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Security Nexus Perspectives

A NETWORK OF MARITIME FUSION CENTERS THROUGHOUT THE INDO-PACIFIC

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Summary

Indo-Pacific maritime initiatives are urgently required to meet growing transboundary threats to international security. The establishment of a national maritime fusion center in the U.S. and a network of similar centers across the Indo-Pacific region would significantly advance maritime security cooperation. The lack of such centers hinders all nations from effectively developing a common operating picture that is required to protect the rules-based international order. This network must be empowered collectively to strengthen international law. Our ever-increasingly complex world changed in 2020 in many ways, but what did not change was the need to defend shared interests, reinforce international rules-based order, strengthen relationships, and promote a networked region to preserve a free and open Indo-Pacific for decades to come.

The Need for Action

The United States National Security Strategy (NSS) provides a framework for protecting the nation, and ensuring its freedom, security and prosperity in a rapidly changing, complex world.¹ Consistently and innovatively translating the NSS blueprint into action remains a core function of government. To this end, the United States Department of Defense is in the process of expanding its security network to meet emerging challenges by reinforcing rules-based international order, strengthening allies and partners and extending cooperative security to like-minded new partners. The aim of this approach is to promote a

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secure and stable environment where nations can maintain their sovereignty while working openly and fairly together to achieve economic prosperity.

Fundamental to this endeavor is supporting the right of all nations to fly, sail and operate wherever international law allows. As stated in the U.S. Department of Defense Asia-Pacific Maritime Security Strategy: “the United States has, throughout its history, advocated for the freedom of the seas for economic and security reasons.”² The basis of the world economy is trade by sea, with 60% of world GDP derived from it.³ Upholding the rules-based international order that enables trade to move swiftly and safely, thereby underpinning global prosperity, is key to the United States maintaining its way of life. Preserving the rules-based order is achieved, in part, by sustaining a trusted network of allies and partners, and by conducting navigation and joint presence operations in collaboration with that network. For decades, the United States has invested heavily in defense cooperation to strengthen information sharing, build interoperability and develop the capabilities required to deter shared maritime threats. For instance, the United States has invested \$396 million in the Philippines, Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh to enhance their maritime security capacity.⁴

However, the next iteration of U.S. strategy must take the focus on key regional initiatives further because the threat to maritime international security is growing. Therefore, the U.S. approach needs to be innovative and ensure that critical instruments of alliance power are positioned to facilitate appropriate responses to emerging threats with adequate scope and focus. Operationalizing the three-year-old NSS and actualizing U.S. strategy is critically important at this juncture to demonstrate U.S. commitment in times of uncertainty.

The establishment of national maritime fusion centers across the Indo-Pacific region would go a long way toward advancing maritime security. Indo-Pacific states should establish such centers with a focus on maritime threats of a transboundary nature, as well as traditional state-based threats. Indeed, the lack of such centers hinders all nations from effectively developing a common operating picture that is required to protect the rules-based international order.

National Maritime Fusion Centers

Having no respect for borders, transnational maritime threats, ranging from crime to sovereignty violations, continually emerge and evolve to present significant security challenges. The United States has 80 state-based fusion centers that focus mainly on domestic law enforcement issues, and several maritime agencies that focus on different aspects of domain awareness, usually for a particular agency, such as the U.S. Coast Guard. None of these could be considered to be a national maritime fusion center (NMFC) with all the capacities that such a title infers. Therefore, it is time to consider the creation of a national fusion center with a strategic focus on the maritime domain rather than a focus that is limited by borders.

A NMFC, serving as a center that receives all relevant data, fuses it to produce valuable information, and disseminates threat intelligence, would immeasurably facilitate the enforcement and monitoring of all laws, customs, and international agreements, such as treaties, conventions, and protocols, that underpin the rules-based international order at sea and the free and open Indo-Pacific.⁵ Such a center would operationalize the NSS and the U.S. National Defense Strategy (NDS)⁶ through attaining threat protection;

maintaining the safe passage of commerce and trade through sea lines of communication; providing forewarning or detection of conflicts or incidents at sea; and advancing American influence with like-minded nations to enhance a free and open Indo-Pacific.⁷

Establishing a U.S. NMFC with strong collaborative links between existing maritime fusion centers would dramatically increase maritime domain awareness (MDA) in the Indo-Pacific region. The conceptual basis of such a center already exists in U.S. intelligence organizations such as the National Maritime Intelligence-Integration Office (NMIO), whose mission is to work at the: “national and international level to facilitate the integration of maritime information and intelligence collection and analysis in support... of Maritime Domain Awareness objectives.”⁸ The U.S. Department of Defense also has existing infrastructure, likely within the numbered Navy fleets and existing Coast Guard facilities, in which to develop the necessary command and control systems.

Networking National Maritime Fusion Centers

Although there may never be a Pacific equivalent of NATO, there is an urgent need for a cohesive and cooperative regional maritime security architecture. China’s untoward extended influence in the region increasingly makes national leaders aware of the fact that there has been far too little consultation and strategic cooperation when it comes to maritime security.⁹ One of the key tenets of the NSS is to achieve better outcomes in multilateral forums. Specifically, the NSS sets as priority action to ensure that the common domains remain free.¹⁰ The sea, the original global commons, is the domain in which international security is most threatened, and is the domain in which threats to the rules-based international order are emerging.¹¹ Threats in the common domains make it necessary for all states to cooperate in protecting what belongs to all of us. We are therefore seeing the emergence of the concept of international security, which is becoming more linked to the concept of maritime security.¹² Moreover, the growing scope of the threat now requires the collaborative effort of all nations. In this regard, the first step is joining with all stakeholders to identify and understand threats.

Most coastal states have at least some MDA capacity, but there are currently only two NMFCs in the Indo-Pacific that come close to fulfilling the mandate expected of such an agency. In India, Prime Minister Modi’s concept of Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) resulted in the launch of the National Information Fusion Centre – Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) in 2018 to achieve pervasive MDA for the protection of the international rules-based order.^{13,14} The IFC-IOR coordinates among likeminded stakeholders in bilateral and multilateral information sharing networks to deter threats. This rules-based approach to maritime security is resulting in “greater tactical synergy, operational engagement and strategic trust between maritime agencies in South and Southeast Asia.”¹⁵ In Singapore, a national Information Fusion Centre (IFC), with strong external focus and multinational approach toward defeating threats at sea, was formed under the Republic of Singapore Navy.^{16,17} The IFC provides actionable information to regional and international navies, coast guard forces, and other maritime agencies to distribute forewarning of new and emerging threats. As a means of promoting international security cooperation, the IFC invites liaison officers from 24 countries and has established collaborative links with 97 other centers in 41 countries.¹⁸ The IFC’s efforts in the Strait of Malacca and Singapore Strait resulted in a 92% reduction in piracy and robbery at sea from 2015 to 2018.¹⁹

Despite the good intentions and hard-earned success of these NFMFCs, two critical difficulties limit international intelligence sharing - dissimilar information platforms and national classification of intelligence products. The first of these serves to slow efforts to share and fuse data, and the second prevents the aggressive and rapid distribution of information. Combined, these two issues erode trust between nations and create gaps in the network that adversaries can exploit.

Persuading states to use a common operating information platform is a very difficult and sensitive task because nations are reluctant to use software that has been developed externally. This challenge is more easily overcome among allies and friends, however, and the developing partnership among the states of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (the Quad) – Australia, India, Japan, and the United States – may go some way to improving communication between the United States and the IFC-IOR.²⁰ At the very least, international information sharing requires that all national systems be able to communicate with one other, which is not an insurmountable problem. Nonetheless, layered on this issue are incompatibilities between different cryptography and communication technology systems.

An International Maritime Fusion Center

One possible way to overcome this technical problem is to create another layer – an International Maritime Fusion Center (IMFC). An Indo-Pacific IFMC, designed to internationally manage MDA in the region, would link NMFCs and would ideally employ a single system that fused data feeds from NMFCs from all participating nations. However, such a system may further exacerbate the data classification problem. While an IMFC would link together NMFCs in identifying and managing transnational threats, dealing with transnational crime issues is very different from dealing with state threats and sovereignty issues. Interpol is a global fusion agency that deals with criminal matters, but there is no equivalent for the more complex issues of maritime security threats. Even Singapore's IFC with its strong collaborative culture, avoids strategic considerations and limits its attention firmly to operational and tactical issues.

The real problem with classification is that information is routinely over-classified by the originating authority, and that agency is typically the only agency that can declassify the information. This is a significant problem in the United States in that it creates long delays in sharing, thus diminishing the usefulness of information for partners, and costs over \$20 billion each year.²¹ Indeed, it has been said that, "the principal concern of the classifiers is not with national security, but rather with governmental embarrassment."²² When it comes to national security, there is no incentive to avoid over-classification, so classifiers err on the side of caution and over-classify.²³

Thus, while the United States tries its best to promote international security cooperation, it is currently limited in contributing to Indo-Pacific international MDA efforts in a significant way when it comes to intelligence sharing. This makes the United States far less useful and relevant to other nations that can easily identify better partners with whom to share information. Combined with a giant leap forward in discretionary declassification, the United States needs new internal policies that provide negative consequences for over-classification, and incentives for identifying information that is of value to cooperative endeavors with allies and partners.

Moving forward

There is an urgent need to reorganize and coalesce the many agencies that have begun to address MDA within the United States Government. A more viable and focused structure, centered around a single NMFC, perhaps in conjunction with an IMFC, would add structure and purpose. The United States, a maritime nation and the guarantor of the international rules-based order, is in great danger of being left behind in the maritime domain by our strategic competitor. A good first step in addressing this problem would be to create a significant national surveillance structure capable of monitoring the vast maritime expanses of the Indo-Pacific oceans with terrestrial, surface, subsurface, maritime patrol aircraft, and space-based technology sensors, and fusing data into valuable intelligence.

This may not be enough. In fact, in order for the United States to maintain its position as the world's preeminent maritime power, it will need to form a NMFC, or even an IMFC, that is able to collaborate in a meaningful manner with allied and partner NMFCs to provide enhanced maritime domain awareness and a near real-time common operating picture. Accurate, comprehensive, real-time information about the maritime domain is vital for leaders as they decide how to manage crises and incidents at sea. This is especially true in the Indo-Pacific region with its vast expanses of ocean, its large population that lives near and is dependent upon the sea, and its frequent natural disasters. The proficiency of these centers in gathering, fusing, and disseminating relevant information in the maritime domain is a value-added proposition that has the potential to build trust in Indo-Pacific alliances and partnerships.

The Quad, as noted above, is a potential starting point for regional cooperation with its well-functioning, informal, network and is well placed to be at the core of any effort to network NMFCs. The four states of the Quad have already concluded logistics support and basing agreements with one another, and these could be used as the foundation to take the next step. Other nations with significant MDA capacity such as Singapore, Indonesia, South Korea, along with Taiwan, could then be included. As additional ASEAN nations build capacity, they will add critical value to this web of maritime capacity.

As a close ally of the United States, Japan is expanding its defense capabilities and is integrated more with U.S. forces. In January 2020, former Prime Minister Abe Shinzo said: "the Japan-U.S. security treaty is a pillar that is indestructible, a pillar immovable, safeguarding peace in Asia, the Indo-Pacific, and in the world, while assuring prosperity therein." Given the challenges of an ascendant China determined to thwart the international rules-based order and upend maritime security, the United States should collaborate with Japan for a greater role in pursuing regional MDA together.

The United States has the opportunity to advance Indo-Pacific maritime awareness if it can leverage its existing security relationships with regional allies and partners in a coordinated approach to improve national and international maritime domain awareness. Drawing upon the strength and strategic alignment of our many relationships will only be effective, however, with the mechanisms required to facilitate the rapid sharing of intelligence.

If the United States can stand up a NMFC, and collaborate with likeminded partners in standing up an IMFC, the result will be an expanding web of maritime security, enhanced capability and interoperability, and greater resilience. This network must be empowered collectively to strengthen international law, which has unfortunately become powerful against the powerless, but powerless against the powerful.²⁴ Our ever-

increasingly complex world changed in 2020 in many ways, but what did not change was the need to defend shared interests, reinforce international rules-based order, strengthen relationships, and promote a networked region to preserve a free and open Indo-Pacific for decades to come. The 2019 U.S. Department of Defense Indo-Pacific Strategy Report: “affirms the enduring U.S. commitment to stability and prosperity in the region through the pursuit of preparedness, partnerships, and the promotion of a networked region.”²⁵ The best place to start is by collaborating with our allies and partner in building an Indo-Pacific NMFC or IFMC.

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