

Chapter 2

MARITIME COOPERATION BETWEEN NON-MAJOR POWER STAKEHOLDERS IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA: JAPAN'S CAPABILITY AND LIMITATIONS

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China's assertive behavior in the maritime domain since the 2010s has concerned regional states, including Japan. China has intruded into the territorial sea and contiguous zone around the Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea by claiming sovereignty over them. It has also asserted administrative rights over a large part of the South China Sea and reclaimed land on shoals and reefs despite disputed sovereignty claims by regional states. Furthermore, China is trying to control the resource extractions by blocking fishing and resource exploitation by regional states. China's assertiveness in the South China Sea has posed a broader challenge to the regional maritime order that has hitherto been supported by the United States and the United Nations Convention of the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).

Concerned about China's challenges in the maritime domain, Japan has become increasingly vocal and proactive, promoting maritime cooperation. While an ongoing debate argues that Japan primarily views its interests through the lens of its territorial dispute with China over the Senkaku Islands,¹ for Japan – a maritime trading nation whose sea lanes pass directly through the South China Sea – maintaining a stable maritime order is a vital national interest. At the same time, Japan's peace constitution prohibits the use of force for settling international disputes, leading Tokyo to rely primarily on diplomatic and other non-military means. This paper chapter examines (1) Japan's assessment of escalation risks over the next five years and (2) the measures Japan is taking to avert escalation. As a policy recommendation, it suggests that Japan should continue to devote resources to nurturing multi-layered cooperation with like-minded states in order to enhance the regional stability.

Japan's assessment of the situation in the South China Sea

Japan has long expressed concern over China's assertive behaviour in the maritime domain, and especially since the 2000s. The concern became more clearly articulated when Prime Minister Shinzo Abe first set out the “three principles”,² outlining the principles governing states' conduct at sea, at the 2014 Shangri-la Dialogue. In the meantime, although China's behaviour has become increasingly assertive, Japan's basic

¹ Paul Midford, Japan's Approach to the South China Sea: Quietly Balancing China from A Distance, Japan Up Close, September 26, 2024, https://japanupclose.web-japan.org/policy/p20240926_4.html.

² (i) making and clarifying claims based on international law, (ii) not using force or coercion in trying to drive their claims, and (iii) seeking to settle disputes by peaceful means. See, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, “Keynote Address by H.E. Mr. Shinzo Abe, Prime Minister of Japan at the 13th IISS Asian Security Summit “Shangri-La Dialogue”,” May 30, 2014, https://www.mofa.go.jp/fp/nsp/page18e_000087.html.

assessment remained essentially unchanged. For instance, at a recent Japan-Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) summit meeting, newly elected Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi presented a severe assessment regarding the security environment in the region, criticising militarisation and coercive activities in the South China Sea as a cause of regional tension. She underlined Japan's determination not to acquiesce in any unjust maritime claims and activities that are not based on the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).³ Japan has also opposed the dangerous and coercive use of Coast Guard vessels, maritime militia and aircrafts.⁴ In particular, Japan's concern was further reinforced by China's adoption of the 2021 Coast Guard Law that includes problematic provisions – such as vague definitions of applicable maritime areas and the authority to use weapons against foreign vessels. The maritime militia and fishermen operating in the South China Sea has also presented a serious concern because China has used them to change the status quo without using the military.⁵

Japan's concern was further strengthened by Russia's aggression against Ukraine. As Prime Minister Kishida's statement "Ukraine today may be East Asia tomorrow" in 2022 illustrates, Japan has feared that a similar situation may arise in the future in East Asia. Japan considered that this development, coupled with China's assertiveness in the maritime domain and the probability of Taiwan contingency, signals a significant change in power balances, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region.⁶

Judging from the current situation, the Japanese government has concluded that "China seeks to expand its presence and enhance war-sustaining and other joint operational capabilities" in the South China Sea.⁷ In light of China's recent sea and airspace activities, Japan judges that China plans to further expand the areas of its activities and intensify its operations in waters surrounding Japan, including the East China Sea, and South China Sea, as well as the broader maritime areas such as the Pacific Ocean, and the Indian Ocean.⁸ Since Japan assesses the security environment in the South China Sea is directly related to not only peace and stability of the region but a broader rules-based international order,⁹ it has taken the situation seriously and adopted a more proactive stance in upholding the existing maritime order.

Measures to avert escalation

Although Japan is not a disputant in the South China Sea, it has a strong interest in the stability of the sea because of its heavy dependence on maritime trade for imports of food,

³ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan, "28th Japan-ASEAN Summit," October 26, 2025, https://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/rp/pageite_000001_00004.html

⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan, "Recent Surge in Tensions in the South China Sea," August 27, 2024, https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/pressite_000001_00562.html.

⁵ Ministry of Defense, Japan, *2025 Defense of Japan* (Ministry of Defense, Japan, 2025), 65.

⁶ Ministry of Defense, Japan, *2025 Defense of Japan*, 32.

⁷ Ministry of Defense, Japan, 76.

⁸ Ministry of Defense, Japan, 78.

⁹ Ministry of Defense, Japan, 16.

oil, and other resources, most of which passes through this area. It also has a territorial dispute with China over the Senkaku Islands, and stability around these islands is closely linked to developments in the South China Sea. In addition, destabilising developments in the South China Sea risk weakening the rules-based maritime order underpinned by UNCLOS. Japan has therefore sought to prevent further escalation of tensions in the South China Sea.

Japan's policy, however, cannot be reduced to a simple strategy of "containment" vis-à-vis China. Rather, it is better understood as a de-escalatory strategy that seeks to strengthen coastal states' maritime law-enforcement and crisis-management capabilities, thereby reducing the risk of accidental clashes and escalation at sea. It is also a strategy of networking that aims to build a tie with as many like-minded states as possible. Because Japan's peace constitution prohibits its employment of military means to settle a dispute, its strategy is essentially diplomatic and less confrontational. Roughly speaking, Japan's measures to curb regional tensions are twofold: Bilateral approach to the regional states, in particular, the Philippines, Vietnam and Indonesia, multilateral approach including minilateral approach with like-minded states, such as Quad, the Trilateral Security Dialogue and Squad.

Bilateral approaches

Japan has relied primarily on its economic strength and the employment of the Japan Coast Guard (JCG), although in recent years it has expanded these measures to include support from the Japan Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) as well. Long-term good relationships with the regional states, nurtured by successive Japanese governments, enabled the country to deepen security cooperation with the regional states.

Since the 1990s, Japan has employed JCG in providing assistance in maritime domain. While the JCG's support was limited to ensuring the safety of the sea lanes at an early stage, in the 2010s, its role shifted and expanded to encompass security aspects, helping regional states in enhancing law enforcement capabilities of their Coast Guards.¹⁰ China, for its part, has employed grey zone tactics by using its Coast Guard, militia and fishermen, thereby avoiding a direct military confrontation by the People's Liberation Army Navy and the regional militaries while seeking to change the status quo – for example, by seizing disputed reefs and shoals and tightening its control over surrounding waters. As a result, competition for the administration of the maritime area and shoals, reefs and uninhabited islands between China and the regional states have been largely played out by their respective coast guards. Reinforcing the Coast Guards' capabilities was therefore essential for effective crisis management in the maritime domain.

¹⁰ Kyoko Hatakeyama, "A Middle Power's Roles in Shaping East Asian Security Order: Analysis of Japan's Engagement from a Normative Perspective," *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 65, no. 3 (2019): 466-481.

Japan's assistance was mainly provided bilaterally. For instance, since the early 2010s, Japan has provided the Philippine Coast Guard with more than ten patrol vessels, including large multi-role response vessels, as well as smaller high-speed boats and maritime law-enforcement equipment. It provided two 97meters-class patrol vessels to the Philippine Coast Guard in 2022 to improve its capability and agility for maritime law enforcement and rescue mission.¹¹ It has also conducted continuous practical training on boarding, search and rescue, and other operational skills. In addition, it dispatched the Japan Coast Guard Mobile Cooperation Team, which is a team of officers with specialised knowledge and advanced skill in boarding, search and rescue.

Japan and the Philippines have also deepened its security ties. The two states concluded the Japan-Philippines Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA) that establishes procedures for cooperative activities conducted by the forces of Japan and the Philippines while visiting each other's territory, and that defines a legal status during such developments. In 2025, they reached an agreement in principle on an Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA),¹² a defence framework allowing their militaries for reciprocal provision of supplies and services. They also deepened ties through the newly created scheme, Official Security Assistance (OSA),¹³ which aimed to provide defence equipment and other items free of charge to the armed forces of like-minded countries. Hitherto, Japan had been long prohibited to export arms and weapons under the arms export ban policy. However, in 2023, the government relaxed the regulations to a large degree, allowing the Japanese companies to export defence equipment. Under this new scheme, Japan decided to provide coastal surveillance radar worth approximately 1600 million yen to the Philippines in December 2024.¹⁴

The reason for Japan's focus on the Philippines is clear. The Philippines has long-standing disputes with China and has frequently confronted Chinese vessels over shoals and islands within its Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs). It has the experience of Mischief Reef and Scarborough Shoal – features that were once under its effective control – being subsequently taken over by China.

Japan's support is not limited to the Philippines but has been extended to other ASEAN states. Vietnam is another state that has a dispute with China. Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) has supplied refurbished patrol vessels and related equipment to Vietnam and extended yen loans up to about 37 billion yen for the

¹¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan, "Prime Minister Ishiba Shigeru's Visit to the Philippines (Visit to the Philippine Coast Guard)," Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan, April 30, 2025, https://www.mofa.go.jp/s_sa/sea2/ph/pageite_000001_00953.html?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

¹² Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan, "Japan-Philippines Summit Meeting, 26 October 2025," October 26, 2025, https://www.mofa.go.jp/s_sa/sea2/ph/pageite_000001_01325.html.

¹³ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan, "Official Security Assistance (OSA)," December 5, 2025, https://www.mofa.go.jp/fp/ipc/page4e_001366.html.

¹⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan, "Official Security Assistance (OSA) Programme in Implementation FY2024," March 13 2025, https://www.mofa.go.jp/fp/ipc/pagewe_001067_00001.html.

construction of new coast guard vessels for the Vietnam Coast Guard.¹⁵ Indonesia has likewise benefited from Japan's capacity-building schemes. Tokyo has decided to provide 85 meters large patrol vessel to BAKAMLA, transferred related equipment, and dispatched the Mobile Cooperation Team to improve maritime law-enforcement capabilities.¹⁶ Malaysia also welcomed hand-over of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) and rescue boats through Japan's OSA, as well as new agreement for the provision of a diving support vessel and other equipment.¹⁷

Multilateral approaches

Japan's first step at multilateral level was the creation of a forum. Noticing the growing importance of maritime security, Japan proposed to establish a forum to discuss maritime cooperation among the East Asia Summit (EAS) participating countries. The Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum (AMF) was launched in October 2012. The framework, which involved China, aimed to discuss maritime issues to prevent escalation of confrontation and promote confidence building through dialogue.

More importantly, in 2016, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe announced the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) vision and emphasised the importance of the rule of law, prosperity, diversity and openness. By presenting a concept that highlights commitment to the rules-based maritime order in the Indo-Pacific region, he reminded the international community of the importance of maintaining the current maritime order underpinned by UNCLOS. His argument prompted debate not only among regional states but also in the United States and Europe regarding how best to preserve freedom of the seas and the existing maritime order. By stressing the importance of the rule of law, Japan implicitly criticised China's assertive behaviour in the maritime domain.¹⁸

Subsequently, the regional states announced their vision on the regional order. Partly influenced by FOIP, ASEAN announced ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP). Japan soon expressed support for this initiative and has been building up concrete cooperation in line with AOIP's priority areas of maritime cooperation, connectivity, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and economic and other possible areas of

¹⁵ Japan International Cooperation Agency, "Signing of Japanese ODA Loan Agreement with Viet Nam: Strengthening the maritime security and safety capability of the Vietnam Coast Guard," Japan International Cooperation Agency, July 30, 2020, https://www.jica.go.jp/english/information/press/2020/20200730_31_en.html.

¹⁶ Japan Coast Guard, "The JCG Provided Capacity-Building Assistance to the Indonesia Coast Guards (Summary of result) – Promoting Our Efforts toward the FOIP –," Japan Coast Guard, July 26, 2024, https://www.kaiho.mlit.go.jp/e/topics_archive/article6623.html.

¹⁷ Embassy of Japan in Malaysia, "Handover ceremony for UAV provided through OSA," Embassy of Japan in Malaysia, September 22, 2025, https://www.my.emb-japan.go.jp/itpr_en/newinfo_22092025.html.

¹⁸ For instance, please see Ministry of Defense, Japan, "Minister of Defense Nakatani's Participation in the 11th ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus," Ministry of Defense, Japan, November 21, 2024, https://www.mod.go.jp/en/d_act/exc/admm/admmplus_11.html.

cooperation. To support the AOIP, Japan had conducted 89 projects with ASEAN during 2020 and 2023.¹⁹

In addition, Japan deepened defence cooperation with ASEAN under Vientiane vision 1.0 (2016) and 2.0 (2019) to promote Japan-ASEAN defence ties. These visions aimed to promote joint training and exercise between the militaries of Japan and ASEAN through, for instance, Japan-ASEAN Ship Rider Cooperation Program, the Japan-ASEAN Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HA/DR) invitation programme, and joint military training with ASEAN countries at Indo-Pacific Deployment.²⁰ In the past, Japan's role in the security domain was not regarded as a viable option given its aggressive history during the Pacific War. However, China's growing assertiveness has paved the way, enabling Japan to assume a more active security role. The initiatives for promoting defence cooperation were further upgraded by JASMINE in 2023, in order to advance the principle of FOIP and to constrain unilateral moves in the maritime domain.

In addition, Japan has deepened defence cooperation with ASEAN under Vientiane vision 1.0 in 2016 and 2.0 in 2019. Japan's defence cooperation was not regarded as an option in the past given its aggressive history during the Pacific War. However, China's assertiveness paved the way, enabling Japan to play a more active security role. The initiatives for promoting defence cooperation were upgraded by JASMINE in 2023 in order to promote the principle of FOIP and block unilateral moves in the maritime domain.²¹

Japan's efforts to garner support for the maintenance of the rules-based order in the maritime domain were also directed to the European states. Even before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Japan emphasised the importance of cooperation between Japan and the European Union (EU) by linking Europe's security with Asia. Their growing ties culminated in the EU's first-time invitation to Japan's Foreign Minister Toshimitsu Motegi to attend the EU's Foreign Affairs Council online in January 2021. Motegi explained Japan's FOIP and pointed out the security challenges in the East and South China Seas and stressed the fundamental principles including the rule of law.²²

Although the EU is not a direct stakeholder of the South China Sea, some European states such as France, Germany and the UK adopted their respective Indo-Pacific Strategies, dispatching vessels and aircraft carriers to show their presence in the region. EU's willingness to play a role as a maritime security provider is also well illustrated by its

¹⁹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan, "Diplomatic Bluebook 2023," Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan, accessed December 10, 2025, https://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/other/bluebook/2023/en_html/chapter2/c020207.html.

²⁰ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan, "Progress Report on Japan's Cooperation for the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific," October 1, 2021, 3, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/100253488.pdf>.

²¹ Ministry of Defense, Japan, "JASMINE," Ministry of Defense, Japan, accessed December 10, 2025, https://www.mod.go.jp/en/d_act/exc/pdf/jasmine_en.pdf.

²² Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan, "Foreign Minister Motegi's Attendance at the EU Foreign Affairs Council (Virtual Format)," Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan, January 25, 2021, https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/press1e_000168.html.

adoption of Coordinated Maritime Presences (CMP) strategy, which aims to boost EU's capacity through coordination of the members' assets.²³ Although CMP has not implemented in the South China Sea, the EU's updated 2023 Maritime Security Strategy emphasised cooperation with Japan in the form of joint exercises and port calls. The 2023 EU-Japan Joint Statement also highlighted the potential of further cooperation between the two navies, including on 'joint exercises in the Indo-Pacific'.²⁴ Thus, even though cooperation between the EU and Japan has not yet been fully institutionalised, both sides have shown a clear willingness to work together to uphold the stability of the maritime order.

Quad

In 2017, Japan relaunched Quad, a framework of the US-Japan-Australia-India partnership. Quad was once established in 2007 by Prime Minister Abe, but soon lost momentum amongst the member states. The member states other than Japan felt uncomfortable since it seemed to be an anti-China bloc.²⁵ However, in the face of Chinese assertiveness in the 2010s, Abe revived the Quad under the slogan of upholding and reinforcing rules-based international order. The revival of the Quad was welcomed by the four states due to a shared concern among the member states about China's expansionist moves.²⁶ The joint Malabar exercise, involving the four states, also began in 2020.

At an early stage, the four states only cooperated in areas other than in the security field, failing to agree on initiating new security cooperation.²⁷ However, the Quad began to emphasise the importance of maritime security in the 2022 meeting. Its member states agreed to start the Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA) initiative.²⁸ Through IPMDA, which ostensibly focuses on non-traditional security issues in maritime realm, the Quad created a framework to monitor Chinese military and intelligence-gathering activities. Furthermore, at the 2023 meeting in Hiroshima, they demonstrated unity. In a symbolically important departure from the previous language, the statement used 'we', not 'the four states', to show their unity and solid opposition to any attempt to change the status quo unilaterally. It also emphasised the importance of

²³ European Union, "Coordinated Maritime Presences," February 21, 2024, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/coordinated-maritime-presences_en.

²⁴ European Commission, "EU-Japan Summit 2023: Joint Statement," European Council, July 13, 2023, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/07/13/eu-japan-summit-2023-joint-statement/>.

²⁵ Kyoko Hatakeyama, "Are We Ready for the Quad? Two Contradictory Goals," *Issues & Insights* 21, no.2 (2021): 28-33.

²⁶ Hatakeyama, "Are We Ready for the Quad?"

²⁷ Hatakeyama.

²⁸ Australian Government, "Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness," Australian Government, accessed December 10, 2025, <https://www.pmc.gov.au/resources/quad-leaders-summit-2023/indo-pacific-partnership-maritime-domain-awareness>.

adherence to international law, such as UNCLOS. The four states' ideas on how to address the challenges to the regional order have converged more than before.²⁹

Subsequently, the maritime cooperation became more concrete. The US Coast Guard, the JCG, Australian Border Force, and Indian Coast Guard launched a first-ever Quad-at-Sea Ship Observer Mission in 2025 in the Indo-Pacific region. As observers, the members of the coast guards of the four states go on board and spend time together to strengthen their interoperability and share knowledge to address unlawful maritime activities by learning the operational procedures of other states.³⁰ While first activities were hosted by the US, future activities are envisaged on a rotational basis.

In addition, the Quad came to extend its role to strategic economic cooperation. Playing a security role would attract Chinese censure as an 'Asian NATO', but playing an economic role was considered as less controversial, if strategic. Since India, which maintains an omnidirectional policy, was cautious not to develop the group into a quasi-alliance, this orientation was welcomed. Underlining the importance of quality infrastructure, the Quad leaders announced the Quad Partnership for Cable Connectivity and Resilience, which aimed to prioritise the development of undersea cables as a key component of regional infrastructure. They also announced the Quad Ports of the Future Partnership to develop resilient port infrastructure.³¹

The Quad also announced the first-ever Open RAN deployment in Palau, to support a secure, resilient, and open telecommunications system. Expanding open RAN collaboration in the region could replace Huawei, ZTE or other Chinese telecom firms that dominate the closed 5G system. Although the initiatives did not explicitly refer to China, the cooperation intended to provide Palau with alternatives to Chinese infrastructure assistance – cables, Open RAN, quality infrastructure. This approach was reinforced by the 2024 Quad Principles for Development and Deployment of Digital Public Infrastructure, which underlined the importance of democratic values in developing digital infrastructure.³² Offering credible alternatives to China's assistance enables regional states to take a firm stance when confronting pressure or challenges from China.

²⁹ Kyoko Hatakeyama et al., "The Quad's growing focus on maritime security," East Asia Forum, February 28 2024, <https://eastasiaforum.org/2024/02/28/the-quads-growing-focus-on-maritime-security/>.

³⁰ US Department of State, "2025 Quad Foreign Ministers' Meeting Fact Sheet," July 1 2025, <https://www.state.gov/releases/office-of-the-spokesperson/2025/07/2025-quad-foreign-ministers-meeting/>.

³¹ Australian Government, "Infrastructure," accessed December 17, 2025, <https://www.pmc.gov.au/resources/quad-leaders-summit-2023/infrastructure>.

³² Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan, "Quad Principles for Development and Deployment of Digital Public Infrastructure," September 19, 2024, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/files/100736224.pdf>.

Trilateral Security Dialogue (TSD)

The TSD between Japan, the US and Australia was launched in 2002 as an informal platform for strategic dialogues with its first meeting held in 2006.³³ Although the initial meeting aimed to respond to terrorism and regional instability, it gradually shifted its attention from terrorism to North Korea's missile launch and China's rise, particularly in light of Chinese assertiveness in the maritime domain. In the 2010s, the group increased its political weight to counter China's growing influence and assertiveness and ensure the current rules-based order, evolving into a platform facilitating three-way military cooperation.

The deepening of the TSD was reinforced by the growing defence ties between Japan and Australia.³⁴ In October 2022, the two states affirmed their strategic partnership and signed the Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation. Although this was an updated version of declaration in 2017, the new declaration cemented their security relationship. Ensuing RAA also facilitated the deepening of defence ties between the two states. After the conclusion of the RAA, in 2023, Japan's F-35A aircraft were deployed to Australia, and Australia's F-35A were similarly deployed to Japan, marking the first cooperative activities. Furthermore, they plan to conduct trilateral F-35 joint training in 2025 and 2026. Due to the growing security ties between Japan and Australia, both of which are US allies, the TSD became a 'quasi-alliance' with the US as its centre.³⁵ That is to say, the TSD has served to create a trilateral 'core' within the US alliance network in the region and became the group that strengthens collective defence.³⁶

Likewise, the Japan-U.S.-Philippines minilateral cooperation has been deepening under the US initiative, which aimed to strengthen partnership building. The three countries' navies conducted multilateral joint exercises in the South China Sea, while their maritime law-enforcement agencies initiated a high-level Coast Guard meeting and launched a Japan-United States-Philippines Maritime Dialogue in Tokyo.³⁷

Squad

Reflecting a growing interest in coordinated defence strategy, another minilateral group that emerged in 2023 is Squad, which includes Japan, the US, Australia, and the Philippines – instead of India. This framework was initiated by the US to deepen defence

³³ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan, "Trilateral Strategic Dialogue Joint Statement Australia-Japan-United States," March 18, 2006, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/australia/joint0603-2.html>.

³⁴ Kyoko Hatakeyama, "The Deepening Japan-Australia Security Relationship: Deterrence against China or Alternatives to the Region?" Asia Society, Feb 19, 2023, <https://asiasociety.org/australia/deepening-japan-australia-security-relationship-deterrence-against-china-or-alternatives-region>.

³⁵ H.D.P. Envall and Thomas S. Wilkins, "Japan and Australia: Forging an Indo-Pacific Partnership," in *Handbook of Japanese Security*, ed. Leszek Buszynski (Amsterdam University Press, 2024), 385.

³⁶ Thomas Wilkins, "US-Japan-Australia Trilateralism as the Inner 'Core' of Regional Order-Building and Deterrence in the Indo-Pacific," *Asia Policy* 19, no. 2 (2024): 159-185.

³⁷ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan, "Japan-U.S.-Philippines Maritime Dialogue," December 10, 2024, https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/press/release/pressit_000001_01491.html.

cooperation among US treaty allies. According to L.J. Austin, the US Secretary of Defense, the aim of the group was to promote the establishment of a regional security framework with an expanded network.³⁸ A joint statement issued after the second Defence Ministers' meeting explicitly criticised China for continuing its assertive maritime expansion in the East and South China Seas and expressed grave concern over its repeated obstructions to the exercise of freedom of navigation.³⁹ Similarly, they expressed concern about China's destabilising action in the maritime domain and underscoring their collaboration to advance a free and open Indo-Pacific region.⁴⁰

Under this framework, the navies of Japan, the U.S. Australia, and the Philippines conducted joint training as a Multilateral Maritime Cooperative Activity (MMCA) in the South China Sea to strengthen the effectiveness and interoperability. New Zealand also joined the activity later in the same year.⁴¹ These states also conducted joint exercise in support of a free and open Indo-Pacific in the Philippines' EEZ amidst tensions between the Philippines and China.⁴²

Thus, Japan played a role in building networks with like-minded states in order to realise the goals articulated in FOIP.⁴³ Since Japan is not a direct stakeholder in the South China Sea disputes, its efforts have focused on building networks with like-minded states and on supporting the regional states' capabilities through by various means, including joint training and exercise conducted by the JCG and the JSDF. Japan's economic strength and its diplomatic proactivism have facilitated the process.

Conclusion and policy recommendations

Japan has sought to prevent escalation in the South China Sea through diplomacy, capacity-building assistance, and defence cooperation in bilateral, multilateral, and minilateral frameworks, because it has a large stake in the South China Sea – for instance, the free flow of maritime trade which is crucial for Japanese survival as a maritime country. More importantly, the South China Sea has become a showcase for the

³⁸ Yusuke Takeuchi, "U.S., Japan Push to Expand Multilateral Security Framework", *Nikkei Asia*, June 2, 2023, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Defense/U.S.-Japan-push-to-expand-multilateral-security-framework>.

³⁹ Australian Government, "Joint Readout from Australia-Japan-Philippines-United States Defense Ministers' Meeting," Australian Government, May 4, 2024, <https://www.minister.defence.gov.au/statements/2024-05-04/joint-readout-australia-japan-philippines-united-states-defense-ministers-meeting>.

⁴⁰ US Department of War, "Joint Statement on the Meeting of Defense Ministers from Australia, Japan, the Philippines, and the United States," May 31, 2025, <https://www.war.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/4202565/joint-statement-on-the-meeting-of-defense-ministers-from-australia-japan-the-ph/>.

⁴¹ Ministry of Defense, Japan, "Japan-U.S.-Australia-Philippines-New Zealand Multilateral Exercise," Ministry of Defense, Japan, September 28, 2024, https://www.mod.go.jp/js/pdf/2024/p20240928_01e.pdf.

⁴² US Indo-Pacific Command, "Australia, Japan, Philippines, and United States Conduct Multilateral Maritime Cooperative Activity," February 5, 2025, <https://www.pacom.mil/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/4054083/australia-japan-philippines-and-united-states-conduct-multilateral-maritime-coo/>.

⁴³ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan, *Diplomatic Bluebook 2023* (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan, 2023), 18.

international community to uphold the rule of law. While Japan's constitutional constraints have limited its options, Tokyo has nonetheless built a network-based strategy in Asia to promote the rule of law and to support regional resilience through three layers of engagement – bilateral, multilateral, and minilateral diplomacy.

China has employed grey-zone tactics that creates a situation of neither war nor peace. Given this ambiguous security environment, there is room for middle powers such as Japan, together with regional states, to play a meaningful role in maintaining the existing regional order and ensuring the rule of law. For instance, Japan and like-minded states have consistently advocated the rule of law at multilateral meetings whenever possible, reminding others of the significance of this norm. Repeated articulation is important to keep the norm salient. To substantiate these claims, Japan has provided bilateral military and security assistance to improve regional states' law-enforcement capacities and their defence capabilities, which in turn has facilitated the creation of minilateral security networks. Japan's support is not confined to the security domain. The Quad's attempts to provide public goods – such as Open RAN and quality infrastructure projects – to the region are particularly noteworthy, as the provision of such public goods can help prevent regional states from becoming overly dependent on China for support.

The creation of multi-layered networks in the region has been made possible largely through Japan's initiatives. At the same time, cooperation with other middle-power states has further facilitated this networking process. Notably, Australia, alongside Japan, is a member of all the major minilateral groupings in the region, and its collaboration with Japan has been central to the deepening of these frameworks. **European states have not yet been fully incorporated into these security networks. However, given their abundant financial resources, technological capabilities, and military strength, they could play a role even if they do not frequently participate in events such as joint exercises due to geographical distance. In this context, it is important that Japan continue its efforts to create and consolidate minilateral groupings, particularly in light of the uncertainty surrounding the durability of US commitments.**

The security frameworks established so far may appear modest, as they lack the binding force and enforcement mechanisms of formal military alliances. However, the cumulative development of such groupings, underpinned by strong bilateral ties, is likely to strengthen the security and normative structure in the region over time. This, in turn, will raise the threshold for any state seeking to change the status quo by force.