INSIGHT BRIEF

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Strengthening Indo-Pacific Security:
A Regional Framework for Enhanced Security Cooperation

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Introduction

The Indo-Pacific is ground zero for 21st-century strategic competition. Its economic dynamism, strategic geography, and normative frameworks all have profound implications for global governance. It is home to as many as 46 countries including rising powers like India and China, whose ambitions challenge established rules and norms. With the region's stability vital for global economic and strategic balance, its future will shape the trajectory of international order this century.

Currently, this stability is being challenged by China's unprecedented naval build-up – the largest since World War II (Erickson, 2024). Strategic balance is tilting and with it the order that has underpinned the established rules and norms that have provided for unparalleled regional global growth and freedom. This manifests across various security challenges, including maritime disputes and cyber threats. Regional countries are responding, for instance, by reinforcing existing alliances and partnerships and establishing new ones, like the Quad, AUKUS, and ASEAN-led mechanisms.

Several regional security frameworks have been attempted, including the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP), Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP), and the recent Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF). While these frameworks signal valuable normative messaging and partnerships catalyse

Highlights

The region is central to global governance, with rising powers like China and India influencing security, economic, and diplomatic dynamics.

The essay proposes a multi-tiered security framework that integrates existing partnerships and mechanisms to address geopolitical tensions.

The IP-RSF would strengthen regional maritime security by fostering cooperation, transparency, and deterrence against illegal activities.

A coordinated approach to cyber threats would enhance regional cybersecurity resilience and establish norms for responsible cyber behaviour.

A dedicated diplomatic forum would provide a platform for ongoing cooperation and dialogue on Indo-Pacific security challenges.

valuable support, there is a need for a multi-tiered framework that is inclusive and engages traditional allies and emerging regional players across political divides. This would aim to reflect the heterogeneity of Indo-Pacific countries' regional interests and how the Indo-Pacific construct is approached. It would seek to maximise convergence in multiple areas of cooperation, encouraging mutual transparency and cooperation and reducing the risks of escalation (De, 2024). Australia's diplomatic posture, capabilities and geography uniquely position it to work in coalition with partners to advance this framework – and would ensure its voice in shaping rules and norms while protecting its economic and security priorities.

Indo-Pacific Regional Security Framework

The Indo-Pacific Regional Security Framework (IP-RSF) would encourage mutual transparency and cooperation and reduce the risk of miscalculation and misunderstanding. At its most simple, its inclusive approach to regional engagement would enmesh the existing constellation of partnerships to counter unilateral coercion and risks from great power competition.

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To achieve this objective, the IP-RSF would be operationalised across several core domains, with a focus on three priority areas for initial cooperation.

Maritime Domain Awareness

A common priority of Indo-Pacific countries is the need to ensure a safe and secure maritime space through an inclusive and multilateral approach and to promote a rules-based order that supports regional stability (De, 2024). However in the Indo-Pacific, many countries struggle to afford or operationalise systems to enable this objective – leading to unwatched spaces in the region which, by extension, are ungoverned spaces (Brewster, 2023). A Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) initiative as part of the IP-RSF would therefore be a crucial component of the IP-RSF (International Maritime Organization, 2024)[1]. It would ensure countries have

visibility of their maritime zones and areas which impact their interests. It involves being attuned to the position and posture of all actors – whether own, hostile or neutral – and in all dimensions – on, over, and under the seas (Lahiri & Sangtan, 2024). This would complement already established sub-regional or autonomous MDAs (De, 2024);[2] pooling resources (i.e. information sharing and surveillance) and working to coordinate responses to threats such as illegal fishing, smuggling, and illegal maritime activities. While MDAs have traditionally been costly propositions, technological advancements including satellite-based data, low-cost commercial drones, AI, and crowdsourcing are opening MDAs to countries previously unable to resource it and who would therefore benefit the most from a shared MDA with likeminded Indo-Pacific countries (Brewster, 2023).

Rather than the existing constellation of separate MDAs, with one overarching MDA, this web would support a common view of maritime activities, promoting transparency and trust and deterring others from pursuing actions inimical to these interests. Broad membership would ensure voluntary contributions, including access to existing MDAs, data and technology. An overarching MDA would therefore turn down the heat on strategic competition in the Indo-Pacific by enabling countries to understand others' maritime capabilities, have situational awareness, and assert sovereignty over their waters, transforming previously unwatched and ungoverned spaces. This would work to deter external players from exploiting ungoverned spaces' vulnerabilities in the maritime domain, strengthening regional cooperation and bolstering strategic balance.

Cyber Infrastructure Taskforce

Geostrategic instability in the Indo-Pacific is exacerbated by a broad spectrum of cyber threats, including to critical infrastructure which all Indo-Pacific countries depend on (Congressional Research Service, 2024a; Congressional Research Service, 2024b).[3] Regional cooperation is needed to counter these threats, enable a unified regional approach

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1 The International Maritime Organization defines 'maritime domain awareness' as "the effective understanding of anything associated with the maritime domain that could impact security, safety, the economy or the marine environment."

2 In this sense, the IP-RSF MDA would be broader than the Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness and deeper than the Information Fusion Centre in Singapore, for example. For a review, see (De, 2024)

3 Note, a regional approach to engaging on these issues is vital due to the interconnected nature of cyber infrastructure, the shared vulnerabilities of Indo-Pacific countries, and the geostrategic dynamics which serve to amplify these risks.

to deter adversaries and advocate for a regional agreement to establish norms for acceptable state and non-state behaviour. For this proposed Cyber Infrastructure Taskforce (CIT), several models can be used – the Quad Cybersecurity Partnership, Pacific Island Cybersecurity Initiatives, and Japan's collaboration with NATO. [4]

Accordingly, the CIT would have 5 pillars: Capacity Building, Information Sharing, Norms and Governance, Exercise Coordination, and Cyber Interoperability. Each of these five pillars is a balance between the hard and soft tools needed to effectively cooperate across the spectrum of interconnected cyber infrastructure threats facing the region and would reduce the incentive for actors to pursue unilateral action. For example, Indo-Pacific countries have a shared interest in securing undersea cables and preventing cyber warfare. While these pillars are negotiable, the critical part of the task force is that it establishes a framework for meaningful cooperation and interoperability in a way that reduces fragmentation and supports meaningful channels of diplomacy and similarly effective deterrence effects. A broad coalition of countries under the IP-RSF would support this objective. This is the incentive for countries to support the CIT – for their own national cyber capabilities to be more effective, a multilateral approach to this cross-border issue is needed.

Critically, the CIT would also hold a normative role for countries' own cyber offence and defence operations. It would ensure that countries are accountable for unilateral actions which affect others and encourage transparency of countries' own cyber capabilities. Transparency and increased accountability would promote dialogue on country rights and obligations in this realm (Hurel, 2024). This, in turn, would support an environment where countries cooperate and pool resources on common issues in their shared interest, and deter countries from seeing cyberinfrastructure as a vector to exploit for their own strategic interests.

Indo-Pacific Dialogue for Stability and Security

Fusing the IP-RSF would be a forum dedicated to the issues the framework aims to engage on and elevate discussion for future areas of cooperation. Other multilateral forums in

the Indo-Pacific are generally sub-regional and, therefore, of limited appeal when engaging on region-wide issues affecting all countries. An Indo-Pacific forum – the 'Indo-Pacific Dialogue for Stability and Security' (IPDSS) – would cross this divide to emphasise the role of dialogue and diplomacy in understanding regional issues and the approaches needed of IP-RSF countries to align on common priorities.

> Regional diplomacy is vital for addressing 'micro-level' security concerns that larger multilateral groupings have traditionally overlooked or lacked the agility to effectively engage

Separate from other parts of the IP-RSF which could be added or dissolved over time, the IPDSS would continue in perpetuity in fulfilling its role as the underpinning mechanism for leaders-level discussions on Indo-Pacific priority issues and the approaches needed of countries to engage effectively on them. This diplomacy would ensure the IP-RSF has enduring relevance and is agile in evolving security and strategic issues. The IPDSS would also stand as a platform for leaders to promote, advocate, and defend IP-RSF positions to their public constituencies. It would offer a broader context for why certain approaches to regional issues are necessary and align with national interests, showcasing countries' regional influence on common issues and providing an avenue for media and civil society to engage in areas not necessarily afforded in other diplomatic processes. In this sense, the IPDSS would bridge the gap between regional diplomacy and national interests and concerns.

Furthermore, the IPDSS would underline the role of modern regional diplomacy in engaging on Indo-Pacific issues. It would highlight how the Indo-Pacific has grown from a blend of traditional multilateral organisations and new multilateral partnerships to one where, with the aim of transparency and accountability, countries can retain existing regional architecture and scale it with the IPDSS. In this sense, the Indo-Pacific would act as a proof point for larger integration, adapting existing frameworks and creating new ones to test cooperation mechanisms before scaling to a more global level (i.e. adapting the Malacca Strait Patrols between Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand to other areas of the Indo-Pacific to safeguard sea lines of communication) (Breslin, 2000). In addition, the IPDSS would underline how regional diplomacy is vital for addressing 'micro-level' security

concerns that larger multilateral groupings have traditionally overlooked or lacked the agility to effectively engage (i.e. the UN Security Council inadequately addressing the security implications of the South China Sea disputes).

The IP-RSF demonstrates how modern regional diplomacy can be a decisive force in enhancing Indo-Pacific security and stability

Scope

This paper has its limitations however provides scope for future research. Several potential areas for exploration include:

1. **Expanding areas of cooperation:** Future studies could investigate additional areas where the IP-RSF could enhance its appeal and practical reach. These could include undersea mining, humanitarian response mechanisms, and forward-planning for migration challenges, all of which are critical to regional security.
2. **Establishment of a Secretariat:** Another avenue for research could examine whether creating a dedicated Secretariat might strengthen the agenda-setting and corporate capacity of the IP-RSF, empowering it to function more effectively as a regional institution.
3. **Integration with existing regional architecture:** Further work could explore how the IP-RSF might integrate existing sub-regional frameworks to promote a more cohesive and coordinated Indo-Pacific approach to regional issues.
4. **Neutral and inclusive platform:** Research could also assess the optimal platform for launching the IP-RSF, focusing on how it could be introduced in a politically neutral and inclusive way that gains widespread regional support.

Conclusion

The Indo-Pacific's geography, strategic importance and interconnected economies mean cyber, maritime, and regional diplomatic efforts naturally overlap. The IP-RSF would be a key response to this and prioritise three initial areas that amplify regional cooperation and strengthen the incentive for regional adherence to laws and norms that have supported regional stability and security for decades, even in the midst of asymmetric threats.

The IP-RSF demonstrates how modern regional diplomacy can be a decisive force in enhancing Indo-Pacific security and stability. It integrates existing architecture, enabling proximity-based or other minilateral partnerships to continue while connecting them through an inclusive and adaptive framework. Unlike traditional multilateral groupings, which often lack agility or broad appeal, the IP-RSF reduces the incentive for unilateral coercion and risks from great power competition. This regional approach to diplomacy supports information sharing, transparency, and comprehensive approaches to regional challenges, in turn de-escalating strategic tensions and tempering competitive rivalries.

A defining strength of the IP-RSF is its politically neutral membership structure - both in perception and in practice. This neutrality addresses the hesitations of Indo-Pacific countries wary of frameworks tied to explicit strategic alignments, positioning the IP-RSF as a legitimate and attractive platform for a broad coalition. With this legitimacy, it can generate the critical mass necessary for effective cooperation across its three pillars – maritime security, cyberinfrastructure, and regional dialogue.

If implemented effectively, the IP-RSF would support strategic balance and durable security in the Indo-Pacific. Its regional diplomatic approach ensures the framework is not only impactful but also sustainable, creating an enduring mechanism to address common challenges in an era of heightened strategic competition.

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