

Research Brief

No.2

Developments in the Indo-Pacific since late 2022: new strategies and increased militarisation

The signing of a defence agreement between the United States (US) and Papua New Guinea (PNG) in May 2023 - and this against the backdrop of the security pact signed between the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the Solomon Islands in 2022 - indicates that the Indo-Pacific is becoming increasingly contested as major powers vie for influence in the regionⁱ. Recognising the importance of this region, Bangladesh has become the latest country to release a strategic document. In the "Indo-Pacific Outlook of Bangladesh", the country identifies a stable and prosperous Indo-Pacific as vital to achieving its national development goals as articulated in its "Vision 2041". Bangladesh's actions will be guided by its "friendship towards all, malice towards none" dictum, and specific attention is directed at addressing non-traditional security threats, such as climate change, marine pollution, and

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advancing the "women, peace and security" agendaⁱⁱ. The Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) Outlook, officially adopted in November 2022, also includes women's economic empowerment as part of its areas outlined for cooperation with Indo-Pacific countries, and it similarly emphasises the need to address crucial challenges to the stability of the region



such as promoting sustainable use of maritime resources, especially in the face of climate changeⁱⁱⁱ.

Apart from these commonalities, both these outlooks are clear in not identifying or choosing one side over the other, something that also reflects in South Korea's Indo-Pacific Strategy released in November 2022. South Korea, while aspiring to become a "Global Pivotal State", posits that "our inclusive Indo-Pacific Strategy targets nor excludes any specific nation" and that they are willing to work with every like-minded partner from Southeast Asia, South Asia, Oceania and the African coast of the Indian Ocean^{iv}. This is in stark contrast to Canada's Indo-Pacific Strategy (launched at the end of 2022) that clearly targets China as "an increasingly disruptive global power" owing to its "assertive pursuit of its economic and security interests, advancement of unilateral claims, foreign interference and increasingly coercive treatment of other countries"^v.

Even the Czech Republic's Indo-Pacific Strategy, published in October 2022, explicitly identifies China as a threat, arguing that "China's growing ambitions and assertive (if not confrontational) approach have given rise to tense political, economic and security

relationships with countries within the Indo-Pacific and beyond.^{vi}" A further point of divergence between Canada and the Czech Republic's strategy, and the strategy of South Korea, is Canada's and the Czech Republic's exclusion of Africa as part of the Indo-Pacific. While Canada aims to work with The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) and the Pacific Islands Forum, no reference is made to Africa nor to the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA). Similarly, the Czech Republic outlines that the Indo-Pacific refers to the territory bounded by the Indian and Pacific Oceans, but then completely excludes the coast of Africa from consideration, naming only East Asian, Southeast Asian, and Oceania and Pacific states.

Increased militarisation?

While some countries have emphasised non-traditional security threats in their strategy documents, other actors are looking to increase their presence in the region in terms of more traditional military-political understandings of security. At the second European Union (EU) Indo-Pacific Ministerial Forum held in Stockholm in May, the EU expressed its desire to introduce a "meaningful European naval presence in the Indo-



Pacific region including through the implementation of a Coordinated Maritime Presence in the North West Indian Ocean”^{vii}.

Similarly, speaking at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore in April, German Defence Minister Boris Pistorius confirmed that Germany would deploy a frigate and a supply ship to the Indo-Pacific in 2024^{viii}. Canada’s Indo-Pacific strategy states that it will augment its naval presence in the region by increasing the number of frigates deployed^{ix}, whilst a joint statement released by the leaders of the Australia, United Kingdom, and United States (AUKUS) partnership - in the context of creating a prosperous and free Indo-Pacific - announced that Australia would begin to acquire conventionally armed, nuclear-powered submarines^x.

In early February US Defence Secretary Austin visited the Philippines and announced that under the “Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement” four new military sites, along with the five already existing sites, would become operational^{xi}. These sites will provide the platform for joint military training and exercises. The Philippines have also agreed to enhance security cooperation during the inaugural quadrilateral talks with Japan, the US and Australia.

According to Acting Defence Secretary Carlito Galvez Jr. the possibility of expanding the joint Philippine and US military exercise, “Balikatan,” into a multilateral exercise with its allies was also discussed^{xii}. In the beginning of June, at a meeting of the military commanders of the ASEAN member states, ASEAN announced that it would hold an inaugural joint military exercise in the South China Sea which will be known as ASEAN Solidity Exercises. However, ASEAN has been quick to point out that these drills are not focused on combat training but rather aimed at reinforcing ASEAN centrality^{xiii}. Closer to home, South Africa, together with Russia and China, conducted naval exercises - Mosi II - in February^{xiv}.

The increased military presence in the region often goes hand in hand with aims and objectives related to non-traditional security threats. The US, for example, has stated that its new security cooperation with the Philippines includes a focus on addressing natural and humanitarian disasters, while Japan has expressed a similar sentiment, positing that the defence arrangement signed between Japan and the Philippines will allow Japanese troops to “join training exercises to respond to natural disasters



and humanitarian needs in the Philippines”^{xv}.

Even Canada has stated in its strategy that its military will work with its counterparts to improve resilience to climate-related disasters. It remains to be seen whether the issue of climate change and using the military to respond to non-traditional security threats is simply being used as a pretext to enhance states’ military presence in the Indo-Pacific, especially as a means to counter China’s influence.

Upcoming events

Considering the above-mentioned, developments in the Indo-Pacific can be expected to increase and there are several more events scheduled for 2023 that may prove to be interesting. At the time of writing, the second U.S. Indo-Pacific Conference (14th - 15th June) was underway, with the conference focusing on US relations with ASEAN and the Quad (Australia, India, Japan and the US), as well as the US’ Indo-Pacific Economic

Framework (IPEF)^{xvi}. Then, as part of its “Futures in the Indo-Pacific” initiative, launched in January of 2023, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) will be hosting expert discussions on the topic of the implications of the Indo-Pacific for the Euro-Atlantic area, in Canberra, Tokyo and Paris throughout 2023^{xvii}. Indonesia, the current chair of ASEAN, is set to host the first high-level ASEAN Indo-Pacific Forum in early September, alongside the East Asia Summit^{xviii}. The summit will promote the theme “ASEAN Matters: Epicentrum of Growth” which positions ASEAN as a force and means of stability in the region^{xix}. Lastly, between the 6th and 10th November 2023, the 52nd Pacific Islands Forum Leaders Meeting will be held under the theme “Our Voices, Our Choices, Our Pacific Way: Promote, Partner, Prosper” in the Cooks Islands^{xx}. This meeting is especially important as the President of Palau has stated that he will bring up the issue of Chinese vessels entering Palau’s exclusive economic zone in May^{xxi}. •

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