

INVIGORATING REGIONAL EFFORTS TO BOLSTER MARITIME SECURITY IN ASIA

RYAN HASS

Executive Summary

The international system is facing acute stresses at the same time as great power competition is intensifying, and the two trends are mutually reinforcing. Russia's invasion of Ukraine is straining food and energy security worldwide. Deepening U.S.-China enmity is eliminating options for both major powers to coordinate responses to pandemics and climate change.

Simultaneously, maritime Asia is becoming the fulcrum of great power competition. As grand strategist Bruce Jones stated, "The Western Pacific is becoming to today what East Germany was to the Cold War; the front line of tensions between the world's leading military powers. Its deep waters have replaced the European heartland as the fault line of geopolitical tensions."¹

Moreover, there are no signs that this major power competition will abate any time soon. To the contrary, China's growing strategic appetite suggests that the competition will intensify in the coming years. Regional actors must improve their ability to manage incidents and lower the risk of conflict.

Steps to reduce risk could include forging a greater common understanding of relevant international law, broadening codes of conduct for operational behaviors, expanding practical cooperation in the maritime domain, and organizing existing regional dialogues thoughtfully to spur progress on maritime security.

Introduction

The long-standing peace in Asia is breaking down at an accelerating rate.² The previous four decades in East Asia were the most peaceful time in this region in the past 125 years. While there were persistent tensions on the Korean Peninsula and in the Taiwan Strait, they were managed below the threshold of conflict. The enduring peace created the conditions for rapid economic growth and historic improvements to human welfare in every country except North Korea.

This period of stable security and economic growth now appears to be closing. The United States is becoming more and more wary of China's strategic designs in Asia, and Beijing's own actions and rhetoric are amplifying such concerns. China

is rapidly building up its military, becoming more tolerant of friction with neighbors over territorial issues, and increasingly characterizing its competition with others as an ideological struggle. China is also working to establish strategic depth by pushing U.S. and other forces farther from its periphery. What Beijing views as a prudent and necessary step to strengthen its security is seen by many in Washington as an attempt to forge an exclusive sphere of influence.

With the United States holding diminishing leverage to deter regional countries from challenging each other over longstanding disputes, they increasingly are taking matters into their own hands. For example, North Korea is barreling forward in its development of nuclear warheads and long-range delivery systems. Myanmar's junta is shrugging off external censure and asserting control of the country. And China's disputes with India and Japan are increasingly adopting a military personality.

Concurrently, the international system is facing its most severe period of stress since the end of World War II. Russia's invasion of Ukraine is disrupting food and energy supplies. The world is still struggling to contain the spread of COVID-19. The effects of global warming are manifesting in major catastrophic weather events. The developing world is experiencing debt distress, and the global economy is teetering on the edge of recession. And, unfortunately, international institutions are proving to be insufficient in addressing this growing array of problems.

Many of these challenges converge in the waters of East Asia. Eighty-five percent of all global trade moves by sea, and more than 90% of global data flows along undersea cables.³ Within the region, over \$3.4 trillion worth of goods pass through the South China Sea each year, including energy and food to support the populations of China, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan.⁴

Given the centrality of the seas, China is swiftly expanding its naval presence and capabilities. For the first time since the mid-1500s, China is investing massive sums to become a global naval power.⁵ This national development imperative to protect sea

lanes of communication is driving a naval arms race. Numerous countries besides the United States and China are pouring national treasure into this competition, including Australia, India, Japan, Russia, and the United Kingdom.

It is safe to assume, then, that these maritime tensions are going to sharpen, not lessen, in the coming years. China's rapid buildup of naval capabilities will lead to greater military parity in maritime Asia. And this may make Chinese leaders more confident and risk-acceptant in testing other maritime powers. Beijing seeks greater control over contested waters and airspace it claims as its own in the East China Sea, South China Sea, and Taiwan Strait. China's People's Liberation Army will likely challenge American, Indonesian, Japanese, Malaysian, Philippine, Taiwan, Vietnamese, and other naval and air activities that it believes pose a challenge to its control over its claimed territories.

Such efforts will be aided by the introduction of new and emerging technologies, including fully autonomous anti-radiation weapons that are designed to destroy enemy missile launchers. There may also be greater use of autonomous unmanned underwater vehicles and unmanned air vehicles. These and other technologies will take on larger roles over time.

Additionally, China will likely establish a string of bases to support and sustain its maritime operations beyond its shores. Beijing has already built airstrips, docks, barracks, and missile batteries to bolster its force projection capabilities from its outposts in the South China Sea.⁶ As the naval strategist Alfred Thayer Mahan previously observed, a global naval power must have naval bases across the geography of its supply lines, each within range of the next, so that its forward bases can be reinforced at times of war.⁷

China has not yet met this criterion for becoming a global naval power. Its only overseas military installation is in Djibouti. China's key supply line for food and fuel runs from the Middle East through the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea. It is unsurprising, then, that Beijing reportedly is seeking to establish access arrangements for its naval fleet in Bangladesh, Cambodia, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka.

Beijing is also reportedly seeking to establish basing access in the Solomon Islands and other areas in the South Pacific, partly as a strategy to blunt the United States' ability to deploy its naval power through the South Pacific into the region during a conflict in East Asia.⁸

To further bolster its competitive position, China has been building complementary naval capabilities with Russia. The two countries have undertaken multiple joint naval exercises: in the Mediterranean in 2015, the South China Sea in 2016, the Yellow Sea in 2018, and the East China Sea in 2019. Joint drills in 2019 and 2022 included Iran. Following both countries' announcement of a "no limits" partnership at a leader-level meeting in Beijing in January 2022, such efforts will probably deepen in the coming years.⁹ If China gains access to Russia's constellation of overseas naval bases, it would meaningfully augment Beijing's ambition to establish global military reach.

In response to China's development of anti-access/area denial capabilities, the United States and its partners are strengthening their own competencies. Washington is developing additional capabilities and doctrine to frustrate and undermine China's operational advances. Under the AUKUS agreement, the United States is also working closely with Australia and the United Kingdom to develop new and emerging technologies that will bolster their ability to maintain a persistent presence in the waters and airspace of East Asia. Additionally, Washington is coordinating with European partners in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to strengthen their presence in the waters of East Asia, as well as cooperating with its Indo-Pacific counterparts in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (the Quad) and in other fora to promote regional stability.

The tussle for military advantage is particularly intense along the first island chain — the string of islands from Japan's Ryukyus through Taiwan, the Philippines, and Borneo. China's military presence along this chain has grown considerably as its capabilities have expanded. U.S. officials have registered concerns privately and publicly that Chinese military personnel have become increasingly brazen in conducting unsafe intercepts at sea and in the air in

this region.¹⁰ Chinese officials assert that the root of the problem is the increasing frequency of American air and naval military operations at China's doorstep.

Left unaddressed, maritime competition and tensions in Asia will surely mount. And this could negatively affect the future of global trade and the prospects for addressing global challenges such as food and energy security, macroeconomic coordination, and climate change. But given the parlous state of U.S.-China relations, the two major powers are unlikely to make near-term progress in lowering tensions or improving risk reduction mechanisms. With this reality in mind, the central question is whether regional actors can advance meaningful actions to limit risk and claw open diplomatic space for coordination on regional and global challenges?

The best way these actors could reduce the risk of conflict in the maritime domain is by reinforcing support for international law, building operational predictability, developing a more integrated common operating picture, and synchronizing existing dialogue mechanisms to maximize their effectiveness. Different actors will need to make different contributions to various elements of this scaffolding. Given the diffuse nature of regional activities in Asia, there likely will not be any central hub for coordinating such an approach. Therefore, efforts to limit the risk of conflict will need to proceed organically and in a mutually reinforcing manner — all guided by the common goals of risk reduction and improved coordination on common challenges.

Reinforce support for international law

Every country in maritime Asia depends upon freedom of navigation to ensure goods can reach and depart their shores. However, there are fundamental differences in views among certain actors over the scope of permissible maritime activities and territorial claims.

Disputes over maritime territorial claims linger in various areas in East Asia, even though the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) has a mechanism in place to address such disputes. In 2016, for example, an ad hoc tribunal under UNCLOS invalidated China's expansive maritime claims in the South China Sea.¹¹ To ensure international law continues to play a stabilizing role, countries should take their disputes to UNCLOS tribunals for resolution, and all those in the region must recognize the tribunal findings — even if China for the time being exercises indignation against the results.

Actors in the region must also reach a more common interpretation of navigational rights in exclusive economic zones and territorial seas. Given that the United States is an imperfect champion for upholding UNCLOS principles (it has not ratified the treaty and is unlikely to do so for the foreseeable future), other countries that have ratified and abided by the treaty must work together to narrow differences of interpretation and use international law to guide operational behavior. Indeed, a growing number of countries have taken steps to contest excessive maritime claims through bilateral and multilateral consultations, diplomatic channels, and operational assertions of rights.¹²

These efforts, by and large, do not take a position on competing claims, but rather are intended to demonstrate commitment to upholding the principles of freedom of navigation and secure sea lines of communication. The more that regional and global actors contribute to such efforts, and narrow differences of interpretation among them over what navigational rights are permissible in different contexts, the more that such principles will be recognized. This chorus effect should have the side benefit of lessening the risk that freedom of navigation issues will be further subsumed as an element of U.S.-China competition.

Advance codes of conduct to bolster operational safety and predictability

There has been important progress in bolstering operational safety. For example, the Western Pacific Naval Symposium developed a Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea (CUES) and, in 2001, Malaysia and Indonesia signed an agreement for preventing incidents at sea (known as MALINDO). Regional countries developed a Malacca Straits Security Initiative to bolster operational safety through this critical waterway. In 2014, the United States and China adopted rules of behavior for the safety of air and maritime encounters.

Looking forward, regional actors will need to build upon these efforts. And because Washington and Beijing are unlikely to expand bilateral codes of conduct for military activities in the near term, these actors should provide a platform for both major powers to participate.

Washington and Beijing disagree on the source of the problem and proper response to it. For Washington, the primary source of risk to maritime Asia is unsafe or unprofessional Chinese behavior as Beijing seeks to solidify its sphere of influence. For Beijing, the activities of U.S. and allied military platforms along its periphery are the source of potential conflict. Chinese leaders do not see the virtue in creating a more predictable and safer environment for the U.S. and its partners to operate near their shores.

Codes of conduct for operational behavior may need to be built in a piecemeal fashion by various actors. It would be helpful, for example, for the Western Pacific Naval Symposium to forge a common understanding of what constitutes a "safe distance" between vessels in various scenarios and what types of actions would constitute unsafe behavior. Such steps could helpfully build upon this forum's past work in developing CUES.¹³

Similar initiatives should be undertaken to demarcate rules for military aircraft encounters. There are no *binding* rules specific to aircraft encounters in any international convention. However, in 2018, defense ministers in Southeast Asia adopted *nonbinding* guidelines. Members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) could explore expanding the adoption of these guidelines by including participants in the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus), a grouping that also comprises Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, the Republic of Korea, Russia, and the United States.¹⁴ If adopted, the guidelines could materially lower risk among many of the main actors operating in the region.

An Open Skies mechanism that resembles the model previously in place between Russia and NATO countries could also be beneficial. As Michael O'Hanlon and James Steinburg have argued, obtaining mutual agreement on unarmed aerial surveillance among participating countries in Asia could prevent miscalculation and promote openness and transparency related to military forces.¹⁵

ASEAN leaders could also develop an understanding for the uses and limits of autonomous weapons systems in the region. This initiative could build upon the 1972 Incidents at Sea Agreement and other historical precedents.¹⁶ The purpose would be to establish boundaries of acceptable behavior for interactions involving autonomous platforms enabled by artificial intelligence — in both the maritime and air domains in the geographic scope of ASEAN. The understanding could be broadened over time to cover waters and airspace administered by other governments in Asia.

Advance efforts to develop a common operating picture and patterns of coordination

The Information Fusion Center (IFC), located in Singapore, has provided a tremendous service for the region by helping to establish a common operating picture in maritime Asia.¹⁷ The center provides a venue for representatives from 24 nations — which represent around 70% of the global gross domestic product — to combat piracy and protect maritime trade.¹⁸ Continuous attempts should be made to broaden the geographic scope, increase the types of activities being tracked, and spotlight operators that are challenging regional rules and norms.

For instance, the region is confronting depleting fish stocks due to illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing. But no single country can address this challenge alone. Resolving the problem requires broad maritime domain awareness, as well as coordination between maritime law enforcement and other agencies to counter IUU fishing wherever it occurs. A new fusion center in the Western Pacific could link with the IFC in Singapore to raise visibility on IUU fishing and spur coordinated responses to incidents.

Awareness of IUU activities is insufficient, however, to effectively protect fish stocks in the Pacific. Increased awareness will need to be paired with expanded interdiction capabilities. This will require elevated and persistent U.S. Coast Guard presence with shiprider arrangements for local maritime law enforcement officers, as well as fast response cutters on American Samoa potentially.¹⁹ It will also require significant new investments in maritime law enforcement capacity building for the front-line states most heavily impacted by IUU fishing.

Even if such efforts are insufficient in the near term to deter Beijing from continuing its IUU fishing, they could over time put the spotlight on Beijing for destroying the maritime habitat, thereby sharpening the choice for China of whether to continue plundering ocean resources. Taking these steps might also help instill a greater collective purpose in the Pacific.

On a broader level, the region should seize the opportunities that crises present to galvanize action. Coordination has strengthened in response to previous tragedies, including the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami and the 2011 earthquake and tsunami in Japan. Following these crises, the United States and other capable countries coordinated to deliver humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. Should future crises emerge in the region, ASEAN or a subset of its members could play a critical role in helping coordinate relief efforts.

In addition, there may be value in creating greater regional transparency around seabed natural resource exploration and exploitation activities. These activities often spark the escalation of tensions and disputes. If the IFC or a similar body could raise awareness regionwide of seabed exploration and exploitation, it could increase the costs and risks to any parties that try to unilaterally extract resources in contested areas.

Expand and regularize dialogue mechanisms and other exchanges to build relationships

As a rule of thumb, it is easier for officials who have genuine relationships with each other to manage incidents and advance maritime security. Of course, building relationships takes time and repeated interactions. Empowered officials should meet each other regularly, but this will have to be at regional meetings given Asia's geography. To draw senior officials to these gatherings, the meetings must be scheduled on a consistent basis and deliver practical progress in addressing common challenges.

There is already a dense collection of regional groupings (see table 1). These forums provide a neutral venue for U.S. and Chinese counterparts to meet. They also offer an opportunity for the rest of the region to remind both major powers of their responsibility to look beyond each other to address key challenges in Asia and globally.

At present, the overlapping regional meetings do not appear to follow any strong sequence or logic. A group of esteemed former officials could examine the multiplicity of dialogues to determine whether there might be any benefit to adjusting the meetings' timing and sequencing; one forum could generate momentum for other groups to advance their pieces of Asia's maritime security agenda.²⁰

TABLE 1

LIST OF REGIONAL MARITIME SECURITY FORUMS

Forum	Members
ARF Inter-Sessional Meeting on Maritime Security (ARF ISM)	ASEAN, Australia, Bangladesh, Canada, China, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, the EU, India, Japan, Mongolia, New Zealand, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea, the Republic of Korea, Russia, Sri Lanka, Timor-Leste, the U.S.
ASEAN Defense Minister Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus) Maritime Security Expert Working Group (MSEWG)	ASEAN, Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, the Republic of Korea, Russia, the U.S.
ASEAN Maritime Forum (AMF)	ASEAN
Asia-Pacific Heads of Maritime Safety Agencies (APHoMSA)	Australia, Canada, Chile, China, Cook Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, Hong Kong (China), Indonesia, Japan, Kiribati, Mongolia, Malaysia, New Caledonia, New Zealand, Niue, Papua New Guinea, the Philippines, the Republic of Korea, Singapore, the Solomon Islands, Timor-Leste, Tuvalu, the U.S., Vanuatu, Vietnam
Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum (EAMF)	ASEAN, Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, the Republic of Korea, Russia, the U.S.
Heads of Asian Coast Guard Agencies Meeting (HACGAM)	ASEAN, Australia, Bangladesh, Bahrain, China, India, Japan, Maldives, Myanmar, Pakistan, the Republic of Korea, Sri Lanka, and Turkey
North Pacific Coast Guard Forum (NPCGF)	Canada, China, Japan, the Republic of Korea, Russia, the U.S.
Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia (ReCAAP)	ASEAN, Bangladesh, China, Denmark, Germany, India, Japan, the Republic of Korea, the Netherlands, Norway, Sri Lanka, the U.K., the U.S.
Southeast Asia Cooperation and Training (SEACAT)	Australia, Bangladesh, Brunei, Canada, Fiji, France, Germany, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, Maldives, New Zealand, the Philippines, Republic of Korea, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Thailand, United Kingdom, United States, Vietnam
Western Pacific Naval Symposium (WPNS)	Australia, Brunei, Cambodia, Canada, Chile, China, France, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, Peru, the Philippines, Russia, the Republic of Korea, Singapore, Thailand, Tonga, the U.S., Vietnam

Conclusion

The great power rivalry between the United States and China is most directly demonstrated in the waters of the Western Pacific. The Asian maritime domain is growing more contested and more crowded. This reality magnifies how important it is to lower the risk of war by reducing the potential for incidents that could escalate.

Investing in efforts to lower maritime risk will gain urgency in the coming years. It is almost a given that both the United States and China will invest significantly in their naval maritime technological base. They will also continue to bolster their deterrent capabilities. The United States is already working with its partners to accelerate the innovation of new and emerging technologies. It is then developing new doctrines and plans to obtain an edge in the use of those technologies. Similarly, China is advancing its own historic naval buildup, looking for ways to expand access for its forces overseas, and apparently pursuing opportunities for coalition building with Russia and potentially others as well. Both

major powers may remain cautious about endorsing risk reduction initiatives until they feel confident in the strength of their deterrent against the other.

In the meantime, regional countries cannot sit idly by while the United States and China seek this confidence. Even if the recommended actions in this paper do not lower the temperature of U.S.-China tensions, they should help reduce the risk of military escalation. And such an outcome would serve the interests of all countries in the region. For this reason, Asian powers should advance practical mechanisms to limit the risk of conflict and enhance opportunities for cooperation. To begin with, they could forge greater consensus around international law, build up codes of conduct, create greater unity of effort and a common operating picture, and use dialogues to foster relationships among the chief actors. With systemic stresses growing and great power relations deteriorating, there is no time to waste.

References

- 1 For further writing on the evolution of the Western Pacific as a geopolitical fault line, see Bruce D. Jones, *To Rule the Waves: How Control of the World's Oceans Shapes the Fate of the Superpowers* (New York: Scribner, 2021), 163.
- 2 For further writing on the long peace in Asia, see Richard C. Bush, "Conference on the risks to the Asian peace: Avoiding paths to great power war," (conference remarks, Taipei, June 17, 2019), <https://www.brookings.edu/on-the-record/conference-on-the-risks-to-the-asian-peace-avoiding-paths-to-great-power-war/>.
- 3 Bruce D. Jones, *To Rule the Waves*, 4.
- 4 Ben Dolven, Susan V. Lawrence, and Ronald O'Rourke, "China Primer: South China Sea Disputes," (Washington: Congressional Research Service, February 2021), <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/details?prod-code=IF10607>.
- 5 Bruce D. Jones, *To Rule the Waves*, 163.
- 6 Ben Dolven, Susan V. Lawrence, and Ronald O'Rourke, "China Primer: South China Sea Disputes."
- 7 Bruce D. Jones, *To Rule the Waves*, 184.
- 8 Patricia M. Kim, "Does the China-Solomon Islands security pact portend a more interventionist Beijing?," The Brookings Institution, May 6, 2022, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2022/05/06/does-the-china-solomon-islands-security-pact-portend-a-more-interventionist-beijing/>.
- 9 Tony Munroe, Andrew Osborn, and Humeyra Pamuk, "China, Russia Partner up Against West at Olympics Summit," Reuters, February 4, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russia-china-tell-nato-stop-expansion-moscow-backs-beijing-taiwan-2022-02-04/>
- 10 Lolita C. Baldor, "Milley: China more aggressive, dangerous to US, allies," AP News, July 24, 2022, <https://apnews.com/9d5172dafc703b7d-ccc4ac175a984c91>.
- 11 Permanent Court of Arbitration Award for Case N° 2013-19, July 12, 2016, <https://pcacases.com/web/sendAttach/2086>.
- 12 In addition to the United States, other actors including the United Kingdom, France, Australia, and Japan have conducted freedom of navigation operations in the region in recent years.
- 13 "Risky Competition: Strengthening U.S.-China Crisis Management," (Brussels: International Crisis Group, May 2022), 27, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/north-east-asia/china/324-risky-competition-strengthening-us-china-crisis-management>.
- 14 *Ibid.*, ii.
- 15 James Steinberg and Michael E. O'Hanlon, *Strategic Reassurance and Resolve: U.S.-China Relations in the Twenty-First Century* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2014), 197-198.
- 16 Michael Horowitz and Paul Scharre, "AI and International Stability: Risks and Confidence-Building Measures," (Washington: Center for a New American Security, January 2021), <https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/ai-and-international-stability-risks-and-confidence-building-measures>.
- 17 "Fact Sheet on Information Fusion Centre (IFC) and Launch of IFC Real-Time Information-Sharing System (IRIS)," Ministry of Defense and the Singapore Armed Forces (MINDEF), May 14, 2019, https://www.mindef.gov.sg/web/portal/mindef/news-and-events/latest-releases/article-detail/2019/May/14may19_fs.
- 18 Bruce D. Jones, *To Rule the Waves*, 171.
- 19 Alexander B. Gray, "Guarding the Pacific: How Washington Can Counter Beijing in the Solomons and Beyond," War on the Rocks,

September 30, 2022, <https://warontherocks.com/2022/09/guarding-the-pacific-how-washington-can-counter-china-in-the-solomons-and-beyond/>.

- 20** In the maritime security domain, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) focuses on environmental protection, mariner safety, fisheries management, resource management (other than fisheries), counterterrorism, law enforcement, and naval operations. See Dita Liliansa, “ASEAN Conceptualizations of Maritime Security,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, December 1, 2021, <https://amti.csis.org/asean-conceptualizations-of-maritime-security/>.

About the author

Ryan Hass is a senior fellow, the Chen-Fu and Cecilia Yen Koo Chair in Taiwan Studies, and the Michael H. Armacost Chair in the Foreign Policy program at the Brookings Institution. He is also a nonresident affiliated fellow in the Paul Tsai China Center at Yale Law School. Hass focuses his research and analysis on enhancing policy development on the pressing political, economic, and security challenges facing the United States in East Asia.

Acknowledgments

The author presented an earlier version of this paper at the Jakarta Geopolitical Forum on August 24, 2022. The author wishes to thank Kevin Dong for research support, Bruce Jones and Michael O’Hanlon for providing feedback, Lori Merritt for editing, and Chris Krupinski for layout.

Disclaimer

The Brookings Institution is a nonprofit organization devoted to independent research and policy solutions. Its mission is to conduct high-quality, independent research and, based on that research, to provide innovative, practical recommendations for policymakers and the public. The conclusions and recommendations of any Brookings publication are solely those of its author(s), and do not reflect the views of the Institution, its management, or its other scholars.