

Webinar Summary Report

Maritime Security in the Indo-Pacific: An Opportunity for Australia, Japan and Europe?

3 November 2020 (Zoom)

1. Background

The Indo-Pacific region has become increasingly defined by mounting interstate tensions and great power rivalries, putting the rules-based order and institutions that underpin it under strain. This new strategic dynamic provides an opportunity for like-minded partners to work together to reinforce the multilateral system and step up in support of stability and prosperity in the region.

Australia, Japan and Europe share many common economic and strategic interests in the Indo-Pacific, including the need to ensure a free, safe and secure maritime environment. Against this background, the webinar brought together distinguished experts and senior policy practitioners from the three regions to discuss the interconnected relations, interests and objectives in the region and explore potential areas for future cooperation.

Divided into two parts, a **closed-door seminar** first brought together over forty participants from the three respective regions to discuss the common interests and explore possible avenues for cooperation. A subsequent **public roundtable** presented the key findings to the wider audience. The event was organized by the newly established Japan Program at the VUB in cooperation with the Australian Embassy to Belgium, Luxembourg and Mission to the EU and NATO, and the Japanese Embassy to Belgium and Mission to NATO.

2. Identifying challenges

All three parties agreed on the most pressing concerns for the regional maritime security environment, with **China's growing military assertiveness** in the East and South China Sea, as well as in the Strait of Taiwan at the forefront. China's intrusions in the territorial waters of the Senkaku islands have been a priority concern to Japan, infringing on Tokyo's territorial integrity and challenging its effective control of the area. The fact that China is trying to change the status quo by force and is violating key principles of the Law of the Sea, threatening freedom of navigation in the Indo-Pacific is a core concern to Japan, Europe and Australia.

The growing risk of a zero-sum game stemming from the **Sino-American rivalry** and the ongoing battle of narratives, accentuated in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, has been

also identified as by all partners as a major factor deteriorating the region's overall security environment – that needs to be addressed through joint efforts.

The proliferation of China's **disinformation campaigns** has been a growing concern for Indo-Pacific democracies, targeting Japan, as well as the Quadrilateral security partnership. Beijing's **interference operations** in national politics has been a major source of concern for Canberra, but also Brussels, which has been increasingly preoccupied by China's assertive diplomatic discourse and growing political influence across the continent.

Besides the many traditional security concerns (including piracy and terrorism), all parties agreed on the worrying trend of **environmental degradation and resource depletion**, as well as the negative impact of **climate change** on the region's rich and fragile marine natural environment. Environmental security has been a key issue of preoccupation for the European Union and its Member States in their Indo-Pacific outlooks.

3. Interests and approaches

The promotion of rule of law at sea remains a priority for the three like-minded partners. The need for a coalition of democracies to share insights on maritime norms and promote a rules-based order in the region is as an overarching rationale for cooperation. The EU and Japan can use their "reputational capital" and join forces within multilateral institutions. The first step could be the enforcement of the 2016's judgement of the Permanent Court of Arbitration on the South China Sea at the UN level. Normative power is essential within the Indo-Pacific context.

The need to **uphold multilateralism** to contain the rising tide of great power politics and promote cooperative and diplomatic solutions in conflicts and crisis is a way to bridge the growing divide between Washington and Beijing and lower the risk of military confrontation in the region.

Building resilience of small island nations in the Indo-Pacific is also important to maintain a balanced, multipolar region. Economically weak, but strategically important, small island nations are most vulnerable to China's assertive economic diplomacy. Greater coordination between the three dialogue partners is necessary to move beyond the development rhetoric to a more political engagement and capacity building.

The promotion of **sustainable connectivity and quality infrastructure** development is key to a safer and more transparent investment environment and more prosperous Indo-Pacific - providing a viable alternative to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The EU-Japan Partnership for Sustainable Connectivity or the Australia-Japan-US Blue Dot Network initiative are steps in the right direction.

Maritime capacity building to empower the small and medium Indo-Pacific actors in South and Southeast Asia is a promising way forward. The EU has been providing capacity building in **Maritime Domain Awareness** – through its projects on critical maritime infrastructure in the Indian Ocean region and beyond. Japan has been providing capacity building in Southeast Asia and East Africa, improving port facilities and Coast Guard vessels. Australia is also participating to the build-up of maritime capacities of Southeast Asian and South Pacific countries.

While there is a given “geographical division of labour”, with each partner focusing on certain sub-regions depending on pre-existing relationships or special interests (Japan in Northeast Asia, Australia in South Pacific etc.), many issues are of global concern and impact and need to be addressed at the multilateral level.

4. Partnerships and institutional frameworks

The QUAD (Quadrilateral Security Partnership, including Australia, Japan, India and the US) is seen as a prime formation for promoting common interests in the region for Canberra and Tokyo. The QUAD Foreign Ministers’ Meeting, held in Tokyo on 6 October, and the subsequent Malabar drill involving the four partners demonstrated the deepening of the security cooperation. At the same time, the COVID-19 crisis highlighted the importance of expanding both the membership, in a flexible manner through the “QUAD Plus” dialogue, and the areas of cooperation, touching health crisis management and the resilience of Global Value Chains. European countries remain reluctant to officially join so far, cautious of the negative perception of the initiative by China.

NATO’s involvement in the Indo-Pacific region is followed with great attention and expectations by Japan and Australia, who welcome the broadened focus of the Organisation on China and global threats. Besides strengthening cooperation with Japan and Australia, NATO could reach out to other like-minded regional partners – in South and South Asia – providing capacity-building and strengthening their strategic autonomy. Setting up a study group on the Indo-Pacific within NATO could be a possible first step.

Diversifying security relationships among like-minded partners has been a new trend across the region. While relying on its alliance with the US, Japan has boosted security ties with India, Australia, European countries and NATO among other, emphasizing the need for “multilateral deterrence” vis à vis China. Outside of the QUAD framework, Australia has been multiplying defence partnership with Japan, India, but also France and Germany, welcoming the increased European interest in the Indo-Pacific.

Building on operational experiences gained within the international anti-piracy deployments in the Gulf of Aden is most valuable to further enhance interoperability between navies. Since 2008, the multinational crisis management efforts enabled the improve communication,

understanding and overall interaction between the naval forces of the EU, Japan, Australia through ship visits and joint exercises, facilitating future operational cooperation.

5. Avenues for trilateral cooperation

Trilateral cooperation could take the form of informal consultation and coordination at several levels. At the **UN-level**, the three partners could join forces in promoting rules-based solutions to international crisis, starting with the enforcement of the 2016 PCA ruling in the case of the South China Sea. The series of depositions of *note verbales* to the UN Security Council by Australia, Indonesia, Malaysia and recently Germany, France and Great Britain could announce the formation of a broader international coalition in that respect.

Politically, the three could coordinate and support each other's efforts within the region's various **multilateral fora**, such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM Plus), the Extended ASEAN Maritime Forum (EAMF) or the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA).

The three partners could also try to increase their coordination to mitigate the side-effects of the Sino-US rivalry. They could do that reaching out to the US and China and trying to shape their choices to prefer cooperation over confrontation and multilateral solutions over unilateralism. Another important way is simply to provide an alternative to the Indo-Pacific countries who do not want to choose a side between the US and China.

At the operational level, cooperation in developing maritime surveillance and reinforce **Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR)** activities is the low hanging fruit. The three partners could engage in joint or coordinated **capacity building initiatives** by providing Indo-Pacific states with both hardware - vessels and technological tools - and training and information sharing - to enhance maritime domain awareness and law-enforcement at sea

Finally, cooperation on **cross-cutting issues** of global importance, such as climate change, marine resources management, cyber and space security, blue connectivity – including in research and technological development could be encouraged.

In light of the COVID-19 crisis, the three partners could work together to mitigate the economic and health impact of the pandemics in the region, and weight to make a vaccine a public good.

6. Recommendations & way forward

- Trilateral cooperation between Australia, Japan and Europe can serve as a useful mechanism for **coordination and informal consultation** on security issues of common interest in the Indo-Pacific, serving as shared operational concept. The most practical format would be a dialogue at the **Foreign Minister's level**.
- Australia, Japan and Europe should enhance coordination and consider joint initiatives to support the **development and resilience of small island nations** within the Indo-Pacific region.
- Australia, Japan and Europe can join forces diplomatically in **defence of maritime rules-based order** at the UN level, as well as within the framework of existing regional multilateral structures.
- **Operational cooperation on functional issues** should be pursued, notably in the fields of regional connectivity, Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief, cyber security, capacity building activities and joint trainings.