026/03/31/china-pakistan-iran-peace-deal-strait-ceasefire.

3 Gokcay Balci and Ebru Surucu-Balci, 'From the Strait of Hormuz to Malacca, Global Trade Relies Almost Entirely on These Five Narrow Waterways', *The Conversation* (16 March 2026), https://uk.finance.yahoo.com/news/strait-hormuz-malacca-global-trade-154018469.html.

4 Amy Walker and Jack Fenwick, 'Foreign Secretary Denounces "Reckless Iran Threats" after Missiles Fired at Diego Garcia', *BBC News* (21 March 2026; updated 22 March 2026), https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c5yljdgwppzo.

5 Marc Weller, 'UK Ratification of the Chagos Archipelago Treaty Will Not Violate International Law', *Chatham House* (26 January 2026), https://www.chathamhouse.org/2026/01/uk-ratification-

quietly shelve its latest decolonisation plans amidst the war.[1]

The EU's relationship with China adds a further layer of complexity to this picture that distinguishes European calculations from American ones. Where Washington treats the China relationship through an adversarial competitive lens, the EU retains the aforementioned triple designation of Beijing which transcends economic and security lines: China is simultaneously a cooperation partner, an economic competitor, and a systemic rival. This frame has real policy consequences. China is the EU's largest source of imports and its third-largest export market; approximately 40% of EU external trade transits Indo-Pacific sea lanes, giving European capitals a structural interest in Indo-Pacific stability that is qualitatively different from a purely security-driven calculus. Beijing has historically exploited this economic interdependence to drive a wedge between European and American positions, offering bilateral concessions to individual member states—French agricultural exports, Italian manufacturing investment, Spanish tourism—that complicate the EU's capacity for a unified front.[2] The EU EV tariff investigation of 2024—25 illustrated the dynamic in real time: China retaliated directly against French exporters while simultaneously courting German automakers, seeking to split the coalition that had assembled around the Commission's trade defence action.

Against this backdrop, four broadly discernible positioning logics have emerged among European actors in response to the combined pressures of Trump's transactional diplomacy, the Hormuz shock, and the intensifying U.S.-China competition.

The first is associated with France, which has pursued the most coherent and operationally ambitious "third way" posture of any European actor. As

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chagos-archipelago-treaty-will-not-violate-international-law.

1 Joe Pike, 'UK Shelves Chagos Deal after Trump Opposition', *BBC News* (11 April 2026), https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c04x1lg1lygo.

2 Nicola Casarini, 'A European Strategic "Third Way?" The European Union between the Traditional Transatlantic Alliance and the Pull of the Chinese Market', *China International Strategy Review*, vol. 4, no. 1 (2022), pp. 91–107, https://doi.org/10.1007/s42533-022-00095-1.

the first European head of state to deliver the keynote at the Shangri-La Dialogue in May 2025, Macron called for a "coalition of independents" to resist great-power polarisation—a speech notably sharpened relative to his earlier, more ambiguous remarks on Taiwan by his explicit naming of China as a potential aggressor in Asia, drawing a direct rhetorical link between the Ukraine conflict and a hypothetical Taiwan contingency.[1] By April 2026, Macron traveled in Tokyo and Seoul warning against becoming "vassals of two hegemonic powers" and formalising the coalition language into a concrete appeal for defence-industrial integration with Indo-Pacific middle powers.[2] France's position is reinforced by material stakes that no other EU member can replicate: 1.6 million French citizens reside across Indo-Pacific overseas territories, Paris controls approximately nine million square kilometres of EEZ in the region, and the French navy maintains the full spectrum of blue-water capabilities. During the Hormuz crisis, France authorized the use of French bases for limited defensive operations and deployed additional air defence assets to Cyprus, threading a line between visible engagement with the crisis and refusal to endorse the offensive campaign as legally grounded.[3] The irony of France's position—the most rhetorically assertive on Chinese behaviour in the Indo-Pacific, yet also the most willing to cultivate bilateral economic dialogue with Beijing to insulate French exporters from Commission-level trade actions—is not lost on European partners, and reflects the same Gaullist logic that animates the "third way" posture: maximum strategic autonomy, minimum subordination to either pole.

The second posture groups Germany under Merz and Italy under Meloni—the two centre-right governments nominally closest to Trump—as a pair

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1 Céline Pajon, 'France Seeks Third Way between US and China in Southeast Asia', *The Interpreter*, Lowy Institute (5 June 2025), https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/france-seeks-third-way-between-us-china-southeast-asia.

2 Shao Jingkai, 'The EU Is Forging a "Hedging Alliance" with Indo-Pacific Middle Powers', *The Diplomat* (7 April 2026), https://thediplomat.com/2026/04/the-eu-is-forging-a-hedging-alliance-with-indo-pacific-middle-powers/.

3 Agence France-Presse, 'France to Let US Planes Not Involved in Iran Strikes Use Air Base' (5 March 2026), https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2026/03/france-let-us-planes-not-involved-iran-strikes-use-air-base.

whose political proximity to Washington has been tested. The structural logic is similar in both cases: leaders whose domestic political bases share Trump's instincts on migration and European strategic dependency entered office expecting that Transatlantic ties could be managed as an asset, only to find that Trump's second term demanded operational endorsement of American military adventurism that neither their constitutional frameworks nor their publics would tolerate. Merz travelled to Washington as the first European leader to do so after the outbreak of hostilities—a signal of Germany's investment in the bilateral relationship—yet explicitly declined to endorse the strikes' legal basis, telling reporters he "addressed both issues very clearly in a personal conversation" rather than publicly.[1] Italy's position was more dramatically exposed: Italy denied a U.S. request for aircraft to land at a Sicilian military base; Meloni called the strikes "outside the scope of international law"; after Trump described her as lacking "courage," she responded that true friendship required "the courage to say when you disagree."[2] The bottom line: right-wing European governments aligned with Trump on cultural politics face durable domestic constraints on translating that alignment into operational military support. For the Indo-Pacific, the significance is that Germany and Italy have demonstrated the limits of the "alignment" pole in European strategic positioning. Both remain committed to the EU's de-risking framework and neither has sought to soften the Commission's trade defence actions against China, but they have not escaped Trump's ire or won any tangible support from Washington for supporting the de-risking agenda.

The third posture is that of Spain under Sánchez, who has been the most vocally and consistently critical of American escalation throughout the crisis. Spain denied the use of its military bases for any activity relating to the Iran war; Sánchez went on national television with the message "No to

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1 Issy Ronald, '"No Winston Churchill": Trump Opens New Rift with Europe as Leaders Try to Avoid Being Sucked into Iran War', *CNN* (4 March 2026), https://kesq.com/news/national-world/cnn-world/2026/03/04/no-winston-churchill-trump-opens-new-rift-with-europe-as-leaders-try-to-avoid-being-sucked-into-iran-war/.

2 Lauren Kent, 'Trump Lashes Out at Europe as Growing Number of Allies Reject US Calls for Help', *CNN* (31 March 2026), https://kvia.com/news/us-world/cnn-world/2026/03/31/trump-lashes-out-at-europe-as-growing-number-of-allies-reject-us-calls-for-help/.

war"; his defence minister called the war "profoundly illegal and profoundly unjust."[1] Trump responded by threatening a full U.S. embargo on Spain. Unlike Meloni, whose position evolved under pressure, Sánchez has been consistent: his earlier resistance to raising Spanish defence spending to 5% of GDP, his April 2025 Beijing visit seeking off-ramps on EV tariff tensions, and his FM's expressed willingness to engage China on Hormuz mediation collectively sketch a posture that reflects a genuine divergence on what the rules-based order means when the U.S. is both its nominal guardian and its most conspicuous current violator. As one of Europe's most progressive figures in power, Sánchez is also normatively committed to such positions, recently hosting a conference of progressive leaders where anti-American sentiments were commonplace.[2] Spain's position essentially marks the outer bound of the EU's overtone window approaching the Indo-Pacific's security and economic intersections—exposing both the allure of hedging against U.S. hegemony even when exposed to potential retaliation from both sides, and the strain emerging from the bloc's allowance of plurality.[3]

As the responsible party for trade policy across the whole bloc, manager of the EU's formal diplomatic relationship with Beijing, and executive for twenty-seven governments with divergent China exposures, the European Commission's approach is qualitatively ascendant over all of the above. While EU mechanisms (such as ministerial meetings on maritime infrastructure[4]) may enhance resilience to a certain extent, they pale in comparison to de-escalatory efforts by extra-regional leaders across

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1 Tim Lister, 'Most European Leaders Have Tiptoed Around Trump's War with Iran. Not Spain's PM', *CNN* (8 March 2026), https://www.kq2.com/cnn/cnn-world/2026/03/08/most-european-leaders-have-tiptoed-around-trumps-war-with-iran-not-spains-pm/.

2 Maria Tadeo, 'Spain's Sánchez Builds Anti-Trump Coalition Looking for Political Lifeline at Home', *Euronews* (18 April 2026), https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2026/04/18/spains-sanchez-builds-anti-trump-coalition-looking-for-political-lifeline-at-home.

3 María Herrero Martínez and Stefan Messingschlager, 'The EU's China Fault Line Runs through Spain', *The Diplomat* (19 December 2025), https://thediplomat.com/2025/12/the-eus-china-fault-line-runs-through-spain/.

4 European External Action Service, 'Working Together to Protect Critical Maritime Infrastructure in the Indo-Pacific' (20 November 2025), https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/working-together-protect-critical-maritime-infrastructure-indo-pacific_en.

Europe, Islamabad, and Beijing, complicating Brussels' characteristic triple designation of China as partner, competitor, and rival. For Brussels, this dynamic encapsulates the central tension the Commission cannot resolve by institutional process alone: China is simultaneously the actor whose regional behaviour has most driven European strategic adjustment in the Indo-Pacific, and the actor whose economic weight and current diplomatic positioning make sustaining a consistently adversarial posture most costly. Meanwhile, its traditional ally across the Atlantic is—for better or worse—a much more destabilising factor in the current era.

The UK, outside the EU since 2020 but carrying the heaviest hard power capacity of any European state, has navigated the Hormuz crisis with characteristic studied ambiguity. Nevertheless, Prime Minister Starmer's selective approval of British bases for U.S. use without joining in any offensive operations led Donald Trump to describe him as "no Winston Churchill" for this posture. It is a posture that invites the "Ming vase" characterisation that has trailed Starmer since he took office: moving through a crowded room with exaggerated care, straining not to knock anything over, and ending up satisfying no one fully.[1] The U.S. got its bases; it did not get its coalition partner. It got calibrated support for the legality of its operation; it did not get additional support for breaking the blockade or launching a ground invasion. Even as the UK has uniquely resumed military activity in the Taiwan Strait in 2025, it has not won any persistent goodwill from the U.S. despite bearing the highest cost of any European actor for bolstering the American interpretation of navigational freedom.[2] Whether Starmer's government can translate its strategic nuance and capabilities into truly enhanced security—rather than a series of carefully calibrated half-measures—is a question the Hormuz episode

1 Martin Rowson, 'In the UK, Keir Starmer Has Few Fans. I Learned That in China It's a Very Different Story', *The Guardian* (13 April 2026), https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2026/apr/13/keir-starmer-uk-china-menu-prime-minister-beijing.

2 Sam LaGrone, 'U.S., U.K. Warships Transit Taiwan Strait, Pentagon Confirms', *USNI News* (16 September 2025), https://news.usni.org/2025/09/16/u-s-u-k-warships-transit-taiwan-strait-pentagon-confirms.

has sharpened considerably.

Taken together, the divergent European responses to the Hormuz crisis and Trump's Indo-Pacific pressure reveal a deeper truth about the EU's regional position. The recalibrations documented across the preceding three sections were all developed under conditions where the U.S. remained, despite its unreliability, broadly aligned with European normative positions on Chinese maritime behaviour. The Iran War has introduced a new variable: a scenario in which the costs of alignment with Washington may exceed the costs of maintaining a distinctive European position, and in which China—the systemic rival whose behaviour in the South China Sea and Taiwan Strait has driven European strategic adjustment—is simultaneously offering itself as a de-escalatory counterweight to American unilateralism. What the events of the last year have clarified is that European reflections on global affairs vary based on different structural exposures, and provoke varied responses ranging from development of strategic autonomy, bandwagoning with the U.S., courting China explicitly, and broad de-risking. Whether this plurality of preferences can be held together without strategic incoherence—enough so as to function as a credible interlocutor for regional partners like Manila, Tokyo, and New Delhi—is the central question that the EU's Indo-Pacific trajectory must now answer if it wishes to transition from regional trading power to a normative anchor.

## 6. Conclusion

What, then, can be inferred about the trajectory of EU calculations and actions toward the Indo-Pacific in the years ahead? First, while the region occupies an important place within the evolving global order, European leaders continue to interpret its significance through the prism of core interests which tend to be more structural or closer to home. For example, China remains a central economic partner for the EU which necessitates sustained attention to Beijing's policies and strategic preferences in its near abroad. Concern also permeates Brussels over the extent of China's relationship with Russia and its impact on European security vis-à-vis the

course of the war in Ukraine. Furthermore, the current period of strained Transatlantic relations introduces an additional layer of complexity. European debates over strategic autonomy and hedging reflect uncertainty about the durability of U.S. commitments, raising questions about whether—and to what degree—the EU should diversify its strategic alignments without undermining its foundational partnership with Washington. These logics often precede engagement with the Indo-Pacific region rather than the other way around.

Second, China's behaviour in the Indo-Pacific provides a platform through which European leaders can project their normative preferences regarding the conduct of international affairs. The EU's cautious support for the cross-strait status quo alongside advocacy for de-escalation and cooperation in the South China Sea reflect a strategy deliberately designed to avoid binary alignment while mitigating the risks of confrontation. Macron articulated this vision most explicitly in the most recent Shangri-La Dialogue, where he encouraged Southeast Asian partners to pursue a "third way" amid intensifying U.S.-China rivalry, grounded in multilateral cooperation and the preservation of a rules-based international order. The Hormuz crisis and Trump's second term have sharpened this challenge considerably. The member state plurality documented here reflects genuinely different structural exposures that the EU framework encompasses without resolving. The added irony is that China, whose behaviour in the South China Sea and Taiwan Strait has done most to drive European strategic recalibration, has simultaneously positioned itself through its Hormuz mediation posture as a more predictable interlocutor than Washington in the eyes of several European capitals.

Therefore, the EU is positioning itself as an independent but engaged Indo-Pacific actor with an aim of contributing to regional stability without being subsumed into great power politics. In practical terms, this approach has translated into calibrated support for Southeast Asian states facing heightened maritime tensions with China, including the Philippines and Vietnam, as well as deeper strategic engagement with established regional security partners such as Australia and Japan. These efforts appear to be

intended to bolster the EU's credibility as an autonomous geopolitical actor in the region, while avoiding overt moves that would fundamentally destabilize relations with Beijing. Complementing this security-oriented engagement, bloc-to-bloc cooperation with ASEAN in the economic and normative domains further reinforces the EU's preference for institutionalized dialogue and economic diplomacy via potential trade deals and regulatory arbitrage.

Taken in full, the EU's Indo-Pacific trajectory is likely to remain characterized by selective engagement, calibrated signaling, and a persistent effort to reconcile normative ambition with material constraints. Rather than pursuing dramatic strategic realignments, European policymakers appear committed to a middle course: defending core principles, expanding partnerships, and hedging against systemic uncertainty to manage the risks stemming from this region corollary to an era of intensifying geopolitical competition. The question is whether that posture will be coherent enough to matter to the regional partners increasingly looking to Europe as something more than a trading bloc. On current evidence, the EU is moving in that direction; propelled less by design than by the accumulated pressure of events it did not choose.

# 4. FROM STRATEGIES TO SEA: EUROPE'S ASIA-PACIFIC MARITIME SECURITY IN 2025

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## 1. Introduction

In recent years, Asia-Pacific maritime security—increasingly reframed through the Indo-Pacific lens—has ascended to the forefront of the European foreign policy agenda. Once viewed primarily as a distant arena of economic opportunity, the region is now recognized by European capitals as a critical theater where the defense of international law and the security of global supply chains are directly contested. Yet, despite this surge in strategic attention and a proliferation of new policy frameworks, a significant analytical gap remains. Existing research has yet to fully illuminate how these diverse European actors translate high-level strategic intent into concrete maritime practices, nor has it sufficiently explored the nuances, similarities, and divergences among them within today's volatile and rapidly evolving security environment.

This article addresses this gap by investigating two core questions. First, how have European states and EU formulated their strategic approaches toward Asia-Pacific/Indo-Pacific maritime security since 2020? Second, what were the specific operational practices observed in 2025, how did these actions align with or deviate from previous policy benchmarks, and what drivers explain these shifts?

To address these questions, the article utilizes a dual analytical framework. It first employs an archetype-based comparative model to categorize European actors, enabling a structured analysis of their strategic logics. Building on this, it adopts a strategy-to-practice methodology, utilizing policy documents published since 2020 as a baseline to measure

implementation during 2025, which serves as a critical test year for European engagement in the theater.

The study proceeds in four sections. It begins by reviewing and comparing the policy documents of selected European states and the EU, identifying where different foreign-policy archetypes converge and diverge. Next, it uses these policy texts as a benchmark for a country-by-country assessment of 2025 practices, identifying shared operational patterns and measuring the extent of implementation gaps. The third section synthesizes the 2025 record, distilling key trends across archetypes and explaining the international and domestic drivers behind the yearly practices. Finally, the article concludes by highlighting the potential implications of unprecedented geopolitical disruptions emerging since 2025 for the future of Europe's maritime-security posture in the region.

## 2. Europe's Strategic Reframing After 2020

Prior to 2020, only a handful of European countries—such as the United Kingdom (UK) and France—had issued standalone Asia-Pacific policy documents. Since 2020, however, this pattern has shifted markedly, with a growing number—including the EU—publishing or updating their policy papers on the region, as shown in Table 2. The selected countries capture a broad cross-section of European foreign policy archetypes, encompassing the UK, the EU's institutional mainstream (the EU, France, Germany, and the Netherlands), Southern Europe (Italy), the Nordics (Sweden), and Central and Eastern Europe (Czech Republic/ Czechia).

**Table 2. Asia-Pacific/Indo-Pacific Policy Documents of Selected**

**European Countries and the EU, by Author**

| Country | Year of Publication | Title |
|---|---|---|
| Germany | 2020 | Policy guidelines for the Indo-Pacific: Germany-Europe-Asia: Shaping the 21st century together |
| Netherlands | 2020 | Indo-Pacific: Guidelines for strengthening Dutch and EU cooperation with partners in Asia |
| EU | 2021 | EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific |
| France | 2021 (updated) | France's Indo-Pacific strategy |
| Czech Republic | 2022 | Cooperating with the Indo-Pacific: The Czech Republic's Strategy |
| Italy | 2022 | The Italian Contribution to the EU Strategy for the Indo-Pacific |
| United Kingdom | 2023 (updated) | Integrated Review Refresh 2023: Responding to a more contested and volatile world |
| Sweden | 2024 | Defence policy direction for cooperation with countries in the Indo-Pacific region |

## 3. From Asia-Pacific to Indo-Pacific

A noticeable change shared by all the documents is the replacement of the term "Asia-Pacific" with "Indo-Pacific" when they refer to the subject of the matter. Popularised in the late 1980s and institutionalized by the formation of APEC, Asia-Pacific is primarily an economic construct that focuses on the Pacific Rim, linking East Asia with the Americas. It implies a region defined by market integration, where security issues were often secondary to the imperative of economic growth.[1] The concept is inherently "Sino-centric" under the premise of U.S.-China engagement. As China grew to become the central node in trans-Pacific supply chains, it describes a region where China is the "factory of the world" and the U.S.

1 Sanchari Ghosh, 'The "Indo-Pacific" Is Here. Yet "Asia-Pacific" Lives On', *The Interpreter*, Lowy Institute (3 May 2023), https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/indo-pacific-here-yet-asia-pacific-lives.

is the primary market.[1] On the contrary, Indo-Pacific, coined by the then Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in 2007, is more than just a geographical expansion of Asia-Pacific to include the region of the Indian Ocean. Unlike the economistic logic of the Asia-Pacific, its vision is grounded in geopolitical calculations by pivoting toward balance of power, maritime security and economic realignment. Its core strategic implication is a shift in attitudes toward China. By widening the aperture westward, it explicitly seeks to dilute the centrality of East Asia—and, more precisely, China—in the regional architecture. More importantly, it marks a move from facilitating and taking advantage of China's economic rise to containing its bid for regional dominance.[2]

The concept was further codified in 2016 when Abe unveiled the FOIP strategy, underscoring rule of law, freedom of navigation, anti-coercion capacity building, etc.[3] Nevertheless, it was not until 2017 when the U.S. government under the first Trump Administration officially adopted "Indo-Pacific" in its National Security Strategy that it gained momentum. This adoption signaled a strategic reorientation in American regional policy, shifting from a primarily economistic emphasis toward security priorities. At the core was Washington's shift of its China approach toward a more explicit posture of competition and containment.[4] This reframing was quickly institutionalized when the U.S. Pacific Command was renamed U.S. Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM) in 2018, underscoring that the theatre now stretched across two oceans and that maritime connectivity was being treated as strategic terrain. Under the following Biden Administration and ever since, this Indo-Pacific framing has been sustained by a rare and durable bipartisan consensus, even as tactics and rhetoric have varied.[5] Meanwhile in recent years, U.S. allies—including

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1 Brantly Womack, 'The Indo-Pacific versus Pacific Asia', *China–US Focus* (14 December 2023), https://www.chinausfocus.com/foreign-policy/the-indo-pacific-versus-pacific-asia.

2 Ibid.

3 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, *Towards Free and Open Indo-Pacific*, (November 2019), https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/000407643.pdf.

4 The White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (December 2017), https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf.

5 The White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (November 2025),

European nations—have followed suit by abandoning "Asia-Pacific" in favour of "Indo-Pacific".

## 4 Shared Motivations, Diverge Approaches

An examination of the above-mentioned policy papers reveals that these countries' Asia-Pacific/Indo-Pacific maritime-security strategies are driven by largely shared motivations. One of the most obvious threats is the rising anxiety about regional stability, with particular focus on flashpoints in the Taiwan Strait and the South and East China Seas. The majority of the countries—apart from Italy—single out China's conduct as a key driver of regional tensions.[1] The UK and France warn that a high-intensity crisis could generate economic and security spillovers that rival—or even exceed—the shock effects of the war in Ukraine. This fear is compounded by intensifying China-US competition, widely seen as polarizing the region into rival blocs. France, Germany, and the Netherlands explicitly caution against a "bloc mentality" or a new bipolarity that could force Indo-Pacific states into zero-sum choices, heightening risks of miscalculation and escalation at sea. Layered onto great-power dynamics is concern over the security of SLOCs, threatened not only by state militarization but also by non-state challenges such as piracy and IUU fishing.

The anxiety over regional stability translates directly into risk assessments, framed less as distant contingencies than as potential shocks to domestic prosperity. Countries such as Germany, France, and the Netherlands describe the Indo-Pacific as the "engine of global growth" and a central "world trade hub," implying that disruption would reverberate through European supply chains and consumer markets. The core concern lies in the security of SLOCs. Germany and the EU emphasize that with over 90%

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https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/2025-National-Security-Strategy.pdf.

1 Some countries avoid naming China explicitly in their Indo-Pacific strategies, but do so in standalone China policy documents—the EU's *EU-China – A strategic outlook* (2019), Germany's *Strategy on China* (2023), and the Dutch cabinet ministers' letter to the House of Representatives (2023).

of global trade conducted by sea and a staggering percentage passing through the Strait of Malacca, a regional conflict would thus catastrophically sever supply chains, endangering millions of domestic jobs and the very provision of goods for their populations. Even landlocked nations like the Czech Republic recognize this vulnerability, citing the region's role in securing energy routes. Beyond physical shipping risks, the documents stress that instability and great-power rivalry could weaponize trade, interrupt supply chains, and push up prices at home.

Europeans also converge on the belief that durable peace in the Indo-Pacific depends on law and institutional order, not merely the absence of conflict. They prioritize a rules-based approach that elevates the "strength of the law" over the "law of the strong," with UNCLOS treated as the non-negotiable foundation for maritime security. France and the UK explicitly call for peaceful dispute settlement through dialogue—particularly in relation to the Taiwan Strait and the Korean Peninsula—while rejecting unilateral changes to the status quo by force. This legal-institutional orientation is reinforced through practical commitments, such as Germany's accession to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation and the EU's emphasis on conflict prevention and resilience-building. Across the documents, ASEAN centrality serves as a legitimacy anchor: working through existing regional architecture is repeatedly presented as the preferred way to support stability while avoiding an appearance of intrusion or bloc politics.

Apart from the shared rationales, France stands out as the only state to explicitly define itself as a "resident" Indo-Pacific power by virtue of its overseas territories and nearly two million citizens in the Indo-Pacific. This territorial footprint recasts the region from an external theatre into an immediate homeland-security perimeter. Accordingly, French priorities centre on the physical defence of sovereign territory and the protection of the world's second-largest EEZ against predatory practices such as IUU fishing. In contrast, Italy's Indo-Pacific engagement is least driven—among the countries discussed—by immediate hard-security threats, and more by the region's geopolitical centrality and Italy's commitment to

international legal norms. Drawing on its deep maritime tradition, Rome prioritises defending the rules-based order—particularly UNCLOS—as a framework for managing disputes and constraining destabilising behaviour.

Policy approaches of these countries, however, diverge sharply. One major difference lies in the nations' willingness and capacity to project military force France and the UK combine limited standing regional footprints with the capacity for occasional major naval deployments. Their presence supports patrols, exercises and diplomatic signalling, but does not by itself establish a sustained regional warfighting posture. While the UK emphasizes continuous naval posture, advocacy for a permanent European maritime presence, and deep embedding in partnership and alliance; France leans towards permanent or pre-positioned forces, major naval deployments, regional partnerships, and strengthened involvement of the EU. Other European actors generally rely on more selective deployments and cooperative instruments, prioritizing signalling, interoperability, and better governance rather than combat-ready forward posture. Germany and the Netherlands emphasize port visits and legal training to uphold UNCLOS without constant combat patrols, and the EU acts as an information-sharing hub through multilateral platforms. Italy's profile is more functional-oriented, including law enforcement cooperation, ocean governance, and exercises. Sweden mixes exercises, capacity building, liaison placement, and participation in EU naval missions. Finally, as a landlocked state, the Czech Republic stands apart as explicitly non-military, prioritizing multilateral advocacy and commercial and values-based diplomacy within the EU and NATO frameworks.

Another distinction lies in how they navigate China—US competition. Although all are NATO allies of Washington and most—either explicitly or implicitly—cast Beijing as a challenge to the rules-based order in the maritime domain, their strategies differ markedly in emphasis and alignment. The deter & align camp of the UK and the Czech Republic, treats China in overtly competitive terms and anticipates deeper integration into the U.S.-led regional security architectures in the region. Conversely, the balance group—including France, Germany, and the Netherlands—

pairs risk-management toward China with a preference to avoid polarization. They tend to rely on less confrontational instruments to check China, while maintaining a pragmatic partnership with the U.S. and avoiding full integration into Washington's camp. The functional engagement cluster—the EU and Italy—maintains flexible cooperation with Beijing on global issues like trade and climate while acknowledging systemic rivalry. Sweden deserves separate treatment as it sits between balance and deter & align. Its 2024 policy moves closer to the U.S., labelling China a driver of insecurity and seeking high-tech defence synchronization with trusted partners. However, unlike the UK or the Czech Republic, it still favours institution-anchored, low-signature cooperation and technology hedging over a deterrence posture or a U.S.-centric structure.

## 5 Five European Archetypes

On the analysis, we can distill the defining features of each European foreign policy archetype on Asia-Pacific/Indo-Pacific maritime security.

The UK approach treats Indo-Pacific maritime security as a near-term strategic risk: instability in the Taiwan Strait or the South/East China Seas could produce shocks that spill into Europe. That logic supports a more force-forward posture, persistent naval presence, and tight alignment with partners, especially the U.S., in deterrence-focused cooperation.

The institutional mainstream of the EU shares a baseline built around protecting trade flows and SLOCs while defending a rules-based order. It emphasizes UNCLOS, peaceful dispute settlement, conflict prevention, and working through regional institutions (notably ASEAN), with a preference for low-signature tools like capacity building, maritime governance, and selective deployments.

Main divergences inside that mainstream hinge on (1) how much hard power to show and sustain, with France most willing to lead with major and/or enduring naval presence; and (2) how directly to frame China, ranging from sharper competitive language to more hedged "risk-reduction

plus engagement," especially at the EU level.

Southern Europe favors pragmatic presence and multilateralism: staying engaged in the region, supporting legal norms, and doing cooperation that looks like exercises, law-enforcement links, and capacity building rather than sustained deterrence-led forward posture.

The Nordics largely mirror the EU baseline but adds a stronger emphasis on technology, resilience, and hybrid risks as part of maritime security. Contributions are typically modular and non-kinetic, while rhetorically edging closer to U.S./partner threat perceptions.

Central and Eastern European nations show "Indo-Pacific relevance without fleets": it frames the region's stability as economically and strategically consequential for Europe, pushes action through EU/NATO and diplomatic channels, and often adopts relatively firm language on China despite limited military instruments.

**Table 3. Five European Archetypes on Asia-Pacific/Indo-Pacific Maritime Security, by Author**

| Archetype | Motivation | Power projection | China–US competition |
|---|---|---|---|
| UK | Keep FOIP with no single power domination, avert globally consequential conflict, secure SLOCs | Hard power: persistent naval presence, push for permanent European maritime presence, integrated partnerships & alliances | Deter & align: "deter, defend and compete" vis-à-vis China, integration into US-led regional security architecture |
| EU Mainstream: France | Defend sovereign territories & EEZ, prevent conflict, uphold UNCLOS, resist coercive spheres | Hard power: permanent/ pre-positioned forces, major naval deployments, strengthen EU involvement, regional partnerships | Balance: uphold international law & resist coercion, pragmatic partnership with the US, avoid a binary logic |
| EU Mainstream: Germany | Protect SLOCs/supply chains and uphold UNCLOS, worry about escalation and being forced into "new bipolarity" | Non-kinetic: port visits, joint naval exercises, liaison officer in Singapore, capacity building | Balance: risk-reduction dialogue with China, close partnership with the US while avoiding polarization |
| EU Mainstream: Netherlands | Trading-state dependence on open sea lanes; rules/UNCLOS emphasis, worry about being a "playball" of great powers | Non-kinetic: legal/institutional capacity building, selective security cooperation, military actions under consideration | Balance: security dialogue with China, pragmatic coordination with the US while avoiding polarization |
| EU Mainstream: EU | Secure trade routes and prosperity, manage rising tensions; defend UNCLOS/rules-based order | Non-kinetic: more member-state deployments and naval exercises, information-sharing, capacity building | Functional engagement: flexible and pragmatic engagement with China, cooperate with the US |
| Southern Europe (Italy) | Indo-Pacific economic centrality, UNCLOS/multilateralism, leverage Italy's maritime tradition | Non-kinetic: joint naval exercises, law enforcement & capacity-building, ocean governance cooperation | Functional engagement: economic & institutional engagement with China, align via NATO framework & with regional partners |
| Nordics (Sweden) | Uphold rules-based order, secure trade flows, access cutting-edge/ dual-use tech | Non-kinetic: regional exercises & capacity-building, liaison officer placement, participate in EU naval missions | Between balance and deter: view China as a driver of insecurity, align with the US & regional partners |
| Central & Eastern Europe (Czech Republic) | Protect global trade/energy routes, concern over regional instability | Non-military: multilateral advocacy, focus on hybrid threats & resilience building, commercial & value-based diplomacy | Deter & align: label China as systemic rival, cooperate via US-led security arrangements |

## 6. Turning Strategy into Action: 2025 Practice Across Cases

Based on the preceding investigation into Europe's varied strategies, this section now shifts from intent to execution by examining how those commitments were translated into practice in the year of 2025. The country-by-country analyses that follow use the earlier policy texts as the benchmark to identify which operational patterns countries converged on in implementation, and how far practice diverged from the previous policy framework.

### 6.1 UK

The UK's maritime security strategy in 2025 was underpinned by the publication of the 2025 Strategic Defence Review (SDR) in June and the National Security Strategy 2025 (NSS 2025) in August, which introduces the "indivisible security" doctrine into the British strategic thought. This concept posits that the security of the Euro-Atlantic and the Indo-Pacific are no longer separate theatres but are fundamentally linked. This policy framework reaffirmed maritime engagement as an instrument of the UK's Indo-Pacific approach, implemented through forward-deployed patrol vessels, periodic major deployments and partner cooperation. The SDR specifically identified a "new era of threat" characterized by great power competition, placing a "clear win for maritime power" at the heart of the UK's force design.[1]

The most visible practical demonstration of the year was Operation Highmast, the eight-month deployment of the Carrier Strike Group. Led by the flagship HMS Prince of Wales, the mission spanned from April to November, covering 40,000 nautical miles and visiting 15 countries. The deployment was notable for its "full sovereign air wing" of 26 F-35B Lightning jets, demonstrating a unique carrier-borne air power capacity.[2]In

1 UK Government, '*National Security Strategy 2025*' (2025), https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/685ab0da72588f418862075c/E03360428_National_Security_Strategy_Accessible.pdf.

2 George Allison, 'Britain Set to Deploy Aircraft Carrier Strike Group' *UK Defence Journal* (14 February 2026), https://ukdefencejournal.org.uk/britain-set-to-deploy-aircraft-carrier-strike-group/.

addition to high-end warfighting drills like Exercise Konkan-25 with India and Exercise Talisman Sabre 2025 in Australia, the group utilised platform diplomacy as the carrier's flight deck served as a mobile summit venue in ports like Tokyo, convening regional leaders and industry partners to showcase the UK's commitment to a rules-based international order and its advanced defence-industrial capabilities.[1]

Beyond high-end carrier surges, the UK emphasised persistent maritime governance through Operation Woodwall. The forward-deployed River-class patrol vessels, HMS Spey and HMS Tamar, maintained a constant presence in the South Pacific and Southeast Asia, focusing on IUU fishing and smuggling. A unique characteristic of this engagement was the "Sea Rider" Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed with Papua New Guinea in September, which allowed local enforcement officers to utilise the UK's naval platforms to police their own Exclusive Economic Zones to directly support the maritime sovereignty of Pacific Island nations.[2] Furthermore, the UK conducted UN sanctions enforcement patrols near Japan, using HMS Richmond and HMS Spey to monitor and record illicit ship-to-ship transfers involving North Korean-flagged vessels in the East China Sea. These patrols illustrate the enforcement functions of the UK's regional naval presence rather than a new capability or a departure from established practice.[3]

Bilateral diplomacy in 2025 moved toward "industrial embedding," creating long-term structural ties that go beyond traditional defence sales. In November, London announced a £4 billion maritime partnership with Indonesia, focusing on technology transfer and the domestic construction of naval assets in Indonesian shipyards to foster local capability and resilience.[4] Simultaneously, it launched formal Status of Visiting Forces

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1 Royal Navy, 'HMS Prince of Wales Arrives in Tokyo for Historic Visit' (28 August 2025), https://www.royalnavy.mod.uk/news/2025/august/28/20250828-hms-prince-of-wales-arrives-in-tokyo.

2 Royal Navy, 'Tamar Bolsters Bond with Papua New Guinea' (12 September 2025), https://www.royalnavy.mod.uk/news/2025/september/12/20250912-hms-tamars-bond-with-papua-new-guinea.

3 Ibid.

4 UK Government, '£4bn Maritime Deal with Indonesia Set to Boost British Jobs' (21 November 2025), https://www.gov.uk/government/news/4bn-maritime-deal-with-indonesia-set-to-boost-british-

Agreement (SOVFA) negotiations with the Philippines during a visit by HMS Richmond to Manila with the aim to creating the legal infrastructure required for routine UK troop rotations and joint exercises.[1] The elevation of ties with Vietnam to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in October further reinforced the London's diplomatic scaffolding, providing a basis for regularised naval port calls and enhanced cooperation on MDA across the South China Sea.[2]

Multilateral engagements in 2025 were defined by the progression of AUKUS Pillar II and the Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA). The UK spearheaded the Maritime Big Play series, testing AI-enabled autonomous underwater systems and advanced sensing technologies alongside the U.S. and Australia, with Japan participating in experimental capacities. These trials demonstrated the UK's role as a provider of asymmetric security solutions.[3] The high-tech posture was reinforced by leadership in the FPDA during Exercise Bersama Lima 2025, which featured the most ambitious anti-submarine drills in 30 years. These multilateral efforts were multiplied by Track II initiatives, notably the Pacific Future Forum hosted aboard HMS Prince of Wales in Tokyo. By convening over 1,000 delegates to discuss economic security and naval power, the UK utilised its flagship as a symbol of diplomatic inclusivity.[4] Such forums, alongside the IISS Shangri-La Dialogue, provided opportunities for diplomatic convening and increased the UK's visibility without by themselves demonstrating enduring regional influence.

Overall, the UK's 2025 Indo-Pacific maritime-security practice

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jobs-and-support-indo-pacific-security.

1 Naval News, 'UK, Philippines to Start Talks on Visiting Forces Agreement' (19 September 2025), https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2025/09/uk-philippines-to-start-talks-on-visiting-forces-agreement/.

2 UK Government, 'Joint Declaration on the Elevation of UK–Viet Nam Relations to Comprehensive Strategic Partnership' (29 October 2025). https://www.gov.uk/government/news/joint-declaration-on-the-elevation-of-uk-viet-nam-relations-to-comprehensive-strategic-partnership.

3 Frank A. Rose, 'Beyond Submarines: Why AUKUS Pillar II Matters Now' *the interpreter*, Lowy Institute (3 September 2025), https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/beyond-submarines-why-aukus-pillar-ii-matters-now.

4 Royal Navy, 'HMS Prince of Wales arrives in Tokyo for historic visit', (28 August 2025), https://www.royalnavy.mod.uk/news/2025/august/28/20250828-hms-prince-of-wales-arrives-in-tokyo.

implemented selected elements of the 2023 policy framework, with differences chiefly in the intensity of activity and the combination of instruments used. While the 2023 document's motivations remained intact, engagements in 2025 reframed them through a sharper "threat-era" lens and a stronger logic of Euro-Atlantic-Indo-Pacific security indivisibility, with added weight on undersea infrastructure protection and resilience. Operationally, these priorities were reflected in a combination of forward-deployed patrol vessels and a time-limited carrier deployment involving complex multinational exercises. This implemented the 2023 framework's emphasis on presence and partnership-building, without by itself establishing a lasting increase in regional force availability or deterrent effect. On China-US competition, the line was consistent— "compete and deter" alongside allies—but 2025 deepened alignment via minilateral tech and capability integration, notably AUKUS Pillar II, and denser bilateral enabling arrangements.

### 6.2 France

France released an updated Indo-Pacific Strategy in 2025, reflecting a shift from vision-setting to more operational signalling. It reweighted priorities toward the Pacific and Southeast Asia through Pacific-led regionalism, foregrounding joint action on climate and the defence of sovereignty. Centered on the Sovereignty Partnership model, Paris aimed to reduce partners' dependencies and build resilience, presenting an autonomous "third way" amid U.S.-China rivalry in which France functions as a "cooperation aggregator."[1] Simultaneously, the 2025 National Strategic Review identified the region as a critical theatre for global stability, where France must maintain "autonomy of assessment" and the capacity to project high-end military power to deter revisionist attempts to change the status quo.[2]. President Macron's 2025 Shangri-La keynote further linked European security to maritime stability in the South China Sea and the

1 Groupe d'études géopolitiques, 'The Geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific: France's Strategy' (27 February 2025), https://geopolitique.eu/en/2025/02/27/the-geopolitics-of-the-indo-pacific-frances-strategy/.

2 Secretariat-General for National Defence and Security, *National Strategic Review 2025* (2025), https://www.sgdsn.gouv.fr/files/files/Publications/20250713_NP_SGDSN_RNS2025_EN_0.pdf.

Taiwan Strait, proposing Coalitions of Action to uphold international law.[1]

France operationalized its maritime security interests through Mission CLEMENCEAU 2025, deploying the nuclear aircraft carrier Charles de Gaulle to the Western Pacific for the first time in over fifty years.[2] The mission served as a high-end power projection tool, featuring a strategic port call in Singapore and participation in Exercise PACIFIC STELLER alongside Japanese and U.S, carriers. Multilateral exercises like LA PÉROUSE 2025 focused on protecting vital chokepoints in the Malacca and Sunda straits, while CROIX DU SUD in New Caledonia tested large-scale humanitarian assistance and civilian evacuation. These activities signal France's commitment to a rules-based order, particularly through combined drills in the Philippines explicitly framed around UNCLOS compliance.

To enforce international law and combat non-traditional threats, France reinforced its Coast Guard functions through the State Action at Sea (AEM) framework. Operation NASSE 2025 saw France collaborate with the Pacific Quad (Australia, New Zealand, and the U.S.) to conduct high-seas boardings to combat IUU fishing across 6.5 million square nautical miles.[3] The Shiprider framework—allowing partner inspectors to board French vessels for EEZ enforcement—was also operationalized, enhancing France's capability to provide persistent MDA for itself and its partners.[4]

In addition, Paris strengthened partnerships to de-risk supply chains and

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1 IISS, 'President of the French Republic Emmanuel Macron delivers the Keynote Address' (30 May 2025), https://www.iiss.org/events/shangri-la-dialogue/shangri-la-dialogue-2025/plenary-sessions/keynote-address/.

2 French Navy (Marine Nationale), 'Deployment of the Carrier Strike Group - Mission CLEMENCEAU 25' (28 April 2025), https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2025/04/french-csg-ends-its-clemenceau-25-deployment-in-the-indo-pacific/.

3 Australian Fisheries Management Authority, 'Operation Nasse: Pacific Partnerships Protect Our Shared Seas' (2025), https://www.afma.gov.au/news/operation-nasse-pacific-partnerships-protect-our-shared-seas.

4 Marc Abensour, 'The Geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific: France's strategy', *Groupe d'études géopolitiques* (2025), https://geopolitique.eu/en/2025/02/27/the-geopolitics-of-the-indo-pacific-frances-strategy/.

secure defence technology, emphasizing industrial reciprocity and technological transfers. This included the final delivery of the sixth Scorpène submarine and significant progress on the 26-Rafale Marine fighter jet contract for the Indian Navy.[1] Bilateral dialogues with Indonesia culminated in orders for the Scorpène Evolved class, while a high-level tour of Southeast Asia in mid-2025 yielded 14 major agreements in Vietnam, including a $600 million deep-water container terminal project.[2]

On the multilateral level, France's engagement leaned heavily on institution-building with tangible outputs over one-off signalling. The most consequential deliverable was its role as a core EU implementer in Critical Maritime Routes in the Indian Ocean (CRIMARIO) II, supporting the launch a major upgrade to a maritime information-sharing and interagency coordination platform.[3] On the Track II side, French policy networks advanced practical partner-facing agendas via the IFRI memo on enhanced France-Philippines maritime cooperation and its dissemination through a Manila Blue Nations forum, translating strategic intent into actionable cooperation lines.[4]

France's engagement is best read as a recalibration: more than incremental fine-tuning while short of a wholesale strategic rewrite. The core motivations of the 2021 strategy remained intact, while the 2025 record highlighted strategic autonomy, resilience and cooperation with Pacific partners within France's Indo-Pacific engagement. CLEMENCEAU 2025 provided a temporary demonstration of carrier-based capability and opportunities for complex exercises with regional partners. Yet it did not, by itself, establish a sustained increase in France's regional combat presence or demonstrate a lasting deterrent effect. On China-US

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1 Ajai Shukla, 'India, France to Sign Contract for 26 Rafale Marine Fighters', *The Diplomat* (22 April 2025), https://thediplomat.com/2025/04/india-france-to-sign-contract-for-26-rafale-marine-fighters/.

2 France-Vietnam Business Council, Summary of Agreements: Presidential Visit to Hanoi, (June 2025).

3 Groupe AFD, 'CRIMARIO II - Critical Maritime Routes in the Indian Ocean' (2025).

4 Céline PAJON, Jose Renan SUAREZ, '*The Case for Enhanced France–Philippines Maritime Cooperation*', IFRI, (7 January 2025), https://www.ifri.org/en/memos/case-enhanced-france-philippines-maritime-cooperation.

competition, the strategic line was continuous—cooperate closely with the U.S. and partners without embracing bloc logic—but 2025 made the "third way" posture more programmatic through sovereignty partnerships and flexible coalitions of action. Overall, these activities implemented existing strategic objectives through a combination of episodic naval deployments, standing regional forces and partner cooperation.

### 6.3 Germany

Germany's 2025 engagement reflected a stronger security emphasis under the newly elected Merz government. The fifth Progress Report on the Indo-Pacific Guidelines linked Euro-Atlantic security to Indo-Pacific stability and emphasized cooperation with regional partners. Echoing this policy logic, German Foreign Minister signaled that Germany would act as a security provider rather than merely a trading partner in the region.[1] The framework also highlighted diversification and the management of critical dependencies, alongside deeper defence ties. These priorities signalled an intention to broaden Germany's security contribution, rather than demonstrating an achieved reduction in dependence on China or a sustained regional military posture.[2]

Accordingly, Germany's participation in multinational exercises provided opportunities to practise long-distance deployment and interoperability with partners, without necessarily indicating a sustained German deterrent posture in the region. The centerpiece was participation in Exercise Talisman Sabre 2025 in Australia, where Bundeswehr personnel operated within high-end, multinational frameworks to test rapid deployment, joint forcible entry, and the coordination of land and sea-based fire support. The drills also stressed long-distance logistics and interoperability with the U.S.

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1 Federal Foreign Office (Germany), 'Opening Remarks by Foreign Minister Johann Wadephul at the 4th EU–Indo-Pacific Ministerial Forum' (21 Novemebr 2025), https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/newsroom/news/4th-indo-pacific-ministerial-forum-2744494.

2 Federal Foreign Office (Germany) , 'Intensifying security policy cooperation, strengthening economic relations and tackling the climate crisis: The Federal Government adopts the fourth Progress report on the implementation of the Federal Government's policy guidelines for the Indo-Pacific' (25 September 2025), https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/aussenpolitik/regionaleschwerpunkte/asien/policy-guidelines-indo-pacific-2677534.

and allied command structures, reinforcing Germany's ability to contribute in a high-intensity Pacific operating environment.[1] This approach was reinforced by routine freedom-of-navigation transits through the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait, framed as a principled defence of international law and open sea lanes.[2]

In law enforcement, Germany's focus was on comprehensive MDA and legal norm diffusion. A cornerstone initiative was to provide the Philippines and Malaysia with unarmed surveillance drones to enhance resilience against gray-zone coercion without escalating to kinetic confrontation. Berlin also leveraged "lawfare" as a security tool by founding workshops on ocean governance, which trained ASEAN officials on legal responsibilities under UNCLOS, including navigational entitlements and dispute settlement.[3]

Berlin's bilateral strategy centers on tailored partnerships with key like-minded anchors. In May 2025, Germany and the Philippines signed an Agreement Concerning Defence Cooperation, expanding ties to include cybersecurity, armaments, and logistics.[4] With Japan, it held a Strategic Dialogue in August 2025 and a second round of Economic Security Consultations, focusing on semiconductor supply chains and secure telecommunications to reduce critical dependencies on China.[5] Engagement with India peaked at the High Defence Committee meeting in New Delhi, where both nations reaffirmed a strategic partnership focused

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1Bundeswehr, 'Talisman Sabre 2025: Bundeswehr trainiert in Australien' (14 July 2025), https://www.bundeswehr.de/de/organisation/heer/aktuelles/talisman-sabre-grossuebung.

2 David Rising, 'Germany Sails Two Warships through Taiwan Strait for the First Time in Two Decades', *Associated Press* (13 September 2024), https://apnews.com/article/germany-china-taiwan-strait-warship-0bc53be4d6dc363c5ef21eedfc721206.

3 Max Planck Foundation, 'Germany–ASEAN Workshop on Regional Cooperation and Ocean Governance' (7 October 2025), https://www.mpfpr.de/2025/10/07/germany-asean-workshop-on-regional-cooperation-and-ocean-governance-held-in-manila/.

4 Indo-Pacific Defense FORUM, 'Germany, Philippines Sign Defense Agreement' (26 May 2025), https://ipdefenseforum.com/2025/05/germany-philippines-sign-defense-agreement/.

5 Werner Pascha, 'Japan–Germany Security Cooperation Deepens in a Changing Global Order', *East Asia Forum*, (19 November 2025), https://eastasiaforum.org/2025/11/18/japan-germany-security-cooperation-deepens-in-a-changing-global-order/.

on co-development of niche technologies, including submarines.[1]

In multilateral and Track II settings, Germany's approach emphasized advocating for a unified European security profile at premier regional forums. At the Munich Security Conference, Berlin highlighted "multipolarization" and advocated for inclusive ocean governance to prevent a bifurcated regional order.[2] During the Shangri-La Dialogue, it promoted cooperative maritime security to protect underwater infrastructure, linking the war in Ukraine to Indo-Pacific stability.[3] At the 4th EU-Indo-Pacific Ministerial Forum in Brussels, Germany pushed for the EU's Global Gateway as a secure alternative for maritime infrastructure.[4]

Germany's 2025 practice rebalanced the earlier approach in ways that created a noticeable distance in framing and instruments. While the 2020 policy framework prioritized protecting supply chains and avoiding bipolarity, these motivations were articulated in 2025 through a more security-forward lens that more explicitly linked Indo-Pacific stability to wider Euro-Atlantic security concerns. In terms of operational engagement, Germany selectively implemented the 2020 Guidelines through exercise participation, defence diplomacy and capacity cooperation. These activities demonstrated practical cooperation with regional partners, without necessarily indicating a routine naval presence in sensitive waters or a substantial increase in independent power-projection capacity. On China-US competition, Germany continued to stress bloc-avoidance, but its behavior seemed slightly less hedging, accepting more friction with Beijing while deepening ties with key U.S.-aligned regional partners.

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1 Ministry of Defence (India), 'India–Germany High Defence Committee Meeting Held in New Delhi' (2025), https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2191312.

2 Munich Security Conference, *Multipolarization: Munich Security Report 2025* (2025), https://securityconference.org/assets/02_Dokumente/01_Publikationen/2025/MSR_2025/Multipolarization_%E2%80%93_Munich_Security_Report_2025.pdf

3 IISS, 'Cooperative Maritime Security in the Asia-Pacific', Shangri-La Dialogue special session (2025), https://www.iiss.org/events/shangri-la-dialogue/shangri-la-dialogue-2025/special-sessions/special-session-3/.

4 Federal Foreign Office (Germany), 'Opening Remarks by Foreign Minister Johann Wadephul at the 4th EU-Indo-Pacific Ministerial Forum', (2025), https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/newsroom/news/4th-indo-pacific-ministerial-forum-2744494.

Overall, 2025 operationalizes the Guidelines with a harder threat picture and more deterrence-capable posture.

### 6.4 Netherlands

In 2025, the Dutch government updated Netherlands Defence Doctrine, in which it explicitly links Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific security and reorients the armed forces from crisis management toward territorial defence. Its behaviour-centric approach provides a clearer legal-operational basis for calibrated responses to grey-zone coercion, ranging from "catalytic" to "definitive" force. The end-of-cycle review of The Dutch Maritime Strategy 2015-2025 reinforces this logic through a "global-to-local" lens, treating Dutch port access (e.g., Rotterdam) as contingent on freedom of navigation through Indo-Pacific chokepoints.[1] In parallel, the Defence Strategy for Industry and Innovation (D-SII) 2025-2029 prioritizes maritime systems—Including autonomous underwater platforms—to secure supply chains for advanced sensors and unmanned capabilities—an Indo-Pacific—salient push for "technological sovereignty."[2]

Dutch naval activity in 2025 prioritized high-end interoperability and coalition integration. The most consequential engagement was probably the participation in Exercise Talisman Sabre 2025, where Dutch forces contributed to the Tri-Marines amphibious construct with the UK and the U.S.[3] While rotational presence continued as a pattern, much of 2025 focused on preparing the next major mission and building the logistics backbone to sustain it. Consistent with the plug-and-play approach, Dutch officers and specialists were embedded in the UK-led Operation Highmast, emphasizing carrier-strike integration and staff-level interoperability as the

1 Government of the Netherlands, *The Dutch Maritime Strategy 2015–2025*, https://noordzeeloket.nl/en/policy/maritime-strategy/.

2 Netherlands Ministry of Defence, *Defence Strategy for Industry and Innovation 2025–2029* (2025), https://www.scribd.com/document/990395373/Defence-Strategy-for-Industry-and-Innovation-D-SII-2025-2029-EN.

3 Militär Aktuell, 'Dutch Armed Forces at Talisman Sabre 2025' (2025), https://militaeraktuell.at/en/dutch-armed-forces-at-the-talisman-sabre-2025/.

highest-leverage contribution for a small-to-medium navy.[1]

On the non-kinetic line, Dutch maritime law enforcement focused on capacity building and enhancing regional domain awareness through technological cooperation. Following the April 2025 conclusion of the EU Critical Maritime Routes Indo-Pacific (CRIMARIO II) project, Dutch experts assisted in the May handover of the Indo-Pacific Regional Information Sharing (IORIS) platform's governance in the Philippines.[2] Additionally, the Netherlands intensified its cooperation with Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia (ReCAAP) to counter a 2025 surge in armed robbery against ships in the Malacca and Singapore Straits, advocating for "legal finish" frameworks to ensure the successful prosecution of maritime criminals.[3]

Regarding bilateral and multilateral engagement, the nation deepened its strategic ties through security agreements that facilitate logistical endurance. The Japan-Netherlands Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement established Japan as the Netherlands' primary security partner in Asia, granting the Dutch navy reciprocal access to Japanese facilities for maintenance and refueling.[4] Multilaterally, the Netherlands acted as a connector between Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific frameworks, leveraging platforms such as the 2025 EU-Indo-Pacific Ministerial Forum. At the same time, it also maintained an active presence in Track II diplomacy and dialogue, such as the Shangri-La Dialogue—to advocate the global indivisibility of maritime security and defend the rules-based international

1 Eddie Maskell-Pedersen, 'Force for Stability', *Indo-Pacific Defense FORUM* (2 February 2026), https://ipdefenseforum.com/2026/02/force-for-stability/.

2 European External Action Service, 'IORIS Steering Committee Meeting: Promoting Information-Sharing across the Indo-Pacific' (2025), https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/philippines/ioris-steering-committee-meeting-promoting-information-sharing-across-indo-pacific_en.

3 Xavier Vavasseur, 'Netherlands Coastguard Looking for New Maritime Surveillance Aircraft', Naval News (17 April 2019), https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2019/04/netherlands-coastguard-looking-for-new-maritime-surveillance-aircraft/.

4 Netherlands Ministry of Defence, 'Japan and the Netherlands Sign Agreement on Security Cooperation' (18 December 2025), https://english.defensie.nl/latest/news/2025/12/18/japan-and-the-netherlands-sign-agreement-on-security-cooperation.

order.[1]

In sum, the analysis suggests that while the Netherlands' 2025 Indo-Pacific practice remains consistent with the core logic of the 2020 document, it extends the earlier framework in two significant respects. Whereas the 2020 guidelines privileged non-kinetic instruments and selective security cooperation, 2025 practice places greater weight on high-end coalition integration and logistics-access agreements that enable sustained deployments. Although still largely non-kinetic in form, this shift is more militarily enabling and deterrence-adjacent than previously envisioned. However, notable gaps remain, as regular and visible naval deployments in-theater remain limited despite intensified rhetoric and new capabilities. Furthermore, the 2025 record placed greater emphasis on partner interoperability, indicating selective security cooperation without necessarily departing from the guidelines' preference for avoiding polarization.

### 6.5 EU

The EU's 2025 policy landscape focused on the securitization of maritime infrastructure and military interoperability. The centerpiece was the EU Action Plan on Cable Security issued by the Commission, establishing a resilience cycle to safeguard the conduits carrying 99% of inter-continental data. Its strategic novelty is extraterritorial, as it targets the protection of cables linking the EU to external theaters, including the Indo-Pacific, backed by an additional €540 million for Cable Projects of European Interest, as well as a push to explore UNCLOS-based options for boarding/inspection of "vessels of interest" represented by shadow fleets.[2] The Cable Security Toolbox further added six strategic measures to mitigate risks like physical sabotage and supply chain dependency.[3]

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1 Ruben Brekelmans, '*Managing Proliferation Risks in the Asia-Pacific*', IISS Shangri-La Dialogue (2025), https://www.iiss.org/globalassets/media-library---content--migration/files/shangri-la-dialogue/2025/transcripts-final/p3/sld2025_third-plenary-session_ruben-brekelmans_as-delivered.pdf.

2 Winston Qiu, 'EU Action Plan on Cable Security', Submarine Networks, *Submarine Networks*, (2025), https://www.submarinenetworks.com/en/nv/insights/eu-action-plan-on-cable-security.

3 Ibid.

Member-state deployments and exercises contributed to European maritime engagement in the Indo-Pacific in 2025, although their scale and continuity varied. These national activities should be distinguished from EU-level initiatives centred on maritime information-sharing, capacity-building and institutional cooperation. Unlike naval engagement which typically driven by individual member states, EU mainstream members led or coordinated several maritime law-enforcement initiatives that continued to prioritize non-kinetic enablement, especially MDA and capacity-building. The flagship instrument was CRIMARIO Phase 3, which expanded its geographic reach into the Pacific and strengthened MDA support through the IORIS platform.[1] Complementary efforts included the RECOPORT-ESA 25 exercise and CRIMARIO/ESIWA training packages, providing littoral states with technical and legal expertise to improve operational inter-agency coordination and bolster law-enforcement capacity.

EU security diplomacy in 2025 built on existing institutional relationships with regional partners, with further initiatives intended to broaden the scope of cooperation. The India-EU Strategic Agenda 2025 operationalized India as a Preferred Security Partner, elevating a dedicated security and defence pillar centered on combined naval exercises and enhanced MDA, and confirming EU participation in India's Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative.[2] Brussels also matured a network of Security and Defence Partnerships with Japan, South Korea, and the Philippines to provide a permanent bureaucratic structure for cooperation.[3] In multilateral settings, Brussels positioned itself as a reliable alternative. The Fourth EU Indo-Pacific Ministerial Forum emphasized the inseparability of Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific security, focusing specifically on critical infrastructure

1 European Commission, 'EU CRIMARIO' (2025), https://fpi.ec.europa.eu/projects/projects-action/eu-crimario_en.

2 Council of the European Union, 'New Strategic EU–India Agenda: Council Approves Conclusions' (20 October 2025), https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2025/10/20/new-strategic-eu-india-agenda-council-approves-conclusions/.

3 European Parliament, 'The EU's New Bilateral Security and Defence Partnerships' (18 March 2026), https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_BRI(2025)767215.

protection.[1] The 32nd ASEAN-EU Joint Cooperation Committee meeting confirmed the operational status of the Sustainable Connectivity Package, supporting seafarer training and certification.[2]

The EU's 2025 practice largely operationalized its 2021 Indo-Pacific strategy with a clearer security hardening. While the core rationale remained consistent, the distance lay in the sharper threat lens and upgraded instruments. In 2025, Brussels prioritized resilience against hybrid and grey-zone risks, elevating critical maritime infrastructure protection into a central organizing task. While the EU continued to favour non-kinetic instruments, selected member-state deployments and exercises complemented the EU's institutional instruments without establishing a sustained EU-level naval posture. On China-US competition, European posture remained functionally pragmatic, yet the infrastructure-security agenda implicitly tightened the EU's stance toward coercive contingencies.

### 6.6 Italy

The Italian cabinet's "Go East" resolution in early 2025 emphasized Italy's economic security dependence on Indo-Pacific stability, authorizing a €1.48 billion budget for 39 international missions.[3] Parliament also pushed for greater strategic formalization: a March 2025 Foreign Affairs Commission Report advocated a national Indo-Pacific strategy to bridge the "Enlarged Mediterranean" with the Indian Ocean, defining a new "Indo-Mediterranean continuum".[4]

Naval activity remained the primary instrument, but 2025 placed more weight on interoperability and partner integration than on presence alone.

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1 European External Action Service, 'Fourth EU Indo-Pacific Ministerial Forum' (2025), https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/fourth-eu-indo-pacific-ministerial-forum_en.

2 European External Action Service, 'EU and ASEAN Hold 32nd Joint Cooperation Committee Meeting' (16 June 2025), https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/asean-eu-and-asean-hold-32nd-joint-cooperation-committee-jcc-meeting_en.

3 Decode39, 'Italy Strengthens Indo-Pacific Ties amid Rising Geopolitical Shifts' (26 February 2025), https://decode39.com/10033/italy-strengthens-indo-pacific-ties-amid-rising-geopolitical-shifts/.

4 Decode39, 'Italy's Indo-Pacific Committee Charts the Country's Strategic Course' (2025), https://decode39.com/10241/italy-s-indo-pacific-committee-charts-the-country-s-strategic-course/.

The six-month deployment of ITS Antonio Marceglia served as the flagship platform for multilateral and bilateral engagement, including the multilateral Komodo 25 exercise and joint maneuvers with the Indian Navy.[1] Operational maturity was demonstrated by the deployment of ITS Cavour Carrier Strike Group, making it one of only three countries able to project carrier-based fifth-generation airpower in the Western Pacific.[2] Additionally, ITS Raimondo Montecuccoli continued to surveillance tasks linked to sanctions monitoring around North Korea, aligning non-proliferation objectives with contested-waters presence.[3] Meanwhile, Italy broadened its soft security footprint through coast guard diplomacy and maritime governance initiatives. It became the first European nation to chair the Coast Guard Global Summit in Rome. The summit produced a resolution on standardized maritime information sharing and addressed the vulnerability of critical undersea infrastructure (CUI) to grey-zone operations.[4]

Rome's bilateral diplomacy prioritized consolidating strategic partnerships with key regional partners, most notably with the plan to transfer the decommissioned carrier ITS Giuseppe Garibaldi to Indonesia as a grant for conversion into a drone and command-and-control platform.[5]

Compared with the Indo-Pacific strategy outlined in 2022, Italy's 2025 approach largely operated within that framework, yet with a noticeable shift in emphasis. Rome has successfully bridged its "soft security" roots with a more assertive "functional engagement." While last year's actions

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1 Decode39, 'Italian Frigate Boosts Defence and Business Ties in the Indo-Pacific' (2025), https://decode39.com/9871/italian-frigate-boosts-defence-and-business-ties-in-the-indo-pacific/.

2 Center for International Maritime Security, 'On Wider Seas: Italian Naval Deployments and Maritime Outreach to the Indo-Pacific' (5 March 2025), https://cimsec.org/on-wider-seas-italian-naval-deployments-and-maritime-outreach-to-the-indo-pacific/.

3 Decode39 'Italy strengthens Indo-Pacific ties amid rising geopolitical shifts' (2025), https://decode39.com/10033/italy-strengthens-indo-pacific-ties-amid-rising-geopolitical-shifts/

4 International Maritime Organization, 'Coast Guard FORA 2025, Rome, Italy' (2025), https://www.imo.org/en/MediaCentre/SecretaryGeneral/Pages/IMO-statement-Coast-Guard-FORA-2025.aspx.

5 Naval News, 'Italy Moves to Transfer Garibaldi Aircraft Carrier to Indonesia' (February 2026), https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2026/02/italy-moves-to-transfer-garibaldi-aircraft-carrier-to-indonesia-looking-to-new-programmes/.

still leaned non-kinetic, the center of gravity moved toward interoperability-based presence and defense-enabled influence, edging beyond the primarily cooperative, law-enforcement-forward posture of 2022. These activities demonstrated practical engagement through individual deployments and partner cooperation, without establishing a persistent regional naval footprint. Cooperation with Japan and India and maritime monitoring activities formed part of this engagement, although these examples alone do not establish a broader shift away from cooperation with China.

### 6.7 Sweden

Sweden's 2025 strategic posture was updated by the release of two policy documents. The 2025 Statement of Foreign Policy frames the country's security as increasingly interlinked across Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific. Priority should thus be given to the defence of international law (specifically the UNCLOS), and the protection of critical maritime infrastructure against hybrid threats.[1] In the same vein, the Defence Policy Direction for Cooperation with Countries in the Indo-Pacific Region operationalizes a pragmatic agenda: deepening defence relations, expanding attaché and presence mechanisms, and leveraging Sweden's industrial base with regional high-tech partners.[2]

Operationally, Stockholm's naval activity in the region highlighted interoperability by integration with security partners. The flagship engagement was the participation in the Operation Highmast, in which Sweden contributed staff officers integrated into the task group to strengthen combined planning and operational readiness during transits through the Indian Ocean and Western Pacific.[3] However, beyond this,

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1 Government Offices of Sweden, 'Statement of Foreign Policy 2025' (12 February 2025), https://www.government.se/speeches/2025/02/statement-of-foreign-policy-2025/.

2 Government Offices of Sweden, 'Defence Policy Direction for Cooperation with Countries in the Indo-Pacific Region' (2024), https://www.government.se/information-material/2024/08/defence-policy-direction-for-cooperation-with-countries-in-the-indo-pacific-region/.

3 Government Offices of Sweden, 'Sweden to Participate in Operation Highmast in the Indo-Pacific Region' (2025), https://www.government.se/press-releases/2025/04/sweden-to-participate-in-operation-highmast-in-the-indo-pacific-region/.

Stockholm undertook almost no other power-projection activity in the Asia-Pacific/Indo-Pacific over the year, including maritime law-enforcement deployments.

On the diplomatic front, Sweden appointed a non-resident Defence Attaché to the Philippines, based in Bangkok, to deepen defence dialogue as regional security dynamics intensified.[1] It launched a Sectoral Strategic Partnership with Vietnam that focuses on the digitalization and modernization of port infrastructure.[2] Stockholm also maintained presence in regional Track II platforms, most notably through the defence minister's participation in the Shangri-La Dialogue, who advocated for a stable, rules-based Asia-Pacific while underscoring the growing interconnectedness of European and Indo-Pacific security.[3]

Based on the review above, Sweden's 2025 practice seems to have only partially operationalized its 2024 policy framework, revealing an implementation gap between stated intent and delivered posture. Despite that the activities tracked the framework's motivation layer, the power-projection toolbox was applied narrowly. Beyond participation in the Operation Highmast, Stockholm undertook almost no sustained regional activity and no maritime law-enforcement deployments, leaving the framework's emphasis on recurrent exercises and capacity-building under-realized. Diplomatically, engagement expanded mainly as liaison-building and framework-setting, but the 2025 record showed few evidenced near-term operational outputs in maritime security. Finally, the framework's "balance-to-deter" China lens was muted in practice, with limited concrete alignment signaling beyond rules-based rhetoric.

### 6.8 Czech Republic

In the 2025 version of Foreign Policy Framework, the Czech government

1 Philippine News Agency, 'Sweden Appoints New Non-Resident Defense Attaché to PH' (2025), https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1251651.

2 Government Offices of Sweden, 'Ulf Kristersson Receives Vietnam's Prime Minister' (June 2025), https://www.government.se/articles/2025/06/ulf-kristersson-receives-vietnams-prime-minister/.

3 Government Offices of Sweden, 'Pål Jonson to Travel to Singapore' (May 2025), https://www.government.se/press-releases/2025/05/pal-jonson-to-travel-to-singapore/.

codified a structural recalibration of its external engagement by elevating security as the overriding strategic objective and explicitly acknowledging the Indo-Pacific's growing systemic weight. Within this framework, maritime flashpoints in the East and South China Seas, as well as the Taiwan Strait, are identified as salient risk vectors shaping the regional security environment. The document further commits Czechia, acting through collective formats, to contribute to the protection of transport routes and critical infrastructure, explicitly including maritime shipping and maritime-energy networks.[1]

Operationally, Prague's 2025 posture was most concretely manifested through participation in the EU maritime-security operation European Union Naval Forces ASPIDES by staffing its strategic headquarters in Greece. This contribution supported the protection of merchant shipping and freedom of navigation along Indian Ocean-connected trade routes linking Europe with the broader Indo-Pacific economy.[2] Czech military personnel also participated for the first time as observers in the annual U.S.-Philippines Balikatan exercise, which was explicitly framed around maritime and air defence amid South China Sea and Taiwan-related tensions. This rare involvement signaled a calibrated expansion of Czech interoperability and situational awareness in South China Sea—related defence planning without implying independent force projection.[3]

On the diplomatic front, Czech maritime security engagement was reinforced through targeted defence diplomacy with the Philippines. The Czech defence minister's official visit enabled a bilateral meeting focused on maritime security in the West Philippine Sea and coincided with the resumption of the Philippine-Czech Joint Defense Committee as a

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1 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic, *Foreign Policy Framework* (2025), https://mzv.gov.cz/file/5950159/III._Foreign_Policy_Framework_MFA_Czech_Republic__1_.pdf.

2 Ministry of Defence of the Czech Republic, 'European Union Naval Forces – ASPIDES' (2025), https://mise.mo.gov.cz/aktualni-mise/as/european-union-naval-forces-_-aspides---obranna-namorni-bezpecnostni-operace-255264/.

3 Reuters, 'Philippines Calls Joint US Drills "Defense Rehearsal" as China Tensions Simmer' (15 April 2025), https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/philippines-calls-joint-us-drills-defense-rehearsal-china-tensions-simmer-2025-04-15/.

mechanism for deepened defence cooperation.1 Meanwhile, although less active than Europe's larger powers, Prague has proactively leveraged Track II channels to project its value-based foreign policy into the Indo-Pacific security architecture. The most prominent example was the European Values Summit 2025 in Prague: President Petr Pavel opened the conference by explicitly highlighting the interconnectedness of the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific regions, and the first panel focused squarely on security dynamics in the Taiwan Strait.[2]

Czechia's 2025 engagement with the Asia-Pacific/Indo-Pacific both aligned with and stretched the intent of its 2022 strategy outline. The stated objectives remained consistent, yet the gap lay in how power was projected. The 2022 framework leaned toward non-military multilateral advocacy, resilience building, and hybrid-threat focus, whereas 2025 practice introduced more explicit security signaling and limited military-linked engagement. In relation, the 2022 "deter and align" approach to China-US competition is arguably sharpened in 2025. Despite not appearing likely to pursue independent force projection, Prague's expanding interoperability and increased attention to Taiwan and the South China Sea still signal closer, more practical alignment with regional security frameworks than the earlier, primarily diplomatic posture suggested.

## 7. What 2025 Practices Reveal

### 7.1 Shared Patterns and Archetypal Differences

European actors' 2025 practices largely preserved the objectives set out in earlier policy documents, while varying in the instruments and intensity of implementation. Policy framing placed greater emphasis on security concerns, although this did not translate uniformly into expanded operational capacity or a sustained regional military posture.

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1 *The Philippine Star*, 'Marcos Jr. Eyes Stronger Ties with Czech Republic' (21 February 2025), https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2025/02/21/2423083/marcos-jr-eyes-stronger-ties-czech-republic.

2 European Values Center, 'The 11th European Values Summit' (2025), https://europeanvalues.cz/en/summit/summit-2025/.

Across several cases, this stronger security emphasis linked established concerns over trade, diversification and regional stability to critical infrastructure protection and resilience against hybrid or grey-zone threats. The language of Euro-Atlantic-Indo-Pacific security interconnectedness reinforced this framing, alongside increased attention to undersea cables and strategic supply chains. These developments supplemented existing economic and cooperative objectives rather than replacing them.

The 2025 record combined established maritime cooperation with selected high-profile deployments and exercises. These activities varied substantially in scale, duration and military significance, and should not be treated as a uniform European transition toward sustained regional deterrence. Engagement included exercise participation and interoperability, alongside maritime-domain awareness, coast guard capacity-building and technical or legal support for regional partners. Defence-industrial cooperation and logistics arrangements provided additional enabling mechanisms in some cases, although their implications for the frequency and continuity of deployments require separate assessment.

Cooperation with Japan, Australia, the Philippines and India remained an important component of European engagement, including through exercises and bilateral defence ties. Its implications for alignment with Washington nevertheless varied, given differences in European strategic preferences and regional partners' relationships with the U.S.

Within these broad patterns, differences across the archetypes concerned the scale and continuity of engagement, the balance of instruments, and approaches to China-US competition.

The most consequential difference concerned the scale and continuity of maritime engagement. The UK and France combined standing regional footprints with the capacity for episodic carrier or task-group deployments, supporting patrols, exercises and diplomatic signalling. By contrast, Sweden and Czechia contributed mainly through staff integration, selective participation and diplomatic engagement. These differences shaped how

shared strategic concerns were translated into practice.

A second difference concerned the relative weight of military and institutional instruments. The UK and France combined major naval deployments and complex exercises with maritime governance and capacity-building. Germany relied on selective exercise participation, defence diplomacy and partner support. At the EU level, institutional platforms, information-sharing and maritime governance remained central, while the Netherlands combined cooperative instruments with selective military contributions. Italy likewise pursued naval engagement alongside law-enforcement and capacity-building cooperation. These combinations reflected different capabilities and priorities rather than a uniform shift toward higher-end power projection.

Third, European actors differed in how they combined security cooperation with their approaches to China-US competition. Germany's exercise participation and defence diplomacy demonstrated selective cooperation with regional partners, while the EU placed greater emphasis on institutional instruments and infrastructure resilience. Italy's naval engagement supported practical cooperation with regional partners, without by itself demonstrating a broader retreat from engagement with China. France maintained cooperation with the U.S. and regional partners alongside an emphasis on strategic autonomy. These variations caution against treating expanded partner cooperation as evidence of uniform U.S.-led alignment or a shared willingness to accept greater friction with Beijing.

### 7.2 Major Drivers

What factors drove these patterns and trends? The author argues that, because policy implementation and adjustment tend to lag behind events, the 2025 practices of individual countries and archetypes largely reflected responses to shifts in the strategic environment over preceding years, rather than being driven primarily by developments specific to 2025. In addition, domestic factors certainly mattered—for example, most of the cases discussed experienced changes in governing coalitions and periods of heightened domestic political contestation in recent years—but

international drivers were more consequential overall.

A key external driver of Europe's 2025 convergence was NATO's increasing focus on "interconnected security" across the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific theatres. By elevating Indo-Pacific dynamics in alliance consultations, partnership agendas, and interoperability planning, NATO provided both political cover and practical incentives for European states to adjust their maritime-security posture. This meant strengthening ties with Indo-Pacific partners, joining more demanding combined activities, and framing selective presence as relevant to European deterrence and resilience rather than optional "out-of-area" engagement. At the same time, NATO's emphasis did not amount to a single operating concept, which also encouraged divergence in implementation. Expeditionary-capable archetypes translated connectivity into higher-visibility naval signalling and complex exercises. More capacity- or geography-constrained archetypes responded through staff-level integration, diplomatic alignment, and framework-based contributions that advanced interoperability without requiring sustained forward deployments.

Another driver was a sharper Indo-Pacific risk environment, combining high-end military signalling with persistent coercive practices at sea. This raised perceived systemic risks to global trade, maritime norms, and crisis stability. In response, European approaches placed greater emphasis on international law, operational safety, and practical cooperation with regional partners through maritime governance, coast-guard cooperation, and interoperability. Because these issues sit close to major-power competition, they also amplified divergence. Some archetypes leaned toward deterrence-forward, high-visibility operational behaviour. Others prioritised risk management, de-escalatory signalling, and resilience-first approaches to limit political and economic exposure while sustaining engagement.

A third factor behind the 2025 practices was the rapid securitization of undersea cables and other critical maritime infrastructure through a hybrid/grey-zone risk lens. EU- and NATO-level initiatives reinforced this

shift by emphasising prevention, detection, response and recovery, and deterrence. This generated shared features across archetypes because infrastructure protection is trans-regional, politically defensible, and compatible with both civilian and military tools. Yet it also widened differences. Actors with stronger intelligence, cyber, and maritime surveillance capabilities tended to foreground infrastructure resilience more explicitly. Others maintained a more episodic approach to Indo-Pacific maritime engagement, centred on trade diplomacy or symbolic presence.

Finally, the heightened salience of chokepoint disruption in 2024-2025 made maritime security a concrete European economic-security concern. This strengthened the case for protecting sea lines of communication, improving MDA, and supporting defensive escort or presence missions, reinforcing a broader shift toward resilience alongside selective hard-power signalling. It also produced divergence in theatre priorities and instrument choice. Some archetypes treated Europe's extended maritime neighbourhood as the most immediate focus. Others used the same shocks to bolster the argument for a more forward Indo-Pacific posture, leading to variation in where scarce naval assets were allocated and how engagement was justified.

## 8. Conclusion: Another Strategic Transformation on the Horizon?

Since 2020, European states have given Indo-Pacific maritime security greater strategic attention, supported by new or updated policy frameworks. Across the five archetypes, shared concerns include exposure to maritime disruption, the defence of international law and cooperation through regional institutions. Differences lie principally in threat perceptions, capabilities and preferred instruments. The UK places greater emphasis on expeditionary engagement and allied cooperation; the EU institutional mainstream shares a rules-and-institutions approach but varies in its use of military instruments; Italy favours pragmatic cooperation; Sweden emphasizes technology and resilience; and Czechia relies mainly on diplomatic and collective contributions.

The 2025 record largely preserved earlier strategic objectives, while their implementation varied across actors. Selected deployments and exercises demonstrated capability and partner cooperation, alongside continued maritime-domain awareness, capacity-building and enforcement activities. Defence-industrial ties and logistics arrangements supported engagement in some cases, although their effects on deployment continuity require separate assessment. Four factors help explain these patterns: NATO's emphasis on Euro-Atlantic-Indo-Pacific security interconnectedness, concerns over regional maritime contingencies, increased attention to critical maritime infrastructure, and chokepoint disruptions that heightened awareness of supply-chain exposure. These developments reinforced security concerns without producing a uniform expansion of sustained European maritime power in the region.

Developments in 2026 further caution against interpreting the 2025 record as evidence of such an expansion. Although the deployment of HMS Prince of Wales demonstrated expeditionary capability and temporarily increased regional visibility, its shift in operational focus to the High North and North Atlantic in 2026 underscores that the UK did not establish a continuous carrier presence in the Indo-Pacific. Institutional cooperation nevertheless continued, with the EU establishing a Security and Defence Partnership with India and a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership with Vietnam. These initiatives broaden existing relationships, while their maritime operational effects require separate assessment. European engagement should therefore be assessed against distinct indicators: the continuity of partnerships, the frequency and duration of deployments, the availability of capabilities, and demonstrated operational outcomes. Institutional ties may deepen without annual carrier deployments, while a prominent naval visit alone does not establish a durable deterrent posture.

Looking ahead, the 2025 record largely reflects responses to strategic developments over preceding years, so the operational implications of more recent changes may take time to emerge. Uncertainty surrounding U.S. policy under the second Trump administration adds pressure to European choices over cooperation with Washington, intra-European

coordination and strategic autonomy. Competing demands across theatres may also constrain the allocation of naval assets to the Indo-Pacific. Further recalibration could therefore involve changes in the scale and continuity of deployments, the balance between military and institutional instruments, or the selection of partners. Assessing these adjustments requires distinguishing stated ambitions and visible activities from sustained capabilities and demonstrated effects.

# 5. THE SOUTH CHINA SEA DISPUTE-A THORNY ISSUE IN AUSTRALIAN/CHINESE RELATIONS

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Since the last decade SCS dispute has driven a wedge in Australian/Chinese relations. It adds a new thorn to the already deteriorating bilateral relationship troubled by their traditional conflict of interests, over issues such as human rights, cyber security, high-tech restrictions, and regional security architecture. The worsening Sino-U.S. relations have also further facilitated the free-fall of Canberra/Beijing interaction. Most analysts would be puzzled by the SCS factor in Australia/China ties: Australia and China co-existed cooperatively for three decades when the SCS dispute existed, why Australia suddenly changed its basic position and became active in challenging China's SCS position, as a non-party in the dispute and situated far away from the venue of conflict. And Australian opposition to China over the SCS affairs is amid the substantial economic benefits it has gained from China. There are certain deep geopolitical causes for Australia's change of SCS policy. This paper will explore these causes and answer the above question in a relatively concentrated way.

## 1. Conceptualizing the context of Australia's involvement in the South China Sea

By standard interpretation of international relations theory of pragmatism, which is one of three basic principles of Australia foreign policy,[1] Australia's deepening involvement in the SCS dispute is irrational in several aspects. First, Australia is an outsider to a distant regional territorial dispute that bears no immediate consequences in its economic development and security-making. A relatively detached stance would

1 Brendan Taylor, 'Australian Agency and the China–US Contest for Supremacy', *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 79, no. 4 (2025), pp. 618–635, https://doi.org/10.1080/10357718.2025.2471360.

have accorded the country with enlarged space for maneuvering among the disputants. Second, Australia's SCS involvement is not mutually beneficial with the relevant parties in the region: it has aroused either opposition or suspicion from major stakeholders. For instance, China is strongly against Australia's naval transit in the sensitive areas in the SCS and Indonesia is alert on the planned nuclear submarine development that targets the SCS as the main venue for operations.[1] Even if Australian SCS engagement is favored by some disputants, e.g the Philippines, it is not cost-effective because of low returns in outcome for Australia and estranges its important bilateral relationship with China in terms of economic interests. Thirdly, Australia's primary SCS action takes the military form, e.g., through disguised FONOPs, and this may pose risks to its overall geopolitical standing in the Asia-Pacific region. Inevitably militarized involvement encounters likely pushbacks in kind. Had there been an accidental naval or mid-air collision, the consequences would be dire.

In short Australia's SCS involvement entails obvious negativities to its pursuit of national interests, if the country is stranded in Asia's maritime disputes, especially against its largest trading partner. An unanswered question emerges then—had Canberra chosen a relatively low-key response to the SCS dispute, like what it did for several decades before its change of policy in the 2010s, would it have possessed a wider range of choices along the lines of "having the cake and eating it too"? This would mean positive response to the U.S. call but avoidance of fierce opposition from China. Such policy has been currently pursued by the U.S. allies of New Zealand and South Korea. Australia's ex-foreign minister Bob Carr once categorically stated that "it is not in Australia's interests to take side in the SCS confrontation".[2] Then another seul-searching question comes in line—why Canberra has not only continued its SCS side-picking but even intensified it occasionally. Is there anything else that obliges Australia to get itself into the dispute? Yes, there certainly is.

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1 Stephen Dziedzic, 'Indonesia Criticizes Submarine Loophole in Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty', *ABC News* (28 July 2022).

2 Bob Carr's speech at Asian Society Hong Kong Centre, on 29 July 2013.

## 2. Australia-US alliance above all?

Empirical research shows that it is not factual to state that Canberra's SCS decisions are substantially influenced by Washington's. However, it is an undeniable that the U.S. intervenes with Canberra's SCS options.[1] Australia changed its traditional stance on the SCS dispute, namely neutrality towards sovereignty disputes, mainly because of America's change of its SCS position around the time of Obama's announcement of Asia-pivot. Clearly the third-party factor has been the most critical driver for Australia's SCS policy-formation. Again, what is the reason for Canberra's SCS policy change and why has Australia followed the U.S. so closely against China on SCS issues?

On the other hand, Australia as a firm supporter to U.S. SCS initiative notwithstanding, a nuanced analysis of its SCS engagement also reveals its cautiousness in striking a balance between fulfilling its alliance commitment to America and avoiding the kinds of actions that would wreck Australian-China relations beyond repair, meaning that Canberra has set limits to its SCS involvement. Below are few explanations to test the "two sides of the coin".

### 2.1 Australia's strategic culture of "tyranny of distance" and its SCS policy

Strategic culture is foundational to any state's strategic decision-making. China's strategic culture is rooted in its history of "a century of humiliation at the hands of foreign aggressors" and underscores its fundamental position on issues of sovereignty and territorial integrity. In contrast Australia's strategic culture is deeply linked to its geographic location: it is too far away from "Anglo-Saxon cousins", and it is too close to countries with "alien values". This latter gave rise to a mentality of "tyranny of distance" reflecting Australia's fear psyche and a threat phobia in its security-perception: it needs a powerful guarantor in the form of alliance.

1 Wang Shuqi, 'Role and Threat: An Assessment of Australia's South China Sea Policy amid Great Power Rivalry', *Asian Perspective*, vol. 48 (2024).

The resultant ANZUS Treaty provided ready access to U.S. forward deployment in the country that has made Australians felt safe since the end of the World War II.[1]

Siding with America is therefore seen as a natural choice rooted in a realist conviction, expressed bluntly by former PM Harward's logic in supporting the second U.S. war against Iraq: "if we do not support Americans this time, we could not expect their support to us when we need them". Interestingly, however, when Australia's SCS involvement is driven from such a (un)natural security anxiety, it may not be so much derived from a perception of China as a direct military threat to Australia as in Canberra's belief that if China's rise weakens U.S. dominance in world affairs, it weakens Australia's security as a result. It was this kind of Cold War conviction that led Australia to join SEATO-sponsored SCS exercises in the 1970s in supporting U.S. actions against the so-called communists. History repeated itself after a pause of three decades when the U.S. again identified China as its pacing threat and called its allies for support. Then understandably Canberra, which sees its alliance with the U.S. outweighs all its other foreign relations,[2] would willingly go for a rigid policy option at the expenses of Australian-China relations. A new SCS policy against China has served as Canberra's pledge of loyalty to Australia-U.S. alliance but ultimately it reflects Australia's dilemma under its strategic culture of seeking a security protector. To outsiders Australia is the safest country in the world and they would believe that the country's perceived security threat is more imagined than realistic.[3]

## 2.2 Carefully handling alliance entrapment and abandonment

Undoubtedly, Australia-US alliance has positively contributed to

1 Alex Burns, "Australia's Strategic Culture: Constraints and Opportunities in Security Policymaking", *Contemporary Security Policy*, Vol. 35, No. 2, (2014).

2 Michael Wesley and Allan Gyngell, *Making Australian Foreign Policy*, Cambridge University Press, (2007).

3 David Kilcullen, "The Australian Statecraft: The Challenge of Aligning Policy with Strategic Culture", *Security Challenges*, Vol. 3 No. 4, (2007).

Australia's wellbeing from economic development to security assurance.[1] Yet history also proves that the pegging of Australia's security with the U.S. global exercise of power would involve Australia in conflicts mainly of a U.S. nature, such as its participation in the Vietnam War in the 1960s and the second Iraqi war, which Canberra later apologized. Indeed, an alliance is not a free lunch. Like all other U.S. allies Canberra faces two normal deviations in alliance-making: abandonment and entrapment which underline allies' dilemma in managing an asymmetrical allied relationship.[2] It is natural for one ally to minimize its sacrifices in handling a crisis endured by another, while it expects to receive full support from allies in offsetting a grave threat to itself. Allied treaties such as Article 5 in NATO and Article 4 in ANZUS, oblige members to join others' wars, which may create anxieties of entrapment. Treaty obligations are indeed expensive. This is one reason why NATO membership has been so inaccessible to Ukraine.[3] Nonetheless, countries do join an alliance relationship to collectively enhance national security and willingly pay for the alliance's security insurance that outweighs concerns of abandonment or entrapment.[4]

Australia's SCS involvement can be seen as its unavoidable premium to sustain Australia-U.S. alliance. However, like Australia's previous costly participation in the successive U.S.-led wars, its SCS premium appears to be high, measured by backfires from its largest trading partner, which names SCS affairs as its core national interest and is thus willing to launch punitive moves against any country in breach of it. More specifically on SCS issues, Canberra behaves cautiously. For example, Australia does not entertain any U.S. type commitment to protect global waterways. In fact, Canberra has been more committed to helping Washington's SCS

1 Evan S. Medeiros et al., *Pacific Currents: The Responses of U.S. Allies and Security Partners in East Asia to China's Rise* (RAND, 2008).

2 Glenn H. Snyder, 'The Security Dilemma in Alliance Politics', *World Politics*, vol. 36, no. 4 (1984), pp. 461–495.

3 You Ji and Wu Xiangning, 'The Enduring Sino-Russian Strategic Relationship of Mutual Dependence', *Journal of Contemporary China*, vol. 34, no. 155 (2025).

4 Stephen M. Walt, 'Why Alliances Endure or Collapse', *Survival*, vol. 39, no. 1 (1997), pp. 166–167.

initiatives than other U.S. allies, i.e., Japan and South Korea, enough to prevent U.S. criticism of allied "free riding". On the other hand, what Canberra has done is a kind of "voice-loud but action-thin" to eschew the likelihood of another allied entrapment of pushing Australia into another war. And this time such entrapment would be more deadly for Australia if it is about a war scenario set up against the second most powerful military in the world and its top trading partner. A sensible balance seems to have been kept.

## 3. An Evaluation of Australia's New Position towards SCS Disputes

As mentioned earlier, Canberra adopted a new policy position on SCS politics after Obama initiated his Asia-pivot in the early 2010s. Before then the word SCS was hardly heard from either Australian political leaders or from the academia in their speeches. Even after Canberra decided to toe U.S. SCS steps in 2011, it was cautious towards what to do in the SCS. It took half of a decade to mount first concrete actions, e.g., issuing official statement to deny Chinese ownership of the Spratly islands and deploying naval ships to transit through the region. Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull probably made the first top-level statement for picking sides against China in September 2015.[1] However, generally Australia's SCS moves are ad hoc, often more as response to a circumstance than under a clearly defined policy guideline. In addition, Canberra's SCS behavior oscillates under influence of internal and external politics. Internationally it matches alterations of U.S. SCS approaches under different White House hosts and domestically it goes with government changes represented by the Labor Party and the Liberal Coalition. Below is a brief review of what Australia has mainly done over the SCS dispute.

1 BBC News, 'China "Pushing the Envelope" in South China Sea, Says Australia PM' (22 September 2015).

### 3.1 Leaning towards one side of the dispute is "one stone killing several 'birds'"

Canberra's changing stance on SCS affairs can be summarized in three categories listed below. First, it has openly picked side among the disputants by mainly supporting non-Chinese claimants. Such change of position has been made known through official statements by top cabinet members, especially by the successive prime ministers, the military's maneuvering, and tangible material assistance to China's opponents in the dispute and set tones and themes of Australia-sponsored international conferences. Since the 2010s Australian leaders have purposely mentioned the SCS dispute in almost every major regional security forum, such as the Shangri-La Dialogue, East Asian Summit and ASEAN + 6 mechanisms. The SCS topics are discussed in most bilateral meetings between Australia and its regional allies and between Australia and Southeast Asian states. This presents an unusual phenomenon in Canberra's regional diplomacy.

Picking side is a strategic move by Canberra to initiate a realignment of like-minded states in a common effort to balance China. Australia's relationship with ASEAN was somewhat lukewarm for a long period of time, which was the reason why it was accepted to the East Asian Summit quite late. By supporting claimants of Southeast Asia, Canberra has gradually improved ties with ASEAN. More strategically, Australia has utilized its changed SCS position to lure ASEAN in general and Southeast Asian SCS claimants in particular into the QUAD-plus framework. It was hoped that such regional security realignment would add collective pressure on China.

Picking sides aims to internationalize the SCS dispute with an effect of isolating China in the dispute management/resolution process. China has long held a position that the regional disputes should be handled by regional disputants and the implicated parties in the region. It is a common-sense view that internationalizing the SCS dispute would substantially add difficulties in stabilizing the already-complicated situation.[1] Claimants in

1 You Ji, 'Managing the South China Sea Dilemma: China's Strategy and Policy', in Lowell Ditmmer

Southeast Asia, however, see Chinese preference for SCS dispute control to be kept within the region untenable because the balance of power between the disputants is highly lobsided. Australia's SCS involvement against China specifically caters for internationalizing the dispute in order to offset China's overall power superiority and influence jointly. Therefore, such involvement is encouraged by certain SCS claimants. And again, when the dispute is internationalized, it naturally adds greater collective pressure on China.

Australia's side-picking has been substantiated by concrete bilateral and multilateral programs it has conducted with the disputants other than China. These include bilateral defense treaties, weapons sales and donations, and joint military exercises with Southeast Asian countries. In recent years, Canberra has emphatically singled out Philippines and Vietnam as the recipients of its material aid in a hope to strengthen their defense capabilities in confronting China in the SCS. For instance, Australian Defence Minister Richard Marles visited Manila for a ministerial meeting in 2025. The primary goal of the visit is to coin a new defense agreement to help the Philippines' expansion of defence infrastructure. Five military bases have been identified in the agreement with a focus to enhance the Philippines' maritime security in general and its SCS dispute with China in particular.[1] This agreement sets special provisions to allow Australian soldiers to be deployed in the Philippines, which is unusual for two non-allies. Indeed Australia-Philippines joint war games have increasingly become routinized. For instance, on 24 August 2025 soldiers from the Royal Australian Regiment (2RAR) joined the Philippines Marines Corps for an amphibious assault during a Combined Joint Forced Entry Operation at San Vicente in the Philippines. The exercise was specifically designed against a China-Philippines combat context.[2] Obviously the vocal side-

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and Ngeow Chow Bing (eds.), *Southeast Asia and China: A Test in Mutual Socialization*, World Scientific, (2017).

1 The Straits Times, 'Philippines, Australia to Seal New Defence Pact as China Tensions Rise' (22 August 2025)

2 USNI News, 'Australia Could Deploy Forces to Philippine Bases in New Agreement' (26 August 2025)

picking has been tentatively accompanied by certain military commitment and arms transfers.

### 3.2 Making lawfare as an effective vehicle against China's SCS territorial claims

Australia was one of the chief sponsors of the Philippines lawsuit against China and it even allegedly bore a good proportion of the cost of the endeavor. Officially sponsored, Professor Clive Schofield from Australia's Wollongong University served as an expert panel member and provided "evidence for the verdict". It is interesting to point out that Schofield had long argued that the Ite Aba Island in the Spratlys was an island because the island possessed fresh water that could sustain life on the island, which is a principal criterion to ascertain whether a feature in the ocean can be defined as an island with entitlement of EEZ claims. Yet out of political necessity he negated his long belief and testified that the Itu Aba Island was not an island in the Hague deliberations.[1] Interestingly, in his article "The Legal Regime of Islands after the South China Sea Award—Orphaned or Influential?", he intentionally "fails" to mention Itu Aba when he alluded to a number of islands in the Spratlys.[2] Evidence like Schofield's change of mind may have indicated that the whole affair had been politicized for specific purposes.

Even before the verdict was issued, Australian Foreign Minister Bishop already announced that Canberra supported the Philippines' lawsuit against China.[3] Understandably, Canberra hailed the 2016 Hague ruling as a major victory in maintaining the rule-based international order. Bishop then particularly stressed that the court decision should be binding to all. She further put diplomatic pressure on Beijing by saying the latter would suffer

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1 "Political necessity" was the words Professor Beckman conveyed in an international conference on the SCS dispute in Vietnam in November 2018.

2 Clive Schofield, 'The Legal Regime of Islands after the *South China Sea* Award—Orphaned or Influential? An Essay in Honor of Ted L. McDorman', *Ocean Development and International Law*, Vol. 55, No. 4, (2024).

3 BBC News, 'China Warns Australia over the South China Sea Dispute' (17 February 2016)

"reputational damage", if China was not compliant on the ruling.[1] However, ten years after the ruling the so-called reputational cost seems to be minor, as "reputational" notion pales in force in great power geopolitics.

Even though Canberra confirmed again that it would not change its neutral position on the sovereign ownership of the SCS islands after the verdict was issued, the so-called "neutrality" has been rendered empty in substance through unconditionally backing up the ruling and supporting the Philippines' claim. Canberra's push for a lawsuit against China was strongly criticized in Beijing in that the Hague verdict amounts to de-legitimizing China's SCS claim altogether. When the claimants' offensive and defensive actions in the disputed areas are judged by the ruling, the clash of law enforcement would potentially intensify and further erode the status-quo-based dispute management in the SCS. For the time being, a level of stability in the Spratlys continues to prevail despite the Hague ruling but this is largely because of the ill-balance of power between the implicated parties that makes reinforcement of the ruling impossible. Then there is no surprise that support for the lawsuit, including that from Australia, has largely stayed at the vocal level.

### 3.3 The Riskiest Form of Australian Involvement: Freedom of Navigation Operations

Maritime FONOPs vividly expresses outside intervention in regional disputes and signals potential escalation of confrontation with its zero-sum connotation against the targeted countries. And the ultimate form of FONOPs that China reacts fiercely against are those carried out within 12 nautical miles (NM) of its SCS holdings because of several challenges FONOPs entertains. First, 12 NM intrusion is seen as the most serious violation of China's sovereignty and territorial integrity. Secondly, compared with other types of outside intervention, such as policy announcement, think tank reports and public speeches, which normally generate little real effects to Chinese claims and are largely neglectable, FONOPs for Beijing, especially with a 12 NM intrusion, must be answered

1 SBS News, 'Bishop Warns Beijing over South China Sea Ruling' (13 July 2016).

immediately and effectively. Thirdly, FONOPs are implemented by naval vessels, and this represents the militarized outside intervention. Often a form of military brinkmanship is present with potentially dangerous consequences, e.g., chances of accidental exchange of fire. As an outcome FONOPs, especially inside 12 NM of China-held islands, are specifically identified as direct challenge to China's core national interests. "Core" here has a special meaning that entails a military response. Therefore, Beijing would not mind going all the way to respond.[1]

Canberra seems to have recognized the serious consequences of conducting FONOPs in the SCS areas that are sensitive to China. Therefore, despite repeated urge by Washington, Australian politicians and think tanks, Canberra has long opted out of such a form of SCS involvement.[2] One important reason is that FONOPs is generally defined in Australia by 12 NM entry. Hitherto there is no state in the world that has done so, except for America. Indeed, Canberra is clear that Australia is not America, as it knows well about the way of Beijing's punitive retaliation. If the PLA Navy engages ship collision against the intruding ships, which is hinted to Canberra through various channels, as is to Tokyo, it is doubtful what support the U.S. would provide. Eventually it would be Australia that would sustain the losses in this allied entrapment. China is of course a victim as well.

Generally, Canberra has struck a subtle equilibrium in designing its SCS FONOPs: it has to do it to meet American demand on the one hand and it has to do it in way that does not trigger China's hard retaliation. So far it has adopted the following methods in dealing with its catch-22 situation.

Canberra does not use the term of FONOPs in depicting its SCS involvement to reduce the sensitivity of such action as perceived by China. Instead, it employs the moderated description in defining the actions in

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1 You Ji, 'Sino-US "Cat-and-Mouse" Game Concerning Freedom of Navigation and Overflight', *Journal of Strategic Studies,* Vol. 39, No. 5-6, (2016).

2 Rebecca Strating, 'Australia's Approach to the South China Sea Debate', *Asia-Pacific Bulletin*, East-West Centre, No. 485, (July 2019).

public, with terms such as naval ship transit or presence navigation.

Canberra's naval transits happen mostly in the less-than-sensitive areas in the SCS. Beijing does not claim the entirety of SCS waters but waters adjacent to its claimed islands. If Australian transits are conducted in open waters, these are innocent passages according to international maritime regimes. Sometimes Canberra makes these actions known to the public as if these are challenges to China's excessive SCS claims because the Australian public is fed with false information that China's claims cover the whole of SCS waters.

Again, out of concern over Beijing's reaction, Canberra has kept its naval ship transits in the sensitive areas to a minimum level. As mentioned earlier, Canberra has largely arranged such transits more in terms of symbolic shows than routinized operations. Here symbolism is defined by the frequencies of these transits, normally within a range of an annual average of a few.

Conduct naval transits in a collective manner if possible. Canberra seems to have learned a lesson from its past unilateral actions against the Chinese targets, such as ban on Huawei and chasing the origin of the Covid-19 that precipitated Beijing's punitive moves. A naval transit with an ally may have been contemplated as a balanced act that would cushion the brunt of Chinese backfire, as compared with FONOPs that Australia does single-handedly. A typical example of this was the Australian/British joint deployment of warships HMAS Sydney and HMAS Spey in May 2025. In fact, Canberra did not even announce such a transit until the British side disclosed the event to the public. This, as an Australian maritime expert put it, raised more questions than answers.[1]

The biggest challenge to Australian decision-makers is whether to pursue FONOPs into 12 NM of Chinese holdings in the SCS, as mentioned earlier. The topic of the issue has generated heated policy debate among

1 Euan Graham, 'Australia's freedom-of-navigation activities raise more questions than answers', *The Strategist*, *ASPI's analysis and commentary*, (10 July 2025).

government officials and think tank specialists. Arguably, most Australian diplomats and trade officials advocate against the 12 NM entry by the Royal Navy for fear of Chinese retaliation. Keeping a distance away from China-held islands has also been the government policy line since the first U.S. naval 12NM entry in 2011. Malcolm Cook pointed out that "Australia should continue to resist any U.S. pressure to conduct FONOPs (12 NM entry)", and "FONOPs are not one of the thirteen missions of maritime operations identified by the Royal Australian Navy".[1]

Some Australian analysts, most of them with pro-American sentiment and U.S. education background, argue in opposition. Their argument falls into several categories of reasoning. First, they believe that naval transit without 12 NM entry simply acknowledges the validity of Chinese sovereign claims of the islands, which is practically justified by the 12 NM demarcation of the territorial waters. Secondly, the American navy has been the single outside force in conducting 12 NM entry in the SCS and it needs allied backups. Since no regional allies of the U.S. would do it, Australia is the only state that is potentially capable of doing it, even if as a sole supporter. Thirdly, more strategically, as Sino-US competition dominates global geopolitics in the 21st Century with a significant proportion rivalry situated in the maritime domains, whether to implement FONOPs has become a touchstone to judge where a state, like Australia, strands in the fight. More specifically this would become an issue for Australia to meet American expectation on Australia-U.S. alliance.[2]

Canberra's sensible projection of naval transits in the SCS is based on careful assessment of what such a move would contribute to Australia's own security-making, probably none. On the contrary it would tangibly undermine Sino-Australian relations from which Australia has been a significant economic beneficiary. After all, "the freedom of navigation are largely unrelated to the safety of maritime transport. Instead, they serve as

1 Malcolm Cook, 'Australia's South China Sea Challenges', Lowy Institute (May 2021); Royal Australian Navy, *Australian Maritime Operations* (2017), https://www.navy.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/Australian_Maritime_Operations_2017.pdf.

2 Nick Bisley and Brendan Taylor, 'Conflict in the East China Sea: Would ANZUS Apply?', Australia–China Relations Institute (November 2014).

proxy for an increasingly static imagination of international order—written backward in time—to be secured".[1]

The current Labor government has set restoration of normal relations with China as one of its diplomatic priorities. The rationality is clear: while America is the largest investor in Australian economy, China is the largest trading partner. It is a simple economic calculation that annual trade volumes surpass the accumulated investment in contributing a state's annual growth rate and thus impacts more on the public approval rate for the ruling party. Under the circumstances, as Euan Graham pointed out "it appears clear that Australia's military activities in China's environs are ultimately subordinate to higher policy priorities in the bilateral relationship, such as trade."[2] It is probably safe to predict that Canberra would continue its policy of no FONOPs entry within 12 NM of China's holdings in the SCS in the foreseeable future.

On the other hand, a more dangerous irritant in Australia-China interaction in the SCS is their mid-air dog-of-war type engagement that occurred a couple of times in 2022 and 2025. Australia's P-8As approached the Paracel Island at a time when the PLA conducted military exercises. The latter scrambled J-16s to edge out the P-8As and this close engagement triggered release of chaffs from J-16s in automatic reaction to the laser irradiation from the Australian planes, as analyzed by Chinese side.[3] In fact, such a cat-and-mouse contact could no longer be defined as fight for right to freedom of overflight but combat engagement, i.e., in the category of anti-submarine warfare.

In short, Australia's "FONOPs" in the SCS presents a vivid example of how Canberra manages its SCS dilemma: supporting U.S. initiatives on the one hand and maintaining a level of strategical autonomy on the other, as

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1 Christian Wirth, 'Whose "Freedom of Navigation"?', *The Pacific Review*, vol. 32, no. 4 (2019), pp. 475–504.

2 Euan Graham, 'Australia's freedom-of-navigation activities raise more questions than answers', *The Strategist*, ASPI's analysis and commentary, 10 July 2025.

3 *Global Times*, 20 October 2025.

called by a senior Australian military officer.[1] Yet a more confrontational chapter of the bilateral conflict has now dominated the leadership concerns and public attention, namely, Australia's close-in spy activities near Chinese territories in the South-and-East China Seas and the China's tough reactions to them. This has somewhat militarized the bilateral disagreement on how SCS politics should be handled. Fortunately, such incidents occur rarely and are generally manageable.

## 4. The SCS Dispute, Australia/China Relations and the Third-Party Factor

Clearly, the SCS dispute represents an additional irritation to the traditional bilateral conflict of interest over issues of human rights, cyber security, tech-restrictions and so on. The good side of the story is that the most difficult phase of the bilateral conflict over SCS affairs seems to have passed with the Liberal Coalition out of office. The current Labor government has stabilized the relations with China and again has bent on seeking common interests rather than deepening conflict. This re-set is important to both sides because the very intention for cooperation or confrontation makes a huge difference in way of mutual trust, mutual benefits and long-term development. Sino-Australian interaction used to be an example of how two very different countries maximized commonality and minimized negativity. The current situation in the bilateral ties is far from restoring the good old days but may herald a right direction to re-start a largely positive relationship along the lines of pragmatism and sensible accommodation. This return to common sense certainly serves as a positive precondition for Canberra and Beijing to effectively manage their disputes over SCS politics.

Bilaterally, the two countries in fact entertain few structural causes for confrontation, as they encounter no territorial disputes and no lasting popular hostility against each other, e.g., as compared with Sino-Japanese

1 Group Captain Lindley Ghee, 'Policy Options for Australia to Support Stabilization and Resolution of Maritime Disputes in the South China Sea', *Centre for Defense and Strategic Studies*, (February 2016).

relations. Their recent conflicts in the security areas have seriously estranged their overall relationship and hurt each other's vital interests. Since the two governments have now developed a clearer vision on the SCS affairs, it is possible that they would come to build a sensible framework to avoid unnecessary confrontation, while Australian SCS involvement continues. As mentioned earlier, this paper argues that for the time being Canberra and Beijing both agree to treat their SCS disagreement as part of a much broader relationship and are committed not to allow the part to overshadow the whole.

One made-believe myth that may have contributed to Canberra's change of its SCS policy in the 2010s was the narrative that China would turn the SCS into its internal lake and then intercept Australian shipment sailing through the region. So far not a single incident of freedom of navigation has been reported, including all Australian commercial vessels transiting the SCS. The "internal lake" characterization is highly dramatic and sensational without much evidence to support either academically or empirically. Further, many stated Australian interests in the SCS, e.g., rule-based order and free transits of commercial ships, are either hypothetical/abstract or soft ones in low politics. Ironically, many Australians argue that the country has thick economic interests in the SCS because about two thirds of its sea-borne trade transits the SCS. What they fail to point out is the fact that the bulk of this volume comes from Australia/China trade. It is highly unlikely that China would disrupt such freedom of navigation at its own expense.[1] The opposite scenario is more probable, namely U.S. military blockade of the SLOCs in the SCS. Therefore, the argument of potential Chinese concealment of the SCS sea routes is a politicized statement and factually rather phony. Unless there is a substantial war in the region, like what happened in the Strait of Hormuz during the U.S./Israel-Iran war, the SCS would remain open to all for freedom of navigation.

Another made-believe narrative is that China's rise has reshaped the world

1 Rebecca Strating, 'Australia's Approach to the South China Sea Debate', *Asia-Pacific Bulletin*, East-West Centre, No. 485, (July 2019).

and regional geopolitical order, which renders maritime security vulnerable. However, the SCS status quo has basically sustained and the sovereignty dispute has posed no direct and tangible security threat to Australia now as 30 years ago when China's rise just began.[1] This is the true reason why the successive Australian governments have sought to follow a delicate balance in supporting U.S. SCS endeavors on the one hand and maintaining substantial ties with China with carefully designed SCS involvement on the other. Put another way, both Beijing and Canberra have worked to compartmentalize their SCS disagreement and continue to seek mutual economic benefits with China's rise that persistently increases China's purchase of Australian resources.

One structural challenge that both Canberra and Beijing must embrace is the third-party factor, namely the U.S. impact on the shape of Australia-China relations. In a way Canberra must face this challenge more acutely than Beijing would. In a way Australia has answered the question "should it go all the way to support to U.S. SCS initiatives against China that may backlash against its economy" with an answer of "not really". America and Australia have differentiated interests in international politics in general and in the SCS in particular. Australia's defense focus lies in its mainland and by extension the South Pacific. Extra-regional security concerns, while important, enjoy secondary attention. For instance, Canberra has effectively distanced itself from the Epic Fury in February 2026. More indicatively, in the same month of 2025 it declined to answer U.S. demand that Canberra should make its position known whether to back up U.S. military operations in the Taiwan Strait. Some commentator even characterized the bilateral difference with the word "Quiet Crisis".[2] In fact, Canberra's silence on U.S. call on Taiwan in 2025 did not deviate much from the remarks by Ex-Australian Foreign Minister Downer who told Chinese premier Wen Jiabao on 16 August 2004 that ANZUS may not

1 Wu Xianning and You Ji, 'China's South China Sea Strategy and Sino-US Discord', in Tran Truong Truy, John B. Welfield and Le Thuy Trang (eds.), *Building a Normative Order in the South China Sea, Evolving Disputes, Expanding Options*, Edward Elgar Publishing, (2019).

2 Evan A. Feigenbaum, 'Beneath the Mateship, a Quiet Crisis Is Brewing in the U.S.-Australia Alliance', *Carnegie Commentary*, (Jun 23, 2025).

oblige Australia in a Taiwan situation because U.S. actions in the Strait may not be legally defined as U.S. protection of its overseas interests which would automatically trigger Australian participation by the ANZUS Treaty.[1]

America's influence on Australia has visibly dropped in intensity since the Trump Administration. First, Washington has itself marginalized its SCS centrality in its China policy in order to make room for MAGA at home and for paving the way for Trump/Xi summit in 2026. For instance, there has been no 12 NM entry of U.S. naval vessels since Trump came to power in 2025. Secondly, the Liberal Coalition, the most pro-US. Political Party in Australia, which would ask how high when Americans ask it to jump, has left office. The current ruling party has been more rational and pragmatic in handling SCS affairs. Thirdly, when Trump started the trade war against all, including Australia, the Australian public approval rate for America nose-dived. The U.S./Israel-Iran war has further eroded Australians' trust and confidence in Washington. The Lowy Institute's 2025 public opinion survey reveals that only 36% of Australians maintained favorite feeling toward America.[2] This inevitably broadens Canberra's space for making SCS policies according to its own evaluation of Australian interests. The outcome is thus positive to Australia's re-set of its China policy in general and its SCS policy towards China in particular.

## 5. Conclusion

Australia and China will continue to uphold their positions towards the SCS dispute. However, this paper argues that disagreement can be managed relatively effectively. On part of Canberra, it will continuously back up U.S. SCS initiatives, facilitate allied alignment vis-à-vis China over the SCS lines, and provide moral, military and economic assistance to Southeast Asian claimants. On the other hand, SCS affairs do not present itself as Australia's vital national interest. Canberra will take care the

1 *Australian*, (17 August 2004), p.1.

2 Lowy Institute, 'Australians' Trust in the United States Drops to a New Low' (16 April 2025).

economic side of the bilateral relations with pragmatic policies that would somewhat offset the confrontational part of its SCS involvement against China. For instance, Australia will unlikely mount FONOPs within the 12 NM of the Chinese SCS holding. It would seek to establish a balance in maintaining a mutually beneficial relationship with China on the one hand and continuing its geopolitical pursuits in the SCS with China as the rival.

For the time being the most confrontational prospect of Australian/Chinese disagreement over SCS politics has eased with the change of governments in Canberra and in Washington D.C. The chief players will focus more on other aspects of their relations to gain tangible benefits, e.g., economic ones, than efforts to obtain zero-sum gains in the SCS geopolitical battle. In short Canberra will continue to separate its SCS policy from its overall China policy. Then the SCS thorn in Australian/Chinese relations will not harm the bilateral interaction beyond the limits both have set.

# 6. ASIA-PACIFIC MARITIME SECURITY: RESPONSES FROM MALAYSIA

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## 1. Introduction

The Asia-Pacific region has emerged as one of the most strategically significant theatres in global security. Rapid economic growth, geopolitical competition, territorial disputes, and evolving security threats have transformed the region into a focal point of international strategic interest. The maritime domain is particularly central to Asia-Pacific security due to the region's reliance on sea-borne trade, energy transportation, and marine resources.

Maritime stability in the Asia-Pacific is a central pillar of global economic security because the region hosts some of the world's busiest sea lanes, strategic chokepoints, and major naval powers. The stability of this maritime domain directly affects global trade, energy flows, and regional security dynamics. Major sea routes such as the Strait of Malacca and the South China Sea serve as critical arteries for global commerce, linking the economies of East Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Indian Ocean region. These waterways also represent strategic chokepoints where geopolitical competition and maritime security challenges intersect. Asia-Pacific security is therefore shaped by a complex interaction of traditional military threats, geopolitical rivalries, and non-traditional security challenges.

## 2. Strategic Landscape of Asia-Pacific Security

The security architecture of the Asia-Pacific is influenced by the presence of major global and regional powers, including China, United States, Japan, India, and Australia. Strategic competition between China and the United States has increasingly shaped regional security dynamics. The United

States maintains a significant military presence in the region through alliances with countries such as Japan, South Korea, and Australia, while China has expanded its naval capabilities and maritime presence. This strategic rivalry has intensified debates about regional balance of power, freedom of navigation, and the future security order in the Asia-Pacific.

The contemporary security environment in the Asia-Pacific poses a multifaceted set of challenges for China and Southeast Asian countries. These stem from great-power competition, territorial disputes, alliance dynamics, economic vulnerabilities, and regional geopolitical shifts. Understanding these threats is critical to interpreting strategic behaviour of great powers that created strategic dilemma in regional security policies.

A central dimension of strategic dilemma in Asia Pacific security perception is the strategic rivalry between China and the United States and its allies. The U.S. maintains robust military alliances and forward deployments across the region, notably with Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, and Australia. China views these alliances and increases joint exercises as efforts to contain its regional influence and counter its military modernization. Concurrently, the modernization of the People's Liberation Army (PLA), including advanced naval platforms such as the aircraft carrier, reflects Beijing's drive to challenge U.S. maritime dominance and project power beyond China's immediate periphery.

### 3. Alliances, Mini-lateralism and Regional Security

The Asia Pacific strategic positioning is shaped primarily by shifting alliance structures in the Indo-Pacific. The U.S. has promoted enhanced defense cooperation among regional partners, urging increased military spending and interoperability to counter perceived Chinese threats. Meanwhile, the emergence of the QUAD among AUKUS signals a trend toward minilateral security cooperation aimed at preserving a balance of power that is aligned towards the U.S. interests. These strong alignments represent not only military counterweights but diplomatic efforts that erode China's influence and challenge its security narrative.

## 4. Emerging Security Architecture in the Region

The Asia-Pacific security environment is supported by a network of alliances, partnerships, and multilateral institutions. Regional organizations such as ASEAN plays a central role in promoting dialogue and conflict management. ASEAN-led mechanisms such as the ASEAN Regional Forum and the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting provide platforms for security cooperation. At the same time, new strategic groupings, e.g., the QUAD, have emerged in response to shifting geopolitical dynamics. Such arrangements reflect efforts by regional powers to balance strategic influence within the region and beyond while maintaining stability in the Indo-Pacific.

The Asia-Pacific region will remain central to global security in the coming decades. Strategic competition among major powers, territorial disputes, and non-traditional security threats continue to shape the regional security landscape. Maintaining stability in the region will require sustained diplomatic engagement, effective regional institutions, and cooperative security arrangements. For Southeast Asian countries, including Malaysia, balancing national interests with regional cooperation will be essential to ensuring long-term peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific maritime domain.

## 5. Militarisation in the Asia Pacific

Militarisation in the Asia-Pacific has intensified significantly over the past decade, driven by strategic rivalry, unresolved territorial disputes, and expanding military modernisation programmes among regional powers. The region encompasses some of the world's most critical maritime trade routes and geopolitical flashpoints, specifically in the South China Sea, the East China Sea, and the Taiwan Strait. As economic growth and geopolitical competition intersect, the increasing military build-up across the Asia-Pacific has raised concerns regarding regional stability, maritime governance, and the potential escalation of conflict.

One of the primary drivers of militarisation in the region is the growing strategic competition between the United States and China. China's rapid

economic rise has enabled significant investment in military modernisation, particularly in naval and missile capabilities. The expansion of the People's Liberation Army Navy has transformed China into one of the world's major naval powers, with increasing capabilities to project power across the Indo-Pacific. In response, the United States has reinforced its security presence in the region through alliance strengthening, forward military deployments, and enhanced security cooperation with regional partners. These developments reflect a broader strategic competition for influence and dominance in the Indo-Pacific maritime domain.

Territorial and maritime disputes also contribute significantly to the militarisation trend. The South China Sea remains one of the most contested maritime areas in the world, with overlapping claims by several states, including China, Vietnam, Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei. China has undertaken extensive land reclamation and infrastructure development in disputed areas such as the Spratly Islands and the Paracel Islands. These disputed areas have been equipped with military facilities such as airstrips, radar systems, missile platforms, and naval support infrastructure. Such developments have heightened tensions and triggered increased maritime patrols and military deployments by other claimant states and external powers.

In addition to territorial disputes, defence modernisation programmes across the region have accelerated militarisation. Countries such as Japan, India, Australia, and South Korea have expanded defence budgets and invested in advanced military technologies, including submarines, missile defence systems, cyber capabilities, and surveillance assets. Japan, for instance, has strengthened the capabilities of the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force to enhance maritime security and deterrence in the East China Sea. Similarly, India has expanded its naval presence in the Indian Ocean to secure sea lines of communication and counter emerging security challenges.

Strategic security partnerships have also contributed to the militarisation of the region. The formation of mini-lateral groupings such as the QUAD

reflects increasing coordination among like-minded states seeking to promote a free and open Indo-Pacific. Additionally, the establishment of AUKUS between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States underscores the growing emphasis on advanced defence cooperation, including the development of nuclear-powered submarines and emerging defence technologies. These arrangements signal a shift toward stronger security alignments in response to perceived strategic challenges in the region.

Another dimension of militarisation involves the use of so-called "gray zone" tactics. These actions fall below the threshold of conventional warfare but involve the deployment of coast guard vessels, maritime militia, and paramilitary forces to assert territorial claims and influence maritime spaces. Such tactics are particularly evident in the South China Sea, where confrontations between coast guard vessels and fishing fleets frequently occur. Gray-zone activities complicate conflict management because they blur the distinction between civilian and military operations while gradually altering the status quo.

For Southeast Asian states, the implications of Asia-Pacific militarisation are complex. Members of ASEAN, including Malaysia, must navigate an increasingly competitive strategic environment while maintaining regional stability and neutrality. The militarisation of nearby maritime areas can affect national sovereignty, fisheries resources, and offshore energy activities. At the same time, Southeast Asian countries remain heavily dependent on secure maritime trade routes such as the Straits of Malacca, one of the world's most important shipping chokepoints. Ensuring freedom of navigation and maritime security therefore remains a central concern for regional policymakers.

## 6. Major Maritime Security Challenges in the Asia-Pacific

Maritime security involves multifaceted issues such as the safety of humans interacting at sea, risks to vessels (both commercial and military) navigating the seas, maritime infrastructure protection, safety of maritime shipping and industry and ecosystem wellbeing including living and non-

living resources. In this respect, the management of multifaceted issues involves more than one state, non-state actors, official or non-government organisations and international institutions. Therefore, maritime security governance is managed in various ways including through policy directive, implementation of agreed frameworks, international conventions, treaties, agreements, rules, regulations, and laws or through bilateral or multilateral security arrangements.

### 6.1. Maritime Territorial Disputes

One of the most prominent security challenges in the region involves maritime territorial disputes, particularly in the South China Sea, implicating China, Vietnam, Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei. The disputes involve access to fisheries, hydrocarbon resources, and strategic sea lanes. Tensions have increased due to the construction of artificial islands, military deployments, and frequent encounters between naval and coast guard vessels.

Territorial competition in the *South China Sea* remains one of the most persistent sources of friction. China's claims are referred as expansive under the "Nine-Dash Line,". Its construction of artificial islands, and the installation of military facilities have been widely reported as sources of regional tension. These actions are often contributing to *security dilemmas* with neighbouring Southeast Asian states that have overlapping claims.

### 6.2 Emergence of Gray Zone Tactic

Territorial disputes remain one of the most significant security challenges in the region, particularly in the South China Sea. These disputes involve sovereignty over features in the Spratly Islands and Paracel Islands, as well as competing claims to EEZs in the Scarbrough Shoal. Tensions have increased in recent years due to the militarisation, increased naval patrols, and the use of maritime militia vessels. The involvement of multiple units of law enforcement and naval operations has created "gray zone" activities that fall below the threshold of armed conflict but has emerged as security threat to the claimant states.

China has increased naval and coast guard patrols, supported by the deployment of maritime militia vessels which include civilian fishing boats that operate under state direction. These vessels are frequently used to assert maritime claims, monitor foreign activities, and challenge the presence of other claimant states such as Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei. The increasing reliance on gray-zone strategies has become a defining feature of maritime disputes in the South China Sea, allowing states with capability, particularly in case of China, to advance territorial claims while avoiding open military confrontation. For regional maritime states, these developments present complex challenges for maritime governance, law enforcement, and the maintenance of stability in one of the world's most strategically important sea lanes.

### 6.3 Piracy and Armed Robbery at Sea

Piracy and armed robbery remain persistent threats in several parts of Southeast Asia. Incidents have historically occurred in the Strait of Malacca, although cooperative patrols have significantly reduced their frequency. Regional cooperation initiatives, including the Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia, have played an important role in information sharing and capacity building to combat piracy.

**Table 4. Piracy and Armed Robbery Incidents in Asia**

| Year | Reported Incidents | Trend |
|---|---|---|
| 2020 | 81 incidents | Lower activity partly due to COVID-19 restrictions |
| 2021 | 97 incidents | Increase of about 20% compared with 2020 |
| 2022 | 89 incidents | Slight decline following enhanced maritime patrols |
| 2023 | 101 incidents | Increase as maritime trade normalised post-pandemic |
| 2024 | 107 incidents | Approximately 6% increase from 2023 |
| 2025 | 132 incidents | Significant rise: highest number recorded in recent years |
| 2026 | Early reports indicate continued concern in regional chokepoints | |

*Source: Adopted from ReCAAP Information Sharing Centre*

Incidents of piracy and armed robbery against ships in Asia have fluctuated between 2020 and 2026 but generally show a gradual increase in recent years, particularly in key maritime chokepoints such as the Strait of Malacca and the Singapore Strait. According to reports by the ReCAAP Information Sharing Centre, the total number of incidents declined during the early phase of the COVID-19 pandemic but began rising again after 2022.

The majority of incidents in Asia involve low-level armed robbery rather than piracy, typically occurring on board slow-moving or anchored vessels. These attacks often involve the theft of engine spares, ship stores, or personal belongings of crew members. Most incidents occur at night and are concentrated in congested sea lanes and anchorages.

The continued rise in incidents since 2022 highlights the vulnerability of heavily trafficked maritime routes in Southeast Asia. Strategic waterways such as the Strait of Malacca, which connects the Indian Ocean with the South China Sea, remain particularly susceptible due to high vessel density, narrow navigation channels, and proximity to coastal communities. Although piracy incidents have declined in recent years, the Straits of Malacca remains vulnerable due to its heavy shipping traffic and narrow geographical features. Continued vigilance and cooperative security arrangements are necessary to maintain maritime safety.

### 6.4 Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated Fishing

IUU fishing has emerged as a major challenge to maritime governance, fisheries sustainability, and regional security in Southeast Asia. The region hosts some of the world's most productive fishing grounds, including the South China Sea and the Sulu Sea, which support millions of livelihoods and contribute significantly to global seafood supply. However, weak enforcement, overlapping maritime boundaries, and high seafood demand have enabled the proliferation of illegal fishing activities across regional waters.

Southeast Asia accounts for a significant portion of global fisheries

production, contributing roughly 25% of the world's fish supply, which increases both economic opportunity and vulnerability to illegal exploitation of marine resources. IUU fishing undermines fisheries governance by allowing vessels to operate without licenses, misreport catches, or use destructive fishing methods that damage marine ecosystems. According to Lee & Viswanathan, 2020, IIU activities not only threaten fish stocks but also undermine food security and the economic stability of coastal communities.

Economically, IUU fishing causes substantial losses across Southeast Asian states. Estimates indicate that ASEAN region loses more than USD 6 billion annually due to illegal fishing activities. Among the major fishing nations, Indonesia experiences the highest losses, estimated at approximately USD 3 billion per year, reflecting the scale of its fisheries sector and extensive maritime jurisdiction. Vietnam is estimated to lose around USD 1.6 billion annually, while the Philippines records losses of approximately USD 620 million. Malaysia's estimated losses are about USD 334 million annually, although some national estimates suggest the figure may exceed USD 1 billion due to foreign vessel incursions and unreported catches.

The prevalence of IUU fishing in Southeast Asia is driven by several structural factors. First, high global demand for seafood incentivizes illegal fishing operations, particularly in waters where enforcement capacity remains limited. Second, transboundary fish stocks and disputed maritime areas, especially in the South China Sea, create regulatory gaps that illegal operators exploit. Third, the presence of large distant-water fishing fleets operating across the region intensifies competition for fish stocks and increases the likelihood of illegal incursions into national EEZs. These dynamics complicate fisheries governance and exacerbate maritime tensions between neighbouring coastal states.

The environmental consequences of IUU fishing are equally severe. Overfishing and destructive practices such as bottom trawling and dynamite fishing contribute to the degradation of marine habitats and the

depletion of fish stocks. Studies indicate that over 60% of fisheries in Southeast Asia are at risk of depletion or collapse, largely due to unsustainable fishing practices and illegal exploitation of marine resources. This depletion threatens not only marine biodiversity but also the livelihoods of small-scale fishers who depend on coastal fisheries for income and food security.

In response to these challenges, Southeast Asian states have increasingly strengthened regulatory frameworks and maritime enforcement capabilities. Governments have expanded monitoring, control and surveillance (MCS) systems, including vessel monitoring technologies, stricter licensing regimes, and port state measures to prevent illegally caught fish from entering supply chains. Regional cooperation initiatives under the ASEAN and international bodies such as the Food and Agriculture Organization also play an important role in promoting information sharing and coordinated enforcement efforts.

### 6.5 Maritime Crime and Smuggling

Maritime crime refers to illegal activities conducted in maritime spaces, including piracy, armed robbery against ships, smuggling of drugs, arms and migrants, illegal fishing, and trafficking in persons. The maritime domain is particularly vulnerable due to vast sea spaces, limited enforcement capabilities, and complex jurisdictional arrangements. Globally, more than 80% of international trade is transported by sea, making maritime routes attractive targets for criminal networks and transnational organized crime groups. Maritime routes in Southeast Asia are also used for transnational crimes such as smuggling, drug trafficking, and human trafficking. Weak maritime governance and the vastness of maritime spaces create opportunities for criminal networks to operate. These activities are particularly prevalent in the tri-border maritime areas between Malaysia, Indonesia, and Philippines.

### 6.6 Drug Trafficking

Drug trafficking represents one of the most lucrative forms of maritime

crime in Southeast Asia. Transnational criminal networks exploit maritime routes to transport narcotics between production areas and consumer markets across Asia and the Pacific. The maritime domain provides traffickers with strategic advantages due to vast sea spaces, complex jurisdictional boundaries, and limited maritime surveillance capacity in many coastal states. Common maritime drug trafficking routes include the Golden Triangle ordering Thailand, Andaman Sea and Malaysia; Myanmar and Bay of Bengal routes to Indonesia and Australia as well the Mekong Basin connecting the South China Sea and the Philippines.

A significant proportion of illicit narcotics circulating in the region originated from the Golden Triangle, a border area where Myanmar, Thailand, and Laos converge. This region remains one of the world's largest producers of synthetic drugs, particularly methamphetamine. According to regional enforcement reports, approximately 236 tons of methamphetamine were seized in Southeast Asia in 2024, representing a 24% increase compared with 2023, indicating the continuing expansion of regional narcotics production and trafficking networks.

Maritime routes are increasingly utilized to transport narcotics from production areas to transit and destination markets. Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines often used as key transit points due to the extensive coastlines and proximity to major shipping routes. Traffickers frequently utilize small fishing vessels, coastal cargo ships, and modified commercial vessels to conceal illicit cargo.

### 6.7 Human Trafficking and Migrant Smuggling

Human trafficking and migrant smuggling are also significant forms of transnational maritime crime in Southeast Asia. Criminal networks frequently transport migrants across maritime borders in unsafe and overcrowded vessels, exposing them to severe risks including drowning, exploitation, and human rights abuses. Furthermore, irregular maritime migration is particularly prevalent across the Andaman Sea and the Sulu Sea, where trafficking networks facilitate the movement of migrants toward destination countries in Southeast Asia.

Many of these movements are linked to broader trafficking networks that exploit migrants for forced labour in fishing, agriculture, or manufacturing sectors. The maritime environment provides favourable conditions for trafficking operations due to several structural factors. These include the porous maritime borders, particularly across archipelagic states, limited patrol coverage across large maritime zones, extensive network among the criminal syndicates. Consequently, maritime human trafficking has become closely intertwined with other forms of organized crime, including document fraud, illegal fishing operations, and labour exploitation within maritime industries.

## 7. Intra-ASEAN Relevance and Cooperation

The Intra-ASEAN cooperation and engagement among the ten ASEAN Member States is a key element in managing the South China Sea challenges. It also serves as a continuous effort in strengthening regional unity, promoting economic integration, and addressing common political and security challenges. Within the SCS context, intra-ASEAN cooperation focuses on preserving ASEAN centrality, maintaining regional peace and stability, and ensuring that maritime disputes do not undermine broader regional cooperation.

While several ASEAN Member States are claimant states in the SCS, ASEAN has consistently sought to manage differences through dialogue, confidence-building measures, and adherence to international law, particularly UNCLOS. At the same time, ASEAN continues to negotiate with the People's Republic of China on an effective and substantive COC to reduce tensions and promote rules-based maritime governance. However, these efforts are faced with complex dynamics such as the growing militarization and emergence of grey zone tactic as well unfriendly statements among states in relation to SCS.

These developments in the South China Sea have highlighted both continuing challenges and opportunities for greater intra-ASEAN collaboration. ASEAN Member States have expanded cooperation through information sharing, maritime domain awareness, joint capacity-building

programs, search and rescue initiatives, environmental protection, and efforts to enhance maritime connectivity and supply chain resilience. Malaysia has maintained a balanced and pragmatic approach by safeguarding its sovereign rights and interests in accordance with international law while advocating for peaceful dispute resolution through diplomacy and ASEAN-led mechanisms. These efforts are needed to reinforcing ASEAN unity as well intra-ASEAN active engagement to a stable, secure, and prosperous SCS region.

## 8. Malaysia's Maritime Security Environment

As a maritime nation, Malaysia possesses extensive maritime zones and coastlines that span several strategically important seas. Malaysia's maritime domain includes the Strait of Malacca, the South China Sea, the Sulu Sea, and the Celebes Sea. These waters are vital to Malaysia's economic prosperity, as the country relies heavily on maritime trade, offshore energy resources, fisheries, and maritime transportation. Malaysia's maritime security environment is therefore shaped by both traditional and non-traditional threats

### 8.1 Foreign Encroachment in the EEZ

One of the most pressing maritime security concerns for Malaysia is the presence of foreign vessels operating within its EEZ, particularly in the South China Sea. These activities include fishing, survey operations, and the presence of foreign coast guard vessels, which challenge Malaysia's sovereign rights over its maritime resources. Foreign vessel encroachments in the South China Sea have intensified in recent years, posing complex challenges to Malaysia's sovereignty, maritime security, and economic interests.

Malaysia's multi-layered response on addressing foreign encroachment is through its strategy, characterised by diplomatic engagement, operational enforcement, legal assertion, and regional cooperation. Malaysia adopts a pragmatic and non-confrontational approach, balancing the need to protect its EEZ with the imperative of maintaining stable relations with major

powers, particularly China. While effective in preventing escalation, this strategy seems to face limitations in addressing persistent "gray-zone" activities and the government is taking strict efforts to deter foreign presence in Malaysian waters. Gray zone operations occupy the space between peace and war. They are characterised by incremental actions, legal and factual ambiguity, and the avoidance of overt military force. Unlike conventional conflict, gray-zone activities are designed to achieve strategic gains without triggering collective defence mechanisms or armed retaliation.

### 8.2 Non-traditional Threats

Non-traditional maritime security threats refer to non-military challenges that affect the safety, governance, and sustainability of maritime domains. These include criminal, environmental, and socio-economic threats that often transcend national boundaries. Within Southeast Asia, such threats are exacerbated by weak enforcement capacity, overlapping jurisdictional claims, and high maritime traffic density.

These threats, distinct from conventional military challenges, include piracy, maritime terrorism, illegal fishing, environmental degradation, and transnational organized crime. Marine pollution, including oil spills, plastic waste, and ship-based pollution, poses long-term ecological and economic threats. High traffic density in the Strait of Malacca increases the risk of maritime accidents, while coastal development exacerbates habitat destruction. Climate-induced threats such as rising sea levels, coastal erosion, and extreme weather events affect Malaysia's maritime infrastructure and coastal communities. These challenges also complicate maritime governance and disaster response mechanisms.

## 9. Malaysia's Maritime Security Responses

Malaysia has adopted a multi-layered and adaptive approach to address non-traditional maritime security threats, combining institutional strengthening, regional cooperation, technological investment, legal reforms, and governance innovation.

## 9.1 Strengthening Maritime Enforcement

A cornerstone of Malaysia's response is the centralization and enhancement of maritime law enforcement under the MMEA. Established to function as a unified coast guard, the MMEA consolidates enforcement functions previously dispersed across multiple agencies. Its responsibilities include combating piracy, curbing IUU fishing, and interdicting smuggling operations. The agency has expanded its operational capacity through increased patrol assets, forward operating bases, and joint operations with the Royal Malaysian Navy and Marine Police. Nevertheless, challenges remain in terms of resource constraints, overlapping jurisdiction, and the need for enhanced inter-agency coordination.

## 9.2 Regional Cooperation

Malaysia actively participates in regional maritime security frameworks, most notably the MSP, alongside Indonesia, Singapore, and Thailand. The MSP integrates coordinated sea patrols, air surveillance (Eyes-in-the-Sky), and intelligence-sharing mechanisms to secure the Strait of Malacca. Additionally, Malaysia is cooperating with the Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia, through sharing of information which facilitates information exchange and capacity building. These cooperative mechanisms have significantly reduced piracy incidents, although emerging threats such as cyber-enabled maritime crime require further collaborative adaptation.

## 9.3 Capacity Building and MDA

Malaysia has prioritized investments in Maritime Domain Awareness to improve surveillance and response capabilities across its vast maritime zones. This includes the deployment of coastal radar systems, AIS, satellite monitoring, and integrated command-and-control centres. Initiatives such as the National Maritime Surveillance System (SWASLA) enhance real-time tracking of vessels, particularly in high-risk areas like the South China Sea. However, gaps persist in integrating data across agencies and ensuring comprehensive coverage in remote maritime regions, particularly in East

Malaysia.

### 9.4 Legal and Regulatory Frameworks

Malaysia has strengthened its legal architecture to address maritime crimes and resource exploitation. Amendments to fisheries legislation and stricter penalties for illegal fishing aim to deter foreign encroachment into Malaysia's EEZ. The country also aligns its policies with international frameworks such as UNCLOS, which provides the legal basis for maritime jurisdiction and resource governance. Despite these advancements, enforcement remains uneven due to limited prosecutorial capacity and challenges in evidence collection at sea.

## 10. Conclusion

Maritime security in the Asia-Pacific region remains a complex and evolving issue shaped by geopolitical competition, economic interests, and non-traditional security threats. The region's critical sea lanes and maritime resources make it central to global trade and regional stability. For Malaysia, maritime security is directly linked to national sovereignty, economic prosperity, and regional cooperation. As a country located at the crossroads of major shipping routes, Malaysia must continue strengthening maritime governance, enhancing maritime law enforcement capabilities, and promoting cooperative security frameworks. Addressing maritime security challenges in the Asia-Pacific will require sustained collaboration among regional states, international organisations, and maritime stakeholders to ensure that maritime spaces remain secure, stable, and open for global commerce.

# 7. INDONESIA'S EVOLVING MARITIME STRATEGY AND THE QUEST FOR REGIONAL STABILITY

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## 1. Introduction

The decade leading up to 2024 was defined by the GMF,[1] a doctrine that sought to reawaken Indonesia's maritime identity through port development and domestic connectivity. However, as the regional security environment has darkened, we are observing a transition led by a more assertive and security-centric framework under the Prabowo Subianto administration.

In 2026, we observe a transition that reflects a growing recognition that economic prosperity via the "Blue Economy" is impossible without the credible ability to project power and enforce sovereignty within the EEZ. The current policy focuses on the Nusantara Trident Shield, a defense philosophy that prioritizes maritime domain awareness, subsurface capabilities, and "total defense" integrated into the maritime sphere.

Indonesia's maritime strategy today has been shaped by a convergence of pressures that blur the line between traditional defense policy and broader questions of sovereignty, regional order, and environmental resilience. Jakarta finds itself navigating a far more complex maritime environment than even a decade ago—one in which legal status, strategic competition, and non-traditional security risks intersect in uncomfortable ways.

One of the clearest illustrations of this complexity is what might be described as a gray zone paradox. Officially, Indonesia is not a claimant state in the South China Sea disputes. It has long positioned itself as an

1 Evan A. Laksmana, 'Indonesia as "Global Maritime Fulcrum": A Post-Mortem Analysis', *AMTI,* (2019), https://amti.csis.org/indonesia-as-global-maritime-fulcrum-a-post-mortem-analysis/.

honest broker, careful not to be drawn into competing sovereignty claims over disputed features. Yet this formal "non-claimant" status has not insulated it from friction. Any cooperative economic scheme now must contend with heightened domestic sensitivities over sovereignty and the optics of appearing to compromise in the face of coercive maritime tactics.

At the same time, Indonesia's maritime strategy is unfolding within a shifting regional architecture. The rise of minilateral security groupings such as AUKUS and the Quad has introduced new layers of strategic coordination among major powers, often outside ASEAN-led frameworks. For Indonesia, which has long championed ASEAN centrality as both principle and platform, this development presents a dilemma. If key security initiatives are increasingly driven by smaller coalitions, ASEAN risks marginalization. Jakarta's response was to push for a more substantive interpretation of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP). Rather than allowing it to remain a declaratory document emphasizing dialogue and inclusivity, Indonesia has sought to translate its principles into practical maritime cooperation—on issues such as maritime domain awareness, humanitarian assistance, connectivity, and sustainable resource management. In this sense, defending ASEAN centrality now requires operational credibility, not just diplomatic rhetoric.

Beyond the arena of great power rivalry, Indonesia must also grapple with quieter but equally consequential vulnerabilities. Climate change poses a direct challenge to an archipelagic state whose maritime baselines and outermost islands anchor its sovereign rights. Rising sea levels and coastal erosion could, over time, affect how baselines are measured and how maritime zones are projected, raising complex legal and geopolitical questions. Simultaneously, organized transnational crime in areas such as the Sulu-Celebes Sea has grown more adaptive and technologically sophisticated. Illegal fishing networks, smuggling, human trafficking, and piracy exploit governance gaps and jurisdictional seams between neighboring states. These threats rarely command headlines in the way naval standoffs do, yet they steadily erode maritime security and state authority.

Taken together, these overlapping challenges have compelled Indonesia to rethink what maritime strategy means in practice. It is no longer simply about defending territory or deterring conventional threats. It is about managing persistent gray zone coercion, preserving diplomatic relevance in a fragmenting regional order, and safeguarding maritime sovereignty against environmental and transnational pressures. Indonesia's maritime posture, therefore, reflects an effort to reconcile its traditional nonaligned instincts with the growing demands of a more contested and uncertain Indo-Pacific.

This report examines Indonesia's maritime strategy as a laboratory for middle-power behavior in a polarized region. It argues that Indonesia is currently attempting a "Grand Synthesis"—balancing its constitutional commitment to a Free and Active (Bebas-Aktif) foreign policy with a pragmatic naval modernization program.

## 2. Strategic Framework and Policy Evolution: The 2025-2045 Long-Term Vision: From "Fulcrum" to "Sovereignty"

As of 2026, Indonesia's maritime trajectory is anchored in the National Long-Term Development Plan (RPJPN) 2025-2045, the country's overarching blueprint for its centenary vision of "Golden Indonesia" (Indonesia Emas).[1] More than a routine planning document, the RPJPN functions as a grand strategic framework, linking economic transformation, governance reform, and sovereignty consolidation into a single narrative of national advancement. It reflects Jakarta's ambition not merely to grow, but to structurally reposition Indonesia from a middle-income economy into a technologically advanced and globally competitive maritime nation by 2045.

A central benchmark within this vision is the expansion of the maritime sector's contribution to national GDP. Bappenas has set an ambitious target: increasing maritime GDP to 17.5 percent by 2045, up from roughly 7.6

1 Ministry of National Development Planning (Bappenas), 'Indonesia Emas 2045', https://indonesia2045.go.id/ (in Bahasa Indonesia).

percent in 2023.[1] This is not simply a matter of scaling up existing activities. It requires a fundamental restructuring of Indonesia's ocean economy. For decades, maritime output has relied heavily on commodity extraction—fisheries, raw marine resources, and basic shipping services. The RPJPN signals a pivot toward a "Blue Economy" model centered on higher value-added industries, including marine biotechnology, sustainable aquaculture, offshore renewable energy, advanced shipbuilding, and maritime digitalization.

The plan also reframes geopolitics as an economic opportunity. Indonesia's Archipelagic Sea Lanes (ALKI), long understood primarily as strategic transit routes under international law, are now conceptualized as economic corridors. Rather than merely allowing global trade to pass through its waters, Jakarta aims to "channel" and capture value from these flows. In practical terms, this involves strengthening integrated port and logistics hubs along each of the three ALKI routes: Batam in ALKI I, Makassar in ALKI II, and Bitung in ALKI III. By aligning port development, industrial zones, and connectivity infrastructure with these sea lanes, Indonesia seeks to embed itself more deeply into regional and global supply chains. The maritime domain thus becomes both a geostrategic asset and a lever for industrial policy.

In this respect, the RPJPN marks an evolution from the 2014-2024 GMF agenda. The GMF era prioritized infrastructure expansion and domestic connectivity, most notably through the "Sea Toll" program designed to reduce price disparities across the archipelago. Its focus was inward-looking: knitting together a vast island state through ports, ships, and logistics networks. The RPJPN 2045 retains the importance of connectivity but elevates "Maritime Sovereignty" to a more foundational status. Sovereignty is framed not only in territorial or defense terms, but as a prerequisite for economic transformation and technological advancement. In other words, Indonesia cannot become a "Golden" nation without securing control, governance coherence, and strategic direction over its

1 Bappenas, *Indonesia Blue Economy Roadmap: 2nd Edition* (2024).

maritime space.

This shift is underpinned by three interrelated transformations. First, there is a paradigmatic reorientation: the sea is no longer to be treated as a barrier separating islands, but as Indonesia's primary strategic depth—an expansive domain that provides opportunity, resilience, and leverage. Second, the economic ambition is quantified through a substantial increase in maritime GDP contribution, according to Bappenas[1]. These figures signal a structural recalibration of national development priorities toward ocean-based growth. Third, and perhaps most politically sensitive, is governance consolidation. For years, Indonesia's maritime management has been hampered by overlapping institutional mandates—the so-called "Too Many Captains" problem—where multiple agencies share or compete over authority at sea. The RPJPN commits to rationalizing these authorities, streamlining coordination, and strengthening institutional coherence. Without such reform, neither sovereignty nor economic transformation can be effectively realized.

Taken together, the RPJPN 2025-2045 binds economic modernization, legal authority, and strategic geography into a single developmental narrative. If successfully implemented, it would not only transform Indonesia's relationship with its seas but also redefine its role in the Indo-Pacific by its hundredth anniversary.

There have been also efforts at the legislative level and the strategic level. First, at the legislative front. A decisive turning point in Indonesia's maritime governance came with the enactment of Law No. 66 of 2024, the Third Amendment to the 2008 Shipping Law. Passed in late 2024 and fully operational by October 2025, this reform represents the most consequential restructuring of maritime business rules in nearly two decades. More than a technical update, it reflects what might be called a doctrine of "archipelagic realism"—a recognition that Indonesia's geography as the world's largest archipelagic state must be matched by regulatory frameworks that defend national interests while selectively leveraging

1 Ibid.

foreign capital and expertise.

One of the most striking provisions is the introduction of a 50,000 Gross Tonnage (GT) threshold for shipping joint ventures (JVCs) involving foreign investment. Under the amended law, such ventures must own at least one Indonesian-flagged vessel of no less than 50,000 GT—a dramatic increase from the previous 5,000 GT requirement. This move is explicitly strategic. By raising the bar, Jakarta effectively prevents small-scale foreign operators from entering and dominating the lucrative inter-island trade, where Indonesian firms have gradually built capacity under the cabotage regime. At the same time, the policy does not shut the door to foreign participation altogether. Instead, it channels such participation upward—into the large-vessel segment, where capital intensity, advanced technology, and global networks are more critical. In doing so, Indonesia seeks to ensure that foreign investors contribute substantial assets and know-how to the national fleet, rather than merely competing with local companies in lower-margin domestic routes.

This recalibration reinforces the long-standing cabotage principle, which reserves domestic shipping for Indonesian-flagged vessels, while introducing a more sophisticated, size-based differentiation. The intent is clear: protect and consolidate local players in the medium- and small-scale inter-island market, while compelling major global shipping firms to integrate meaningfully into Indonesia's registry if they wish to operate through joint ventures. The law thus blends economic nationalism with pragmatic openness, seeking to upgrade the structure of the maritime industry without retreating into protectionism.

Equally significant is the empowerment of the Admiralty Court (Mahkamah Pelayaran). Historically limited to issuing administrative warnings, the court's mandate has been substantially expanded. It now has the authority to mediate Seafarer Employment Agreements, strengthening protections for Indonesian maritime labor, and to investigate foreign-flagged vessels involved in accidents or environmental damage within Indonesia's territorial waters. This extension of jurisdiction is not merely

procedural—it represents a clear assertion of legal sovereignty. By formalizing investigative and adjudicative authority over incidents involving foreign vessels, Indonesia signals that activities within its maritime domain are subject to its legal oversight, regardless of flag state sensitivities.

The law's impact is further amplified by the parallel digitalization of maritime governance through the full operationalization of the National Logistics Ecosystem (NLE) in 2025-2026. By integrating 14 ministries and agencies into a single digital platform, the NLE reduces bureaucratic fragmentation and minimizes "dark time" in ports—the idle periods caused by overlapping paperwork, inspections, and regulatory approvals. Beyond efficiency gains, this integration enhances real-time monitoring of vessel movements and cargo flows. Digital transparency thus becomes both an economic and a security instrument, strengthening the state's capacity to oversee maritime activity across its vast archipelago.

Taken together, Law No. 66 of 2024 reshapes Indonesia's maritime landscape along three axes: economic structuring, legal authority, and administrative modernization. It tightens the rules of foreign participation, fortifies domestic industry, expands judicial reach, and embeds digital oversight into port and shipping governance. In the broader context of Indonesia's centenary ambitions, the law serves as a practical manifestation of archipelagic realism—aligning commercial regulation, sovereignty, and strategic geography in a more assertive and coordinated maritime policy framework.

Beyond legislative reform, Indonesia's strategic vision has also crystallized in a new defense doctrine: the Perisai Trisula Nusantara, or Archipelagic Trident Shield. Launched in late 2025 as a 25-year master plan, it replaces the aging Minimum Essential Force (MEF) framework that had guided procurement and force development for over a decade. If the MEF was primarily about filling capability gaps and achieving baseline readiness, the Trident Shield represents something more ambitious—it is the military operationalization of Indonesia's archipelagic geography. In essence, it

seeks to translate the country's sprawling maritime terrain into a coherent defensive advantage.

The "Trident" metaphor captures its three interlocking pillars. The first is subsurface dominance. Recognizing that deterrence in a crowded maritime environment increasingly depends on stealth and persistence, Indonesia is prioritizing the expansion of its submarine fleet alongside the deployment of Unmanned Underwater Vehicles (UUVs) and seabed sensor networks. Particular attention is given to the deep-water trenches along ALKI II and ALKI III, where strategic sea lanes intersect with complex underwater topography. By strengthening underwater surveillance and strike capabilities, Jakarta aims to establish what might be termed "silent sovereignty"—a deterrent presence that is less visible but highly credible.

The second pillar centers on Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD). Rather than relying solely on blue-water naval projection, Indonesia is leveraging its geography—especially its large outer islands—as defensive anchors. Coastal missile batteries, long-range radar systems, and integrated air defense assets are being deployed in strategically critical regions such as Natuna, Biak, and Merauke. These territories function as "natural aircraft carriers," projecting surveillance and strike coverage over key maritime approaches. The objective is not power projection far from home waters, but layered denial: complicating the calculations of any external actor contemplating coercive action within Indonesia's maritime domain.

The third pillar is digital MDA. The Trident Shield envisions the creation of a "Single Integrated Defense Picture" that fuses satellite imagery, AI-driven vessel tracking, shore-based radar, and other sensor inputs into a unified operational platform. In a region characterized by gray-zone tactics, ambiguous vessel identities, and dense commercial traffic, information superiority becomes as important as kinetic capability. By integrating digital surveillance with command-and-control systems, Indonesia aims to shorten response times, reduce inter-agency fragmentation, and enhance decision-making across the defense establishment.

Underlying these pillars is a broader doctrinal shift toward integrated

defense and jointness. The Trident Shield moves away from service-specific procurement toward interoperability among the Navy, Air Force, and Army. Rather than developing parallel capabilities in isolation, the emphasis is on coordinated planning, shared platforms, and synchronized operations. This reflects a recognition that archipelagic defense cannot be compartmentalized; sea, air, land, and cyber domains must function as a single ecosystem.

A complementary concept is the "Large Island Defense" strategy. Major landmasses such as Kalimantan, Papua, and Sumatra are to be equipped with more self-sufficient logistics hubs and A2/AD capabilities, enabling them to operate as semi-autonomous defense nodes. This decentralization enhances resilience, ensuring that defense posture is not overly dependent on Java-centric infrastructure and reducing vulnerability to disruption.

Finally, the Trident Shield embeds a commitment to strategic autonomy. It mandates stronger prioritization of the domestic defense industry—particularly state-owned enterprises such as PT PAL and PT Pindad—in procurement and technology development. The aim is to reduce exposure to foreign arms embargoes and supply chain disruptions, while cultivating indigenous technological capacity. In this sense, the doctrine links military planning with industrial policy, echoing the broader national objective of sovereignty through self-reliance.

Taken together, the Perisai Trisula Nusantara represents a maturation of Indonesia's defense thinking. It aligns geography, technology, and industry within a long-term framework designed to deter coercion, manage gray-zone pressures, and safeguard the archipelago's strategic depth. Where the MEF focused on adequacy, the Trident Shield aspires to coherence—transforming Indonesia's maritime expanse from a logistical challenge into a structured defensive shield.

All of these efforts would of course have minimal impact if the crucial problem of Indonesia's maritime management is not solved. This is the overlapping institutional mandates, where multiple agencies share or compete over authority at sea.

By 2026, Indonesia's long-running debate over the creation of a "single agency" for maritime security has shifted from abstract institutional reform to concrete implementation. For years, the country's vast waters were managed by overlapping authorities—naval forces, transportation officials, fisheries patrols, customs units—producing what critics called the "Many Captains" syndrome. The current phase is defined by an effort to rationalize this fragmentation and establish clearer lines of command, responsibility, and legal authority at sea.

A key milestone in this process was Presidential Regulation No. 34 of 2022, which initiated the consolidation of "Sea and Coast Guard" functions previously housed within the Ministry of Transportation into the Maritime Security Agency (Bakamla). By 2026, this restructuring has effectively repositioned Bakamla as Indonesia's de facto coast guard, moving it beyond its earlier coordinating role toward a more operational identity as the Indonesia Coast Guard (IDNCG). The legal and bureaucratic adjustments signal an important conceptual shift: maritime security is no longer treated as a patchwork of sectoral mandates, but as a unified enforcement domain requiring a dedicated civilian-led institution.

Yet consolidation does not mean the elimination of institutional complexity. Friction persists, particularly in delineating responsibilities between Bakamla and the Navy (TNI AL). The Navy retains its combatant role, especially in the EEZ and in scenarios involving high-intensity threats or sovereignty defense. Bakamla, by contrast, is tasked primarily with law enforcement, maritime safety, and what has increasingly been described as "white-hull diplomacy." This division of labor is especially visible in the North Natuna Sea, where the presence of Chinese Coast Guard and maritime militia vessels has tested Indonesia's enforcement posture. In such situations, deploying white-hulled coast guard vessels rather than gray-hulled naval ships allows Jakarta to assert jurisdiction and defend its EEZ rights while avoiding immediate military escalation.

The recent arrival of larger patrol vessels—donated or financed by Japan—has strengthened this approach. These platforms enhance Bakamla's

endurance, range, and operational credibility, enabling sustained patrols in contested or sensitive waters. They also carry diplomatic symbolism. By investing in robust coast guard capabilities, Indonesia signals that it intends to defend its maritime rights through law enforcement mechanisms grounded in international law, rather than defaulting to overt militarization. In the context of gray-zone competition, the distinction between white hulls and gray hulls is not merely aesthetic; it is a calibrated tool of escalation management.

An additional innovation is the introduction of a Maritime Security Index by Bakamla. This index seeks to quantify maritime risk in ways that are legible to international investors, insurers, and shipping companies. By linking security metrics to insurance premiums and foreign direct investment considerations, Indonesia is effectively reframing maritime security as an economic variable. Stability at sea becomes measurable, and improvements in enforcement capacity can translate into tangible financial benefits. In doing so, Jakarta reinforces the argument that maritime governance is not solely a defense concern but a pillar of national competitiveness.

Taken together, these developments suggest that Indonesia's maritime security architecture is entering a more mature phase. Institutional consolidation, calibrated white-hull diplomacy, enhanced patrol capabilities, and the financialization of security metrics all point toward a model that blends sovereignty assertion with economic pragmatism. The effort to end the "Many Captains" era is not simply about bureaucratic tidiness; it is about aligning law enforcement, deterrence, and investment confidence within a coherent maritime statecraft.

## 3. Naval Modernization: Ambition Constrained by Fiscal and Institutional Realities

Indonesia's naval modernization trajectory as of 2026 is best characterized as aspirational yet structurally constrained. While doctrinal articulation has become more coherent—particularly under the evolving "Nusantara Trident Shield" concept—the material realization of these ambitions has

proceeded unevenly. The Indonesian Navy (TNI AL) continues to frame its force development within the MEF construct, but repeated timeline adjustments and fiscal limitations have tempered expectations. Defense spending remains comparatively modest relative to Indonesia's geographic scale and maritime exposure, generally hovering below one percent of GDP. As a result, procurement plans often exceed available fiscal space, producing a persistent gap between declaratory strategy and operational capability.

Submarine acquisition illustrates this tension most clearly. Following the Nagapasa-class program, Jakarta signalled interest in expanding its undersea fleet through partnerships that included potential cooperation with France for Scorpène-class submarines. However, negotiations have been shaped by complex financing arrangements, including export credit mechanisms and long-term repayment structures. Budget reallocations and delays in disbursement associated with earlier defense contracts have contributed to lender caution and contractual uncertainty. In this context, submarine expansion remains a medium-term aspiration rather than an imminent transformation of Indonesia's subsurface posture.

Surface combatant procurement presents similar challenges. The planned acquisition and domestic construction of the Arrowhead 140 frigates, in cooperation with the United Kingdom's Babcock, represents an ambitious effort to enhance blue-water endurance and air-defense capability while strengthening the national shipbuilding industry through PT PAL. Yet industrial absorption capacity, supply-chain integration, and the sequencing of technology transfer have proven demanding. Payment scheduling and phased financing arrangements have introduced additional uncertainty into implementation timelines. These constraints do not negate the program's strategic significance, but they do underscore the gap between contract signing and fleet induction.

Missile modernization efforts likewise demonstrate the tension between rhetoric and realization. Announcements regarding long-range anti-ship systems, including cooperation on platforms such as the BrahMos, have

reinforced a narrative of distributed deterrence and archipelagic denial. However, the integration of such systems requires complementary investments in targeting networks, secure communications, logistical infrastructure, and trained personnel. In several instances, memoranda of understanding have preceded the establishment of fully secured funding lines, leaving implementation dependent on future budget cycles. The risk, therefore, lies not in overreach but in incremental underexecution, where strategic signaling outpaces operational readiness.

Beyond individual programs, deeper structural constraints shape the modernization process. Inter-service competition for limited defense resources complicates prioritization, particularly when naval expansion coincides with major Air Force and Army procurement cycles. Indonesia's emphasis on technology transfer and local content requirements reflects a long-term industrial strategy, yet domestic absorption capacity does not always align with the pace of planned acquisitions. Workforce specialization, systems integration expertise, and maintenance infrastructure require sustained investment. Without parallel attention to lifecycle support and fleet sustainment, nominal platform growth may not translate into consistent maritime presence.

Taken together, these dynamics suggest that Indonesia's naval modernization in 2026 should not be interpreted as a rapid transition toward blue-water parity with major powers. Rather, it represents a cautious, incremental process shaped by fiscal prudence, industrial learning curves, and complex procurement diplomacy. The strategic direction—anchored in archipelagic depth, distributed deterrence, and chokepoint control—remains conceptually coherent. However, its realization depends less on headline acquisitions and more on sustained budgetary discipline, institutional reform, and the gradual strengthening of domestic defense-industrial capacity.

In this sense, the 2020s may be understood as a decade of doctrinal consolidation rather than decisive capability transformation. Whether Indonesia can convert strategic clarity into durable maritime power will

depend on its ability to reconcile ambition with affordability, rhetoric with implementation, and procurement with long-term sustainment.

## 4. Navigating the "Gray Zone": The North Natuna Sea and Beyond

Since 2017, Indonesia has referred to the waters north of the Natuna Islands as the North Natuna Sea,[1] a cartographic clarification intended to reinforce its maritime entitlements under UNCLOS 1982. The renaming was designed to reduce ambiguity regarding Indonesia's EEZ rather than to signal a shift toward confrontation. By 2026, Indonesia continues to occupy a distinctive position in the broader South China Sea context. It maintains that it is not a claimant to disputed features, yet it is directly affected by overlapping maritime claims that intersect with its EEZ. This dual reality—non-claimant but geographically exposed—requires a careful calibration of diplomacy, law enforcement, and regional engagement.

The sensitivity of this balance became evident following the 2024 Joint Statement issued during President Prabowo's visit to Beijing, which referenced the possibility of "joint development in areas of overlapping claims." The phrasing generated domestic debate, with scholars and parliamentarians seeking clarity on its legal implications.[2] In response, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a clarification in 2025 emphasizing that any prospective joint development would be strictly economic and would not imply legal recognition of maritime claims inconsistent with Indonesia's established EEZ or with the 2016 Arbitral Tribunal ruling. By 2026, this clarification has framed Indonesia's official position: cooperation remains possible, but it must rest on a clear legal foundation and respect existing maritime rights.

Operationally, Indonesia continues to encounter what are commonly described as "gray-zone" activities—maritime interactions that fall short

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1 The Jakarta Post, 'New Map Asserts Sovereignty over Natuna' (15 July 2017), https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2017/07/15/new-map-asserts-sovereignty-over-natuna.html.

2 Aristyo Rizka Darmawan, 'Prabowo's Flawed Logic on the Natuna Joint Development Proposal', *East Asia Forum* (31 May 2025), https://eastasiaforum.org/2025/05/31/prabowos-flawed-logic-on-the-natuna-joint-development-proposal/.

of open conflict but generate diplomatic and enforcement challenges. Incidents in 2024 and 2025 involving the presence of China Coast Guard vessels in areas where Indonesia was conducting seismic surveys highlighted the complexity of managing such situations. By 2026, Indonesian authorities have institutionalized response mechanisms focused on monitoring, communication, and measured escort procedures. The emphasis is on maintaining stability while upholding jurisdiction, avoiding actions that could unnecessarily escalate tensions.

Another recurring feature of the maritime environment has been the presence of large fishing fleets operating in contested or sensitive areas, sometimes without active Automatic Identification Systems and occasionally accompanied by coast guard vessels. For Indonesia, the challenge is less about isolated incidents and more about ensuring consistent enforcement of fisheries regulations and EEZ rights. This has required sustained patrols, clearer coordination among agencies, and improved maritime domain awareness.

Indonesia's preferred approach has been to prioritize civilian maritime law enforcement institutions in handling such encounters. Bakamla, increasingly consolidated as the national coast guard, plays a central role in this framework. The "coast guard first" principle reflects Jakarta's intention to keep maritime interactions within a law-enforcement paradigm rather than a military one whenever possible. Enhanced capabilities at the National Maritime Information Center (NMIC), including satellite tracking and integrated data systems, have strengthened monitoring and reduced uncertainty in real time decision-making.

Transparency has also become part of Indonesia's strategy. When incidents occur, authorities may release verified information or imagery to provide factual accounts of events. This practice is intended to reinforce legal clarity and prevent misinterpretation, while signaling Indonesia's commitment to rules-based maritime governance.

At the regional level, Indonesia continues to favor cooperative mechanisms over bloc-based alignments. The 2022 EEZ boundary agreement with

Vietnam has enabled both countries to move beyond bilateral uncertainties and pursue coordinated efforts against illegal fishing. This practical cooperation reduces friction and allows resources to be directed toward shared maritime management challenges. Similarly, Indonesia has supported the ASEAN Coast Guard Forum as a venue for harmonizing operational standards and sharing best practices. Such initiatives aim to build collective resilience and reduce the risk of misunderstanding in crowded sea lanes.

Overall, Indonesia's posture in the North Natuna Sea and the wider South China Sea in 2026 is characterized less by confrontation than by steady management. It combines legal clarity, calibrated enforcement, institutional consolidation, and regional cooperation. As a non-claimant state with direct maritime interests, Jakarta's objective remains consistent: to safeguard its sovereign rights while preserving stability and constructive relations in an increasingly complex maritime environment.

## 5. Maritime Law and Governance: The Quest for Unified Command

As Indonesia's maritime strategy evolves, attention in 2026 has increasingly shifted from hardware and operational encounters to the legal and institutional foundations that sustain maritime authority. The country finds itself in a dual-track reality. Internationally, it presents itself as a consistent defender of the law of the sea and a proponent of rules-based maritime order. Domestically, however, it continues to work through questions of institutional coordination, overlapping mandates, and fiscal constraints. The result is not contradiction so much as an ongoing process of consolidation.

The long-standing governance challenge has been the so-called "Many Captains" syndrome, which has been discussed. Progress toward addressing this challenge has been steady but gradual. Institutional transitions of this scale inevitably involve negotiation. The Ministry of Transportation's KPLP and the Navy retain defined authorities within their respective mandates, and coordination mechanisms continue to evolve. In practice, a "Unified Command" approach has emerged in 2026, with

Bakamla serving as an intelligence and coordination hub through its NMIC. Even where operational assets remain distributed across agencies, shared information systems and joint tasking procedures are designed to reduce duplication and improve coherence. The trajectory is toward consolidation, even if the endpoint has not yet been fully realized.

At the international level, Indonesia continues to ground its maritime posture in what might be described as strategic legalism—a consistent reliance on UNCLOS 1982 as the central reference point for maritime rights and responsibilities. Jakarta has long positioned itself as a norm advocate in this domain. The 2016 Arbitral Tribunal ruling remains an important legal touchstone in official statements, particularly in discussions of maritime entitlements and historic rights claims. When exploring potential joint development arrangements in 2025 and 2026, Indonesian negotiators have included explicit safeguard clauses affirming that economic cooperation does not alter or dilute sovereign rights under UNCLOS. This approach allows room for pragmatic engagement while maintaining legal clarity.

Indonesia has also taken proactive steps to strengthen its maritime claims through established international mechanisms. In 2025, it formally submitted documentation to the United Nations seeking recognition of an extended continental shelf beyond 200 nautical miles in areas north of Papua and south of Java. This forward-looking initiative is linked not only to resource governance but also to the long-term strategic importance of seabed minerals relevant to the global energy transition. By pursuing its claims through multilateral legal channels, Indonesia reinforces its preference for institutionalized dispute management over unilateral assertion.

At home, however, maritime governance operates within broader fiscal realities. The government's 2025-2026 budget priorities have included expanded social programs, most prominently the "Free Nutritious Meal" initiative. As a result, some maritime security agencies, including Bakamla, have faced tighter operational allocations compared to earlier projections.

In parallel, Indonesia has continued to invest diplomatic capital in multilateral and coalition-building initiatives. Through leadership of the Archipelagic and Island States Forum, which now includes dozens of participating countries, Jakarta has framed maritime governance as a shared concern among archipelagic and coastal nations. This platform elevates issues such as baseline protection, climate resilience, and sustainable ocean management, reinforcing Indonesia's identity as a spokesperson for archipelagic interests within the global system.

Regionally, Indonesia has supported the institutionalization of the ASEAN Maritime Outlook (AMO) as a transparency-oriented framework rather than a security alliance. Complementing this, the ASEAN Coast Guard Forum has facilitated information-sharing and best practices among Southeast Asian maritime agencies. One practical outcome has been improved early-warning awareness: tracking vessel movements across different EEZs allows authorities to anticipate patterns and coordinate responses more effectively. The emphasis is on predictability and communication, reducing the risk of misunderstanding in heavily trafficked waters.

Taken together, Indonesia's maritime governance landscape in 2026 reflects incremental consolidation rather than dramatic overhaul. Legal advocacy abroad, institutional streamlining at home, careful budget management, and sustained regional diplomacy form interconnected elements of a broader effort to align authority, capacity, and legitimacy. The process remains ongoing, but the direction is toward a more coherent maritime state—one that anchors its sovereignty not only in ships and patrols, but also in law, institutions, and cooperative frameworks.

## 6. Regional Dynamics and Sub-Regional Synergy

Indonesia's regional maritime strategy in 2026 operates within an institutional environment that is both indispensable and structurally fragile. While Jakarta continues to invest heavily in ASEAN-centered frameworks, the effectiveness of these mechanisms remains uneven. The tension between normative ambition and operational delivery defines the current

state of regional maritime governance.

At the declaratory level, ASEAN retains its position as the primary platform for articulating legal principles and regional norms. Instruments such as the AOIP and the ASEAN Maritime Outlook (AMO) provide a vocabulary of inclusivity, openness, and rule-based order. Indonesia has played a leading role in promoting these documents as expressions of "ASEAN centrality." Yet centrality in this context is procedural rather than material. ASEAN convenes; it does not compel. Its strength lies in agenda-setting and norm diffusion, not enforcement capacity.

The operationalization of the AMO illustrates this gap. While it has evolved from a conceptual document into a more structured roadmap for maritime cooperation, implementation depends entirely on voluntary national alignment. Information-sharing mechanisms, maritime domain awareness initiatives, and coordinated patrols require political trust and technical interoperability that remain uneven across member states. Differences in capacity between littoral states, variations in threat perception, and persistent sovereignty sensitivities limit the depth of integration. In practice, many ASEAN maritime initiatives progress at the pace of the most cautious member.

The ongoing negotiations over COC in the South China Sea further underscore the limits of consensus diplomacy. Although the third reading of the negotiating text represents procedural progress, substantive disagreements persist. The central challenge is not merely textual alignment with UNCLOS, but divergent strategic calculations among ASEAN members themselves. Some prioritize economic relations with China; others emphasize deterrence and external balancing. This divergence constrains ASEAN's ability to negotiate as a unified bloc and reduces the likelihood that any eventual COC will contain robust enforcement or dispute-resolution mechanisms. The risk is that the COC becomes a political confidence-building instrument rather than a binding regulatory framework.

Indonesia's position within this landscape is complex. Jakarta consistently

defends UNCLOS as a legal baseline and resists provisions that might constrain sovereign rights or external defense partnerships. However, Indonesia must balance its normative advocacy with the reality that ASEAN unity is fragile. Episodes of intra-ASEAN disagreement over joint communiqués, particularly when maritime language touches on sensitive issues, have demonstrated how easily consensus can fracture. ASEAN centrality therefore depends less on formal declarations and more on Indonesia's ability to prevent institutional paralysis.

Recognizing these constraints, Indonesia has increasingly complemented ASEAN-wide mechanisms with functional minilateral arrangements. Cooperative patrol frameworks in the Malacca Strait and the Sulu-Celebes Sea have produced more tangible operational results than broader ASEAN initiatives. Yet minilateralism presents its own challenges. It risks reinforcing a two-speed regionalism in which capable states deepen cooperation while others remain peripheral. Over time, this could dilute ASEAN's collective coherence, even if it enhances localized maritime security.

External pressures further complicate the regional environment. Intensifying strategic competition between major powers has sharpened divisions within Southeast Asia. Infrastructure financing, defense cooperation, and technological partnerships are increasingly embedded in broader geopolitical alignments. While ASEAN documents emphasize neutrality and inclusivity, member states face mounting incentives to hedge in different directions. This structural environment makes it more difficult to sustain a unified maritime agenda.

Capacity asymmetry is another enduring obstacle. Maritime domain awareness systems, coast guard professionalism, and naval modernization levels vary widely across Southeast Asia. Without sustained technical assistance and resource pooling, cooperative frameworks risk remaining declaratory. The absence of an integrated regional maritime information architecture—comparable to alliance-based systems elsewhere—limits the ability to translate shared norms into shared enforcement.

In this context, Indonesia's regional strategy is best understood as a balancing act between normative leadership and pragmatic adaptation. Jakarta continues to invest in ASEAN as the legitimizing umbrella for maritime governance, but it increasingly recognizes that ASEAN alone cannot guarantee regulatory effectiveness. The future of regional maritime order will likely depend on a hybrid architecture: ASEAN provides political legitimacy and normative coherence, while minilateral and technical coalitions deliver operational outcomes.

The central challenge for Indonesia is therefore not merely to defend ASEAN centrality in rhetorical terms, but to redefine it in practical ones. If ASEAN centrality is equated with consensus paralysis, it will erode under external pressure. If, however, it evolves into a flexible convening platform that enables differentiated cooperation without institutional fragmentation, it may remain viable. The success of Indonesia's regional strategy will ultimately hinge on its ability to sustain this delicate equilibrium between unity and functionality in an increasingly polarized Indo-Pacific environment.

## 7. Way forward

This chapter has examined Indonesia's evolving maritime strategy in 2026 through the lens of what may be termed Archipelagic Realism: a framework that treats geography not as destiny, but as a structural condition that shapes strategic choice. The central argument is not that Indonesia has resolved its maritime vulnerabilities, nor that it has achieved comprehensive strategic autonomy. Rather, it has begun to align doctrine, institutions, and selective capabilities around a clearer understanding of what archipelagic sovereignty requires in an era of geopolitical competition and environmental stress.

The transition from a transit-oriented maritime vision to one framed around Strategic sovereignty represents a meaningful recalibration. Yet this shift remains incomplete. Fiscal constraints, uneven modernization, bureaucratic fragmentation, and regional institutional fragility all limit the speed and depth of transformation. The Nusantara Trident Shield and

related initiatives provide conceptual coherence, but implementation will be gradual and contingent. Indonesia's maritime posture in 2026 is therefore best understood as a process of consolidation rather than culmination.

Three interlinked trends define this consolidation. First, the integration of technological tools into maritime governance—ranging from domain awareness systems to calibrated legal diplomacy—has enhanced Indonesia's ability to manage gray-zone pressures without immediate escalation. However, technological sophistication must be matched by sustainable funding and human capital development if it is to remain credible over time. Second, institutional reform, particularly in maritime law enforcement, reflects recognition that sovereignty depends on administrative clarity as much as on naval platforms. Yet legal consolidation and inter-agency coordination remain politically sensitive and operationally complex. Third, the incorporation of climate considerations into maritime strategy signals an expanded understanding of security. Rising sea levels, coastal degradation, and blue-carbon governance are no longer peripheral concerns; they are embedded in long-term resilience planning. Still, translating climate-security awareness into enforceable policy and budgetary prioritization will require sustained political commitment.

At the regional level, Indonesia's role should not be overstated. It has positioned itself as a consistent advocate of rule-based maritime order and ASEAN-centered dialogue, but ASEAN itself faces structural limits. Consensus decision-making, divergent threat perceptions, and intensifying major-power competition constrain the organization's capacity for decisive action. In this environment, Indonesia functions less as a hegemon and more as a stabilizing intermediary—seeking to prevent fragmentation rather than impose alignment. Its influence derives from credibility, restraint, and institutional engagement rather than material dominance.

Looking ahead to 2030, the success of Indonesia's maritime strategy will not be measured by fleet size alone. It will depend on whether Jakarta can

reconcile ambition with affordability, maintain institutional coherence amid bureaucratic pressures, and sustain a balanced diplomatic posture in an increasingly polarized Indo-Pacific. The more realistic objective is not maritime supremacy, but durable resilience: the ability to keep its sea lanes predictable, its sovereign rights defended through law as well as deterrence, and its maritime economy viable under climate stress.

Indonesia's experience carries broader regional relevance precisely because it is constrained. Many Indo-Pacific middle powers confront similar dilemmas: limited resources, exposure to great-power rivalry, and dependence on open sea lanes. Indonesia's evolving approach demonstrates that strategic adaptation need not rely on alignment or confrontation alone. It can emerge from incremental institutional reform, selective capability development, and persistent investment in regional norms—even when those norms are imperfectly implemented.

If the coming decade intensifies geopolitical friction across the Indo-Pacific, Indonesia's contribution will not lie in reshaping the balance of power. Rather, it will lie in helping ensure that the maritime domain does not become ungoverned space. A stable Indonesian archipelago is not a sufficient condition for regional order, but it remains a necessary one. Whether Indonesia can sustain that stability under fiscal, environmental, and geopolitical strain will be one of the quiet determinants of the Indo-Pacific's trajectory in the years ahead.

# 8. STRENGTHENING MARITIME SECURITY COOPERATION AND GOVERNANCE IN THE INDIAN OCEAN: BUILDING TRUST FOR A SHARED MARITIME FUTURE

Jayanath Colombage, Former Chief of Sri Lanka Naval Staff, Secretary to Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ambassador to Indonesia and ASEAN

## 1. Introduction

Defining maritime security and present status in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR): "Maritime security" is a multi-dimensional concept that spans traditional interstate military competition such as: sea denial/sea control, power projection, naval diplomacy and non-traditional threats as: IUU fishing, piracy, transnational crime, environmental degradation, and cyber risks to maritime infrastructure. Modern scholarship favours a broad conception that integrates state security, human security-coastal livelihoods, food security, and economic security-unimpeded trade.

Maritime security, according to the International Maritime Organization (IMO), is the safeguarding of ships, ports, and the maritime environment from threats like terrorism, piracy, armed robbery, and other illicit activities[1]. Aftermath of the devastating terrorist attacks on world trade centre in New York in 2001 and due to new security challenges imposed by some devastating terrorist attacks around the world, IMO had a renewed focus on maritime security with a special focus on deterring and preventing maritime terrorism at sea or in harbour. In 2004, the IMO came up with official document "International Ships and Port Facility Security Code" (ISPS Code) with the intention of enhancing maritime security[2]. After the

1 International Maritime Organization, 'Maritime Security', https://www.imo.org/en/ourwork/security/pages/guidemaritimesecuritydefault.aspx (accessed 14 October 2025).

2 International Maritime Organization, 'SOLAS XI-2 and the ISPS Code', https://www.imo.org/en/ourwork/security/pages/solas-xi-2%20isps%20code.aspx (accessed 25 October 2025).

implementation of the ISPS code started in 2004, the number of large-scale maritime terrorist incidents drastically reduced across the world.

However, around 2008, a new major threat emerged at sea near international choke points such as Bab El Mandeb and Gulf of Aden in the form of piracy: Somali pirates began highjack of merchant vessels and demanded huge ransoms, posing great threat to safety of global seaborne commerce. No single navy or coast guard in the IO could counter this threat alone and many navies had to come into the Indian Ocean protect merchant ships from Somali pirates. The IMO Secretary-General condemned the attacks against international shipping in the Red Sea area and reiterated the strong commitment of the International Maritime Organization to protect seafarers, ships and cargoes. Seafarer safety is paramount [1]. Due to combined efforts of naval task forces under On-Board Security Teams (OBST), the incidents of piracy were brought down to a near-zero. This was a classic example of international collaboration at sea against a common threat to maritime commerce.

Thereafter, in 2023 Houthi rebels based in Yemen started high-jacking and attacking merchant vessels passing Gulf of Eden and Red Sea purportedly as a response to Israel attacks on Palestinians. The IMO has strongly condemned the Houthi attacks on ships and seafarers, calling them "Illegal and unjustifiable" [2]. This time the attacks against merchant ships were different than the Somali pirates as they used helicopters, uncrewed and surface vessel, anti-ship missiles, unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV), such as drones, in chasing ships passing the area. Most of the navies tasked against Somali piracy were still present in this region but the sophistication of Houthi attacks compelled much more sophisticated and powerful response including aircraft carriers, fighter jets, long range ballistic missiles. These two situations, first by Somali pirates and second by Houthi

1 International Maritime Organization, 'Conflict-related Attacks in the Red Sea Area – General Information', https://www.imo.org/en/mediacentre/hottopics/pages/red-sea.aspx (accessed 15 October 2025).

2 International Maritime Organization, 'IMO Condemns "Illegal, Unjustifiable" Attacks on Ships in Red Sea', (2024), https://www.imo.org/en/mediacentre/pressbriefings/pages/imo-msc-resolution-red-sea.aspx (accessed 20 October 2025).

rebels, demonstrated the volatility of maritime security in the Indian Ocean even due to activities of non-state actors. These attacks resulted in merchant vessels taking longer routes, convoy re-routing, and increased freight and insurance costs, and hugely impacted the global maritime trade.

Maritime security is no longer limited to countering maritime terrorism and crime at sea. The major power competition in the Indian Ocean and number of flash points there are now posing a great threat to freedom of navigation and trade across this maritime domain. Emerging challenges include the security of undersea cables, application of Artificial Intelligence (AI) to maritime surveillance, and climate-induced migration. The interplay of technological innovation and environmental change will define maritime risk profiles in the coming decade. UNCLOS remains the foundation of maritime law, but its interpretation and implementation vary widely. Maritime boundary disputes underscore tensions between state sovereignty and international norms. This volatility in the IOR is likely to persist through the next decade or so.

## 2. The Strategic Context and Research Contents

This research will utilize qualitative research method for collection of data. It will depend on secondary resource materials combined with personal experiences of the researcher being a former chief of Sri Lanka Navy, Secretary to Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Sri Lankan Ambassador to Indonesia and ASEAN. These assessments synthesise open-source official documents, think-tank reports, peer-reviewed analyses, and high-quality journalism. Emphasis is placed on trend identification, case studies, and strategic policy initiatives this report seeks to offer a clear and forward-looking understanding of IOR maritime dynamics, support policy discussions, and contribute to informed decision-making on maritime security and governance.

The Asia-Pacific is both the engine of the global economy and a maritime environment of acute strategic contestation. Sea lines of communication in the wider Indo-Pacific sustain trade, energy flows, and fisheries that underpin regional prosperity. At the same time, overlapping maritime

claims, rapidly modernizing naval forces, and a proliferation of non-traditional maritime threats make this region central to contemporary security considerations. The Indian Ocean with the only access to the energy rich Persian Gulf is critical for global ocean trade and many developed and developing countries are dependent on it for economic prosperity and survival. Sri Lanka with its geostrategic advantageous location amidst one of the main east-west trade routes in the world experiences many traditional as well as non-traditional maritime security threats. Therefore, Sri Lanka provides an excellent case study of this maritime security mosaic. This chapter will examine the maritime strategies and policies of key regional actors and their strategic competition and convergences which give rise to confusion, ambiguity and dilemma for large number of IO littorals. At the same time the chapter will also track major developments and emerging trends of interactions between the major IOR states through analysis of thematic issues such as Gray-zone operations, maritime law and governance, and climate-related challenges.

This paper will endeavour to answer some critical questions about maritime security in the IO and the evolving dynamics with a special focus on Sri Lanka.

Q1. How has the Indian Ocean Region pursued balance between competition and cooperation?

Q2. How do IOR states maintain the international rule-based maritime order to facilitate uninterrupted maritime commerce?

Q3. How have the IOR littoral states, large and small, strengthened their voice in shaping the future maritime order and balanced their national security with collective regional security?

Q4. How do the IOR littoral states protect their oceans from further deteriorating and preserve the health of the Indian Ocean?

## 3. Evaluating Security Threats in the Indian Ocean Region

The Indian Ocean, an Ocean of Churn, has long been at the centre of global

commerce and strategic interactions and served as a theatre of connectivity, commerce, and culture. Today, it accounts for the movement of a large proportion of global energy flows and a substantial share of containerized and bulk cargo trade, underscoring its enduring importance to the world economy. It is home for one-third of world population and contains large quantities of “strategic natural resources”. This ocean is also a theatre of competition and complexity. Historically and strategically, the northern portion of the Indian Ocean is considered very important because its west to east path is accessible only through narrow straits. The Indian Ocean has the fewest marginal seas of all major oceans. To the north and north-west of the Ocean are the inland regions of the Red Sea, Persian Gulf, Gulf of Aden and Oman. Further to the northeast lie the Andaman Sea and the Strait of Malacca. With seven critical choke points providing access to oil tankers and cargo vessels across the IOR these marginal seas are critically important for energy transportation to the world. Specifically, these seven critical choke points are: Bab -el Mandeb, Strait of Hormuz, Suez Canal, Malacca strait, Sunda strait, Lombok strait and Mozambique channel. The narrow passes in the Western IOR are particularly vulnerable for exploitation, especially the Strait of Hormuz and Bab-el-Mandeb. The worst-case scenario would be double closure of Strait of Hormuz and Malacca Strait, which would impact the global trade substantially.

### 3.1 Flash Points in the IOR

There are many existing and potential zones of conflict in the Indian Ocean, such as Yemen, Israel-Palestine, Iran, Somalia, Afghanistan-Pakistan, India-Pakistan, Syria, Iraq, and Myanmar, which would add risks to maritime security. Situations in these countries can easily spill over to the ocean and disrupt the freedom of navigation across the IOR. One of the worst-case scenarios would be a nuclear conflict between India and Pakistan. Both these countries have gone to war on number of occasions based on their animosity since gaining independence from Great Britain in 1947. In 2025 a four-day war erupted. As illustrated by Clary “The crisis was the most significant between the two nuclear-armed adversaries in several decades. It saw military action unfold that crossed previous

thresholds in terms of geographic reach, weapons systems employed and geopolitical impacts produced. The armed conflict was only concluded with significant international diplomatic engagement, primarily by the United States" [1]. This conflict generated large scale mis-information and disinformation and both sides claimed victory. Today the India-Pakistan relationship remains crisis-prone with new crises likely to emerge and escalate in severity over time. Indeed, each India-Pakistan crisis witnesses veiled threat of using nuclear weapons as a last resort, should one side lose the war. This is a very dangerous scenario for the entire IOR but more threatening to South Asia. Situation in Yemen remains precarious under the rule of Houthi rebels allegedly supported and controlled by Iran, although Iran is losing its influence of its proxies across the middle-east. However, the vital region of Gulf of Eden and Strait of Hormuz will continue to remain volatile, which poses a considerable threat to maritime security for ocean trade and freedom of navigation.

### 3.2 Changes to the unipolar world and the balance of power in the IOR

The Indian Ocean has its own unique features. Its waters, except at the southern extremity, are warm and calm with predictable wind velocity. The region faces mounting challenges: great-power rivalry, chokepoint vulnerabilities, maritime crime, gray zone operations by bogus ships, perception warfare and impact of global warming. Great-power naval presence is deepening resulting in the IOR becoming a denser and more competitive security environment. This oceanic space is no longer defined solely by trade and connectivity; it is also shaped by shifting power dynamics, shifting economic competition, contested geopolitics, technological transformations, and urgent demands of environmental sustainability. As pointed by Jayarathna, "Maritime affairs have always been complex, intertwined, and at times confusing. Thus, throughout history many powers have laid down or promulgated frameworks on what

1 C. Clary, *Four Days in May: The India–Pakistan Crisis of 2025* (Stimson Center, 2025), https://www.stimson.org/2025/four-days-in-may-the-india-pakistan-crisis-of-2025/ (accessed 17 October 2025).

they intended or expected by the maritime space to be"[1]. Furthermore, the Indian Ocean is witnessing a period in which traditional and non-traditional security threats intersect. The spectrum of risks is both wide and evolving.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the U.S. became the only superpower and most dominant military and economic power. However, the world is changing rapidly. It has entered a new phase in international affairs, leaving behind us the brief moment characterized by untrammeled American dominance. Many of the changes underway are beyond America's control. The main reason for this shift is the rise of China. China has risen quickly to become the number two economy in the world. It has a modern and powerful military with significant nuclear capabilities, amply demonstrated by the grand parade on 3rd September 2025 to celebrate 80-year anniversary of defeating Japanese imperialist power. One of the biggest advantages for China is that it has excess capacities and capabilities to the high seas. China vows to have a world class military by 2049.

Due to the importance of the SLOCs for major powers protection of the sea-routes through the Indian Ocean becomes a strategic priority in global geopolitics. For instance, since about 2008, China has been focusing on the safety of Indian Ocean trade routes as it increased its dependence on this ocean for energy imports and exports of its manufactured products. Presently many navies are enhancing presence in the Indian Ocean, e.g., Japan, China, France, Russia, South Korea, Australia and the USA. Most of them arrived under the name of anti-piracy operations. This has led to an increased militarization of the IOR.

In IR theory and practice this IO region is experiencing the phenomenon of "security dilemma", defined by the Britanica Encyclopedia as a situation in which actions taken by a state to increase its own security cause reactions from other states, and in turn this leads to a decrease rather than an increase in the original state's security[2]. States cannot be certain of the intentions of

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1 Y.N. Jayarathna, 'Are We Building a Clear or Confused Maritime Mosaic?', *The Morning*, (5 October 2025), https://www.themorning.lk/articles/hwJrxFwmOvTE0FAfUAbn (accessed 10 November 2025).

2 Encyclopaedia Britannica, 'Security Dilemma in International Relations',

other states; defensive military buildup can be interpreted as a sign of aggressive intent. This is one of the reasons for increased militarization of the IOR. Such "trust deficiency" causes difficulty in regional cooperation. Ultimately economic cooperation is the need of the hour for large number of IOR littorals. Further, when most large powers feel insecure due to historical legacy and geographical reality. They tend to invest heavily in military buildup and coerce their smaller neighbours into asymmetric military alliance. Their vitals would then view this development as a threat and adopt counter-measures, leading to a continuous cycle of military build-up, which reflects a charged military situation in the IOR, where at any given time, about 100-120 surface combatants from the world are deployed in the area. Then they are joined by submarines including nuclear powered and armed, quietly patrolling in this ocean domain. Together the world superpowers, regional major powers, and emerging powers have generated a "Maritime Cool War" in the IO. There is also a "perception warfare" taking place in the IOR. Some countries are portrayed as "bad" and "unilaterally aggressive and violent" by other major powers. Furthermore, "Grey-zone" and "false flag" operations are wide-spread to avoid sanctions or to achieve ulterior motives. Having presented this rivalry in the IO, however, there is not yet prospect of "an immediate combat situation", despite the presence of large number of warships from many nations.

The world witnessed some positive signs of stability between two major powers, the U.S. and China during the meeting of the two leaders in Busan, South Korea in October 2025, despite the global economic turbulence and uncertainties, and U.S. protectionist tendencies. Together these two countries will determine the balance of power in the Indo-Pacific. Positively both have agreed that through careful management their bilateral rivalry should not be allowed to sabotage global peace and stability. A war between them could destroy both rather than just one side winning comprehensively. The Indo-Pacific should be a development frontier rather than a venue for a "cold war" orientation. Competitive coexistence and

https://www.britannica.com/topic/security-dilemma (accessed 16 October 2025).

dialogue are better than zero-sum competition[1].

## 4. Major Players and their Maritime Strategies for IOR

The developing dynamic situation and the importance of the IOR have prompted many nations to promulgate their maritime strategies and concepts with a view to have unimpeded access and transit through this global maritime common. One key stated objective of these officially announced strategies, including U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy, is to construct a rule-based maritime order and promote freedom of navigation and overfly. However, the hidden objective of U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy is mainly to counter another maritime power, namely the rising China. America and its Quad partners, such as India see most Chinese activities through the security and military lens. This has led to intensified Sino-U.S. strategic competition heading toward conflict and affected regional states in way that Jayarathna summarised: "the Indian Ocean has also become a confusing arena for the smaller, or lesser, players, such as Sri Lanka" [2]. Countries such as Sri Lanka are forced to choose between competing powers against their original focus on economic development utilizing the resources from the Indian Ocean. Below are key maritime strategies from major IOR powers.

### 4.1 India's strategy: Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) and MAHASAGAR

India came out with the SAGAR concept in the document published by the Indo-Pacific Studies Center (IPSC) in 2025. The notion aims to improve India's maritime engagement through five pillars. The first is security cooperation, which focuses on strengthen India's maritime security through improving bilateral and multilateral relations with partners.

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1 A. Malindog-Uy, 'Between Containment and Coexistence: Lessons for Philippines in the New US–China Strategic Equation', *The Manila Times*, (4 November 2025), https://www.manilatimes.net/2025/11/01/opinion/columns/between-containment-and-coexistence-lessons-for-ph-in-the-new-us-china-strategic-equation/2213315 (accessed 4 November 2025).

2 Y.N. Jayarathna, 'Are We Building a Clear or Confused Maritime Mosaic?', *The Morning*, (5 October 2025), https://www.themorning.lk/articles/hwJrxFwmOvTE0FAfUAbn (accessed 10 November 2025).

Second, trade and economic integration, which is geared towards enhancing the prospects of the blue economy with regional partners. Third, capacity building and disaster management, based on maritime infrastructure development and humanitarian assistance. Fourth, sustainable development, which is meant to encourage the prudent use of marine resources. Finally, enhancing regional infrastructure connectivity through the construction of ports, naval bases, and provision of digital services in the IOR[1]. Yet a decade since its conceptualization, the SAGAR does not seem to have achieved intended progress, judging from results of the implementation. This means that India has not been able to be the net-security provider for the IOR.

### 4.2 Colombo Security Conclave

India together with Sri Lanka and Maldives launched the Colombo Maritime Conclave in 2011 with the intention of providing MDA information for the region. The initiative came to a standstill after 2014 due to rising tensions between India and the Maldives which led to the suspension of MDA cooperation until 2020. In 2020, India pushed for the revival of MDA program but rebranded it as Colombo Security Conclave (CSC). CSC has now evolved to include security not only in the IO ocean domains but in other areas too. Mauritius has also joined the CSC with Bangladesh as the next target to get on board. However, India has been the first-responder in disaster response in the IOR.

Pursuant to the CSC's resolution at the 6th National Security Adviser (NSA) level meeting held in December 2023 in Mauritius, the member states (India, Maldives, Mauritius and Sri Lanka) signed the Charter and MoU for the establishment of the CSC Secretariat in Colombo on August 30, 2024. India has established an Information Fusion Centre for IOR(IFC-IOR) for development of MDA cooperation. It has also played a key role in Quad's IPMDA launched in 2022.

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1 Indo-Pacific Studies Center, 'From SAGAR to MAHASAGAR: India's Strategic Evolution in the Indian Ocean Region', https://www.indo-pacificstudiescenter.org/commentaries/india-mahasagar-initiative (accessed 4 November 2025).

India has now upgraded their vision of “SAGAR” to “MAHASAGAR”- meaning great Ocean. This is a clear indication of India’s maritime ambition with a broader focus on the Indian and Pacific Oceans. MAHASAGAR aims not only at maritime security but also to address India’s economic and geopolitical concerns. One of its main objectives is to contain Chinese influence in the IOR. Yet India’s efforts to dominate the regional countries have attain only limited success and it even met with rejection in some cases.

### 4.3 The Indo-Pacific Strategy of the U.S.

The U.S. has a large military presence in the IOR. There had been no serious competition against the U.S. in the IOR until recently. Earlier Washington was focusing on the Middle East. It shifted its security focus to Asia-Pacific, then to Asia-Indo-Pacific and now to the Indo-Pacific. The U.S. IPS is a foreign policy framework aimed at fostering a “free and open” region through alliances, partnerships, and collective capacity-building. Its key pillars include economic prosperity via initiatives embedded in the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF), defence and security enhancement through military cooperation, e.g., against foreign coercion, and ecological resilience efforts against challenges like climate change. This strategy emphasizes working with allies and partners to maintain a secure, stable, and prosperous region, while also addressing the rise of China[1]. Japan, the U.S., Australia and India are the four pillars of the IPS. Nonetheless, the four states have different objectives and perceptions on the IPS, resulted in slow progress in Quad alignment. The IPS is categorized as a grouping of “like minded democracies” for “a liberal world order”. The IPS has conveniently sidelined many other littorals such as ASEAN countries, South Korea and smaller, economically less developed countries in the Indian Ocean. The main objective of the IPS is to counter the rise of China especially in the Indian and Pacific

1 The White House, *Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States of America* (2022), https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/U.S.-Indo-Pacific-Strategy.pdf (accessed 18 October 2025).

oceans.

Then there are two more strategic bloc-forging initiatives under the IPS, namely the QUAD and AUKUS. The QUAD was initially designed as a sub-military alliance and later expanded its coverage to economic development, pandemic response and environment protection. The AUKUS is basically a bloc to offer nuclear submarine capability to Australia with the intention of countering China in the Indo-Pacific. AUKUS alienated France, India, Japan, and ASEAN and is seen as a mini-NATO in the Indo-Pacific. In short both of Quad and AUKUS are targeting China with a visible increase in defence expenditure and military power. Inevitably, this has led to an upward spiral of military competition across the IOR, as it divided the region and at times even forced the littorals to converge strategically with one camp against the other. Many of the IOR littorals are experiencing strategic ambiguity and dilemma and this has resulted in weakening overall maritime security across the Indian Ocean.

### 4.4 Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy (FOIP)

Japan's FOIP, launched in 2016, aims to ensure stability and prosperity in the region by promoting a "rule-based international order" through three pillars: promoting the rule of law, freedom of navigation, and free trade; pursuing economic prosperity and connectivity; and committing to peace and stability. It is a strategy to extend regional economic development and security making from the West Pacific to the Indian Ocean, and improve connectivity among partners through initiatives like high-quality infrastructure and maritime security. [1]. Japan is deeply concerned about energy security and freedom of maritime trade across the Indian Ocean and also about China's increased influence in the IP region. Japan is also worried about the situation in the East China Sea where it has overlapping maritime claims with China. Japan considers India as a major partner in their FOIP strategy. However, the FOIP has so far not been able to create a favourable maritime security situation and contributed little to maritime

1 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, *Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy of Japan*, https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/000430632.pdf (accessed 19 October 2025).

security enhancement.

### 4.5 ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific

The AOIP is a framework adopted in 2019 to guide ASEAN's engagement in the region by promoting cooperation, peace, and prosperity based on principles of inclusivity, openness, and ASEAN centrality. This is also as a collective response to diversified maritime strategies of major maritime powers for Indo-Pacific geopolitical strife, especially to cope with tensions between the U.S. and China. ASEAN wishes to emphasize its centrality in the Indo-Pacific as it is located in the confluence of the Indian and Pacific oceans. AOIP particularly advocates dialogue and cooperation rather than confrontation, and it aims to maintain ASEAN's strategic autonomy and central role in a region vis-a-vis external powers, e.g., the rivalry between America's "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" and China's "Belt and Road Initiative"[1]. ASEAN's main objective is to maintain maritime security across ASEAN and adjoining ocean spaces, especially along the important choke points in the margin of the IO—the Malacca Strait which is of paramount importance to ASEAN's economy.

### 4.6 France/EU's Indo-Pacific Strategy

France considers itself as an Indo-Pacific country with its island territories and exclusive Economic Zones in both oceans. The French Indo-Pacific strategy is founded on exercise of multilateralism and respect of international law, and it seeks to see the Indo-Pacific as open and inclusive, free of coercion[2]. The French Strategy is an addition to the EU strategy but the two are mutually enhancing each other. Launched in September 2021, the EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific is the guiding framework that shapes the European Union's engagement with the Indo-Pacific region, spanning from the east coast of Africa to the Pacific Islands.

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1 Association of Southeast Asian Nations, *ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific* (2019), https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/ASEAN-Outlook-on-the-Indo-Pacific_FINAL_22062019.pdf (accessed 19 October 2025).

2 Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, *France's Indo-Pacific Strategy*, https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/en_a4_indopacifique_synthese_rvb_cle068e51.pdf (accessed 19 October 2025).

The EU Indo-Pacific strategy promotes effective rules-based multilateralism, an open and fair environment for trade and investment, while supporting connectivity with the EU. Close cooperation is key in order to achieve sustainable economic growth while ensuring the diversification of supply chains and resilience in the face of economic shocks and disruption. [1]. Both these strategies are mainly to protect EU interests rather than counter China. They support freedom of navigation and maritime trade across the Indo-Pacific regions. France has now set up the Regional Center for Maritime Studies (RCMS) at Kotelawela Defence University in Sri Lanka with a view to address common maritime security challenges which require collective responses.

## 5. Countering Non-Traditional Security Challenges: Maritime Crime and Non-state Actors in the IOR

Maritime security in the IO has now become multifaceted and a dynamic concept. There is concern for traditional as well as non-traditional security threats in the IO. Threats in the IO are not only from the states, but from non-state actors (NSA) as well. Although the chances of a large-scale war are minimal, threats of NSAs are predominant and can impact maritime security and freedom of navigation in a big way. Unlike the other major oceans there are large numbers of non-state actors either with backing of some rogue states or acting on their own, posing a significant threat to maritime security in the IOR.

### 5.1 Piracy

Piracy in the Horn of Africa threatened the global shipping industry with hijacking, ransom demanding and use of violence. It has penetrated to the coastal areas of Somalia, rendering international shipping vulnerable. The reach of pirates extended even closer to Maldives. A High-Risk Area was declared, which covered all of Arabian sea and arears closer to Sri Lanka. The waters off Somalia became a piracy hotspot and a concentrated effort

1 Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, ‘European Union Indo-Pacific Strategy’, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eu-indo-pacific-strategy-topic_en (accessed 19 October 2025).

by regional and international navies, world shipping industry and international police agencies has been sustained to curb this threat. Piracy also prevails in the Malacca Strait. Unlike Somali pirates, who demand ransom from the crew and the ship, pirates in the Malacca Strait are interested in forcefully acquiring the cargo, such as refined oil, and sell it in black markets. Piracy could also be linked to transnational criminal syndicates or terrorist groups.

### 5.2 Maritime Terrorism

Terrorism has evolved into a Global Phenomenon. It is one of the most dominant threats to world peace in the 21st century. No country in the world seems to be immune to the menace of terrorism. Presently Houthi Rebels from Yemen are hijacking and attacking ships with anti-ship missiles, uncrewed surface vessels (USV), remotely controlled suicide boats, drones etc. These acts have impacted on the speed of goods delivery and safety of maritime trade across the IOR.

Sri Lanka experienced huge damages to its shipping, naval vessels, harbours and the overall economy due to maritime terrorist attacks by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) during its civil-war from 1983 to 2009. The LTTE pioneered the suicide boat, underwater suicide saboteurs, semi-submersible craft and attacked selected targets at sea and in harbours. The LTTE also established an international logistic network with their own merchant shipping and bought weapons through black market, operated from international ports and used international shipping lanes to transport lethal war-fighting cargo to areas controlled by the crime organizations in Sri Lanka. This was their main strategy and actions for sustaining the war against the government of Sri Lanka. The LTTE bogus ships that carry illegally purchased weapons, ammunition, high explosives and many other dual-use equipment would come closer to the coastal areas under their domination and put the goods into smaller logistic craft escorted by their own attack craft and eventually transfer the cargo to the land. This operation continued unabetted till about 2006. Thereafter the Sri Lanka Navy was able to obtain accurate intelligence about these bogus ships and

destroyed the entire fleet by 2007. The destruction of logistic life-line for the LTTE was the main reason for the defeat of the terrorist organizations as they could not sustain the battle. The tactics developed and effectively used by the LTTE could be seen followed by Houthi rebels in Yemen to attack ships passing through the Gulf of Eden and Red Sea.

There is also a grave danger if a non-state actor or a terrorist group is able to acquire even a crude nuclear or radioactive weapon and hides it in a merchant vessel and explodes it in a commercial harbour of a targeted country. This kind of activity could have drastic consequences to a port, adjacent population and commercial areas and cripple a country's economy.

### 5.3 Irregular Migration by Sea

Irregular migration by sea or human smuggling is another major non-traditional security threat in the Indian Ocean where transnational criminal syndicates organize these unsafe, inhumane journeys across the ocean for pre-planned destinations to seek refuge. Some of the people undertaking these journeys may be victims of war or subjected to persecution at home. However, in the Indian Ocean, most of these movements were for people to seek economic benefits except in the case of Rohingya refugees coming out from Myanmar. The criminal syndicates which are organizing these boat voyages often break immigration and customs laws of the departing country and risk the life of passengers without adequate safety equipment and hygienic conditions. Quite often these crime gangs are linked with illegal narcotic, smuggling and weapons smuggling syndicates and hence pose a serious maritime criminal phenomenon in the IOR.

### 5.4 Illegal Narcotic Trade Across the IOR

Sri Lanka and bulk of South Asia are located between two drug producing regions: Golden Crescent and Golden Triangle. The Golden Crescent region of South Asia—comprising Afghanistan, Iran, and Pakistan—is a principal global site for opium production and distribution. Over the past few decades, wars and terrorism amid a shifting political landscape have facilitated an active heroin trade throughout the region. The Golden

Triangle refers to the region in Southeast Asia where the borders of Myanmar, Thailand, and Laos intersect. Historically, it was a major center for opium and heroin production, but today it has been turned into a major venue for producing synthetic drugs like methamphetamine. Unfortunately, Sri Lanka is used as a transshipment hub for drugs coming from both drug producing Triangles since the country is located in close proximity to the international main shipping routes.

### 5.5 IUU Fishing

IUU fishing is another non-traditional maritime security challenge in the IOR. IUU fishing activities can take place in EEZ or territorial waters. These could include poaching, use of destructive fishing methods, use of banned fishing nets, failure to declare the catch locations and details of fishing activities, and even the theft of the catch. The IUU fishing can impact on traditional military security and human security as fishing is one of the main livelihood activities of the coastal areas of Indian Ocean littorals. IUU fishing is also linked to transnational maritime crime syndicates, trafficking of illegal drugs, weapons smuggling and money laundering. IUU fishing induces drastic consequences to marine eco-systems and sustainability of corals, endangered species of fish and other pelagic species. Hence immediate collaborative and concentrated action are needed to combat this crime and allow the regeneration of marine habitats as fisheries are the main protein supplier to the humankind. IUU fishing is not a clearly visible maritime crime and hence many nations turn a blind eye considering only the economic benefits.

### 5.6 Global Warming, Climate Change and Sea Level Rising

Ocean is the main protein supplier to the Humans. Ocean produces 50% of Oxygen for human breath and absorbs 40% of Carbon Dioxide we produce. However, 40% of World Oceans are under threat from human action. 80% of ocean pollution starts on land which includes dumping of plastic and toxic waste, as well as discharge of chemical waste. Marine accidents occur, causing pollution of the ocean and coastal areas and threatening marine life. Rise of ocean temperature and salinity have impacted climate and

livelihood of human-being. Sea level rising could force wars, large-scale human displacement, loss of agricultural land and impact on food security.

## 6. Geopolitics of Maritime Infrastructure and Connectivity Initiatives in the IOR

Many have predicted that the 21st century is the century of oceans and Asia. Unfortunately, most of the Indian Ocean littorals are in the category of "developing nations" even many decades after gaining independence from western colonial powers. The main contributory factor for this "developing nations trap" is lack of quality infrastructure, especially maritime related for countries to benefit from wider Indian Ocean trade. Most maritime strategies of the IOR states are mainly military in nature and have failed to meet the development needs of littorals. It has been proven that human security based on economic prosperity is one major attributor for national stability. When a country becomes unstable, its maritime security can easily be compromised. Therefore, infrastructure development is critically linked to the maintenance of its maritime security.

### 6.1 India -Sri Lanka Maritime Security Nexus vis-a-vis China

India and Sri Lanka share a maritime border and occupy a strategic position in South Asia. India is the only neighbour of Sri Lanka, separated by the Palk Strait. India is very concerned about Sri Lanka's strategic location and its linkage with other countries, especially China. Indians wish to see Sri Lanka interact only with them economically and militarily. The economic crises in Sri Lanka in 2022 provided a great opportunity for India to enforce its influence in Sri Lanka, as India offered nearly 4 billion U.S. dollars to bail out Sri Lanka from an economic disaster. India does not want Sri Lanka to exercise strategic autonomy and wishes to place Sri Lanka under its full control.

India and Sri Lanka formalized a defense partnership MoU in April 2025, institutionalizing military cooperation, port calls, joint exercises, capacity-building, and potential defense industrial collaboration. Sri Lanka additionally reassured India that its territory will not accommodate

activities harmful to Indian security interests. This MoU has become a controversial issue in Sri Lanka. India is trying to control Sri Lanka through a high voltage direct current electricity grid, digital and cyber integrations, maritime air surveillance, and infrastructure connectivity by way of a road/rail bridge. Sri Lanka's total dependence on India for fulfilling many of its basic needs is not conducive to its sovereign security. Indian Investment in Sri Lanka is now substantial. India's Adani Group runs the Colombo West Container Terminal and The Indian Mazagon Dock Shipbuilders Ltd which is under Indian Defence Ministry has taken over the control of Colombo Dockyard, the only dry dock facility in port of Colombo. India has formulated a plan to possess a maritime logistics and surveillance hub in Colombo to counter China's The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) footprints in Sri Lanka, such as the Port City and Hambantota port. These Indian actions would lead to Sri Lanka losing its strategic autonomy and becoming a logistic facility for Indian military. All these Indian initiatives may result in Sri Lanka becoming sandwiched in Indo-China strategic rivalry.

### 6.2 BRI in the IOR

The BRI is Chinese president Xi Jinping's signature foreign policy project aimed at strengthening China's connectivity with the world. BRI is a vision to utilize China's capital and excessive industrial capacities to develop infrastructure projects in partner countries. The resultant enhancement of economic connectivity and integration would enable the recipient states to engage in more trade activities for common prosperity. As of October 2023, the Initiative involved 151 countries and about 5.1 billion people with a combined gross domestic product of $41 trillion [1].

South Asia is the least economically integrated region in the world due to lack of quality infrastructure, investment and development. The World Bank estimated that in 2014, that in order to overcome poverty and achieve development goals South Asia needed about 423 billion U.S. dollars per

1 China Power, 'How Is the Belt and Road Initiative Advancing China's Interests?', (2023), https://chinapower.csis.org/china-belt-and-road-initiative/ (accessed 17 October 2025).

year to close the infrastructure gap[1]. South Asia, with its strategic location and pressing development needs, has become a key focus of Chinese engagement. Through the BRI's massive infrastructure projects—such as ports, highways, and power plants—China has positioned itself as a critical partner in the region's pursuit of economic growth. Except India the countries in this region view the Chinese role positively and expect significant dividends from the BRI investments. Some major powers, mainly from the West, see the BRI as a security and geopolitical tool through which Beijing aims to expand its footprint in diverse regions. These countries argue that South Asia is being subjected to facilitate China's military and strategic objectives rather than addressing their dire needs for infrastructure development. They allege that China is engaged in economic colonization of developing countries, e.g., through a debt trap. They have called South Asia to curb Chinese influence while they cannot match the BRI investments, currently the only major source of infrastructure development projects to tangibly enrich South Asia.

India sees Beijing's BRI presence and influence in the IOR intensify geopolitical tension and challenge its traditional dominance in the region. Yet for the rest of the region, some of the BRI projects have already started to provide economic and social benefits to the people of South Asia. They have concluded that the BRI is definitely positive to human security through economic integration and thereby promoting maritime security in the IOR.

To counter the BRI India and Japan have put forward a program entitled Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC) to connect the Indo-Pacific with multiple African nations. The strategy aims at promoting sustainable development through four pillars: development and cooperation projects, quality infrastructure, enhancing capacities and skills, and people-to-people partnerships. Unveiled in 2017, it has focused on connectivity and growth between the regions, often viewed in the context of the Indo-Pacific region. The AAGC is the main concept to counter the growing Chinese

1 World Bank Group, *Infrastructure Gap in South Asia: Infrastructure Needs, Prioritization, and Financing* (2014), https://hdl.handle.net/10986/20327 (accessed 21 October 2025).

influence in Indo-Pacific and especially the success of BRI. However, there is no significant progress made by the AAGC even now. The AAGC has showed that both India and Japan are keen to have a grand plan to connect Asia with Africa with a view to enter African markets and reduce Chinese foot-print in Africa. The main reason for lack of any progress of this initiative could be attributed to lack of financial commitments to undertake infrastructure projects [1].

## 7. Sri Lanka and the Evolving Indian Ocean Maritime Security Environment

Sri Lanka is occupying a critically important geographical location in the Indian Ocean. This location has at times acted as a curse and the country has not really been able to make use of the same for economic prosperity. Sri Lanka is separated from South India by the Palk Strait and Gulf of Mannar. Water levels around these regions are very low in draught, not navigable for ships. Only small boats can pass through. Even Indian naval vessels have to circumnavigate Sri Lanka to sail from naval parts in the south and west to the east. Due to its geographical location south of India and its proximity to India, Sri Lanka occupies an important strategic position in the Indian maritime and air security umbrellas. This led former Indian National Security Adviser, Foreign Secretary and Ambassador Shivshankar Menon to say that "Sri Lanka is an unsinkable aircraft carrier parked 14 kilometers away from the Southern tip of India"[2]. Due to this strategically important location Sri Lanka occupies in the Indian Ocean, the country is invariably subject to actions the major powers adopt to establish the spheres of influence in this ocean.

Sri Lanka has played a key role in the ancient spice and silk routes in the world and acted as an emporium where the goods from Persia and China

1 T. Taniguchi, 'Should We Forget About the Asia–Africa Growth Corridor?', *French Institute of International Relations*, no. 87 (19 October 2020), https://www.ifri.org/en/editorials/should-we-forget-about-asia-africa-growth-corridor (accessed 17 October 2025).

2 S. Menon, *Choices: Inside the Making of India's Foreign Policy* (Penguin Books, 2016), https://www.puradsimedia.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/CHOICES.pdf (accessed 21 October 2025).

were bartered. During the final years of World War II, Sri Lanka was chosen as the main base for allied naval fleets and air arm stationed in the Indian Ocean. Sri Lanka gained independence in 1948 from Great Britain but the British stayed in the country till 1956 with a defence pact which subjugated security of Sri Lanka to the UK. Since gaining independence Sri Lanka has been following a non-aligned foreign policy and has maintained good relations with its neighbours as well as the wider world.

Sri Lanka played a crucial role in forming the non-aligned movement in 1962. The foundation for Non-Aligned Summit was laid in Colombo in 1954, which led to the first Asia-Africa summit in 1956 in Bandung. Together with Tanzania it proposed the famous "declaration of Indian Ocean as a Zone of Peace" in 1971, to be adopted later by the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) as resolution 2832 (XXVI). "The Indian Ocean, within limits to be determined, together with the airspace above and the ocean floor subjacent thereto, was designated for all time as a zone of peace".[1]. As a result of this evolution, the UNGA called upon the great powers to enter in to consultations with the IO littoral States with a view to halting any further escalation of their military presence there. Particularly, the call advocated that the major powers eliminated nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction from their bases, military installations and logistical supply facilities. Unfortunately, this UNGA resolution was never complied by the major powers at that time mainly because of the cold-war situation and their unwillingness to lose military domination of the Indian Ocean. Ironically, most of the Indian Ocean Littorals have continued to wish realization of their 1971 call of Resolution 2832 even today.

The Indian Ocean is the only ocean named after a country on the account of the dominant position of India in this region since ancient times. India is the major military power in this region and also the fastest growing economy with the biggest population in the world. The Indian Ocean which

1 United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs, 'Declaration of the Indian Ocean as a Zone of Peace', *United Nations Disarmament Yearbook 1983* (1983), pp. 375–389, https://www.un-ilibrary.org/content/books/9789210579872s005-c003 (accessed 15 October 2025).

has 36 littoral and 11 hinterland countries, has become one of the most important zones of geopolitical activity in the 21st century. Until the dawn of the 21st century this was somewhat a neglected ocean space. In the 19th and 20th centuries Atlantic and Pacific oceans played key roles in the world affairs with world war I and II being fought therein, industrial revolution taking place and free market economies dominating the world.

According to David and Balls "The U.S. has been the dominant naval power in the IO since the collapse of the USSR. The U.S. has used this supremacy to ensure that its trade routes and energy supplies remain undisrupted. It also used this ocean to launch military interventions, including in Kuwait, Iraq, and Somalia" [1]. The U.S. consider itself as an Indian Ocean residential power with one of its main military bases located in Diego Garcia. Its main focus during the cold war was Europe and during the Global War on Terror (GWOT) was the Middle East. Since U.S. withdrawal from Iraq and Afghanistan, the USA has been shifting its focus to Asia-Pacific and currently to Indo-Pacific.

## 8. Regional Organization Dealing with Maritime Security In the IOR

The IOR has several regional organizations to engage in discussions on maritime issues and specifically to focus on Maritime Security. Some of these organizations are few decades old and has produced some quality academic and policy documents discussing the most important subject of maritime security among many other focus areas. However, most of the time, these organizations act independently and these have not produced any meaningful and tangible maritime security architectures or instruments. Some of the main associations dealing with maritime security in the IOR are as follows:

Indian Ocean Naval Symposium: The Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) is a biennial forum for navies of Indian Ocean littoral states to increase maritime cooperation, discuss regional security issues, and build

1 A.E. Davis and J.N. Balls, *The Indian Ocean Region in the 21st Century: Geopolitical, Economic, and Environmental Ties* (Australia India Institute, 2022), https://aii.unimelb.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/indian-ocean-report.pdf (accessed 15 November 2025).

friendly relationships. IONS was established in 2008, when the first meeting was hosted by India. It provides an open and inclusive platform for navies to address challenges like piracy, drug trafficking, human trafficking, and terrorism. The IONS is a voluntary initiative that seeks to increase maritime co-operation among navies of the littoral states of the Indian Ocean Region by providing an open and inclusive forum for discussion of regionally relevant maritime issues. In the process, it endeavours to generate a flow of information between naval professionals that would lead to common understanding and possibly cooperative solutions on the way ahead[1]. IONS can be said to be the most appropriate platform to discuss maritime security in the IOR since it is a platform for navies. IONS has 25 members including India, Pakistan, France and United Kingdom. It has nine observers including China, Japan and Russia. Based on the membership. IONS has a very good representation from the Indian Ocean littorals as well as other major powers except the USA. IONS has three main working groups such as: Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR), Maritime Security and Information sharing and Interoperability.

Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA): The Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) is an inter-governmental organization founded in 1997 to promote regional economic cooperation among the 23 countries bordering the Indian Ocean. It functions as a forum for cooperation, bringing together governments, businesses, and academia to focus on economic and social development, particularly in trade facilitation and investment. The IORA has six priority areas and two cross cutting areas such as: Maritime Safety and Security, Trade and Investment Facilitation, Fisheries management, Disaster Risk management, Tourism and cultural exchanges, Academic, Science and Technology cooperations, blue economy and Women's economic empowerment[2]. There is no official list for observers for IORA. Various countries and organizations have expressed interest to join IORA

1 Indian Ocean Naval Symposium, 'IONS Official Website', https://www.ions.global (accessed 19 October 2025).

2 Indian Ocean Rim Association, 'IORA Official Website', https://www.iora.int (accessed 19 November 2025).

and participate in related conferences. Notable exception to the member list is Pakistan. Pakistan is a member of IONS but not in the IORA.

Bay of Bengal Multi Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC): BIMSTEC, is a regional organization of seven South and Southeast Asian countries: Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Thailand. Founded in 1997, it aims to promote cooperation in various areas like trade, technology, and security to foster sustainable development and prosperity in the Bay of Bengal (BoB)region. The organization is focused on economic integration and regional security. The main objectives of the BIMSTEC are to act as a bridge between South and Southeast Asia, foster economic integration, enhance regional security, and serve as a platform for addressing global challenges like protectionism and trade wars [1]. Since of late BIMSTEC has a heavy focus on Maritime Security as well. BIMSTEC has got a new lease of life because South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) has become redundant at the summit level. India is also supporting BIMSTEC as Pakistan is not a member and also it coincides with India's Look East Policy.

A notable achievement took place in April 2025 when BIMSTEC and IORA signed a MoU to cooperate on regional security and development challenges [2]. This collaboration focuses on shared areas like the blue economy, maritime security, disaster management, trade, and scientific cooperation, aiming to promote sustainable development and prosperity in the Bay of Bengal and the wider Indian Ocean regions. It is necessary to wait and see how this MoU work in the future.

Although there are three major functioning regional organization for discussing about Maritime Security in the IOR, none of these have contributed to enhance maritime security in a significant manner.

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1 Bay of Bengal Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation, 'Member States', https://bimstec.org/member-states (accessed 19 October 2025).

2 BIMSTEC, 'Memorandum of Understanding Signed between BIMSTEC and IORA', (2025), https://bimstec.org/iora (accessed 25 October 2025).

## 9. The Indian Ocean Maritime Security and China's Global Security Initiative (GSI) and Global Governance Initiative (GGI)

The World is witnessing large scale unpredictable violent events. Some of these result in large-scale loss of lives, destruction of property, habitats and livelihood of people. Some recent examples are Russian-Ukraine War, U.S./Israel-Iran War, Israel-Hams Conflict and the Houthi rebels attacking merchant ships passing in the Gulf of Aden and Red Sea. These terrible events have entailed unintended consequences, e.g., higher oil prices, negative impact on global supply chains, food security and large-scale displacement of people. International response to some of these events are contrary to what the West preaches about human rights and freedom. Rather than finding ways and means to end the conflict through diplomacy, negotiations and discussions, some countries provide weapons to fan warfighting and hence killings. The United Nations, international/ regional organizations do not seem to be capable of stopping these armed conflicts.

Technology is evolving fast and should benefit the people. But some forces use these developed technologies to target and kill people indiscriminately. The matters are now made worse by dual-use technology such as AI, unmanned drones and autonomous weapons etc. Target is determined, weapons released and attacks done by Drones. What about collateral damages? Principle of proportionality, selective targeting are increasingly being challenged by AI and unmanned/ uncrewed platforms.

Under these circumstances, the world needs to revisit the efficacy of existing mechanisms which are there to maintain peace and order. The world needs to look at alternative Chinese initiatives such as GSI and GGI to maintain peace in this modern era. The core concepts and principles of the GSI call the world to pursue common, comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable security. Comprehensive security as a new notion has now included a great variety of issues dealing with traditional as well as non-traditional security aspects. True security cannot be achieved without actual cooperation and collaboration. Development and economic empowerment eliminate some root causes of breeding insecurity.

According to the GGI comprehensive security is achievable by respecting international law, sovereignty and territorial integrity of all nations. The GSI concept calls to maintain the basic legal principles and fundamental norms governing international relations including non-interference in internal affairs of countries. This advocacy counters recent practices of some powerful countries and allies engaged in invading or interfering in internal matters of other countries in the name of fight against terrorism or promoting democracy. Such double-standards have made the situation in those countries and regions worst after prolonged occupation by outside powers. Hence the GSI offers solutions to the problems of individual countries, that is, problem solving must be found by implicated countries themselves with the support from the regional and international community such as funding and capacity building. As suggested by the GSI security making concerns all countries: security of one country should not be attained at the expenses of insecurity of another and it should not be realized through military buildup and preparations for confrontations. Hence world security must be one of balanced, effective, and sustainable and through diplomacy and dialogue in settling disputes rather than engaging in fighting. Indeed, the goal of the GSI is to transform conflicts to lasting peace based on nurturing trust and confidence among various parties to a conflict, not to create fear psychosis which led to confrontations[1].

China proposes the GGI to rectify the problems of a global order constructed under superpower domination, and reshape it amid turbulent changes in the international system. The United Nations authority and multilateralism are being challenged. The deficit in global governance continues to worsen. The collective rise of emerging economies and developing countries necessitates wider representation of the Global South in world governance and rectification of historical injustice. The implementation of the U.N. 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is

1 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 'Implementing the Global Security Initiative to Build a World of Lasting Peace and Universal Security', (2022), https://www.mfa.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xw/wjbxw/202405/t20240530_11343977.html (accessed 20 October 2025).

seriously lagging. Issues such as climate change and the digital divide are becoming more salient. Biodiversity beyond National Jurisdiction Agreement (BBJN), also known as the "High Seas Treaty," a historic international agreement for conservation of marine life in international waters, has been ratified by the United Nations. However, the implementation needs strong commitment especially from developed countries, a central emphasis by Beijing's GGI. Governance gaps exist in new frontiers such as AI, cyberspace and outer space. China's GGI is meant to promote the building of a more just and equitable global governance system and a shared future for humanity. This process, as advocated by the GGI, is driven by staying commitment to sovereign equality, international rule of law, true multilateralism, a people-centered approach of security and efforts to attain real results[1].

What the GGI has promoted will provide eventual solution to problems in the world and the IOR where conflict persists and people suffer. The world needs to seriously study the core concepts of GSI and GGI and work towards to make the world more stable and peaceful.

## 10. Cyber and Maritime Security Nexus

Cyber security is the practice of protecting computer systems and networks, while maritime security is the broader practice of protecting the maritime domain from threats, including cyber threats. Maritime cyber risk refers to a measure of the extent to which a technology asset could be threatened by a potential circumstance or event, which may result in shipping-related operational, safety or security failures as a consequence of information or systems being corrupted, lost or compromised[2]. In today's interconnected world, cyber security is a critical component of maritime security because ships, ports, and infrastructure rely on digital systems for navigation, operations, and logistics. A successful cyberattack on the maritime sector can lead to operational paralysis, financial loss, accidents, and even

1 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 'Concept Paper on the Global Governance Initiative', (2025), https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/ (accessed 19 October 2025).

2 International Maritime Organization, 'Maritime Cyber Risk', https://www.imo.org/en/ourwork/security/pages/cyber-security.aspx (accessed 5 November 2025).

geopolitical conflicts. Maritime cybersecurity focuses on protecting everything from onboard navigation and control systems to ashore port management and communication networks. Disruptions can cause significant financial and economic impacts, as well as pose risks to human safety, leading to potential accidents, environmental disasters, and geopolitical instability. The IMO promotes risk management to identify, assess, and mitigate cyber risks in the maritime sector. The overall goal is to support safe and secure shipping, which is operationally resilient to cyber risks. Global Positioning System (GPS) spoofing is a recently observed phenomena in the middle-east region. There were occasions of ships location marked in the middle of desert or on top of mountains. The navigators were compelled to use basic aid to navigation such as compass, paper charts and radar to find their ships location and to carry out safe passages.

## 11. Conclusion and Way Forward

Maritime security in the Indian Ocean Region has evolved into a complex, multidimensional challenge encompassing both traditional and non-traditional threats. The region's strategic waterways—such as the Bab el-Mandeb, Gulf of Aden, and the broader Indo-Pacific Sea lanes—are vital arteries for global trade and energy flows, but have increasingly become vulnerable to piracy, insurgent attacks, and geopolitical rivalry. The resurgence of maritime threats since 2008 and the recent instability caused by Houthi attacks underscore the persistent fragility of these sea lines of communication.

Major power competition has transformed the IOR into a central arena of strategic contestation. The rise of China and the growing involvement of other extra-regional powers have created a "Maritime Cool War", which has intensified competition over influence, access, and dominance. While numerous infrastructure and connectivity initiatives are underway, China's BRI remains the most financially robust, reshaping regional geopolitics and maritime dynamics. In parallel, the adverse impacts of climate change, rising sea levels, and environmental degradation have compounded the

region's security challenges, and demanded urgent and coordinated responses.

As the principal resident power, India plays a pivotal role in shaping regional maritime domain awareness and fostering cooperative mechanisms. Smaller states like Sri Lanka, strategically positioned along the key east—west trade routes, have faced both the opportunities and vulnerabilities as they are at the crossroads of major power competition. Although regional organizations such as IORA, IONS, and BIMSTEC have been established to promote maritime cooperation, their roles and contributions have so far been limited and fragmented.

The IOR's future stability depends on the peaceful resolution of disputes, strategic restraints among rival powers, and the development of a comprehensive maritime security architecture anchored in international law and mutual trust. The region must pursue inclusive, win-win solutions rather than zero-sum rivalries, as they pursue a rules-based maritime order and effective multilateral frameworks. In an era of global turbulence and weakened faith in traditional multilateralism, alternative initiatives like the GSI and GGI may provide pathways toward shared security and prosperity. Ultimately, sustained peace, stability, and cooperation in the Indian Ocean Region are essential not only for regional actors but for the stability of the entire global maritime system.

Look into the future a holistic maritime security approach is essential. Policies should strengthen legal frameworks, expand domain awareness, enhance regional capacity, integrate environmental resilience, and institutionalize crisis communication to prevent escalation. Sustained cooperation is vital to securing shared maritime interests in an increasingly contested region.