

# FORUM

## NAVIGATING SECURITY

A Geopolitical Compass for Indo-Pacific Stability



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### ABOUT THE COVER

The Indo-Pacific security nexus embraces economic, geopolitical, legal and technological components of defense. FORUM ILLUSTRATION

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Dear Readers,

This edition of Indo-Pacific Defense FORUM highlights the complex interplay of traditional and nontraditional security issues that increasingly require collaboration among regional and global Allies and Partners to maintain peace and stability. Military and security forces must develop integrated strategies that embrace economic, environmental and geopolitical components, among other factors.

In this issue, University of the Philippines College of Law professor Dr. Jay L. Batongbacal examines the emerging security nexus in Southeast Asia. To counter China's escalating aggression and enhance Manila's defense posture, the Philippines is increasing partnerships with nations stretching from Europe to Northeast Asia and the South Pacific.

The New Zealand Defence Force highlights Indo-Pacific security convergence with an account of its contributions to the Enforcement Coordination Cell (ECC), working with more than a dozen nations to monitor North Korea's compliance with United Nations Security Council resolutions. The ECC, based in Yokosuka, Japan, and commanded by the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, is part of the Pacific Security Maritime Exchange formed in 2018.

In another illustration of global security coalescence, Harsh V. Pant and Sayantan Haldar of the Observer Research Foundation detail how the Indian Ocean region is not only central to the Indo-Pacific strategic theater but also entails key advantages and security constraints. By enhancing engagement with Indian Ocean Rim Association members, New Delhi is advancing regional security initiatives and bolstering cooperation, including maritime domain awareness, Pant and Haldar write.

Two articles probe how nations from Australia to Ukraine have countered influence operations and thwarted manipulated information campaigns originating from China and Russia that target public opinion and elections. Dr. Tae-Eun Song of the Korea National Diplomatic Academy proposes a collective Indo-Pacific response to authoritarian regimes' cognitive warfare.

We hope this edition fosters discussion on the Indo-Pacific as an evolving global security nexus.

Please contact the FORUM staff at [ipdf@ipdefenseforum.com](mailto:ipdf@ipdefenseforum.com) to continue the conversation and share your comments.

All the best,  
FORUM Staff

## IPD FORUM

### Global Security Nexus

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#### USINDOPACOM LEADERSHIP



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**Featured on Page 24**



**DR. TAE-EUN SONG** is an assistant professor in the Department of International Security and Unification Studies at the Korea National Diplomatic Academy, under the Republic of Korea (ROK) Foreign Affairs Ministry. She is an advisory committee member for the ROK Cyber Operations Command and Defense Counterintelligence Command, and research chief of the Emerging Technologies and Cybersecurity Study Committee of the Korean Association of International Studies and Korean Association of Cybersecurity Studies. She received a doctorate in international relations from Seoul National University and a master's degree from the University of California, San Diego. Her research focuses on cyberwarfare, hybrid threats, information and cognitive warfare, influence operations, and strategic communications. **Featured on Page 34**



**RETIRED LT. GEN. ROY M. GALIDO** served as Philippine Army commanding general from August 2023 to July 2025, retiring after 39 years of service. He graduated from the Philippine Military Academy in 1990 and previously commanded the 6th Infantry Division, 601st Infantry Brigade and 40th Infantry Battalion. He has master's degrees in management from Philippine Christian University, information technology from the University of New South Wales in Sydney, Australia, and public management from the Development Academy of the Philippines. **Featured on Page 44**

# Join the Discussion

**WE WANT TO HEAR FROM YOU!**

**Indo-Pacific Defense FORUM** serves military and security personnel in the Indo-Pacific region. A product of the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, the quarterly magazine provides high-quality, in-depth content on security efforts across the region — from counterterrorism to international cooperation to natural disasters.

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# JAPAN, PHILIPPINES SIGN NEW DEFENSE PACTS TO BOLSTER JOINT TRAINING, DETERRENCE

Japan and the Philippines signed a defense pact in January 2026 allowing the tax-free provision of ammunition, fuel, food and other necessities when their forces stage joint training to boost deterrence and bolster preparation for natural disasters.

Japan and the Philippines, longtime treaty allies of the United States, have territorial disputes with China in the East China and South China seas, respectively.

Japanese Foreign Minister Toshimitsu Motegi and Philippine Foreign Affairs Secretary Theresa Lazaro signed the acquisition and cross-service agreement in Manila. Japan also announced new security and economic development assistance to the Philippines, including funding for security boat shelters and expanding internet access in southern Philippine provinces once affected by a separatist rebellion.

“We both recognized the value of promoting the rule of law, including the freedom of navigation and overflight, especially in the South China Sea,” Lazaro said.

Motegi said he and Lazaro “concurred on continuing to oppose unilateral attempts to change the status quo by force or coercion in the East [China] and South China seas.”

The military logistical agreement is the latest pact to deepen the nations’ security partnership. It will facilitate joint combat drills and enhance joint response to natural



Philippine Navy personnel welcome the crew of the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force frigate JS Noshiro to Subic Bay in March 2025. AFP/GETTY IMAGES

disasters, a mutual concern. It also will aid participation in United Nations peacekeeping operations, officials said. In mid-2024, the countries signed a Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA) to allow deployment of their respective forces to the other’s territory for combat exercises, including live-fire drills. The RAA took effect in September 2025. The Associated Press

## SOUTH KOREA TO JOIN WORLD’S TOP DEFENSE POWERS, PRESIDENT SAYS

South Korean President Lee Jae-myung said the country will devote a “larger-than-expected budget” to defense and aerospace research through 2030 as it seeks to build the world’s fourth-largest defense industry.



The Republic of Korea Air Force Black Eagles aerobatic team performs during the Seoul International Aerospace & Defense Exhibition in October 2025.

South Korea ranked 10th in arms sales as of 2024, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute.

“Being one of the top four powerhouses in the defense industry is by no means an impossible dream,” Lee said at the Seoul International Aerospace & Defense Exhibition 2025, where firms displayed uncrewed and artificial intelligence-enhanced weapons such as howitzers and drones.

“We will establish technological sovereignty by focusing investment on the development of technologies, parts and materials that must be secured independently, such as special semiconductors in the defense sector.”

He said South Korea pledges to share with defense partners its weapons systems and “the technology and experience of building an industrial foundation.”

Arms have become one of South Korea’s fastest-growing exports, including multibillion-dollar deals for howitzers, ammunition, missiles and warships. Reuters

# DEALS WITH ALLIES

## COUNTER 'RARE-EARTH EXTORTION'

**The United States** reached critical minerals deals in 2025 with several Indo-Pacific countries as China imposed strict rules on exporting its rare-earth minerals.

An \$8.5 billion agreement between Australia and the U.S. takes their alliance “to the next level,” Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese said after signing the pact with U.S. President Donald Trump.

Japan and the U.S. also signed a framework agreement in 2025 for securing the supply of rare-earth minerals that would use economic policy tools and coordinated investment to accelerate the “development of diversified, liquid, and fair markets for critical minerals and rare earths,” the U.S. said.



**Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, left, and United States President Donald Trump shake hands after signing a critical minerals agreement in October 2025.** AFP/GETTY IMAGES

Both countries would consider a stockpiling arrangement and cooperate with international partners to ensure supply chain security.

Beijing has tightened export controls on critical minerals and the magnets made from them, including by requiring buyers to receive licenses from China’s commerce ministry.

Critical minerals are needed in technologies ranging from fighter jets and electric vehicles to laptops and phones. For decades, China has eliminated competition by flooding the global market with critical minerals to drive down prices and force mining companies elsewhere out of business.

“Australia is really, really going to be helpful in the effort to take the global economy and make it less risky, less exposed to the kind of rare-earth extortion that we’re seeing from the Chinese,” said Kevin Hassett, director of the White House’s National Economic Council. The Associated Press and Reuters



# INDIA

## to spend billions on fighter jet engines

**INDIA EXPECTS** to spend about \$7.44 billion to develop fighter aircraft engines through 2035.

The country will require about 1,100 engines for fighter jet programs, said S.V. Ramana Murthy, director of India’s Gas Turbine Research Establishment, a state-run defense laboratory.

Murthy is heading efforts to codevelop an engine with an international partner to power India’s first fifth-generation stealth fighter.

A prototype, known as the Advanced Medium Combat Aircraft, is expected by 2028, Indian officials said.

New Delhi is boosting domestic manufacturing capacity for defense equipment and has invited weapons makers to partner with Indian firms.

Reuters



**An Indian-made Tejas Mark 1A light combat aircraft takes off for its maiden flight in 2025.**

# READY TOGETHER

AN INDO-PACIFIC COMBINED MARITIME  
FORCE COULD COUNTERACT COERCION  
IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA



**THE CHINA COAST GUARD PATROL** aimed a high-powered water cannon at a Philippine vessel and then rammed its stern in an October 2025 confrontation near Sandy Cay, a coral reef within the Spratly Islands. The Philippines Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources vessel was harassed even though it was within the Philippines' exclusive economic zone (EEZ) on a mission to protect fishermen in an area where China illegitimately claims sovereignty.

The coercion from China's maritime forces, one of many incidents in Beijing's yearslong bullying campaign in the South China Sea, potentially could be remedied by a tactic devised by the United States and used in the Middle East, analysts say.

The Combined Maritime Forces (CMF), formed in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the U.S., has grown from a handful of members to a 47-nation coalition to uphold international law and counter drug smuggling, piracy, terrorism and other illicit activities by nonstate actors in the Middle East and off the coast of East Africa.

The CMF, based in Bahrain and led by the U.S., is composed of five combined task forces (CTF) providing maritime security in the Arabian Gulf, Arabian Sea, Indian Ocean, Gulf of Oman and Red Sea. Some CTFs focus on countering piracy and assisting with partner navies' training. The mission promotes security, stability and prosperity across almost 8.3 million square kilometers of international waters, including some of the world's most important shipping lanes and three crucial maritime choke points: the Bab el-Mandeb and Hormuz straits, and the Suez Canal.

The CMF has suppressed piracy off the Horn of Africa, enforced United Nations sanctions, stopped the trafficking of hundreds of thousands of kilograms of narcotics, and, in 2021, seized more than 8,700 illegal weapons systems and rocket-propelled grenades, Eric Cooper, a senior policy researcher at the U.S.-based Rand Corp. think tank, told U.S. lawmakers in 2024.

The CMF "is one of the most successful cooperative naval organizations in the contemporary age," Jeffrey Payne, assistant professor at the U.S.-based Near East South Asia Center for Strategic Studies, wrote in the *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region* in 2023. "Its task forces provide a constant naval presence in regional waters and helped to eliminate the danger from Somalia-based pirates. It serves as a constant training

and consultation institution that in turn helps to advance naval interoperability."

Analysts say the CMF model could be replicated in the Indo-Pacific to resist the hegemonic strategy and bullying gray-zone tactics of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN), coast guard and People's Armed Forces maritime militia, particularly in the South China Sea. A multinational cooperative against maritime security threats would be a logical counter to CCP coercion of Allies and Partners, according to experts.

"We're already doing these things right now in other parts of the world, we're just not doing them here" in the Indo-Pacific, Dr. Michael S. Malley, a senior lecturer in the Department of National Security Affairs at the U.S.-based Naval Postgraduate School, said in July 2025 at the Pacific Amphibious Leaders Symposium in the Philippines.



**Philippine Navy Capt. Mateo Carido, then commander of Combined Task Force 151, and U.S. Navy personnel monitor maritime activity in the Strait of Hormuz in late 2023.**

PFC. TYRIN SAUNDERS/U.S. ARMY

The Philippines and the U.S. moved toward an international coalition in October 2025 when Philippine National Defense Secretary Gilberto Teodoro Jr. and U.S. Secretary of War Pete Hegseth announced Task Force Philippines. It is "another step in our cooperation. Increasing interoperability, exercising and preparedness for contingencies so that we can decisively respond to crisis or aggression and reestablish deterrence in the South China Sea," Hegseth said.

The task force, with about 60 personnel, also is expected to increase multilateral maritime activities with like-minded countries.

◀ **Personnel from the Combined Maritime Forces' (CMF) Combined Task Force 150, under New Zealand's command, conduct a drug interdiction in February 2025 in the Arabian Sea.** U.S. COAST GUARD

Much of the Indo-Pacific is familiar with the CMF concept. Australia, India, Japan, the Republic of Korea, Malaysia, New Zealand, the Philippines, Singapore, Sri Lanka and Thailand are CMF members. Several have commanded individual task forces, which rotate leadership roles.

In early 2025, CTF 150, which included Australia, Canada, India, New Zealand, Singapore and the U.S., conducted more than 40 boarding operations and seized about 8,000 kilograms of narcotics, the CMF reported. “This is why we’re here, to contribute to maritime security and protect the rules-based international order,” stated Royal New Zealand Navy Commodore Rodger Ward, the task force commander. “The richness of this team is that each nation brings its own strengths to the organization, and we get the most out of each other when we allow those strengths to flourish.”



**Illegal narcotics seized by a U.S. Coast Guard crew, operating under Combined Task Force 150, sit on the deck of a vessel in the Arabian Sea in January 2024.** U.S. COAST GUARD

Royal Australian Navy Capt. Jorge McKee assumed command of CTF 153, overseeing maritime security in the Red Sea, in 2024. “Even though Australia is focused on our immediate region, we are committed to working with partners to uphold the global rules-based order,” McKee stated. “We depend on those rules because Australia is an island that is entirely dependent on maritime trade. The rules that keep the seas safe and trade flowing are being broken, so as a medium-sized nation we need to stand shoulder to shoulder with our partners to uphold those rules.”

## A HISTORY OF COLLABORATION

Indo-Pacific nations already work together on maritime security. Those efforts include the Oceania Maritime Security Initiative to combat transnational crime and illegal, unregulated and unreported (IUU) fishing,

and the Southeast Asia Maritime Law Enforcement Initiative to strengthen regional security by increasing law enforcement capabilities in Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Vietnam. The U.S. Coast Guard and U.S. Navy also participate in international maritime coalitions combating transnational criminal organizations under Joint Interagency Task Force (JIATF) South and JIATF West.

Existing security architecture in the region could aid the mission of a combined maritime force. India and Singapore operate Information Fusion Centres for information sharing and collaboration among navies, coast guards and other maritime agencies to counter piracy, smuggling, terrorism, weapons proliferation and other illicit activities. The centers have hosted liaison officers from Australia, France, Japan, the Maldives, Sri Lanka, the U.K., the U.S. and elsewhere.

Individual initiatives, however, “could be improved by operating under the umbrella of a dedicated CMF construct that aligns comprehensive objectives and incorporates more partners,” Cooper testified before the U.S. Congress.

The CCP’s increasing coercion in the resource-rich South China Sea, a vital global trade route, makes an Indo-Pacific CMF or similar coalition imperative, analysts say. “The U.S. must seize the moment to lead the creation of a Combined Maritime Force in the Indo-Pacific. Our allies in the region have the will, and China’s escalating aggression has reinforced the need,” Sean P. Quirk, a lawyer, author and former U.S. Navy officer, told FORUM.

Beijing’s aggression includes firing water cannons, pointing lasers, and blocking and ramming other nations’ government and civilian vessels operating lawfully in their territorial waters as defined by the U.N. Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Though China is a treaty signatory, it ignores the UNCLOS provision designating nations’ sovereign rights over EEZs that extend 200 nautical miles from their coasts. China, instead, arbitrarily claims most of the South China Sea as its own despite overlapping claims from Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines and Vietnam. It ignores an international tribunal’s 2016 ruling — in a case brought by the Philippines — that China’s expansive sovereignty assertions have no legal basis.

In June 2024, the China Coast Guard rammed and punctured a Philippine boat on a resupply mission to a military outpost, seriously injuring a Philippine Sailor. China Coast Guard personnel wielding hatchets and knives smashed and stole equipment.

In August 2025, a PLAN destroyer and a China Coast Guard vessel collided while harassing a smaller Philippine patrol craft, which wasn’t damaged. The wreck reportedly killed Chinese crew members and significantly damaged both boats. The incident happened near Scarborough Shoal, which is claimed by Beijing and Manila, and demonstrated “Beijing’s

growing risk appetite and willingness to employ brute force to impose its will,” the Lowy Institute, an Australian think tank, reported.

The deployment of a PLAN destroyer drew widespread condemnation. “Despite its incompetent execution, Beijing is deploying its most advanced naval assets to bully its neighbors,” Quirk said.

Since 2021, Beijing has allowed its coast guard to use lethal force against foreign military ships operating in waters that China deems its own. It also has empowered fishing vessels to operate as the People’s Armed Forces maritime militia to harass and coerce other nations’ vessels.

“No singular nation, alliance, or existing multilateral forum can effectively deter the types of actions and tactics China utilizes to undermine international law in pursuit of its strategic ambitions,” Courtney Stewart, of the Australian consulting firm OCRT, wrote in an October 2024 essay for the Carnegie China think tank. “The region’s evolving security architecture, marked by a so-called latticework of burgeoning unilateral and bilateral partnerships, reflects a growing desire for collective approaches. Yet, this diffuse framework lacks the structural coherence required to fully integrate disparate components into a cohesive, coordinated, and integrated combined deterrence force. Like-minded nations must urgently establish a framework that consolidates their collective capabilities to deter shared threats and respond if deterrence fails, while competing for mutual interests to secure a Free and Open Indo-Pacific.”

## COALITION OF THE WILLING

A strength of the CMF is that it is voluntary, analysts say. Some countries might provide a liaison officer, while others conduct training or provide ships and aircraft to support operations, Cooper, of Rand Corp., wrote in a 2024 analysis, “The Era of Coast Guards: Combating Gray Zone Tactics Through an Indo-Pacific Combined Maritime Force of Law Enforcement Partners.”

The CMF structure generates force-multiplying effects by matching capabilities and enables smaller nations to participate. CMF members benefit from the group’s capacity-building, gain operational experience under different commands and enhance interoperability outside formal alliances.

Transparency also is an effective tool for the CMF by showcasing key activities, leadership and operational successes. The outreach “fosters a global awareness of CMF initiatives and underscores the tangible contributions of member nations,” Stewart wrote. “By highlighting these achievements, CMF not only strengthens its international reputation but also enhances deterrence by demonstrating collective maritime security capabilities, as well as highlighting individual national achievements at a global stage that improves their military operational credibility.”

The success of the bilateral maritime law enforcement

agreements known as shipriders between the U.S. Coast Guard and 12 Indo-Pacific partners also bodes well for a CMF effort in the region. The shiprider program, initiated in the Indo-Pacific in 2008 in Cook Islands, supports Pacific nations and territories in asserting their sovereignty and managing offshore resources by targeting threats such as IUU fishing and drug trafficking. The agreements enable partner military and law enforcement personnel to ride aboard each other’s vessels within their respective waters to stop, inspect and detain boats suspected of illicit activities. Participants also include Fiji, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Micronesia, Nauru, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu.



**CMF personnel and crews from three Indian Navy warships conduct expert exchanges in Manama, Bahrain, in September 2025.**

U.S. NAVAL FORCES CENTRAL COMMAND

The 11-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations, which includes Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand, could lead a CMF-like organization, analysts say, with participation by Australia, India, Japan and the U.S.

An Indo-Pacific CMF could establish task forces on maritime domain awareness, training and capacity-building, and IUU fishing, with the U.S. Coast Guard as the lead agency, according to Cooper. “The situation in the Indo-Pacific today calls for the employment of softer power that reduces the risk of armed conflict. An international coalition of maritime law enforcement agencies would be poised to demonstrate appropriate conduct by applying international standards in the maritime domain.”

The U.S. Navy also is positioned to lead a regional CMF, said Quirk, who noted the U.S. Coast Guard could contribute vessels to a maritime force, particularly to train and patrol with the Philippine Coast Guard in the eastern South China Sea. But “the vast majority of the Indo-Pacific is open ocean and a global commons; only the U.S. Navy has the experience and assets to lead a CMF there.” □



# *ALLIANCES* *IN ACTION*

**Philippines overcomes challenges in burgeoning defense partnerships**

DR. JAY L. BATONGBACAL/UNIVERSITY OF THE PHILIPPINES COLLEGE OF LAW

The Philippines began quietly negotiating agreements with a diverse list of partners in 2022 to enhance its external defense. For seven decades, it had relied on its long-standing alliance with the United States through their Mutual Defense Treaty, and from the early 2000s, Manila's robust security relations with Australia had evolved to enable Canberra's troops to operate on Philippine soil.

The arrangements proved their worth in major national crises: the devastation of Super Typhoon Haiyan in 2013 and the siege of Marawi City by Islamic State group-affiliated militants in 2017. The deadly storm prompted massive humanitarian assistance and disaster response operations across the center of the country, while the insurgency required the rapid provision of intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance support and assets, urban warfare training, munitions and equipment. The events demonstrated the importance of allied operations and external partners.

The Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) also is strengthening capabilities by integrating the Link-16 tactical data link system into its military assets to allow real-time, secure, and jam-resistant communication with partner forces.

### Expanding Bonds

Manila's outreach for Allies and Partners has been driven by pressure from China, which claims nearly the entire exclusive economic zone (EEZ) and continental shelf of the Philippines, as well as maritime features within them. China's incursion into Mischief Reef, just 125 nautical miles from the Philippine province of Palawan, in the 1990s prompted the negotiation of the 1999 Visiting Forces Agreement with the U.S. When China seized control of Scarborough Shoal, 120 nautical miles from the Philippines' biggest island, Luzon, in 2012, it fueled



Personnel from the Australian Defence Force's Cyber Command and the Philippine Army's Cyber and Network Enterprise Battalions train in Manila, Philippines, in May 2025. AUSTRALIAN DEFENCE DEPARTMENT

the ratification of the 2012 Status of Visiting Forces Agreement (SOVFA) with Australia and the signing of the 2014 Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement with the U.S. China became even more aggressive after an international tribunal's historic 2016 ruling invalidating Beijing's arbitrary and excessive claims to the South China Sea and vindicating the Philippines' rights to its 200-nautical-mile EEZ. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) steadily escalated its interference with supply missions to a remote Philippine military outpost on Second Thomas Shoal, about 105 nautical miles from Palawan. In June 2024, China Coast Guard personnel brandished hatchets and axes after ramming a Philippine Navy vessel. A Philippine Sailor was severely injured in the attack, which also damaged the vessel and its equipment.

Beijing evidently wants to coerce the Philippines into surrendering its maritime rights and entitlements. Over five years, China's deployment of military and paramilitary forces throughout the South China Sea has

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Philippine and U.S. Soldiers conduct sling load training during Salaknib at Fort Magsaysay, Philippines, in March 2025. REUTERS

gone from a passive presence to unprovoked aggression. In August 2025, the dangerous activities backfired and led to a disastrous collision between a China Coast Guard vessel and a People's Liberation Army Navy destroyer, reportedly killing Chinese personnel.

The administration of Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. has strengthened its resolve and diversified and enhanced its alliances and security partnerships. In 2024, it concluded negotiations with Tokyo for a reciprocal access agreement (RAA), which took effect in September 2025. Like a SOVFA, the RAA allows Japan Self-Defense Forces personnel to exercise and operate jointly with the AFP. The agreement is among Japan's first steps in implementing a collective self-defense posture beyond its longtime alliance with the U.S. Like the Philippines, Japan faces increasing territorial incursions by CCP forces, including in the East China Sea.

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**Australian and Philippine troops load an M777 howitzer during live-fire drills for exercise Alon in Laur, Philippines, in August 2025.** REUTERS

### **Strengthening Strategic Partnerships**

The Philippines signed SOVFAs with New Zealand in April 2025 and with Canada in November, based on common interests in preserving a Free and Open Indo-Pacific. Manila expects to finalize similar agreements with France and the United Kingdom. Although Manila's strategic partnerships with Germany, India, the Republic of Korea and Vietnam do not include visiting forces arrangements, they facilitate defense trade, military exchanges and security cooperation.

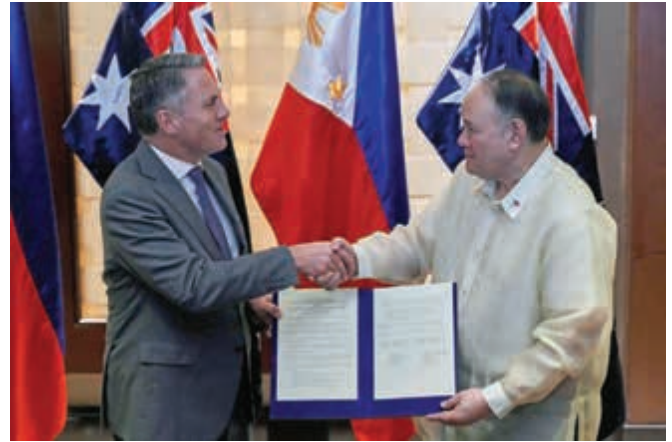
The Philippines' new partners bring the interoperability and standardization experiences gained through NATO and other long-standing defense commitments. While the increase in alliances and partnerships provides Manila with collective security assurances, maintaining multiple relationships comes with practical and political challenges.

The first and most obvious is the challenge of multilateral interoperability, which needs to be achieved on different levels. Perhaps the most basic is language. Clarity in communications is needed not only for human interactions. Seamless communications must also take place between technological systems. Different states, however, often have different technologies, and





**Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. and then-New Zealand Defence Minister Judith Collins celebrate signing the Status of Visiting Forces Agreement in April 2025 in Manila.** THE ASSOCIATED PRESS



**Australian Defence Minister Richard Marles, left, and Philippine National Defense Secretary Gilberto Teodoro Jr. shake hands after signing a statement of intent for an enhanced defense cooperation agreement in Makati, Philippines, in August 2025.** THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

their ability to interface and interact cannot be assumed and can vary across regions even if systems such as the Link-16 data link, used by NATO members and others, facilitate data interchange. Such gaps may be revealed and addressed through exercises.

Still, the Philippines is working to boost interoperability. It hosted the 40th iteration of exercise Balikatan in April 2025, drawing more than 14,000 personnel from Australia, Japan, the Philippines and the U.S. The AFP and partner forces also conduct regular patrols in the South China Sea with the AFP describing the maritime cooperation as “vital engagements between nations aimed at maintaining peace and stability in international waters.” India participated for the first time in 2025, following Australia, Canada, France, Japan and the U.S.

### **Enabling Joint Operations**

Systems and procedures for conducting multinational joint operations must also be considered. Military operations typically embody the weight of decades of habit and experience, which differ among partners. Compared to its partners, the AFP is still relatively new to multilateral joint task forces in land, air, naval, space and cyber domains for external defense. It is still in the midst of a paradigm shift in doctrinal orientation from internal security to external defense. While the AFP already gained much experience operating with Australia and the U.S., it has yet to familiarize its forces with its additional partners.

To ensure operational success, the Philippines and its Allies and Partners must have a clear sense of their respective roles and be equipped with the necessary authority to perform effectively. Manila must be sure it does not have or create expectations that might not be met because of diverging views and policies.

### **Shared Goals**

Beyond operational considerations, the necessary task of clearly identifying and agreeing upon common and

mutual policy goals and objectives remains. Different factors shape the scope and extent of allies’ commitments, and relationships involve reciprocal obligations and expectations. Manila’s new partnerships will require adjustments in its foreign relations. While the Philippines expects that its Allies and Partners will support its positions on South China Sea disputes, its partners may also expect the Philippines to endorse their own positions and policies in their respective geographical areas or issues of concern. This is necessary to enhance and ensure mutual trust and confidence.

## **The Philippines is working to boost interoperability. It hosted the 40th iteration of exercise Balikatan in April 2025, drawing more than 14,000 personnel from Australia, Japan, the Philippines and the U.S.**

The Philippines must also consider the strengths of each partner and/or combination of partners. Differences in interests can affect Manila’s ability to leverage alliance operations in any given scenario. Manila must also balance its alliance partners with each other to ensure that multipartner operations are successful. The possibility of competing or discordant foreign policy priorities and objectives increases with the diversification of alliance partners, and the Philippines must ensure that the network it is creating will be a cohesive and integrated entity that can effectively contribute to securing its national interests. □



# CALL TO ARMS

## Allies and Partners accelerate collaboration to develop and manufacture defense assets

FORUM STAFF

**T**he missile ripped over the red dirt of Australia's Northern Territory, topping 4,000 kilometers per hour and climbing above 18,000 meters in a trailblazing demonstration of the nation's rapidly advancing long-range capabilities. In barely four minutes, the Precision Strike Missile (PrSM) had obliterated its target at Bradshaw Field Training Area, more than 300 kilometers southwest of the launch site at Mount Bunde Training Area.

With the launch from a High Mobility Artillery Rocket System (HIMARS), the Australian Army became the first force other than the United States to fire the PrSM. "This is all about extending deterrence in the Indo-Pacific, all about signaling to any potential adversary that pain can be inflicted — all about deterring war through strength," Australian Defence Industry Minister Pat Conroy said.

The mid-2025 firing, conducted two years ahead of schedule during the Australia-U.S. exercise Talisman Sabre, also was a harbinger of a potent combined arsenal. With demand for defense assets outpacing the production capacity of individual nations, Allies and Partners are accelerating collaboration on the development and

manufacturing of weapons and munitions, from missiles to drones to armored vehicles.

Weeks before defense leaders watched the milestone launch at Mount Bunde, Canberra and Washington agreed to allow Australian firms to produce components and subcomponents for the U.S.-made PrSM. The deal could pave the way for production of the surface-to-surface weapon in Australia. "Australia's capability and technology cooperation with the United States is a critical part of our alliance," Australian Defence Minister Richard Marles said.

Across the Indo-Pacific, geopolitical tensions are fueling similar endeavors. In September 2025, Japan and the Philippines, which face persistent coercion from Beijing in the East China and South China seas, respectively, announced they would promote defense equipment and technology cooperation. That same month, the defense ministers of Japan and the Republic of Korea (ROK) agreed to pursue "mutually beneficial cooperation" in developing drones and other emerging technologies. Italy, Japan and the United Kingdom,

**Nations are bolstering stockpiles of weapons and ammunition, such as 155 mm M795 artillery projectiles.**

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

meanwhile, have quickened development of a sixth-generation stealth fighter under their Global Combat Air Program (GCAP).

“The U.S. network of Allies and Partners represents a tremendous asymmetric advantage in the Indo-Pacific,” Adm. Samuel J. Paparo, Commander of U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, testified before the U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee in April 2025. “No competitor or adversary can match the combined strength and capabilities of this network.”

### **SURGING DEMAND**

Globally, military spending hit a record \$2.7 trillion in 2024, the 10th straight year of growth, the United Nations reported. The grinding war in Europe drove much of the increase as Allies and Partners supported Ukraine with defense assets, while Russia turned to the North Korean dictatorship for arms, violating U.N. sanctions targeting Pyongyang’s weapons of mass destruction programs. At the same time, China’s opaque military buildup and increasing belligerence, including its threats to forcibly annex self-governed Taiwan, have spiked concerns of regional conflict. In response, nations from the Arctic Ocean to the South Pacific are committing to unprecedented defense investment.

From 2020-24, arms transfers worldwide reached their highest level since the Cold War ended almost four decades ago, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI). Ukraine accounted for nearly 9% of arms imports during that period, the single-largest share, as about three dozen nations sent Kyiv weapons. Meanwhile, the U.S. increased its substantial lead as the world’s major supplier, with 43% of arms exports, more than four times that of next-place France, SIPRI reported in March 2025. By contrast, Russia’s exports plummeted by 64% compared with 2015-19 as international sanctions over the war in Ukraine decimated Moscow’s arms industry and its traditional customers turned elsewhere.

China’s arms imports, which historically have come largely from Russia, also fell by 64% as the regime increased domestic production. That shift has been shadowed by accusations that Beijing stole technology and data from Moscow, its purported partner, to illegally reproduce weapons and other military hardware.

Among larger Southeast Asian nations, only the Philippines increased its arms imports, with a 53% jump over the past decade. “However, in response to growing tensions with China, most of the other large states in the subregion have ordered or plan to order combat aircraft and ships,” SIPRI noted. Similarly, in Northeast Asia, Seoul and Tokyo are “expanding their military capabilities

in a move that is largely driven by tensions with China and North Korea.”

While supporting Allies and Partners through arms transfers, nations must ensure the resilience of their own stockpiles, particularly sophisticated assets increasingly deployed across the region, such as the U.S.-made HIMARS, PrSM and Patriot missile systems. Although that task has been complicated by simultaneous conflicts in Europe and the Middle East, forces must be ready and equipped to respond to crises, Paparo told the Brookings Institution, a U.S.-based think tank, in late 2024. That’s especially true in the Indo-Pacific, “which is the most stressing theater for the quantity and quality of munitions because [China] is the most capable potential adversary in the world.”

### **‘TURNING THE TIDE’**

As NATO members and partner nations commit to record defense spending, Beijing and Moscow are preparing for “long-term confrontation,” with 40% of Russia’s budget allocated to its war economy, the head of the security alliance warned in September 2025. “Russia and China are investing heavily to build up and modernize their militaries,” NATO Secretary-General Mark Rutte said in his keynote address at the International Institute for Strategic Studies’ summit in Prague, Czech Republic. “Their defense industries are producing weapons and heavy military equipment at a remarkable, I might say, at a staggering rate. And this is not just to show off at major



**A Precision Strike Missile traveled more than 300 kilometers in barely four minutes to strike its target during the Australia-United States exercise Talisman Sabre in mid-2025.**

AUSTRALIAN DEFENCE DEPARTMENT

military parades ... but to aggressively exert influence, attempt to reshape the global order, and undermine our freedom and security.”

Russia also has deepened military ties with nuclear-armed North Korea, including signing a 2024 mutual defense pact. In recent years, Pyongyang’s military expenditures have accounted for an estimated 30% of gross domestic product, and Kim Jong Un’s regime has provided Moscow with weapons and troops to aid Russia’s war against Ukraine in exchange for military and economic assistance. Those transfers violate U.N. Security Council resolutions targeting North Korea’s illicit weapons of mass destruction programs, including its development of intercontinental ballistic missiles capable of reaching the U.S. mainland.

Facing these looming threats, NATO in early 2025 updated its Defence Production Action Plan, which prioritizes aggregating demand, boosting interoperability and addressing defense industry challenges. “NATO will also seek to enhance defence industrial cooperation through focused dialogue with engaged partners, including Ukraine, and Indo-Pacific partners Australia, Japan, the Republic of Korea and New Zealand,” the alliance noted.



**Italy, Japan and the United Kingdom are developing a sixth-generation fighter jet, seen in this illustration.** COVER IMAGES VIA REUTERS

Among the challenges is securing a resilient supply of rare-earth elements essential for military technologies ranging from night-vision goggles to fighter jets and precision-guided missiles. China has monopolized the critical minerals sector, allowing it to strangle supply for geopolitical gain. Partnerships such as the Quad, made up of Australia, India, Japan and the U.S., counter that threat. The Quad Critical Minerals Initiative, launched in

July 2025, will “strengthen cooperation on priorities such as securing and diversifying reliable supply chains, and electronic waste (e-waste) critical minerals recovery and re-processing,” the nations’ foreign affairs chiefs stated.

While NATO is “already turning the tide on defense production and particularly when it comes to ammunition,” deeper industry collaboration is vital, Rutte said in his keynote. “The demand for capabilities is real and urgent. It is on the rise, and it will continue. We need all your help to further increase production lines, speed up innovation, and support development and production of the capabilities that allies need in Europe and in the U.S.”

### UNMATCHED STRENGTH

In mid-2025, Australia and India agreed to intensify defense science and technology collaboration, including joint research, India’s Defence Ministry stated. The move builds on bilateral arrangements in areas such as logistics support and air-to-air refueling.

Separately, Canberra and New Delhi are increasingly cooperating with Washington. Australia and the U.S. are partnering on developing assets including the P-8 Poseidon maritime patrol aircraft, the F-35 fighter jet and the MQ-4C Triton uncrewed aerial vehicle (UAV), Paparo told

the U.S. Senate committee. Australia’s acquisition of four of the long-endurance Triton drones “clearly demonstrates the ongoing success of the cooperative program with the United States Navy,” Air Marshal Stephen Chappell, chief of the Royal Australian Air Force, said in a June 2025 news release.

To shed its decades-long reliance on Russian arms, India is boosting its domestic defense industry, including through bilateral collaboration. For example, India’s Hindustan Aeronautics and U.S.-based GE Aerospace are codeveloping jet engines for the Indian Air Force’s light combat aircraft. The nations also agreed in early 2025 to coproduce U.S.-developed sonobuoys, which detect submarines, for the Indian Air Force. A similar partnership is being considered for the Stryker combat vehicle, which was developed for the U.S. Army.

“Joint production of defense equipment, such as aircraft engines and MQ-9 drones, exemplifies the expanding U.S.-India security relationship,” experts with the Observer Research Foundation in New Delhi and the U.S.-based Rand Corp. think tank wrote for the Hindustan Times newspaper in early 2025.

UAVs are a focus of ROK-U.S. defense coproduction. In April 2025, Hanwha Aerospace and General Atomics Aeronautical Systems agreed to develop and produce



**India and the United States are discussing coproducing the Stryker combat vehicle, which was developed for the U.S. Army.** SPC. DEVIN KLECAN/U.S. ARMY

the Gray Eagle at facilities in both nations. The announcement followed testing of the short-takeoff-and-landing drone aboard an ROK Navy amphibious landing ship. The ROK recently became the world's 10th-largest arms exporter, as its platforms such as the K2 tank and K9 howitzer attract buyers including India, the Philippines and NATO members, according to SIPRI.

During their March 2025 meeting in Tokyo, then-Japanese Defense Minister Gen Nakatani and U.S. Secretary of War Pete Hegseth agreed to accelerate coproduction of assets such as the U.S.-developed Advanced Medium-Range Air-to-Air Missile. The nations are codeveloping a Glide Phase Interceptor to counter hypersonic weapons, which travel at five times the speed of sound, or about 6,100 kph. The defense leaders promoted initiatives "to further strengthen the Alliance capabilities to deter and respond, with a sense of urgency and speed, in order to respond to challenges posed by the changing security environment," Japan's Defense Ministry stated.

Japan's GCAP initiative with Italy and the U.K. aims to deploy a next-generation fighter jet by 2035. "Fighter warfare has changed from visible-range 'dog-fight' to long-distance combat. Today, stealth capability and advanced sensing technology is vital," Tokyo's Defense Ministry stated. "This will serve as the foundation for broader cooperation with the U.K. and Italy in an increasingly

severe security environment and will contribute significantly to peace and stability in both the Indo-Pacific region and Europe. The U.S. also supports such cooperation."

Japan also is exploring jointly developing destroyers and other defense assets with the Philippines. The nations' visiting forces pact took effect in 2025, highlighting a flourishing relationship. "The considerable security tensions in the South China Sea are putting the Philippines under coercive pressure," noted an August 2025 article published by the U.S.-based Center for Strategic and International Studies. "Japan and the Philippines are aligning their potential shared commercial and strategic interests for defense cooperation, thus forging a prospective pathway for a security partnership in the region."

This expanding nexus of collaboration is key to upholding peace and stability, leaders say. "Together, we have what it takes to prevail. We have world-class industries, we have innovative minds, and we have the freedom that allows innovation to thrive," Rutte said at the Prague summit. "We are combining our forces and leveraging our respective advantages. And that is how we will outproduce and outsmart our competitors. That is how we stay stronger, produce faster and innovate better. And that is how we win the competition and preserve peace through strength." □

# DYNAMIC MISSION

## New Zealand is a Key Partner in Multinational Monitoring of North Korea Sanctions



FORUM ILLUSTRATION

NEW ZEALAND DEFENCE FORCE

**Above the waters** of Northeast Asia, a small team in a P-8A Poseidon conducts surveillance, capturing evidence of potential violations of United Nations sanctions against North Korea. The Royal New Zealand Air Force (RNZAF) crew watches for signs of illegal ship-to-ship resource transfers that violate U.N. Security Council resolutions. It's a challenging mission as would-be violators seek to avoid the sharp gaze of the maritime patrol aircraft. The operation also is beset with risks from vessels below, with the constant threat of lasers being pointed at the Poseidon, endangering the No. 5 Squadron crew.

"There is a really robust risk management plan that

goes into this activity," said RNZAF Flight Lt. Hemi Frires, an air warfare officer. "Fishing boats with visible lasers are mostly a threat at night because they can dazzle pilots better than during the day. This mission is one of the most challenging, most dynamic ones that we encounter, and when we get on task up there it is busy. It's impressive to see a crew that is really switched on."

The crew's monthlong deployment in mid-2025, conducted as part of the multinational Enforcement Coordination Cell (ECC), sought evidence of illicit shipments of coal, oil and other resources used to fuel or fund Pyongyang's banned nuclear and ballistic missile programs.



**The Royal New Zealand Air Force (RNZAF) deployed a P-8A Poseidon maritime surveillance aircraft in mid-2025 to detect violations of United Nations Security Council sanctions against North Korea.** NEW ZEALAND DEFENCE FORCE



**Australian and New Zealand pilots aboard a P-8A Poseidon monitor waters around East Asia to enforce prohibitions against North Korea's nuclear and ballistic missile programs.** AUSTRALIAN DEFENCE DEPARTMENT

In 2006, soon after North Korea conducted its first nuclear weapon test, the U.N. Security Council adopted the first of its major resolutions sanctioning the authoritarian regime over its nuclear and missile activities. Among other measures, the resolutions ban weapons and military equipment trade, limit oil imports, restrict scientific cooperation, and freeze the assets of people involved in the North Korean nuclear program. Concerns over sanctions violations have heightened since 2023, when North Korean dictator Kim Jong Un began sending weapons and thousands of troops to aid Russia's war against Ukraine. In return, Moscow is believed to have provided Pyongyang with money, oil and technological assistance for its weapons of mass destruction program.

The ECC, which is based at Yokosuka, Japan, under the command of the United States Indo-Pacific Command, is a component of the Pacific Security Maritime Exchange. The U.S.-led coalition formed in 2018 to monitor compliance with U.N. Security Council sanctions against North Korea. About a dozen nations from Europe and the Indo-Pacific, including Australia, France, Japan, South Korea and the United Kingdom,

deploy aircraft, ships and personnel to identify smuggling and disrupt black market networks in the East China Sea, Sea of Japan and Yellow Sea.

“New Zealand is committed to maintaining regional peace and security by upholding the rules-based international system, and the ... sanctions are the international community's best way of encouraging North Korea to denuclearize and return to diplomacy,” said New Zealand Defence Force Maj. Gen. Rob Krushka, joint forces commander.

### Eye in the sky

Over international waters, the crew of the RNZAF Poseidon monitored the location and activity of vessels of interest, with the information contributing to the



**The Royal New Zealand Navy ship HMNZS Aotearoa and its embarked Seasprite helicopter deployed to support Enforcement Coordination Cell (ECC) operations.** NEW ZEALAND DEFENCE FORCE





broader intelligence picture, Frires said. “That can be seeing a laden oil tanker full of oil and sitting low in the water and then seeing it again a week later and finding out that it is no longer laden,” he said. “If it hasn’t conducted a port visit, the implication is maybe it has done a ship-to-ship transfer and offloaded oil to other vessels while at sea.”

The aircraft’s powerful camera captures vessel details and the Poseidon flies low enough for crew members to spot illicit activity aboard the boats. “If we see a ship-to-ship transfer, we take a photo of it and send it off ... to be reported,” Frires said. “In a couple of hours, it has allowed the ECC to turn that around and drive the next day’s tasking and flying in a meaningful way.”

It’s a testing but rewarding mission, he said. “We understand why it’s important that we’re doing it and why we are committing time to being away from home and family in a challenging environment and working really hard because we understand the impact it has.

“And it’s not just the impact on supporting the U.N. It’s also understanding that this is good for New Zealand and the New Zealand Defence Force to be out there working with partners, working with allies, and delivering outputs not just for the Air Force but for the government in the global community.”

**A Royal Australian Air Force P-8A Poseidon aircraft and the Royal Canadian Navy frigate HMCS Vancouver conduct surveillance in November 2024 to enforce sanctions against North Korea.** AUSTRALIAN DEFENCE DEPARTMENT



**A suspected ship-to-ship transfer is monitored during the RNZAF’s 2019 deployment to ensure compliance with U.N. sanctions targeting North Korea’s illicit weapons programs.**

NEW ZEALAND DEFENCE FORCE

### Job well done

While the Poseidon crew gathers imagery, New Zealand’s Deployed Poseidon Operations Centre intelligence and communications experts analyze the data to provide reports for the ECC, Headquarters Joint Forces New Zealand and partner nations.

There are three intelligence teams. The first gathers the daily tasking from the ECC and information such



# COORDINATED ENFORCEMENT



The United Nations Security Council has imposed sanctions on North Korea over its illicit weapons of mass destruction and missile programs, including prohibiting or limiting the regime's trade in coal and petroleum.

The United States-led Pacific Security Maritime Exchange formed in 2018 to monitor compliance with the sanctions. The initiative encompasses the multinational Enforcement Coordination Cell, which is based at Yokosuka, Japan, under the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command.

About a dozen nations, including Australia, France, Japan, New Zealand, South Korea, the United Kingdom and the U.S., deploy aircraft, ships and personnel to identify smuggling and disrupt black market networks in the East China Sea, Sea of Japan and Yellow Sea.

For example, the Royal New Zealand Navy sustainment vessel HMNZS Aotearoa located four vessels of interest, questioned 62 vessels and broadcast 52 deterrent messages during its 2024 mission supporting sanctions enforcement. It also conducted nine replenishments at sea to enable partner nation warships to extend their deployments, according to the New Zealand Defence Force.

as weather conditions, the situation within the area of operations and target vessel positions, which it compiles into a brief for the crew.

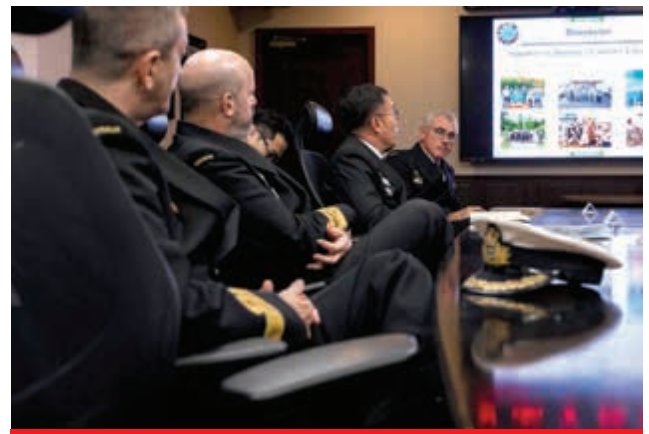
Once the aircraft takes off, the second team provides updates to the crew and collates data and reports throughout the mission. For example, images of suspicious vessels are transmitted from the aircraft for reporting to the ECC and other agencies.

“We can effectively be present on the aircraft even though we’re not physically there because we can communicate directly with the crew, provide real-time updates and receive data throughout the flight,” said Flight Lt. Craig Harnett, an intelligence officer. “It is engagement with the mission as it’s happening.”

The third team analyzes the information gathered, debriefs the crew and produces post-mission reports.

“It’s been an exceptional team that I’ve worked with over here. Everybody knows their roles and they all work hard to support the mission,” Harnett said. “The deployment with the P-8A Poseidon and its crew was an amazing opportunity for us to conduct real-world military operations in a coalition environment, using, testing and further developing the roles we have been trained for.”

In addition to ensuring flight safety during the



**Officers assigned to the ECC and the U.S. Navy 7th Fleet conduct leadership engagements at Fleet Activities Yokosuka, Japan, in April 2024.** PETTY OFFICER 2ND CLASS CAITLIN FLYNN/U.S. NAVY

mission, communications and information systems personnel disseminate data from the aircraft to the intelligence team for immediate analysis, Warrant Officer Isaac Jacobs said. “It can be intensive,” he said. “But when we get to the end of it, we can see how everyone came together and was able to get the job done and done well.” □

RISING TO THE  
**CHINA**  
CHALLENGE



FORUM ILLUSTRATION

# NEW DELHI'S MULTIFACETED INDIAN OCEAN STRATEGY

HARSH V. PANT AND SAYANTAN HALDAR/OBSERVER RESEARCH FOUNDATION

Once considered a neglected expanse, the Indian Ocean region is fast emerging as a critical hotbed of geo-economic opportunities and geopolitical contention.

Although there are many stakeholders from within and beyond the region, the contest appears to be playing out between China and India.

While the region is integral to the Indo-Pacific strategic theater, it also possesses advantages and security compulsions uniquely embedded in geography. As a resident Indian Ocean power, India is a key player in the region, especially in shaping its maritime security architecture by emerging as a preferred security partner or first responder.

Meanwhile, China has sought to enhance its presence, seemingly as part of its strategy to attain global status and regional dominance. The cross-cutting strategies and ambitions of China and India have spurred a geopolitical duel that is shaping the security landscape.

This contest is underscored by evolving strategies pursued by New Delhi and Beijing. For India, China's growing presence has emerged as a critical challenge to securing its maritime interests, with Beijing's advances posing a security dilemma. In response, New Delhi is taking calibrated and systematic political, naval and strategic steps to enhance maritime security preparedness.

## CHINA'S ADVANCES

China's actions in the Indo-Pacific present distinct and diverse maritime security challenges.

In the Pacific region, which encompasses vital trade routes in the East China and South China seas and the Taiwan Strait, China's confrontational actions spark skirmishes mainly between China's coast guards and other countries' coast guards. China's continuing provocation of Philippine vessels operating lawfully in the South China Sea is a notable example.

In contrast, Beijing's forays in the Indian Ocean appear more nuanced and calibrated, revealing what seems to be a long game. Importantly, China is not an Indian Ocean power. The maritime geography is not a natural strategic backyard for Beijing. To overcome this reality, Beijing has deployed a multipronged strategy

to expand its political influence among Indian Ocean countries by fostering developmental partnerships, while deploying dual-use survey vessels to gather military intelligence.

China's naval forays into the Indian Ocean began in the early 2000s, purportedly in response to the surge in piracy off the coast of Somalia in East Africa. However, Beijing has sought to consolidate its presence since Chinese Communist Party General Secretary Xi Jinping unveiled his One Belt, One Road (OBOR) infrastructure scheme in 2013.



Indian cadets drill at the officers' training academy in Chennai in September 2025. AFP/GETTY IMAGES

Under OBOR, China has enhanced its partnerships with Indian Ocean littoral states by investing in infrastructure, offering financial assistance — often involving predatory lending — and promising security cooperation.

China also seeks to project its power as a lead through the China-Indian Ocean Forum, an annual convening of nations it launched in 2022, by ostensibly fostering maritime regionalism.

Additionally, China has deployed survey vessels that often dock at countries near India, such as the Maldives and Sri Lanka. Although China claims the vessels are conducting hydrographic surveys, analysts say the ships may be spying for the CCP's military.

# INDIAN OCEAN RIM ASSOCIATION (IORA)

Founded in 1997, IORA is the leading intergovernmental organization spanning the Indian Ocean and fostering regional cooperation.

Region is home to **2.7 billion** people



## Sea Lanes Carry:



**50%** of world's container ships



**33%** of world's commerce



**66%** of oil shipments

## 23 Member States



## 12 Dialogue Partners



## 2 Crosscutting Issues

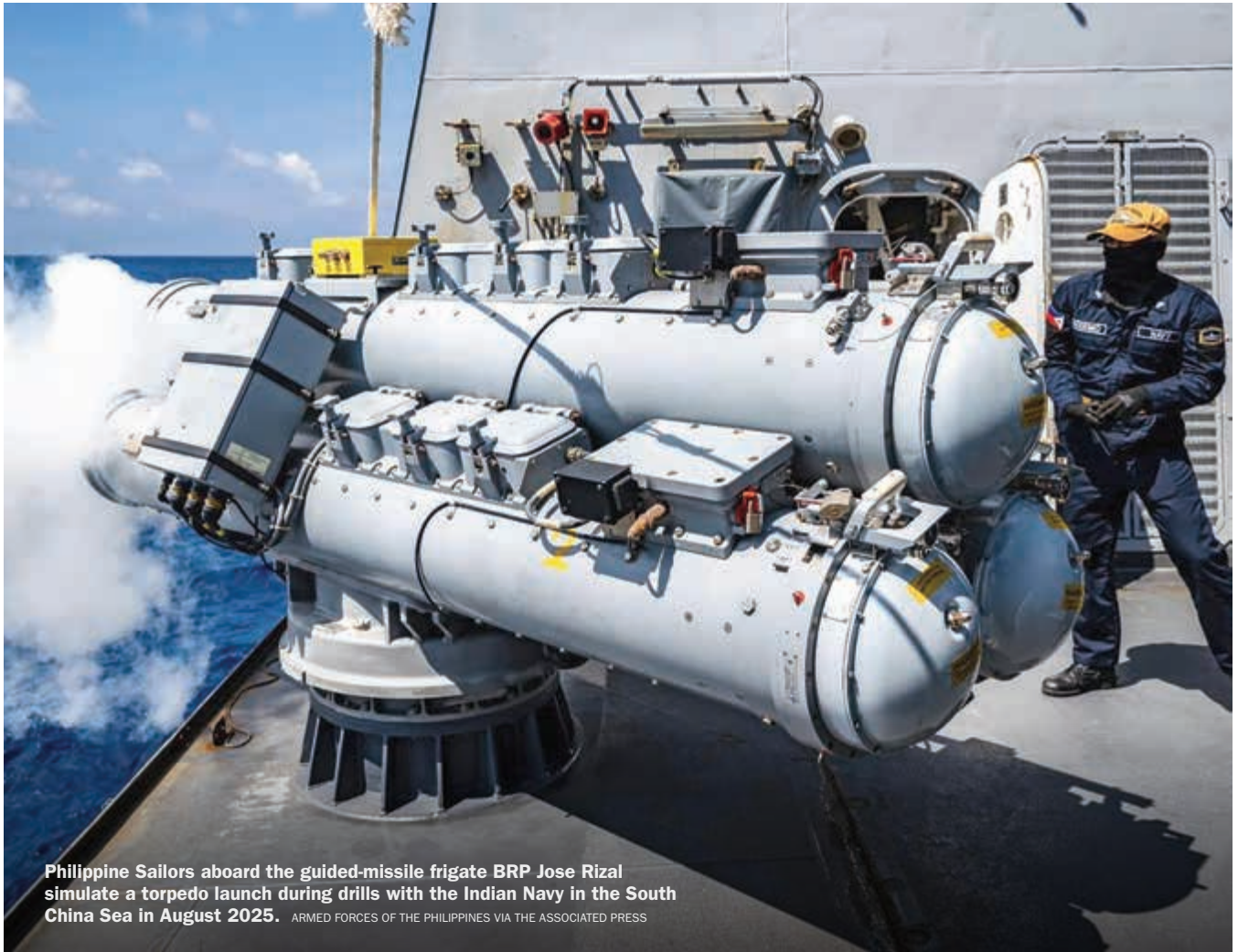


## 6 Priority Areas



The vision for IORA originated during then-South African President Nelson Mandela's visit to India in 1995, when he said: **"The 'natural urge of the facts of history and geography' that [Jawaharlal Nehru, the first prime minister of India] spoke of [in 1947] should broaden itself to include exploring the concept of an Indian Ocean Rim of socioeconomic cooperation and other peaceful endeavors."**

\* Current Chair \*\*Recent Chair



Philippine Sailors aboard the guided-missile frigate BRP Jose Rizal simulate a torpedo launch during drills with the Indian Navy in the South China Sea in August 2025. ARMED FORCES OF THE PHILIPPINES VIA THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

## INDIA'S COUNTERSTRATEGIES

Amid China's expanding presence, India has bolstered its strategic engagements and continues to emphasize its centrality as a maritime security actor. Among other initiatives, New Delhi is fostering multifaceted partnerships, modernizing the Indian Navy and building capacity.

To better counter China's model of quid pro quo, India has increasingly sought to call itself a preferred security partner or first responder. While Beijing seeks partial or total control over the infrastructure it has built, along with other conditions such as the use of Chinese workers in building the projects, India has been careful not to reproduce such a dynamic in its initiatives and negotiations. By emerging as a partner rather than a provider, India has distinguished its approach from that of China to expand influence in the Indian Ocean region.

By enhancing engagement with regional countries through the Indian Ocean Rim Association, India is injecting momentum in developing a regional awareness. This also serves as a vital strategy to reinforce that China is not an Indian Ocean power,

and that it does not have natural stakes in the region.

Simultaneously, India has shifted gears on defense production and capacity building, focusing on domestic development, including a growing naval fleet. India continues to enhance its deterrence capabilities with nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines and stealth frigates. In addition, it increasingly embraces new dimensions of security cooperation, including maritime domain awareness through the Indian Navy-hosted multinational Information Fusion Centre – Indian Ocean Region.

## FUTURE SAFEGUARDS

India continues to lead efforts to check China's advances in the region, seeking to secure its interests and shape a favorable maritime security architecture. The challenges presented by China's presence are complex. India's multifaceted strategy to respond to Beijing's inroads in its strategic backyard is characterized by three key approaches: distinctly define the nature of New Delhi's partnership with Indian Ocean littoral countries; foster regional cooperation; and advance naval capabilities. □

# TRIPLE TROUBLE

*Fissures mar foundation of  
China-North Korea-Russia cooperation*

FORUM STAFF





**T**he spectacle was unprecedented, though rooted in false claims. Leaders of China, North Korea and Russia convened in Beijing in September 2025 to commemorate Imperial Japan’s surrender to Allied forces 80 years before, ending World War II. High-level representatives of 23 mostly developing nations joined them for a tightly choreographed military parade at Tiananmen Square.

Beneath the propagandist fanfare was the reality that the Republic of China (ROC) that then ruled China — not the Chinese communists — signed the surrender documents in 1945. China’s revolutionary leader Mao Zedong did not establish the People’s Republic of China until 1949. His Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was more concerned with its political ambitions than with defeating the Japanese and, at times, undermined the Allied forces, analysts say.

Replete with historical distortions, the parade sought to manipulate international perceptions of China’s modern origins and legitimacy, offend Japan, diminish the standing of self-governed Taiwan — as the ROC is commonly known — and advance Beijing’s hegemonic objectives, according to analysts. Moreover, it sought to advance an equally inaccurate narrative about the strength of the emerging authoritarian triad.

It was the first gathering of the leaders of the three regimes — China’s Xi Jinping, North Korea’s Kim Jong Un and Russia’s Vladimir Putin — though they held bilateral meetings previously.

The orchestrated display belied schisms among

the regimes whose varied ambitions, histories and asymmetric relationships have discouraged them from forming a unit reflective of Western alliances. Serious rifts remain, despite pledges of mutual support and enhanced cooperation. Friction persists between China and Russia, both of which have helped support an otherwise isolated North Korea beset by droughts, famines and economic mismanagement.

Kim and Xi met five times in 2018 and 2019, the last time Kim was in China prior to the 2025 visit. While China remains North Korea’s formal ally and economic lifeline, Kim recently has gravitated toward Moscow, signing a mutual defense treaty with the Kremlin in June 2024 and providing armaments and troops to bolster Russia’s war against Ukraine in exchange for money, oil and weapons technology. At the Beijing parade, his first multilateral diplomatic event since assuming power in 2011, Kim told Putin: “If there’s anything I can do for you and the people of Russia, if there is more that needs to be done, I will consider it as a brotherly obligation, an obligation that we surely need to bear,” The Associated Press (AP) reported.

The gathering sought to boost flailing China-North Korea relations. “This is a major mending of the fence, I would say, between China and North Korea,” John Delury, a senior fellow at the Asia Society think tank, told United States-based National Public Radio. “This puts the strategic relationship

**Russian President Vladimir Putin, from left, Chinese Communist Party General Secretary Xi Jinping and North Korean dictator Kim Jong Un attend a military parade in Beijing in September 2025.**

AFP/GETTY IMAGES



**Gen. Chiang Kai-shek, the Republic of China's leader during World War II, reviews troops in Kwangsi province in April 1944. The following year, he and other Allied leaders signed Imperial Japan's surrender documents.**

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Russia-Ukraine war began in February 2022. At the commemoration in Beijing, Xi welcomed Putin as a “dear friend.” But the outward camaraderie contrasted with Beijing and Moscow’s self-interests and conflicting worldviews.

Xi has tried to position China as a leader of countries that feel disadvantaged by a Western-led order. He cast the Tiananmen Square military showcase as evidence of that authority, defiance and commitment.

The three regimes’ reliance on each other and like-minded states — economically, diplomatically and militarily — has enabled them to weather sanctions imposed by the United Nations, European Union and individual countries, especially since the Russia-Ukraine war began. Though China professes neutrality in the war, it supplies Russia with semiconductors, machine tools and telecommunications equipment that can be used for commercial or military purposes. Beijing vacillates between supporting Russia and

of the leaders back on some kind of even keel.”

Xi and Putin have met occasionally since proclaiming a “no-limits” partnership days before the

appeasing important trade partners in the West.

China, which shares a 1,416-kilometer border with North Korea, is wary of its unpredictable neighbor’s expanding nuclear weapons program and its growing relationship with Russia. Russia, in turn, is skeptical of China’s superior posture and global ambitions. North Korea balances China and Russia to gain recognition, money and power. “North Korea, though substantially weaker than its two primary partners, has been remarkably adept at maneuvering between them,” Dr. Elizabeth Wishnick, an expert on Sino-Russian relations, wrote in a Foreign Policy Research Institute report in March 2025.

### **ENTRENCHED DEFIANCE**

Since North Korea conducted its first nuclear arms test in 2006, the 15-member U.N. Security Council — including permanent members China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom and the U.S. — has adopted nine major resolutions targeting the Northeast Asian nation. The first resolution, adopted unanimously that year, demanded North Korea drop its nuclear program in a “complete, verifiable and irreversible” manner, end its ballistic missile activities, and rejoin nuclear reduction talks. Subsequent resolutions included trade sanctions and gave U.N. members authority to

inspect North Korean cargo within their territories and dispose of illicit shipments.

The resolutions also call for North Korea to rejoin the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. The regime had withdrawn from the international agreement in 2003 after the U.S. maintained North Korea illegally planned to enrich uranium.

U.N. members were banned from selling heavy weapons, spare parts for weapons, or materials and technology for weapons of mass destruction or ballistic missiles to North Korea. The resolutions froze financial assets of entities and individuals the Security Council determined were supporting the illegal programs and set up a committee to monitor compliance. North Korean exports of minerals, textiles and seafood were outlawed or restricted.

Kim said in early 2012 that he would suspend nuclear tests in exchange for food aid for North Korea's starving population, but he defied the U.N. resolutions with long-range missile launches in 2012 and 2013.

North Korea continues to evade the sanctions, which remain in place although Russia backed off their enforcement in March 2024 and China abstained from addressing the matter. In response,

11 nations — including Australia, Japan, New Zealand, the Republic of Korea (ROK) and the U.S. — established the Multilateral Sanctions Monitoring Team in October 2024 to assess North Korea's compliance with the resolutions.

Meanwhile, North Korea focused on illicit ways to enhance its economy and finance its nuclear weapons development. The regime increasingly relies on cybercrime, currency counterfeiting, methamphetamine production and exploitation of overseas labor, the U.S. Army's 8th Theater Sustainment Command, National Security Law Team, reported in May 2025. China has continued to trade with North Korea and facilitate elements of Pyongyang's "shadow economy," according to the report.

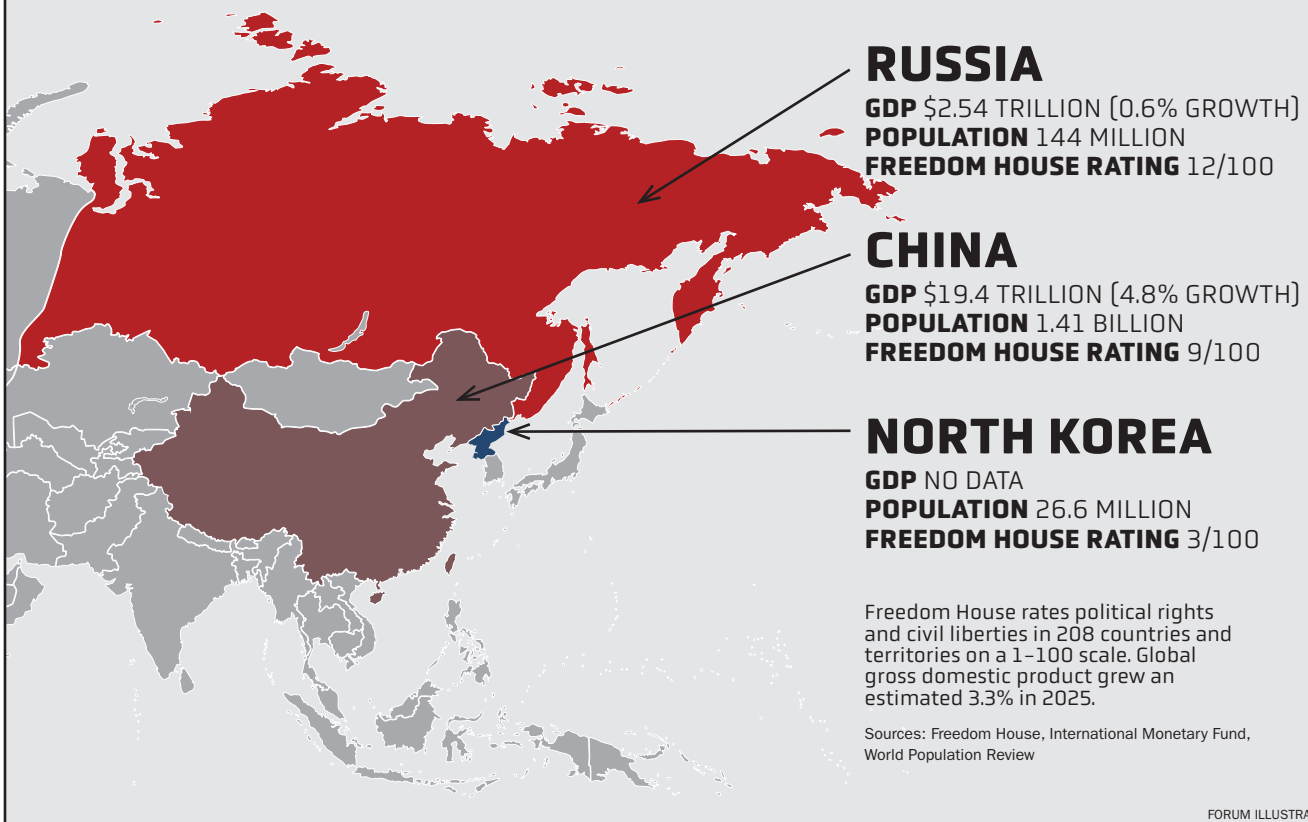
Kim launched a five-year program in 2021 to build more nuclear weapons. He has made progress on that commitment, though North Korea's military still lacks needed technologies, The Washington Post newspaper reported in August 2025.

Pyongyang's provision of armaments and troops to Russia beginning in 2023 is among its latest

**Farmers plant rice in Pyongyang, North Korea. Severe food shortages continue while the regime enhances its military arsenal.** THE ASSOCIATED PRESS



# CHINA-NORTH KOREA-RUSSIA BY THE NUMBERS, 2025



violations of U.N. sanctions and international law. About 15,000 North Korean troops had deployed to fight for Russia by September 2025, and more than 2,000 of them were killed. Additionally, North Korea was preparing to deploy about 6,000 troops to Russia, the ROK National Intelligence Service reported.

“Pyongyang’s illicit cooperation with Moscow has strained ties with Beijing, even as China’s political and economic support remains vital for the North Korean regime,” Leif-Eric Easley, professor of international studies at Ewha Womans University in Seoul, told the AP in August 2025.

## SHAKY PARTNERSHIP

Though Kim, Putin and Xi disparage the increasingly robust Indo-Pacific alliance among Japan, the ROK and the U.S., it’s unclear how far they will go in collectively opposing it.

“Although authoritarian states share an overriding interest in regime security and political survival, this does not necessarily mean that we should expect solidarity among similarly disposed regimes or believe that they would inevitably form an anti-Western axis,” Wishnick wrote, noting that “Russian and Chinese relations with North Korea could not be more different.”

Wishnick highlighted obstacles to a “full-fledged

axis.” Recollections of the Korean War (1950-53) and its fallout still haunt China and North Korea, she wrote. China, per its nonalignment policy, could damage its international reputation if it signed on to such a coalition, a move that could equate to a Cold War scenario. China and Russia would jeopardize policy interests in East Asia if they formalized a partnership with North Korea. And the three regimes have failed to agree on an economic approach that accommodates all their interests.

After the Beijing parade, Kim met separately with Putin and Xi. Putin invited Kim to Russia while Xi and Kim vowed to maintain relations. About three weeks later, the foreign ministers of China and North Korea met in Beijing and pledged to deepen their nations’ ties.

Kim might be trying to reinforce relations with Xi in case Pyongyang’s ties with Moscow fade after the war in Ukraine, according to analysts. The Kim-Xi summit “was an opportunity for North Korea to reaffirm China’s backing amid international sanctions and isolation, and an opportunity for China to show its intention to maintain influence over the Korean Peninsula through Pyongyang,” Lim Eul-chul, a professor in the Institute for Far Eastern Studies at the ROK’s Kyungnam University, told the NBC News network.

Notably, there was no mention of denuclearizing the Korean Peninsula in a summary of the Kim-Xi discussion, unlike their previous meetings, The New York Times newspaper reported.

### CRACKS IN CRINK

Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian, representing another autocratic regime ostracized by democracies, joined Kim, Putin and Xi at the Beijing parade. The nations sometimes are collectively known as CRINK — China, Russia, Iran and North Korea — an informal group laden with international sanctions that has sparked global concern, especially since the Russia-Ukraine war began. Beijing, Pyongyang and Tehran have provided flagrant or thinly veiled support for the Kremlin's objectives in the conflict that has killed thousands of Ukrainians and Russians and caused billions of dollars of damage.

Dubbed “the axis of upheaval” by analysts, the CRINK coalition opposes what it claims is Western hegemony and calls for a new world order, with each regime proffering a loosely articulated idea of what that might entail. Yet their self-interests often conflict.

“These are marriages of convenience; these are very transactional relationships,” Dr. Kelly Grieco, a senior fellow with the Washington, D.C.-based Stimson Center think tank, told FORUM.

It's a balancing act, particularly in the Middle East, Grieco said. “And if each nation is trying to do its own balancing act, it can run afoul of the others as well.” Russia, for instance, has beneficial relations with Israel and other countries that aren't on good terms with Iran. The same is true of China, which has spent years cultivating a relationship with Saudi Arabia, which has long-standing disputes with Iran.

“It's not as though they're all getting together to [formulate] a big plan and say, ‘OK, here are our political objectives. Here's what we're going to try to do over the next year,’” Grieco said of CRINK.

CRINK ties tend to be bilateral rather than collective. Iran and Russia send oil to China, which sells missile propellant chemicals to Iran and dual-use technologies to Russia; North Korea and Russia exchange weapons and troops for military technology; Iran supplies drones and drone technology to Russia.

Many of the exchanges violate or circumvent U.N.

and other sanctions, prompting some to call CRINK “a coalition of the sanctioned,” Nikkei Asia, a Japan-based newspaper, reported in June 2025. The NATO Parliamentary Assembly in October 2025 warned that China, Iran, North Korea and Russia increasingly resort to information manipulation, cyberattacks and election interference “to manipulate public debate and erode democratic institutions in Allied nations.”

The U.S. bombing of three Iranian sites in June 2025 to prevent the regime from developing a nuclear weapon drew condemnation from China and Russia, but no response diplomatically, economically or militarily. Analysts said the lack of action was revealing.

“The reality of this conflict turned out to be that Russia and China didn't run to Iran's rescue,” Alexander Gabuev, director of the Carnegie Russia Eurasia Center in Berlin, told The New York Times in July 2025. “That just exposes the limitations of the whole ‘axis’ idea.”

**Putin, Xi and Kim attend a reception in Beijing in September 2025.**

AFP/GETTY IMAGES



The Beijing parade with its contrived pomp grounded in an erroneous premise couldn't obscure the self-serving, fickle and power-driven elements underpinning the countries' relations.

“Yes, there is probably a very modest amount of coordination among China, North Korea, Iran and Russia,” Michael Kimmage, a former U.S. State Department official, told the newspaper. “But it's not particularly meaningful.” □

# COORDINATED RESPONSE



FORUM ILLUSTRATION

# WAR IN EUROPE UNDERSCORES NEED FOR STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

DR. TAE-EUN SONG/KOREA NATIONAL DIPLOMATIC ACADEMY

The numerous phases of the Russia-Ukraine conflict illustrate the value of different strategies and tactics. Prominent among the lessons learned — and one that should be of special interest to Indo-Pacific policymakers — is the importance of strategic communications and the need for a concerted response to the messaging of malign actors.

When Moscow used hybrid warfare to occupy portions of Ukraine in 2014 there was no clear and unified communications response. After the invasion in February 2022, however, Kyiv and NATO succeeded in undermining the Kremlin’s promotion of false narratives, which were disseminated via fabricated and manipulated messages, images and videos, and in promptly debunking Russia’s false claims.

During the early stages of war, when battlefield information is scarce, state propaganda and psychological warfare operations can have their greatest impact by undermining a military’s will to fight and a society’s resolve to resist. Such tactics can disrupt situational awareness, enabling “combat without fighting” that could influence the outcome of a war. However, if the target state and society can endure and persist as the war progresses, the initial scarcity of information fades and the enemy’s true strength begins to be revealed.

NATO and Ukraine’s resilience in the cyber and cognitive domains can be partly attributed to the lessons from 2014 and the efforts they spurred. After defining the nature of Russia’s hybrid warfare, NATO and Ukraine spent eight years steadily building their capabilities in cyber and information warfare by developing strategic communications systems, and a range of simulated crisis and multinational cyber exercises. They learned that disinformation campaigns and cognitive warfare led primarily by authoritarian states such as China, Iran and Russia can undermine a state’s political legitimacy, and fuel social conflict and disorder by attacking vulnerabilities of target countries — all without the visible use of military force. By weaponizing information and narratives, malign

actors can achieve subversive goals: disabling state functions and gradually bringing about their collapse.

One of NATO’s first initiatives to counter Russia’s information warfare was the Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence (StratCom COE), which was launched in Riga, Latvia, in July 2014. Work on the center already was underway before Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014, as NATO understood the importance of strategic communications in responding to Moscow’s attempts to manipulate public opinion in Ukraine.



**Polling officers count votes in New Taipei City, Taiwan, in January 2024. Taiwan officials said China fabricated and disseminated articles, images and videos as part of its campaign to influence the election.** THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Meanwhile, diverse Ukrainian government agencies are involved in countering disinformation. The threat is addressed from a military and national security perspective, with full mobilization of the armed forces, prosecutors, intelligence services and police. What sets Ukraine’s efforts apart is a clearly designated “control tower” for disinformation response: the Center for Countering Disinformation, established in 2021 under the National Security and Defense Council.

Allies and Partners have blunted Moscow’s deceptive communication efforts and exposed Russia’s true military capabilities.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR THE INDO-PACIFIC

This context is instructive when considering the measures Indo-Pacific countries have taken to prepare for similar battles that use cognitive manipulation and false narratives. Is the region ready to counter the cognitive warfare at which China and Russia are so adept? Who will fight? Who will issue cohesive messages for friendly nations and persistent counternarratives against adversaries? Is there any platform where Indo-Pacific nations can convene and make decisions on information and cognitive warfare?

The questions have become highly relevant as China emulates Russia's methods, such as operating artificial intelligence-enabled bot armies on social media platforms and creating fake websites disguised as mainstream media. Such campaigns targeting Indo-Pacific countries are being conducted in a covert, systematic and increasingly threatening manner, posing a serious challenge to the national security of the targeted state in peacetime — or what appears to be peacetime.



**Security experts attend a June 2025 seminar on irregular warfare, including malign information campaigns by China and Russia, at the George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies in Germany.**

KARLHEINZ WEDHORN/GEORGE C. MARSHALL EUROPEAN CENTER FOR SECURITY STUDIES

This is why such hostile state-sponsored activities are increasingly referred to as a form of warfare, specifically cognitive warfare. Since 2017, nations including Canada, France, Germany, the United Kingdom and the United States have established a coordinated response system through discussions by entities such as the Group of Seven (G7) leading industrialized nations, the Organization for Security and Co-Operation in Europe, and NATO. The goal: collectively counter state-sponsored disinformation campaigns, particularly those aggressively conducted during election periods.

For example, the G7 Rapid Response Mechanism (RRM) was launched in 2018 to identify, prevent and respond to foreign threats to democracy, particularly cyber-enabled interference and disinformation campaigns that seek to manipulate public opinion and endanger democratic institutions and processes. The RRM enhances

coordination among G7 members to detect and counter foreign interference, share intelligence and best practices related to information warfare and democratic resilience, support open and transparent communication to counter false narratives, and protect democratic institutions. The system strengthens solidarity and cooperation among like-minded democracies.

## AN INTENSIFYING CHALLENGE

Despite the clear benefits of unified communications systems such as NATO's StratCom COE and the G7's RRM, there are no comparable frameworks in the Indo-Pacific, although the members of the Quadrilateral partnership — Australia, India, Japan and the U.S. — have discussed information integrity and countering state-sponsored disinformation.

The region is home to U.S. Allies and Partners including Australia, India, Japan, New Zealand and the Republic of Korea (ROK) that historically have maintained complex relationships — ranging from adversarial to competitive to cooperative — with China and Russia across military, technological, economic, political and ideological sectors. As a result, strategic competition is playing out most intensely in the region. Since the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine war, bloc-based tensions have further escalated as authoritarian regimes seek to disrupt the solidarity among Allies and Partners and to dismantle the rules-based international order. In its place, they are pushing for an alternative, authoritarian-led world order, including by waging cognitive warfare.

Recently, nations stretching from Australia to India have experienced the impact of disinformation campaigns and influence operations originating from China, affecting their elections and domestic public opinion. China began conducting influence operations about 2017, targeting not only Southeast Asian countries with which it has territorial disputes but also regions participating in Beijing's One Belt, One Road infrastructure scheme. These campaigns intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic, taking on the characteristics of a systemic rivalry.

As a result, Indo-Pacific countries began establishing response mechanisms similar to those developed by Western democracies, especially in Europe. In January 2024, Taiwan established the Cognitive Warfare Research Center under its Justice Ministry to analyze the threat of online disinformation to democracy and security. The move reflects the severity and intensity of the cognitive warfare Taiwan faces from China, which claims the self-governed island as its territory and threatens to annex it by force. Beijing has been accused of fabricating and disseminating articles, images and videos as part of its campaign to influence Taiwan's elections and public opinion.

The response to such threats has become closely tied to security cooperation among like-minded democracies, making it a priority topic across relevant



Destroyed Russian armored vehicles sit on the outskirts of Kyiv, Ukraine, in March 2022. THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

forums. Exchanges among NATO and its Indo-Pacific Four partners — Australia, Japan, New Zealand and the ROK — have become institutionalized, deepening mutual understanding and solidarity. In security dialogues, information and cybersecurity issues now are addressed with as much importance as traditional military concerns.

## BUILDING A COLLECTIVE RESPONSE

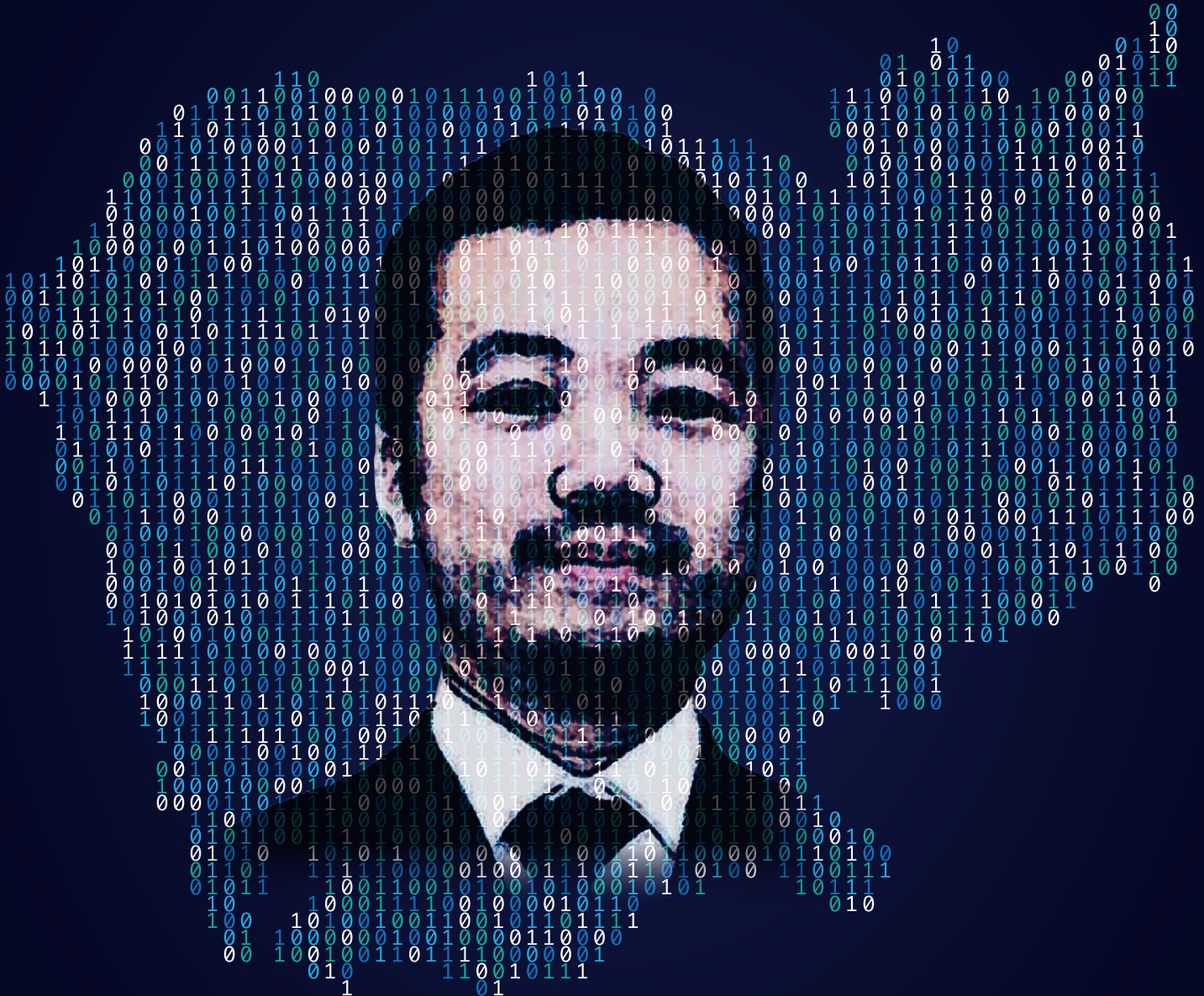
It is time for the Indo-Pacific to develop a level of preparedness comparable to that of Europe and NATO in countering authoritarian regimes' influence operations and cognitive warfare. The establishment of a regional strategic communications center should have four key policy initiatives.

- **Increase Cooperation.** The first and most essential step is to define the scope and level of cooperation among partner countries in responding to malicious foreign disinformation campaigns and influence operations. This includes sharing information on foreign influence activities within each country, identifying which domestic government agencies are currently engaged — or could be involved — in countering such operations, and clarifying whether the necessary legal and institutional frameworks exist. This exchange of foundational information is critical to establishing meaningful and effective cooperation.
- **Raise Awareness.** One of the simplest but most symbolically powerful ways to demonstrate cooperation is by issuing joint statements or coordinated advisory statements in response to information threats.

Especially in the cybersecurity domain, nations already incorporate such mechanisms at the global level in response to malware attacks, and threats to critical infrastructure and supply chains. Such efforts strengthen a shared sense of purpose and cooperation. Similarly, partners can host events to raise awareness about foreign information manipulation and influence operations, engage civil society, and create platforms for public education.

- **Establish Crisis Response.** A key goal of a regional strategic communications system should be establishing a crisis response mechanism. This includes creating a permanent platform to sustain joint responses to influence operations and ensure that partners can block adversarial information, deliver accurate information and issue coordinated messages. A web-based platform could monitor and manage foreign information threats as they are generated, disseminated and neutralized by enabling rapid fact-checking and real-time analysis sharing. Such a virtual platform would enable governments and civil society across partner nations to maintain shared situational awareness and urgency in responding to information threats.
- **Establish Communications Center.** Finally, after gaining experience with a strategic communications center, partners could establish a separate entity focused on hybrid threats. This would lay the groundwork for more comprehensive and sustained security cooperation, making it possible to implement collective responses to emerging challenges across the Indo-Pacific. □

# SYMBOLIC JUSTICE



Alleged Kingpin's Extradition to China  
Protects Scam Centers in Southeast Asia

FORUM STAFF

FORUM ILLUSTRATION

China has touted the January 2026 extradition of Chen Zhi, founder and chairman of Prince Holding Group, as a “major achievement” in Cambodia-China law enforcement cooperation. Chen is accused of heading a massive online fraud network based in Cambodia and stealing tens of billions of dollars annually worldwide.

However, the scam victims, including in Africa, Southeast Asia and the United States, likely will never see restitution. The move also undermines the U.S.’s indictment of Chen.

Analysts contend that the extradition ensured Chen’s activities would never be traced to high-level officials in China and does little to suppress the regional scam networks. The centers, which cropped up over the past decade across Southeast Asia, have defrauded millions of victims and trafficked hundreds of thousands of workers, often confining them to live in inhumane conditions, including torture, according to United Nations reports and related investigations.

The U.S. indicted Chen, 37, in mid-October 2025 on charges of wire fraud and money laundering conspiracy, branding his conglomerate a transnational criminal organization and seizing \$15 billion in cryptocurrency. The United Kingdom and the U.S. also implemented sweeping sanctions against the Prince Group, which includes banking, finance, real estate and tourism enterprises in more than 30 countries.

“The unsealed government documents expose a system of organized corruption that allowed Prince Group to operate openly under the protection of senior Chinese officials,” according to an analysis of the U.S. indictment by TRM Labs, which works with global law enforcement agencies, regulators and private-sector partners to track, trace and disrupt transnational criminal networks. “According to the complaint, Chen Zhi and his co-conspirators used political influence to shield their scam compounds from law enforcement scrutiny, including direct coordination with officials from China’s Ministry of Public Security and Ministry of State Security.”

Chen’s arrest and extradition to China, however, will not shut down the scam-industrial complex, analysts say. Compounds in Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar continue to operate at “unprecedented scale,” according to an April 2025 U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) report, “Inflection Point: Global Implications of Scam Centres, Underground Banking and Illicit Online Marketplaces in Southeast Asia.” Compounds in Cambodia, home to most of the centers, have expanded exponentially in recent years, satellite data reveals. The centers also operate in Malaysia and the Philippines.

Organizations, including Chen’s, have forced at least 100,000 people, many from Southeast Asia, South Asia and Africa, to work in the online scam centers, according to the U.N. More than 350,000 people may have been trafficked across Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar. Southeast Asia operations have stolen at least \$10 billion from victims in the U.S., the U.S. Treasury Department said. The regional centers generate \$50 billion to \$75 billion annually, the U.N. report said.

Scam compounds have been operating openly in casinos, hotels and office buildings, with workers forcibly detained and physically abused when they fail to meet targets, according to a 2024 study, “Human Trafficking & Forced Labour in Cambodia’s Cyber-Scam Industry,” funded by the ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations)-Australia Counter Trafficking program.

### SKIRTING ACCOUNTABILITY

Chen’s extradition lets China off the hook for enabling his scam empire, analysts say. There won’t be a public trial that discloses government complicity. “Handing Chen Zhi to China was the path of least resistance,” Jacob Daniel Sims, a fellow at Harvard University’s Asia Center, told The Associated Press (AP). “It defuses Western scrutiny, while aligning with Beijing’s likely preference to keep a politically sensitive case out of U.S. and U.K. courts,” Sims said. “What we are seeing here is a mafia state actor backed into a corner and choosing the best among bad options, not signs of legitimate reform.” Amnesty International said in 2025 that its cybercrime probe in Cambodia indicated “state complicity in abuses carried out by Chinese criminal gangs.”



The National Bank of Cambodia announced in January 2026 that Prince Bank PLC in Kampot was being liquidated and can no longer operate. REUTERS

The Chinese-born Chen was a naturalized Cambodian citizen until his status was revoked in December 2025, days before his extradition. He was an advisor to high-ranking officials and was granted one of Cambodia's highest elite titles. Prince Group transformed the coastal city of Sihanoukville into a scam hub that persuaded victims to invest in fake financial products or cryptocurrency.

Cambodia's extradition of Chen provides a political offering to secure Beijing's support, including foreign investment, weapons and funding for infrastructure projects.

China also gains because the scam networks disproportionately targeted Chinese citizens. By purportedly showing it is cracking down on "overseas Chinese criminal syndicates," Beijing seeks to prop up its domestic legitimacy.

If Chen stood trial in the U.S., his testimony could have revealed money flows linked to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), high-ranking officials and cross-border networks linked to Chinese crime triads.

Allegations of ties between Chinese officials and Chen may have spurred Beijing to take preemptive action. "The last thing the Chinese want is for Chen Zhi to end up in U.S. custody," Jason Tower, a senior expert at the Switzerland-based Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, told The New York Times newspaper.

Although the extradition removes Chen from the U.S.'s reach, China's charges against Chen remain obscured. "What is clear, however, is that Beijing has

strong incentives to handle this quietly and internally, given the political sensitivities surrounding his business empire, its regional ties, and in particular, a number of reported ties to various Chinese government officials," Sims told news broadcaster CNN.

"The complaint recounts communications in which Prince executives bragged about having government contacts who could 'get associates off the hook,' underscoring how state power was weaponized to safeguard a criminal enterprise that trafficked and exploited thousands of workers," TRM Labs explained.

Investigators found ledgers detailing the bribery network's depth and precision. "Where bribes failed, according to court documents, violence filled the gap. Internal communications, laid out in the government pleadings, describe Chen approving physical punishments of subordinates suspected of disloyalty or theft, cautioning only that they should not be 'beaten to death,'" TRM Labs reported.

China has prosecuted more than a dozen criminal cases against the Prince Group in the past five years but convicted only lower-level Chinese officials, The New York Times reported. Other key participants, including government officials and tycoons, remain unprosecuted.

Although many of the Prince Group's assets, such as those of Chen's Prince Bank, which had 36 branches in Cambodia, are being liquidated, its networks, personnel and infrastructure remain intact.

In September 2025, China handed death sentences to

11 members of a powerful Chinese family that allegedly operated scam centers in Myanmar, the AP reported. This too was pure theater, analysts contend. And now China has control of the evidence and prosecutions in the Chen case. Besides China, Cambodia has few extradition treaties with countries targeted by the scams. Phnom Penh does not have such agreements with the U.K. or the U.S.

"By embedding their operations in jurisdictions unwilling or unable to cooperate with U.S. authorities, the Prince Group leveraged state complicity to build a criminal empire that blurred the line between business and government," according to TRM Labs.

Several other countries have pressured Cambodia to crack down on the scam centers. South Korean officials, for example, said in October 2025 that they were working to retrieve at least 330 citizens who were trafficked to Cambodian scam centers.

## EXPANSION OF SITES HOSTING CYBER-ENABLED FRAUD OPERATIONS, 2022-2025



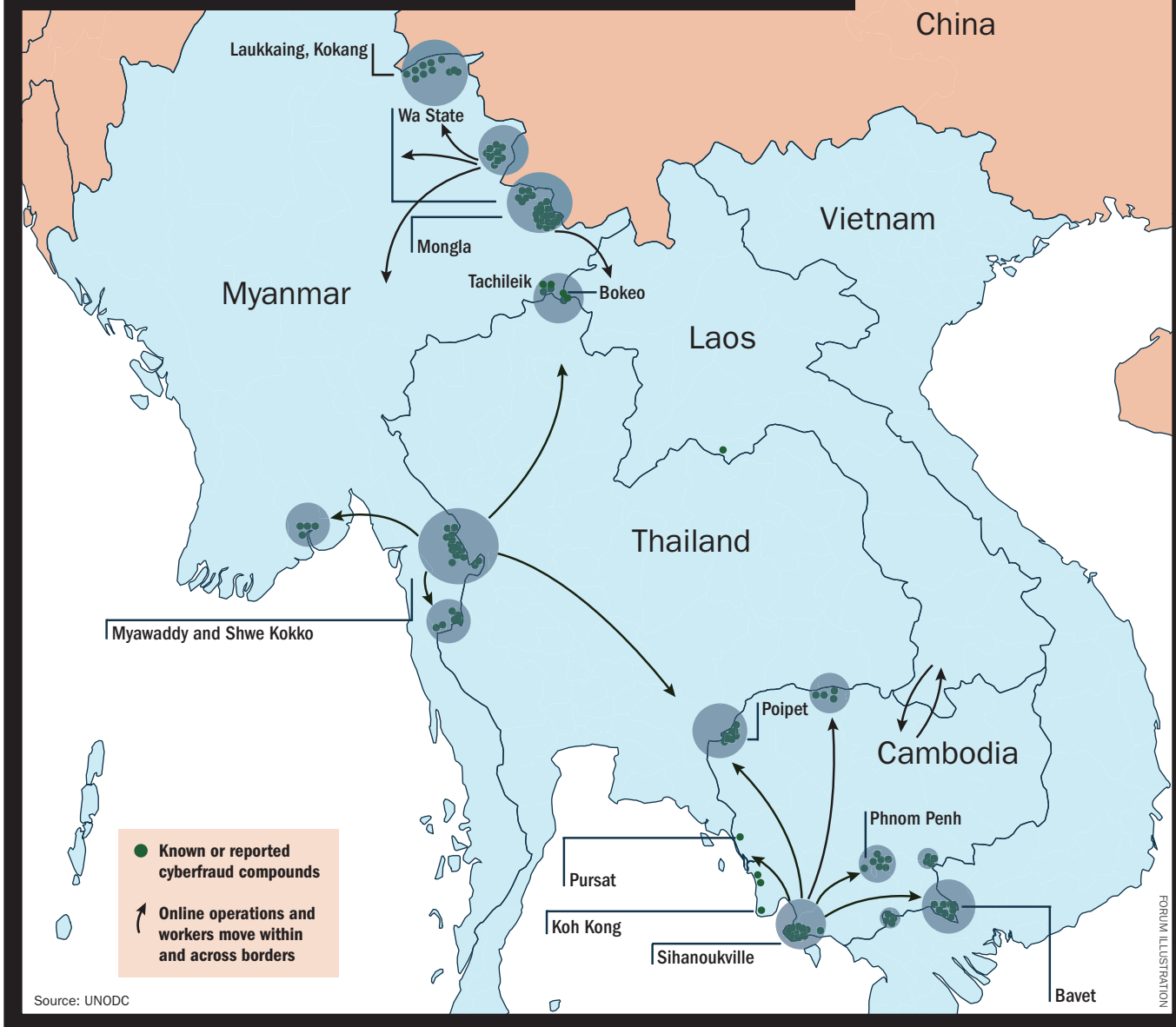
KK Park, Myawaddy, Myanmar, April 2022 and December 2024.



Pursat, Cambodia, February 2022 and January 2025.

UNITED NATIONS OFFICE ON DRUGS AND CRIME (UNODC)

## LOCATIONS OF KNOWN OR REPORTED SCAM CENTERS IN THE MEKONG REGION 2023-2025



“Transnational organized crime in Southeast Asia is evolving at a rate the region has never seen before,” the 2025 UNODC report noted. “Driven by new service-based business models and technologies, rapid professionalization, and the ability to launder profits and shift value across borders undetected with unmatched speed and efficiency, Asian crime syndicates have not only managed to expand into new global markets, but have fundamentally taken hold of entire ecosystems they have built and infiltrated.”

### DEEP TIES TO CHINA

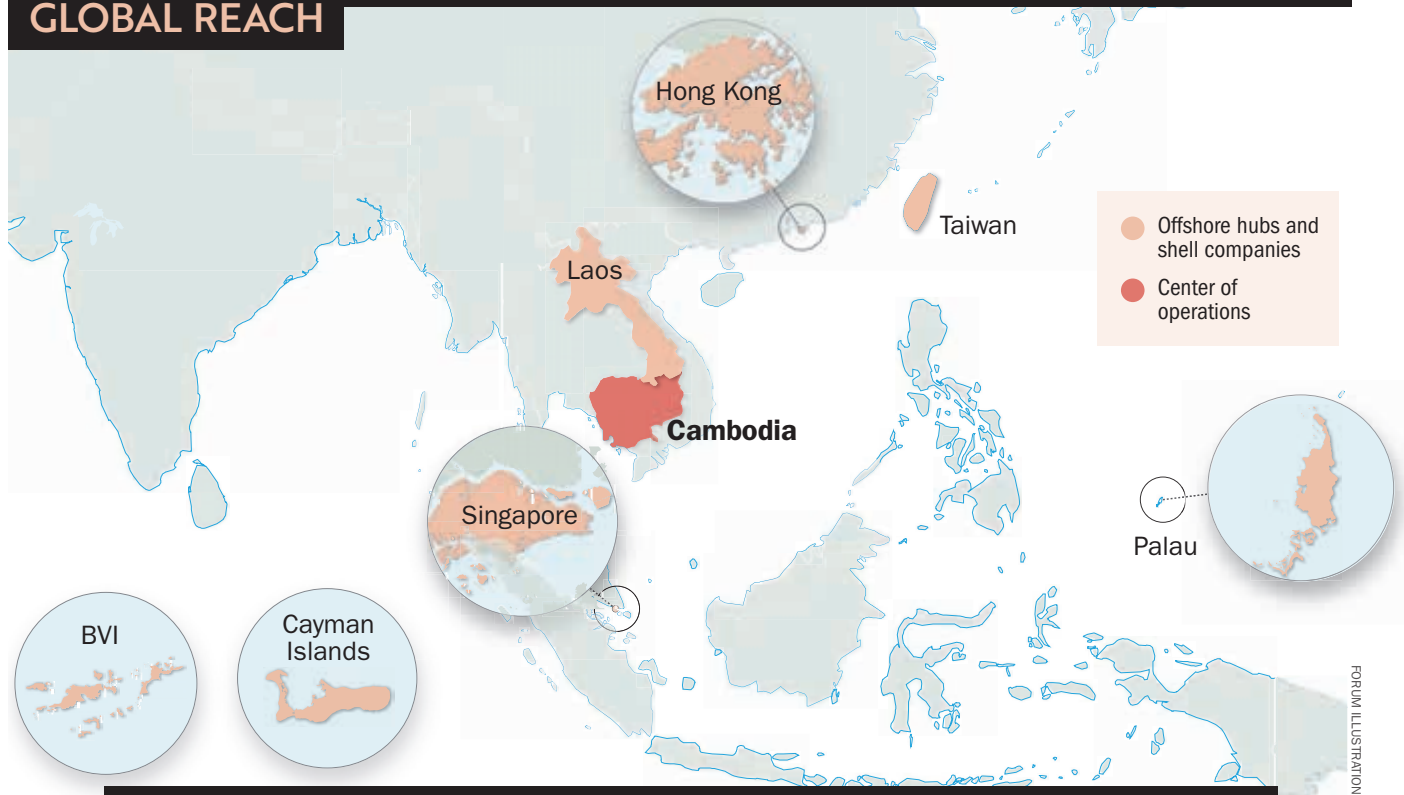
Recent investigations have linked many groups running the scam centers to the CCP’s United Front Work Department (UFWD), which strives to control Chinese elites and organizations domestically and abroad. The

scam groups are mainly part of Fujian and Guangdong and sometimes Zhejiang crime triads, or clans, that act as informal extensions of China’s influence abroad. They are not necessarily directed by Beijing but aligned with its interests and protected by political relationships.

Many clan members have long-standing roles in China’s One Belt, One Road infrastructure scheme to control key assets abroad, such as commerce centers and transportation projects. They invest heavily in casinos, special economic zones (SEZ) and real estate in Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar, and are involved in gambling, smuggling and cross-border trade. Examples include groups that fueled Sihanoukville’s casino boom and financed SEZs tied to the scam hubs.

Their UFWD-linked diaspora business associations include Chinese chambers of commerce in Cambodia,

## PRINCE GROUP TRANSNATIONAL CRIMINAL ORGANIZATION'S GLOBAL REACH



Prince Group targets individuals in the United States and other countries worldwide in virtual currency scams. The illicit revenue is invested through a complex network of shell and holding companies, including in the British Virgin Islands (BVI), the Cayman Islands, Hong Kong, Singapore and Taiwan. These funds are eventually combined with the Prince Group's ostensibly legitimate business activities. Additionally, the Prince Group works with known organized crime facilitators to make predatory investments in Palau.

so-called friendship associations and overseas Chinese business councils. Chen operated in this ecosystem, according to the UNODC.

Investigations also revealed that UFWD-linked groups provide cover for scam operators, sponsor supposed charity events to launder reputations, make political donations to Cambodian elites, and facilitate visas, land deals and favorable business registrations through China's provincial patronage networks. These networks supply funding, management, technical infrastructure and political protection through CCP relationships. They use underground banking and crypto laundering, and increasingly Starlink and Telegram for communicating, the U.N. found.

The groups often provide security inside compounds, manage trafficking routes, and enforce discipline and punishment. They are tied to local political structures, especially in southern China. Some of the clans also operate security companies abroad that provide guards for casinos and SEZs, recruit former People's Liberation Army and paramilitary personnel, and staff China's public security bureaus abroad. Through these relations and activities, a network of money launderers, traffickers, data brokers and service providers drive the scam ecosystem.

Moreover, state-owned and quasi-state-owned

enterprises have intertwined interests with these clans, including building facilities later used as scam compounds, leasing space to front companies and partnering with private Chinese investors who convert properties into scam hubs.

### COUNTERING SCAMS

Scam centers pose regional economic and security threats, and the U.S. and its Allies and Partners must prioritize shuttering them, analysts and security experts contend. The operations threaten Southeast Asian livelihoods and financial and digital ecosystems, as well as regional investment stability, and legitimate development and investor confidence. Southeast Asian leaders should engage partners such as Australia, Japan, South Korea, the U.K. and the U.S. to support capacity building and technology for investigation and financial tracking, experts say.

To strengthen enforcement, action plans could be linked with anti-corruption reforms and technical support. Allied and partner nations could synchronize law enforcement measures across multiple countries to reduce displacement effects, such as trafficked workers moving from Cambodia to Laos to Myanmar and back to Cambodia.

# ORIGINS OF TRAFFICKED WORKERS IN REGIONAL SCAM COMPOUNDS



RUSSIA  
TÜRKIYE

## EUROPE

CZECH REPUBLIC  
ROMANIA  
UKRAINE

## AFRICA

ALGERIA  
BURUNDI  
CAMEROON  
EGYPT  
ETHIOPIA  
GHANA  
KENYA  
LIBERIA  
MADAGASCAR  
MOROCCO  
MOZAMBIQUE  
NAMIBIA  
NIGERIA  
RWANDA  
SIERRA LEONE  
SOMALIA  
SOUTH AFRICA  
SUDAN  
TUNISIA  
UGANDA  
ZAMBIA  
ZIMBABWE

## NORTHEAST ASIA

CHINA  
HONG KONG  
JAPAN  
MONGOLIA  
SOUTH KOREA  
TAIWAN

## SOUTHEAST ASIA

CAMBODIA

INDONESIA  
LAOS  
MALAYSIA  
MYANMAR  
SINGAPORE  
THAILAND  
VIETNAM

## SOUTH ASIA

BANGLADESH

BHUTAN  
INDIA  
NEPAL  
PAKISTAN  
SRI LANKA

## CENTRAL ASIA

KAZAKHSTAN  
KYRGYZSTAN  
TURKMENISTAN

UZBEKISTAN

## NORTH AMERICA/ SOUTH AMERICA

UNITED STATES  
BRAZIL  
COLOMBIA

## ASIA/EUROPE

GEORGIA

## MIDDLE EAST

IRAN

Source: UNODC

FORUM ILLUSTRATION

ASEAN and the U.N. can take the lead in treating scam compounds as transnational criminal organizations rather than labor-abuse cases. Existing mechanisms, such as the U.N. Convention against Transnational Organized Crime and the ASEAN Convention Against Trafficking in Persons, can be leveraged to create a legal and political basis for intelligence sharing, joint investigations and extraditions beyond bilateral agreements. For example, a scam center task force could be established under the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Transnational Crime, with joint watch lists of compounds, owners and key facilitators; shared databases of trafficked workers and abuse patterns; and standardized evidence collection guidelines to ensure extraditable cases.

Coordinated efforts to curb money laundering would raise the cost of doing business for scam operators. ASEAN could blacklist known scam-linked entities, such as casinos, SEZs and property developers. Officials could work with crypto exchanges and major platforms to flag and freeze suspicious currency or crypto flows.

Cross-border regulatory programs could better detect fraud flows. Existing ASEAN mechanisms could identify high-risk zones in which banks and investors would employ enhanced due diligence, and issue travel advisories and business risk warnings. Know-your-customer, and anti-money laundering and anti-fraud practices also could be more widely implemented. Other countermeasures should seek to thwart shady recruitment practices and strengthen legal labor migration routes.

“While the international community now stands at a critical inflection point amidst the accelerating linkages to Asian underground banking and money laundering networks and potential spin-offs of the regional scam industry, governments around the world are slowly coming to grasp the profound implications of the present situation,” the 2025 UNODC report concluded. “Taken together, it is increasingly clear that failure to address [the current scam situation] will have unprecedented and potentially irreversible consequences for Southeast Asia that will be felt globally for years to come.” □

# PUNCHING ABOVE THEIR WEIGHT



## To Prevail, Modest-Size Indo-Pacific Armies Must Focus on Inherent Strengths

LT. GEN. (RET.) ROY M. GALIDO  
FORMER COMMANDER, PHILIPPINE ARMY

In recent years, the world has awakened to new realities, from conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East to increasing tensions around Taiwan and across the Korean Peninsula. Contested geographies, competition for critical resources, the reorientation of sociopolitical paradigms and the redrawing of security architectures point to one thing: an increased likelihood of conflict. And when military experts speak of conflict, they instinctively fall back on land power with the attendant requirements and preparations needed to generate an effective security nexus.

The current geopolitical maelstrom encompasses not only major global and regional players but also small states struggling to protect their interests. And these states mainly rely on their land forces to survive in modern conflicts. In the dynamic and unforgiving realities of war, land power represents the most visible, viable and enduring form of deterrence by way of direct physical control. More importantly, land power, acting as a great equalizer, provides small states a credible means to assert agency and ensure their roles in regional stability.

Warfare, as 19th-century Prussian Gen. Carl von Clausewitz aptly framed it, is not all about scale and size. Modern land warfare instead relies on an ability to maneuver in a complex environment, seize and dominate key terrains, and turn geography into a force multiplier. Essentially, it is shaped by elements that are often overlooked in great power calculations — intelligent use of force, adaptability and positional advantage — that any state can muster to assert its place on the modern battlefield.

### Perspective of Modest-Size Powers

Mainstream theories, doctrines and operating concepts have been derived mostly from the perspective of large modern armies, which can have limited practical use for states such as the Philippines. Unlike major nations with extensive arsenals that can speak confidently about power projection, deterrence and control, and are fortified by sprawling defense budgets, smaller states face a different calculus. They operate with limited strategic magnitude and depth, fewer resources, and

**Philippine and U.S. personnel conduct a simulated air assault during Exercise Salaknib on Calayan Island, Philippines, in May 2025.**

SGT. 1ST CLASS BENJAMIN PARSONS/U.S. ARMY



less tolerance to weighty regional incidents. Their margin for error is narrow. They cannot afford nonsensical doctrines, ambitious postures or underutilized force structures. The burden and risks associated with land power employment by small states are proportionally heavier.

It is easy to imagine a militarily strong state prevailing on a modern battlefield. But a modest-size military power that is threatened by a top-tier adversary will strain its defense leaders' mental faculties, drain its economic resources, and test the limits of its collective ingenuity and national will. In essence, smaller states must compensate for major force and technological asymmetries.

Generating and maintaining all phases of land power requires extensive resources and technology and therefore is unsustainable for most

small nations and territories. First, because of the continuing expansion of the battlespace, land forces are compelled to invest in cross-domain capabilities not only to support joint multidomain operations but also to deter threats from an adversary's other domains. Second, due to the emergence of game-changing technologies, large armies can see and shoot farther, with greater accuracy. Conversely, kill-chain disruptors are being integrated as essential land force capabilities. Lastly, land warfare is becoming more network-centric to accommodate the integration of multiple data sources. This kind of network architecture is difficult for most small powers to establish, maintain and protect, especially in war zones. If small states try to adopt this type of land force configuration, most of them will fall short.



**Royal Thai Navy personnel move ashore near Sattahip, Thailand, during the multilateral Exercise Cobra Gold in March 2025.**

PETTY OFFICER 1ST CLASS ALEX PERLMAN/U.S. NAVY



### Land Power Dilemmas

Nations facing threats from much larger powers must respond with realistic and sustainable strategies. Multiple dilemmas can interfere with that approach:

- **Costly error:** Some armies commit to platforms or force types that are not suited to countering the threat at hand. Reversing previous decisions, tantamount to acknowledging a failure in strategic planning, can entail substantial financial loss and cause public backlash.
- **Threat of obsolescence:** The rapid evolution of technology can make previously essential, resource-demanding capabilities useless, in some cases long before they are paid off. Meanwhile, states that choose to hedge and wait are left with no capabilities at all.
- **Limited capability options:** Smaller states rarely have access to top-notch weapons needed to compete on the modern battlefield. Defense hardware and software, and other off-the-shelf platforms, often are at least a generation old.
- **Legal and policy restrictions:** Local and international regulations prevent acquisition of certain capabilities or restrict their use, thereby affecting how an army chooses to fight. Prioritizing a state's other

domains also can absorb resources and influence land power performance.

- **Coalition or partnership demands:** An army's capability choices are influenced by its Allies and Partners. Substantial resources must be channeled to specific capabilities that will support interoperability.
- **Internal security vs. external defense:** Some comparatively modest-size armies like the Philippines' simultaneously confront internal threats that cause distractions and compete for time, effort and resources.

Modest-size forces also are more prone to major pitfalls of employing land power. It is important to avoid thinking and acting like a superpower. Exposure to a formidable force sometimes gives small powers the illusion that they can fight like one, matching an adversary weapon for weapon and system for system. But in seeking parity they develop unsuitable tactical instruments that look impressive on paper but stretch resources thin. Instead, they need to think and act more like a smaller nation, developing clear strategies that directly avoid an adversary's strength while capitalizing on unique competitive advantages.

The essence lies not in ubiquity but in purposeful readiness — knowing why, where, how and with what



**Philippine Soldiers fire howitzers at a decoy ship during an exercise with Australian and U.S. forces in Laoag, Philippines, in May 2024.**

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

to fight. States with limited resources should be more specialists than generalists. They should accept some degree of risk and focus on what matters most.

An emphasis on operational relevance is critical. Otherwise, by prioritizing appearance over functionality, they end up well equipped but unable to fight effectively.

### **Prevailing on the Modern Battlefield**

Here are some ways smaller forces can punch above their weight, work around capability and resource limitations, and maintain an alignment between the ends and the means.

First, they cannot afford to get entangled in technological races they cannot win. That noted, technology that supports a specific land power strategy is critical. History is replete with examples of innovative concepts blunting an adversary's technological and numerical advantages.

Next, they should identify their unique competitive advantages. These could be geographic features, the population's qualities and traits, a critical resource or competency, or other national features that could offset a potential adversary's strengths and advantages.

Another recourse is to choose how to fight and be really good at it, channeling time, energy and resources to areas that matter most. A clear, effective strategy enables even modestly equipped armies to generate outsized effects through training, discipline, leadership and conceptual clarity.

Early positioning helps shape a conflict's outcome before it begins. It can transform physical, virtual and social terrain into key warfare enablers. Optimal positioning generates faster responses, more effective deployment of weapons, enhanced force survivability and

endurance, and operational flexibility by allowing ease of movement, specifically to rapidly consolidate, disperse and shift forces to address the evolving battlefield.

Armies must be able to adopt an all-domain mindset. This does not mean competing with other services but rather acquiring and effectively positioning essential cross-domain capabilities. Cognitive positioning is important, too, ensuring legitimacy and morality of action, and clarity of purpose. A well-conceived strategy can splinter enemy coalitions and cloud an adversary's decision-making calculus.

Modest-size armies should work closely with like-minded Allies and Partners, exponentially enhancing their collective force posture. Consistent with the dictum that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, multinational collaboration offers an option for states that are in search of an efficient and effective way to deter regional bullies. Multilateral exercises, reciprocal access agreements, mutual logistics arrangements and capability sharing are examples of this collaborative approach.

The specter of conflict increasingly looms over the Indo-Pacific and beyond, shaping the strategies of every nation in the region. As anchors of stability and security, armies should be at the forefront of assuring their nations, and their Allies and Partners, could prevail against any aggressor.

Victory generally comes to the prepared and favors the bold. Smaller nations can compensate for their limited means and help shape regional security by leveraging land power strategies based on an extensive awareness of operational environments. □

This article is adapted from Lt. Gen. (Ret.) Roy M. Galido keynote speech at the Land Forces of the Pacific symposium in Hawaii in May 2025. It has been edited to fit FORUM's format.

# NAVIGATING THE MARITIME

# GRAY ZONE



**Allies and Partners' Vigilance Toward  
China's Dual-Use Research Vessels**

FORUM STAFF

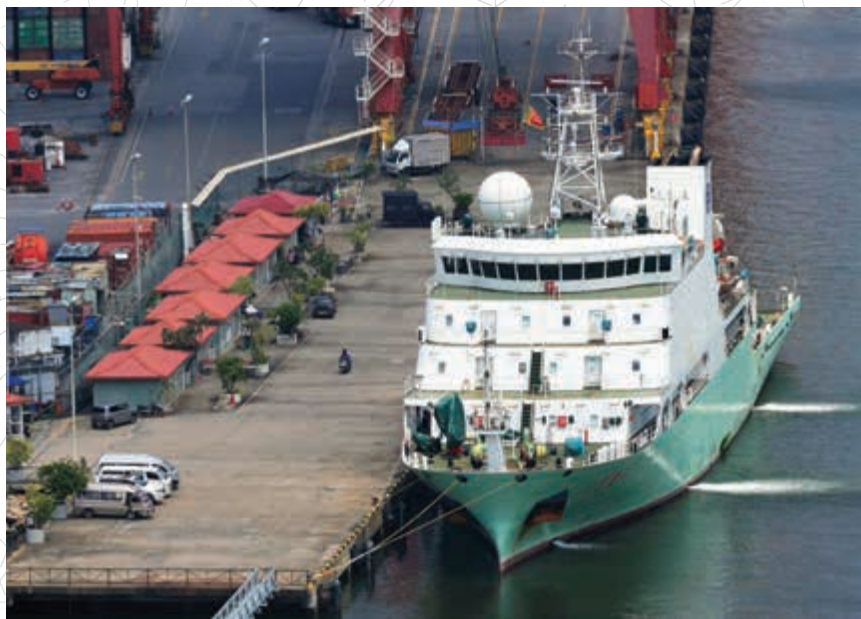
China's posture in the Indo-Pacific includes the deployment of research vessels under civilian guise but designed for military exploitation. Increasingly, these vessels collect marine data in the region's disputed waters. Although Beijing calls the survey trips scientific research, the excursions often mask intelligence gathering of military value — particularly near the United States territory of Guam, the Philippines and self-governed Taiwan.

Understanding this dual-use phenomenon is crucial for anticipating operational challenges, advising policy, and supporting deterrence and resilience for the U.S. and its Allies and Partners. This is true especially for those along the so-called first island chain, a string of major Pacific archipelagos that runs from Japan south through Taiwan, the Philippines and on to Borneo, forming a strategic barrier off China's mainland. China, however, also increasingly collects extensive data farther from its shores, stretching from the Indian Ocean to the South Pacific.

“In truth, all maritime data collection is dual use — it could have useful oceanographic, climate, scientific uses; but it can also have military uses. I'm overall suspicious about China's intent in the region,” Bruce Jones, a senior fellow at the Washington, D.C.-based Brookings Institution, told FORUM. He is studying China's ocean research effort.

China operates one of the world's largest fleets of civilian oceanographic research vessels, analysts say. The Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) reported in 2024 that “of the 64 active vessels, over 80% have demonstrated suspect behavior or possess organizational links suggesting their involvement in advancing Beijing's geopolitical agenda,” indicating dual-use capabilities at scale.

The strategic opaqueness of China's research ship operations challenges monitoring, complicates defensive postures and advances excessive maritime claims, analysts say. The



vessels frequently operate in contested waters, gathering data on bathymetry (water depth), seafloor structure and oceanographic conditions — information that the People's Liberation Army (PLA) can leverage for submarine operations, amphibious planning, and mine and antisurface warfare.

In November 2025, for instance, China deployed three dual-use research vessels in the Indian Ocean. India's maritime surveillance agencies monitored the ships, which included the Shi Yan 6, Shen Hai Yi Hao and Lan Hai 201. “Such deployments typically prompt diplomatic caution and potential denial of port calls at Indian facilities, as seen in earlier instances involving similar Chinese missions,” Indian Defence News reported. The Indian Coast Guard and Navy reported the constant presence of Chinese research vessels in recent years near India's waters.

The Haiyang Dizhi 8, as another example, conducted oil and gas surveys off Vietnam's coast for four months without authorization, highlighting how the vessels can penetrate contested maritime zones under the cover of scientific legitimacy, according to the CSIS's Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative. The Xiang Yang Hong 6 also exemplifies China's dual

**China's research ship Shi Yan 6 berths in Colombo, Sri Lanka, in October 2023.**

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**China's research and survey vessel Yuan Wang 5 arrives at Hambantota Port, Sri Lanka, in 2022.**

AFP/GETTY IMAGES

## Concealed Mission

China's dual-use research fleet offers strategic advantages for potential military operations:

- **Environmental intelligence:** Hydrographic and oceanographic data supports planning for submarine routing, mine deployment, undersea sensor placement and amphibious landing.
- **Sensor development:** Data on sound propagation and currents aid in passive acoustic detection and sensor optimization.
- **Access creep:** Regular presence of civilian vessels normalizes operations inside a nation's exclusive economic zone (EEZ), making detection and interdiction politically complex.
- **Infrastructure placement:** Data can support undersea infrastructure such as communication cables, sensors and uncrewed vehicles.

## Deterrence Measures

To counter China's maritime gray-zone activities, Allies and Partners should focus on:

- **Transparency:** Enhance intelligence sharing and public transparency on research ship movements, flagging dual-use indicators.
- **Policy coordination:** Support interagency initiatives that combine maritime enforcement, sanctions, licensing and public-private cooperation.
- **Capacity building:** Strengthen regional domain awareness via cooperative deployments, hydrographic surveys and shared sensor networks.
- **Legal frameworks:** Clarify norms regarding scientific vessel activity in nations' EEZs and clearly define boundaries for data collection.
- **Strategic messaging:** Identify China's dual-use research vessel surveys as part of its coercive strategy.

Sources: Center for Strategic and International Studies, Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, Heritage Foundation, Rand Corp.

purposes. The vessel and five others made 25 passes in parallel lines off Taiwan's east coast in 2024, conducting systematic seabed surveys, according to Starboard Maritime Intelligence data cited by The New York Times newspaper in July 2025.

"It's hard for us to view this situation as normal," Kuan Bi-ling, the minister of Taiwan's Ocean Affairs Council, told The New York Times.

The same ships have been active around Guam — home to vital U.S. military installations — collecting data relevant to submarine operations. "It appears that China is trying to collect bathymetric data on that part of the ocean without appearing like it is conducting a bathymetric survey," Ryan D. Martinson, an assistant professor and expert on Chinese research ships at the U.S. Naval War College, told the newspaper.

Such activities are emblematic of China's gray-zone tactics, coercive state actions that fall short of open warfare. China views such activity as "a natural extension of how countries exercise power [to] pressure countries to act according to Beijing's interests [and] without triggering backlash or conflict," according to a 2022 Rand Corp. report, "A New Framework for Understanding and Countering China's Gray Zone Tactics."

Similarly, a June 2023 article published by the SeaLight research initiative noted that "China's deployment of research and survey vessels in contested waters is a key component of its maritime gray-zone strategy. These vessels, often presented as civilian or scientific,

**A research vessel prepares to depart Qingdao, China, in August 2024.** REUTERS



The China-operated research and survey vessel Yuan Wang 5 docks at Hambantota Port in 2022.

AFP/GETTY IMAGES



are frequently state-owned or operated by entities with close military ties.” For example, the Chinese Academy of Sciences and China’s Natural Resources Ministry operate research vessels and have PLA cooperation agreements, CSIS reported. The U.S.-based SeaLight uses commercially available technology to expose maritime gray-zone activities.

China has increased marine data collection throughout key Indo-Pacific waters, sometimes disregarding international law that requires coastal state consent for research inside that nation’s exclusive economic zone (EEZ), the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM) reported in July 2025. This pattern reflects a wider lawfare campaign designed to normalize excessive maritime claims while undermining the sovereign rights of coastal states, the report said.

“There are both legal and illegal and aggressive/nonaggressive ways to enter other countries’ EEZs. China is doing a lot of all of the above,” Jones said. “Their behavior is aggressive because it’s aggressive, not because it is/isn’t a violation of the law of the sea.”

### South China Sea Surveillance

China’s survey vessels, operating within the EEZs of nations such as the Philippines, obtain maritime domain awareness in contested areas. They reinforce Beijing’s ability to map and exploit the seabed, with implications for mining, anti-submarine warfare and undersea infrastructure monitoring, among other ventures.

Moreover, these activities are part of a convergence of maritime coercion. China’s



gray-zone campaigns often establish localized “advantages [for China] that can be sustained over time without precipitating acute crisis,” Isaac Kardon, a senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment’s Asia Program, testified in June 2024 before the U.S. Congress.

This sustained presence in waters near the Philippines, Taiwan and other areas seeks to normalize China’s maritime coercion and erode the strategic threshold for escalation. “If you look at China’s coast guard and its maritime militia over the last three years — you would see a dramatic increase in the number of ships and the depth of the penetration,” SeaLight Director Ray Powell told The Wall Street Journal newspaper in March 2025. “It’s taken on the character of a maritime occupation.”

India and the United States protested the Yuan Wang 5’s 2022 visit to Sri Lanka over concerns the purported research vessel was spying.

AFP/GETTY IMAGES

*Continued on page 54*

# China is Mapping the Region's Seabed for Geopolitical, Military Advantage

Chinese-flagged survey vessels are collecting marine data on an unprecedented scale. Between 2020 and 2024, 64 vessels engaged in hundreds of thousands of hours of operations worldwide, with more than 80% exhibiting dual-use behavior or ties to China's geopolitical agenda, according to the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), a U.S.-based think tank.

China also has deployed research vessels to strengthen its presence in geopolitical hotspots. Commercial and

scientific research ships, such as those operated by the state-owned China Oilfield Services Ltd., have helped the Chinese Communist Party assert its illegal claims of sovereignty over large swaths of the South China Sea and obstruct coastal states from finding and extracting natural resources, a study by CSIS found.

Chinese ships have conducted survey operations within the exclusive economic zones (EEZ) of other countries without prior approval, which is prohibited under international law. This also constitutes a double standard given China heavily restricts foreign activities in its EEZ.

China appears to use marine data to bolster its excessive claims and prevent other states from exercising their sovereign rights.

## Sampling of China's Marine Data Collection

- **November 2019:** India ordered the Chinese-flagged survey vessel Shiyun 1 out of its EEZ after the vessel reportedly conducted marine research without prior consent.
- **August-October 2021:** China's Haiyang Dizhi 10 spent about seven weeks inside Indonesia's EEZ in the Natuna Sea.
- **September and October 2021:** The Chinese-flagged Da Yang Hao operated in the EEZs of Brunei, Malaysia and the Philippines. Kuala Lumpur condemned China's actions.
- **November and December 2021:** The Da Yang Hao operated within Palau's EEZ, including in part of a national marine sanctuary.
- **January 2023:** The China Coast Guard deployed its largest vessel to patrol Indonesia's Natuna Sea in an apparent response to an agreement by Indonesia and Vietnam resolving the limits of their respective EEZs.
- **May 2023:** China's Haiyang Dizhi Liu Hao 6 entered Palau's EEZ without approval and appeared to survey the island nation's undersea fiber optic cable system. Other Chinese research vessels continued to monitor the Palauan EEZ into 2024.
- **May and June 2023:** China's Xiang Yang Hong 10 and civilian and military escort vessels operated in and around oil and gas fields near Vanguard Bank in Vietnam's EEZ. China refused to leave despite Vietnam's repeated requests.
- **June and July 2023:** The Chinese-flagged survey vessel Haiyang Dizhi Ba Hao 8, accompanied by China Coast Guard and maritime militia vessels, operated for over a month near Luconia Shoals in Malaysia's EEZ.
- **October 2023:** India raised concerns regarding the activity of the Chinese-flagged research vessel Shiyun 06 near Sri Lanka.
- **March 2024:** Up to four Chinese survey vessels operated in and around India's EEZ.
- **January 2022 through 2024:** Chinese survey, coast guard and maritime militia vessels entered energy exploration areas within Vietnam's EEZ more than 40 times.

Sources: U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, CSIS

## China's Research Vessels are Equipped for Deep-Sea Exploration/Military Uses

### TANSUO 1



Sources: Chinese Academy of Sciences, The New York Times, Scripps Institution of Oceanography, South China Sea Chronicle Initiative  
ORIENTAL IMAGE VIA REUTERS CONNECT

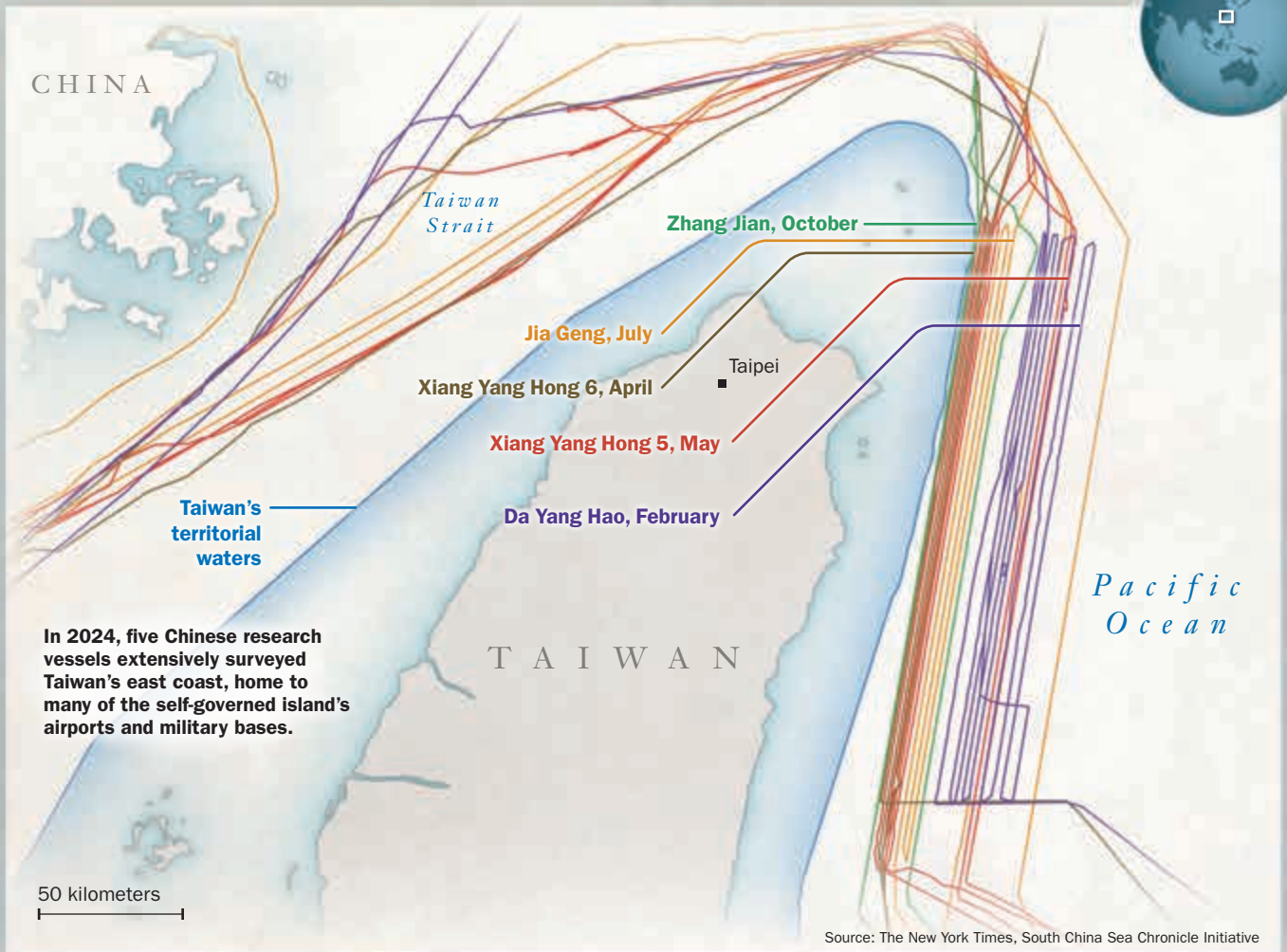
Sonar detects underwater objects and measures depth

## Flashpoints between China and the Philippines in the South China Sea

China extensively uses purported scientific research vessels in portions of the South China Sea also claimed by other nations. This indicates that such vessels are used to advance China's excessive maritime claims, rather than or in addition to serving legitimate scientific purposes. The Chinese-flagged vessels, accompanied by maritime militia and China Coast Guard vessels, often operate in other nations' EEZs without consent and violate the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea.

-  China's claim
-  200-nautical-mile EEZ
-  China's claimed EEZ
-  Philippine EEZ
-  Disputed land features, islands

Source: BBC



Source: The New York Times, South China Sea Chronicle Initiative

*Continued from page 51*

For example, China's ships have made multiple incursions at the contested Sabina Shoal within Manila's EEZ. In April 2024, the Philippines raised its flag at the shoal to assert sovereignty, prompting China's deployment of a massive 12,000-ton Coast Guard vessel. Such events typify the pattern: China's civilian or paramilitary-type vessels enter other nations' claimed waters to consolidate their presence, gather environmental or hydrographic data, or prepare a pretext for sustained operations.



**A China Coast Guard vessel fires a water cannon at a Philippine supply vessel as it approaches Second Thomas Shoal in the South China Sea in March 2024.**

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

In May 2025, the Philippines deployed a Coast Guard vessel and aircraft to track a Chinese research ship operating illegally in its EEZ. Manila declared China's activity a sovereignty violation. The incident reflects China's strategy of ignoring its obligations as a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea while pressing its arbitrary and excessive claims.

By pairing scientific vessels with China Coast Guard and maritime militia escorts, Beijing multiplies the coercive effect. The actions show the PLA's growing use of undersea terrain data to support operations that threaten a free, secure and prosperous Indo-Pacific, analysts say.

China's alarming gray-zone maritime strategy leverages civilian, paramilitary and military assets, including research and fishing vessels, to exert control over contested zones. This multilayered coercion erodes norms and reinforces China's maritime claims incrementally. Such operations allow the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to coerce "while avoiding a conventional military response from the United States and its

allies," notes the November 2024 Rand Corp. report "Understanding and Countering China's Maritime Gray Zone Operations." The report recommends enhanced presence, transparency initiatives and allied coordination as deterrent measures.

### **Masked Intent Near Taiwan**

The Taiwan Strait and its eastern approaches are at the heart of China's coercion campaign. China's parallel survey patterns east of Taiwan suggest mapping for submarine deployment or interdiction zones. Equally concerning are China's surveys near Guam — a hub for U.S. power projection in the Western Pacific. Chinese research vessels resumed operations east of Guam as recently as June 2025, according to data cited by The New York Times.

Taiwan's military intelligence noted a dramatic uptick in China's maritime and aerial activity across the Indo-Pacific in 2024: nearly 12,000 flights and more than 86,000 missions at sea — military exercises that totaled an estimated \$21 billion in operational costs and a nearly 40% increase over 2023 spending, the Reuters news service reported.

Such overt actions distract from less-visible activities such as marine data collection, which accumulates military advantage without risking immediate escalation. The extent of the drills underscores the potential scale and normalization of PLA maritime activities — an environment in which research ships can mix, gather environmental and electromagnetic data, and facilitate PLA submarine or amphibious operations near Taiwan under technical pretexts. "They are trying to normalize their military power projection and intimidation around the first island chain," a Taiwan military official told Reuters.

### **Legal Double Standards**

China's marine data collection is a tool for "preparing the battlespace," particularly when survey tracks are along likely submarine routes or amphibious approach corridors, according to USINDOPACOM. China is moving toward a more conventional approach, indicating a rising threshold of risk tolerance, including in the Pacific, The Heritage Foundation reported in September 2024. Further, PLA modernization is sharpening strategic pressures, making encounters — including those involving ostensibly benign vessels — more fraught and dangerous, according to a May 2024

report by the U.S.-based National Bureau of Asian Research.

China's rapid expansion and deployment of its research and survey fleet, and the systematic surveys it conducts near Guam, the Philippines and Taiwan, are not merely to advance science. They signal and enable coercion and are part of a strategy to collect data of military utility, normalize excessive claims and undermine the sovereign rights of Indo-Pacific states. Vessels such as the Xiang Yang Hong 6 embody this duality — flying the flag of science but sailing as military scouts. Their data collection should be understood for what it is, analysts say: a gray-zone operation, reinforced by lawfare, to ready the battlespace for potential conflict.

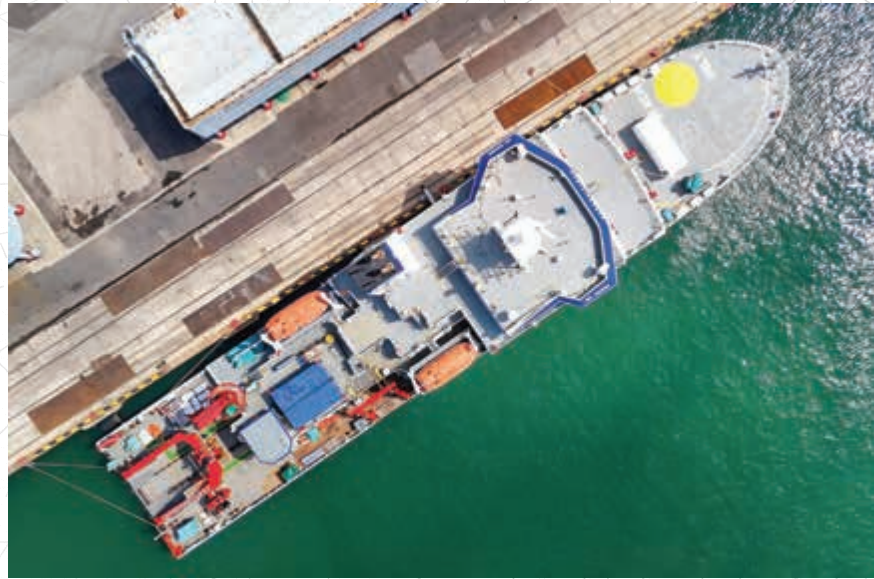
### Strengthening Countermeasures

To ensure a free, secure and prosperous Indo-Pacific, the U.S. and its Allies and Partners must remain vigilant about China's maritime activities — exposing Beijing's duplicity and countering its attempts to redraw the physical and legal maps that define the maritime domain.

Regional resilience requires recognition of this threat and promotion of cooperative mechanisms to challenge China's opaqueness and normalization of dual-use maritime activity, defense experts say.

"The U.S. is the most important oceanographic power in the world — but China is catching up and several of our Allies and Partners have very important capacity, skills, local knowledge and geography," said Jones, the Brookings senior fellow. Countermeasures should integrate intelligence, law enforcement and economic tracking mechanisms, according to Benjamin Jensen, director of CSIS's Futures Lab, and his colleagues. In commentary published on the CSIS website, they recommended interagency campaigns to counter China's gray-zone incursions. A joint interagency task force or similar entity could integrate mechanisms to identify CCP influence channels in real time, they wrote.

"The goal isn't just to shut down documented incursions — it's to shape the environment so that China loses its ability to leverage migration, illicit finance, and cyber operations as tools of competition," the CSIS team wrote. That means "deploying targeted counterintelligence and economic measures across the Pacific. It means leveraging the



China's Yuan Wang 1 survey ship docks in Shanghai in August 2025.  
REUTERS

[U.S.] Department of the Treasury's tools to disrupt illicit Chinese financial networks. It means expanding the use of contracted intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance assets to avoid straining existing military collection capabilities. And it means crafting an influence campaign to expose and undermine CCP operations in the information space before they gain traction."

They cited Jade Spear, an interagency initiative that targeted illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing by China's fleet. The operation coordinated 15 U.S. agencies to target labor violations and human trafficking, impose sanctions, revoke visas and licenses, inspect vessels, and investigate fishing companies. "Jade Spear [reimagined] the spectrum of engagement with the CCP — it's not just about use of kinetic action, but the entire arsenal of U.S. bureaucracy can be called to action," they wrote.

"The private sector plays a critical role — financial institutions, tech companies and media platforms must be mobilized to prevent CCP actors from exploiting digital spaces and economic systems."

The U.S. and its Allies and Partners require a sustained, proactive approach to prevent China from exploiting gaps in governance, security and perception management, they concluded. "The real shift must come from embracing competition as a continuous condition, not a crisis-driven response. ... It's not just about blocking Chinese influence — it's about making the Indo-Pacific a space where U.S. alliances, institutions, and economic frameworks make CCP subversion infeasible." □



# *Rapid* **RESPONSE**

*Countering  
China's Critical  
Mineral  
Coercion  
Demands a  
Collective  
Effort*

The U.S. Army launches a midrange Standard Missile-6 during exercise Talisman Sabre 2025 in Australia. Rare-earth elements are crucial for magnets that power missile guidance systems. SGT. PERLA ALFARO/U.S. ARMY

UNITED STATES ARMY 8TH THEATER SUSTAINMENT COMMAND, NATIONAL SECURITY LAW TEAM

**T**he Indo-Pacific's strategic significance extends beyond geopolitical maneuvering and trade routes. It encompasses the bedrock of modern technology and national security: critical minerals. While rare-earth elements (REE) such as neodymium and dysprosium are crucial for magnets in everything from electric vehicle motors and wind turbines to missile guidance systems and military vehicles, a broader range of materials is also vital. Minerals such as gallium, essential for semiconductors in military radar and electronic warfare, and germanium, critical for infrared optics in night vision and missile guidance, are also vulnerable to supply disruptions, often mirroring the dependence on China for REEs. Achieving peace through strength in the Indo-Pacific requires countering this

critical mineral advantage by leveraging foreign policy and economic influence to diversify supply chains and build resilient partnerships across the region.

China will not voluntarily relinquish its exploitative position as the leading producer of REEs. The United States and its Allies and Partners must employ policy and economic tools to reshape the critical mineral landscape in the Indo-Pacific, prioritizing quick wins through cooperation. This necessitates a multipronged strategy to diversify sources, foster innovation and promote collaboration among like-minded nations. Bolstering domestic refinement and extraction capabilities alongside technology-driven efficiencies remains a long-term goal. The crisis is already here, however, making traditional solutions too slow to address the immediate strategic vulnerabilities.



**A Republic of Korea Marine Corps officer tries on night-vision goggles during an exercise with U.S. Marines. Infrared optics rely on critical minerals such as germanium.** LANCE CPL. EVELYN DOHERTY/U.S. MARINE CORPS

**A U.S. Coast Guard crew rehearses night-vision operations in the Eastern Pacific.** ENSIGN THOMAS GEHMAN/U.S. COAST GUARD

## ALTERNATIVE SUPPLIES

Key to countering China's advantage is engaging with partners to develop alternative and reliable supply chains for critical minerals, including REEs, gallium and germanium. Countries such as Australia, Canada, Japan, South Korea and, potentially, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and Ukraine possess reserves of these and other crucial materials, but with limited refining and processing capabilities. The U.S. can leverage its diplomatic and economic influence to accelerate investment in these regions by:

- Expediting joint ventures and agreements. The focus must be on structuring secure, long-term agreements with private and governmental partners. Such agreements provide the demand certainty required by investors in refining and processing facilities, helping overcome financial risks in an expensive field. Consider the advancements already made. A limited number of Japanese companies have expertise in refining nickel and cobalt. Tokyo is expanding its rare-earth refining capabilities, evidenced by the Japan Organization for Metals and Energy Security's investment in Australian REE mining. Similarly, Australia is increasing support for rare-earth processing, offering grants and financing to domestic firms that extract and refine REEs. South Korean companies also are making advances in mineral processing and Seoul aims to significantly increase its critical mineral recycling rate. These existing capacities and initiatives provide a foundation for rapid development.



Workers sort used batteries at an urban mining plant in South Korea. REUTERS

- Targeting financial incentives and loans. Expanding low-interest loans through agencies such as the U.S. International Development Finance Corp., potentially with development banks, is critical. Direct financial support can fund expansion and modernization of partner countries' refining and smelting facilities.

- Accelerating the Minerals Security Partnership (MSP). The multinational initiative, including Australia, Canada, Japan, South Korea and the U.S., along with the European Union, is a framework for securing and diversifying REE supply chains. Partners should leverage and expand the MSP's scope to coordinate financing, promote responsible mining and tackle supply chain vulnerabilities. The MSP could be used to accelerate funding and technical assistance for projects that hasten processing capacity outside China.

## CAPACITY-BUILDING AMONG ALLIES

As a major mining nation, Australia is increasing its refining capacity for critical minerals including lithium, cobalt and REEs. Prioritizing Australian-U.S. investment in refining facilities, particularly for lithium hydroxide (where Western Australia could account for up to 20% of global refining by 2028), offers a quicker path to diversified capacity. Japan and South Korea, meanwhile, have established industrial infrastructure and heavy demand for processed critical minerals. Deepening partnerships with the Northeast Asian nations to invest in refining and diversifying raw material sources, and securing long-term contracts would leverage their processing expertise and industrial bases. Japan has designated 35 minerals as critical and is increasing its refining and processing capacity, having already reduced dependence on REE imports from China. South Korea, which seeks to cut its critical mineral imports by 50% and increase recycling from 2% to 20% by 2030, presents opportunities for collaboration in processing and recycling technologies.

## NOVEL OPPORTUNITIES

The U.S. should explore nascent opportunities in resource-rich nations such as Ukraine, which possesses significant lithium, titanium and graphite deposits, and the DRC, a major source of cobalt and copper. Namibia and Vietnam also have REE and other mineral deposits. Despite inherent geopolitical complexities, targeted security agreements and joint investment could unlock resources and processing capabilities, with a focus on rapidly establishing facilities.

Collaboration on critical mineral recycling and "urban mining" from electronic waste and industrial byproducts offers a swifter path to increasing supply, bypassing the often protracted timelines of mine development. For example, thousands of tons of electronic waste are exported from the U.S. yearly for disposal rather than recycling.

## ECONOMIC IMPERATIVE

Beyond direct investment and trade agreements, fostering broader economic cooperation can contribute to a more resilient critical mineral supply chain. Partnering to develop common standards for sourcing and processing critical minerals is essential to enhance transparency,

An excavator mines rare-earth elements in Ukraine's Zhytomyr region in February 2025.

GETTY IMAGES



promote responsible practices and mitigate market manipulation by China and others.

Similarly, strategic infrastructure investment should facilitate exporting raw and semi-processed critical minerals for refining in partner nations, thereby helping overcome logistical hurdles that can impede supply chain diversification.

### THE DETERRENT EFFECT

A secure and diversified supply of critical minerals, encompassing REEs, gallium, germanium and others, is a powerful deterrent against potential adversaries. When the U.S. and its Allies and Partners are not beholden to a single source for essential materials, it significantly diminishes the incentive for any nation to wield supply as a coercive tool. This safeguards the production of defense technologies and secures a supply chain for self-reliance within other critical technology sectors. Focusing on partner country solutions is essential to achieving this deterrent effect more rapidly than by relying on a prolonged domestic build-out. Even the most optimistic estimates for sourcing REEs in the U.S., for example, require billions of dollars in government investment, fast-tracked permitting, loosening of domestic environmental regulation, new technology, and a five- to 10-year horizon.

By prioritizing multinational solutions that leverage existing infrastructure, expertise and governmental commitments, Allies and Partners can achieve significant progress on a considerably faster timeline. The overarching focus must be on:

- Leveraging refining capacity. Rather than

initiating projects, expanding and upgrading facilities in partner nations is quicker and more cost-effective.

- Streamlining approvals. Expediting joint venture agreements, export licenses, technology sharing and investment with partner countries will accelerate progress.
- Focusing on midstream processing. Since refining and smelting represent China's most significant choke point, directing resources to rapidly expand these capabilities in partner nations offers the most immediate solution.

### PARTNER-LED PATH

Securing a reliable and diversified supply of critical minerals is essential to U.S. national security and a prerequisite for achieving peace through strength in the Indo-Pacific. Although robust domestic capabilities are undeniably important for long-term resilience, a strategic shift toward fostering alternative supply chains through strong, action-oriented partnerships with nations including Australia, Japan and South Korea offers the fastest and most effective path to countering China's critical mineral advantage.

By leveraging foreign policy and economic influence to accelerate investment in refining and processing, and by promoting the MSP and other multilateral frameworks, the U.S. can rapidly diversify critical mineral supply chains, safeguard its technological leadership, and support a more balanced and stable Indo-Pacific free from the vulnerabilities of single-source dependence. The time for sustained and strategic action among partners is now. □

# Strategy of Denial

## Information operations can support and amplify credible deterrence

MAJ. GEN. PAUL KENNY/AUSTRALIAN DEFENCE FORCE

Australia's strategy of denial, adopted under the National Defence Strategy (NDS) released in 2024, aims to deter conflict, prevent any potential adversary from coercing Australia through force, support regional security and prosperity, and uphold a favorable regional strategic balance.

This strategy rests on signaling “a credible ability to hold potential adversary forces at risk” in order “to deter attempts to coerce Australia through force,” according to the NDS.

Information operations (IO) can include signaling, enhancing operations through the information environment to amplify deterrent effects. Without it, we might conduct activities that we believe deter without achieving the effect we seek. Signaling makes deterrence effects credible to the recipient and supports those effects to be comprehended through a strong narrative — on which actions must deliver or become a bluff or deception. Tailoring the narrative, wherever possible, ensures the recipient interprets the signals as intended.

We must use IO to signal that we possess the capacity, determination and willingness to achieve deterrence. Changes to posture and presence are inadequate without clear signaling, including through IO that demonstrate our willingness to counter, defend and expose.

The Australian Defence Force (ADF) — as the military instrument of national power — is a core part of the NDS. The ADF's primary contribution is “hard power” that deters actions against Australia's interests. However, the ADF



**Australian Defence Force**  
**Maj. Gen. Paul Kenny**  
AUSTRALIAN DEFENCE DEPARTMENT

also supports effects used to shift an actor's decision calculus. We are the only element that can provide a hard power option for government. We are by no means the only element that can have an information effect and, for that reason, we must integrate with all instruments of national power. Similarly, we know that working with Allies and Partners will amplify our deterrence signaling.

### **Amplifying Deterrence**

The first element of IO is strategic messaging. Effectively communicating what we can and will do, and why, is critical to establishing our credibility. IO supporting a deterrent effect should underscore that our military capability is designed to preserve and promote peace, even though it provides options across the spectrum of power. Successful deterrence also requires that strategic messaging contain an element of assurance.

The second element of IO is the need to call out behavior that might challenge regional peace and prosperity. We live in a world where disinformation, propaganda and coercive messaging are the norm. The rise of artificial intelligence tools and the proliferation of disinformation on social media have accelerated this trend. The value we place on individual freedom means these false narratives threaten our citizens. We have a responsibility to present transparent, fact-based information to counter disinformation and expose the actions of those who work against our interests.



**Australian Army Soldiers are transported by CH-47 Chinook to an urban clearance drill during exercise Wantok Warrior in Lae, Papua New Guinea, in October 2025.** AUSTRALIAN DEFENCE DEPARTMENT

The final element is IO as a force multiplier. IO extend the effects of hard power by shaping perceptions, influencing decision-making and degrading adversary cohesion, long before the first shot is fired. When integrated with combat forces, IO capabilities enhance the impact of hard power by amplifying the credibility of deterrent messaging, countering propaganda and ensuring that our narrative dominates the information environment.

At the tactical and operational levels, IO forces provide commanders with tools to shape the information environment in real time. They enable units to disrupt enemy command and control through electronic warfare, expose adversary deception, and safeguard decision-making processes by protecting critical information channels. In the past, combining arms of war focused on including artillery or naval surface fire support to suppress or isolate adversary formations. Today, combining arms includes IO to neutralize adversary influence, disrupt their freedom of action in the information domain and preserve the initiative for friendly forces. By synchronizing IO, cyber capabilities and electronic attack with maneuver and fires, commanders can disrupt a potential adversary.

### Future Deterrence

Credible deterrence demands constant monitoring and evaluation. It requires clear messaging that signals

hard power effects for purposes of deterrence, provides assurance, enhances ally and partner integration, and helps citizens and regional partners see our actions and the principles we defend.

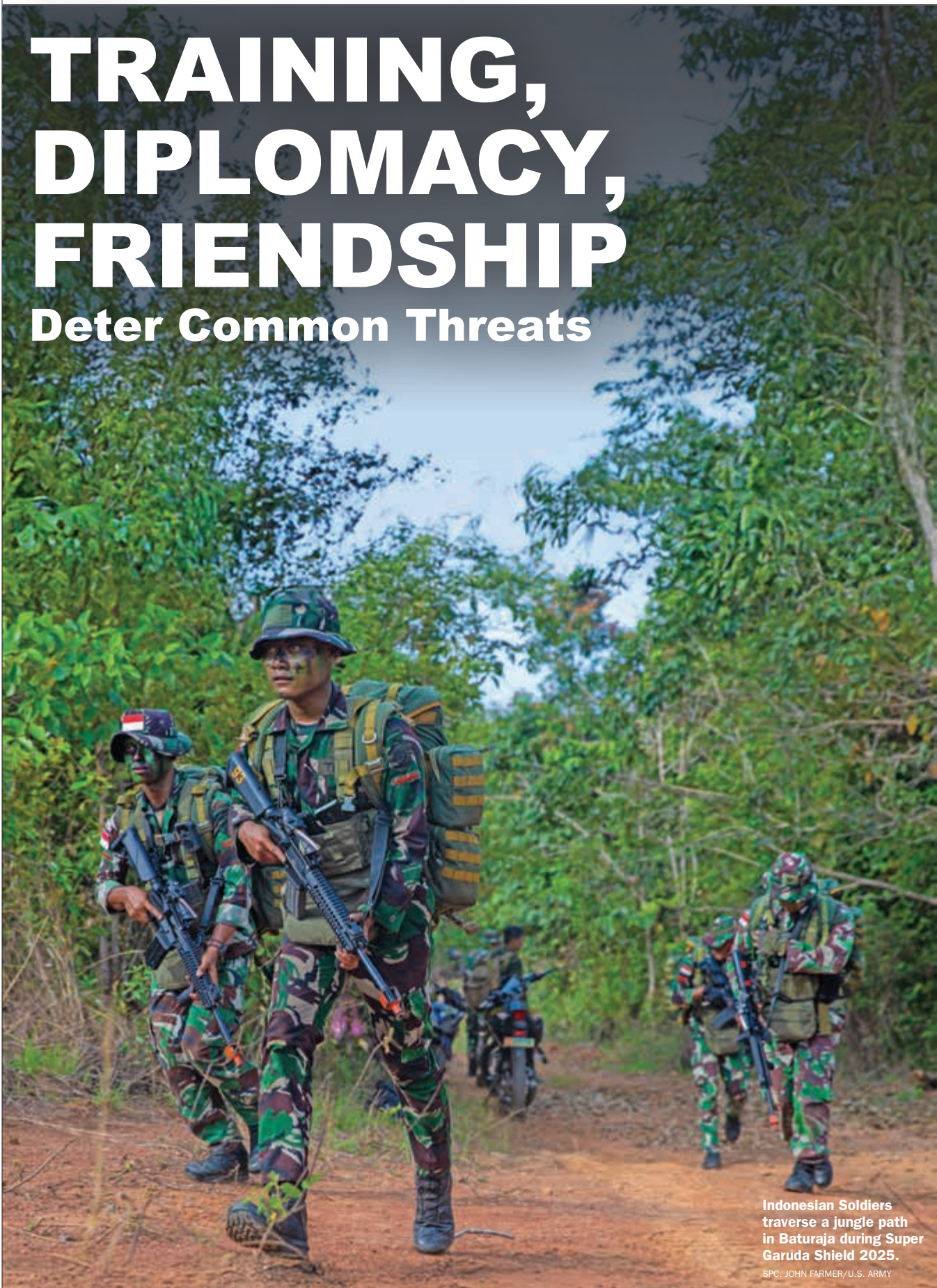
IO are not an optional extra but an enabler of each of these pillars — sharpening signals, exposing malign behavior and strengthening resilience to disrupt a potential adversary's chances of success. As we build integrated IO capabilities across our military and with partners, we must uphold the high standards of ethical, lawful and transparent use of these tools so they reinforce, rather than corrode, the values we protect.

We should accelerate investment in training, interoperability and joint exercises, and shared doctrine that combine hard power with IO. By doing so, we will make deterrence more credible and comprehended with our collective forces. Our joint resolve will be the signal to any would-be coercer that the risks of aggression far outweigh any possible gains.

Maj. Gen. Paul Kenny, the Australian Defence Force's deputy theater commander, Joint Operations Command, delivered this presentation at the United States Indo-Pacific Command in Hawaii in October 2025. It has been edited to fit FORUM's format.

# TRAINING, DIPLOMACY, FRIENDSHIP

## Deter Common Threats



Indonesian Soldiers traverse a jungle path in Baturaja during Super Garuda Shield 2025.

SPC. JOHN FARMER/U.S. ARMY

# SUPER GARUDA SHIELD 2025

## Promotes Cooperation and Readiness to Meet Regional Challenges

FORUM INTERVIEW



**Col. Wahyu Endriawan is deputy commander of the Indonesian National Armed Forces Military Training Command's training center.**

Indonesian Navy Col. Wahyu Endriawan served as operations assistant for Super Garuda Shield 2025, an Indonesia-United States defense exercise that drew 6,500 troops from more than a dozen countries for drills across Indonesia in late August and early September. Endriawan graduated from the Indonesian Naval Academy in 1995 and has deployed aboard 17 warships, commanding three. He was honored as an exemplary naval base commander in 2015-16 and for his teaching at the Indonesian National Armed Forces Command and Staff College in 2013. Endriawan completed joint warfare education in Australia and the U.S. and has extensive experience operating combat simulators. He spoke with FORUM during Super Garuda Shield. The conversation has been edited to fit FORUM's format.

### **FORUM: What were your duties at Super Garuda Shield 2025?**

**Col. Endriawan:** I planned, prepared and coordinated the execution of exercises.

### **FORUM: What were the exercise's main objectives, and how did this iteration build on lessons from previous years?**

**Col. Endriawan:** The goal was to provide joint training and enhance interoperability among the Indonesian National Armed Forces [TNI], the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command [USINDOPACOM], and allied and partner armed forces. The 2025 exercise was excellent, from planning stages through preparation and execution. An evaluation of

the 2024 exercise served as the foundation for developing the most recent one.

### **FORUM: What does Super Garuda Shield's expansion over the years say about Indonesia's vision for multilateral defense cooperation in the Indo-Pacific?**

**Col. Endriawan:** Indonesia's intention is to plan and execute combined operations supported by joint functions, increase interoperability, and enhance the ability of TNI and

U.S. armed forces to plan and conduct bilateral and combined operations. The exercise strengthens military cooperation and friendships.

### **FORUM: How does Super Garuda Shield strengthen interoperability, particularly in terms of joint command and control, logistics, and operational planning?**

**Col. Endriawan:** By integrating joint staff exercises, cyber exercises, multidomain combined operational training, and professional development, as well as tactical and technical coordination at the staff and field levels.

### **FORUM: What's an example of a capability addressed at the exercise that reflects the region's evolving security challenges?**

**Col. Endriawan:** CyberEx training. Participants learn to defend, identify and combat dangerous cyber threats through joint cybersecurity tactics, techniques and procedures that assess strengths and weaknesses, improve interoperability, and enhance readiness through simulations and scenarios.



An Indonesian Apache helicopter engages a simulated target at the joint land strike exercise with the Indonesian National Armed Forces and Australian Defence Force during Super Garuda Shield in Baturaja in September 2025. PFC. SEU CHAN/U.S. ARMY



Indonesian Marines fire an RM-70 multiple rocket launcher system during Super Garuda Shield 2025.

STAFF SGT. GODFREY AMPONG/U.S. MARINE CORPS



Indonesian and U.S. Soldiers prepare a mortar during Super Garuda Shield 2025. SPC. JOHN FARMER/U.S. ARMY

**FORUM: What is the importance of the Indonesia–U.S. military relationship in the broader context of the exercise?**

**Col. Endriawan:** Large-scale exercises such as Super Garuda Shield, involving thousands of personnel from Indonesia, the U.S. and other nations, demonstrate the depth of cooperation and readiness to face regional threats. Security in the Indo-Pacific must be safeguarded to confront geopolitical tensions. The expanded military relationship between Indonesia and the U.S. is a key foundation in strengthening Indonesia’s national resilience, maintaining peace and security, and supporting Indonesia’s strategic position on the global stage.

**FORUM: What message does the multilateral format send to the international community?**

**Col. Endriawan:** Super Garuda Shield is not just a technical exercise but also a platform for strengthening military diplomacy and fostering friendship among armed forces. It plays a strategic role in sharpening combat capabilities, reinforcing multinational collaboration and preparing the TNI to face military threats. This helps strengthen strategic cooperation, which is crucial in addressing common threats.



Dutch, Indonesian, Japanese and U.S. personnel conduct close-quarters battle drills during Super Garuda Shield 2025. CPL. ANITA RAMOS/U.S. MARINE CORPS

**FORUM: What is the central mission of Indonesia's defense strategy?**

**Col. Endriawan:** Safeguarding national security, sovereignty and prosperity amid the complex dynamics of modern threats, including cyber and hybrid challenges.

**FORUM: What role does Super Garuda Shield play in enhancing TNI readiness for potential contingencies?**

**Col. Endriawan:** This exercise trains the TNI and participating countries to collaborate effectively in joint military operations across land, sea, air and cyber domains. This interoperability is essential for the TNI to enhance its military tactics and strategies, and to swiftly adapt to multinational operations.

**FORUM: How does Indonesia balance defense cooperation while maintaining a nonaligned foreign policy?**

**Col. Endriawan:** Indonesia balances defense cooperation with a combination of diplomacy, support of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and its vision for the Indo-Pacific, and development of integrated national capabilities. This approach allows Indonesia to safeguard its sovereignty, mitigate geopolitical tensions and remain involved in maintaining stability. Ongoing strategic steps include strengthening bilateral and multilateral diplomacy, modernizing maritime defense, and fostering inclusive dialogue and cooperation to ensure that the Indo-Pacific remains a safe, stable and prosperous region for all countries, especially Indonesia as the world's maritime axis.

**FORUM: What should be included in future iterations of Super Garuda Shield?**

**Col. Endriawan:** Exercise planners could:

- Enhance interoperability between the TNI and armed forces from partner nations by aligning doctrines, tactics and joint operations to cooperate effectively.
- Strengthen joint military decision-making through staff exercises that encourage a shared understanding of effectively designing operations.
- Develop capacity and professionalism in land, sea, air and cyber domains to address global, regional and nontraditional threats such as humanitarian crises and natural disasters.
- Strengthen relations among participating nations through interactions and cooperation, building mutual trust, friendship and collaboration for collective peace-oriented strength.
- Modernize primary weapon systems and master advanced military technologies that can support the effectiveness of combined operations.
- Enhance professional, responsive, integrative, modern and adaptive values in line with the TNI's vision of optimal exercise execution to meet evolving threats and technologies. □

# GUARDING AGAINST NUCLEAR THREATS

## Seoul Plans First Civilian Bunker Under Public Housing Complex



REUTERS

**A**uthorities in Seoul plan to build the South Korean capital's first civilian bunker capable of withstanding a nuclear attack. The shelter underneath a public housing complex will guard against threats by North Korea and is expected to be completed by 2028.

The bunker is designed to withstand nuclear, biological or chemical attacks, a city official said in October 2025. It will span 2,147 square meters, accommodate up to 1,020 people and be equipped for 14 days of survival.

It is the first such move by a local government in the face of a heightened nuclear threat from the North Korean regime, the Seoul Shinmun newspaper reported.

North Korea's continued focus on its illegal nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programs — despite United Nations Security Council sanctions and high-level diplomatic efforts — threatens stability throughout the Indo-Pacific. North Korean dictator Kim Jong Un repeatedly rejects denuclearization

talks. In response, South Korea has strengthened defense cooperation with longtime ally the United States, bolstering deterrence with military exercises and establishing mechanisms such as the Nuclear Consultative Group, which “discuss nuclear and strategic planning, and manage the threat [North Korea] poses to the global nonproliferation regime,” the U.S. stated.

South Korean President Lee Jae-myung has said the most realistic path to lowering the risk from the North is to secure a freeze on its manufacturing of nuclear bombs and missiles, but Pyongyang has rejected diplomatic overtures.

South Korea has nearly 19,000 bomb shelters, including more than 3,200 in Seoul, but most are not built to protect against nuclear, chemical or biological attacks.

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**South Korean officials plan to build a nuclear bunker under a Seoul housing complex.** STAFF SGT. ALAURA LUCAS/U.S. ARMY

# VANGUARD ACTION



AUSTRALIAN DEFENCE DEPARTMENT

**A New Zealand Soldier fires during an assault drill  
at exercise Talisman Sabre 2025 in Australia.**

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