



BACKGROUND PAPER

Maritime Forces Buildup in Indo-Pacific: Stabilizing and Destabilizing Impacts

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1 Introduction

Home to two main maritime flashpoints—South China Sea and East China Sea—with great intensity, risks, and enduring great power interests, Indo-Pacific has become the most militarized region. Consequently, military buildup has grown drastically in terms of richness and pace, especially in maritime domain. Regional major naval powers in the region in general have upgraded substantially in quantity their submarines, multi-purpose surface combatants, and minor surface combat and patrol forces, among others by 2022 [1]. Particularly, Southeast Asian coastal powers—Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam—have also been advancing their naval powers through extensive modernization programs [2]. Though varying in levels of intensity, regional naval modernization efforts have responded to the fast-changing strategic environment shaped by intra-regional maritime disputes involving regional and external maritime great powers.

Such regional military buildup efforts—though not consistent in degree—pose the question of whether they generate destabilizing or stabilizing impacts to the region as a whole. Traditionally, forces buildup is associated with security dilemma understood as a situation, in which a state takes actions to increase its own security yet causes other states to respond through taking actions to increase their own security, too. That eventually lead to eroding, rather than increasing, the original security of the initiator [3].

This background paper intends to assess whether maritime forces buildup in Indo-Pacific actually is inherently destabilizing under the shadow of security dilemma. To that end, it will explore both possibilities of destabilizing and stabilizing impacts of the buildup. Firstly, the paper will analyze the relationship between such forces buildup and destabilizing impacts, measured by perception of adversarial counterparts in general, and buildup force posture, in particular. Secondly, it will analyze the relationship between the regional forces buildup and stabilizing impacts, measured by intra-regional deterrence, joint combat against crimes at sea, and military procurement cooperation. The paper argues that overall, the maritime forces buildup in Indo-Pacific is inherently destabilizing due to overarching perceived instability by adversarial counterparts in general and their negative presumption that any forces buildup posture is offensive, while the prospects of cooperation from the buildup is still limited in guaranteeing long-term stability.

1.1 Research Questions

The main research question is: Whether maritime forces buildup in Indo-Pacific is inherently destabilizing?

To address this question, the paper will seek to answer two sub-questions to assess the overall level of stability.

1. What are the potential destabilizing impacts of maritime forces buildup in Indo-Pacific?
2. What are the potential stabilizing impacts of maritime forces buildup in Indo-Pacific?

1.2 Methodology

The maritime forces buildup in Indo-Pacific is measured by modernization in terms of increasing volume and sophistication of military hardware for naval operations of key states along the Indo-Pacific rim, including maritime Southeast Asian States, China, Japan, Australia and their key allies. Destabilizing impacts are indicated by perception of general instability by the adversarial counterparts and the instability implications regarding the forces buildup posture itself, which is further examined through explicit offensive posture and force posture that could be interpreted controversially. Meanwhile, the stabilizing impacts are assessed through the intra-regional deterrence generated by the forces buildup and room for enhanced cooperation in the areas of joint combat against crimes at sea and regional maritime military procurement.

Data sources will include, but are not limited to, relevant academic publications—textbooks and journal articles—trusted international news outlets, Op-eds, and publications/communications from related governmental and regional institutions within the scope of Indo-Pacific.

1.3 Limitations of the Paper

This background paper has the advantage of witnessing the state-of-the-art developments of the maritime forces buildup in Indo-Pacific that has increasingly transpired over the past several years. However, it has the disadvantage of limited time to observe the actual stabilizing and destabilizing impacts of such forces buildup as some impacts may take many years ahead to develop and become concrete. Meanwhile, the developments of the maritime forces buildup are rapid and incessant; thus, even during the time of this discussion, the dynamics of the buildup may change, and so are the associated stabilizing and destabilizing impacts.

2. Destabilizing Impacts of Maritime Forces Buildup in Indo-Pacific

2.1 Perceived General Instability by Adversarial Counterparts

A prominent maritime regional forces buildup in Indo-Pacific is the AUKUS alliance—trilateral security partnership of Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States, announced in 2021, aiming to strengthen the ability of each member to support collective security and defense interests based on their longstanding and ongoing ties. Deepening information and technology sharing, fostering deeper integration of security and defense-related science, technology, industrial bases and supply chains are parts of the plans [4].

Two years later, in March 2023, AUKUS unveiled an ambitious defense industrial partnerships in through a submarine deal to equip Australia with nuclear-powered attack submarines (SSNs). The deal will see the three countries cooperate on three unprecedented elements, including the sale of three to five Virginia-class submarines by the United States to Australia beginning in 2032; the cooperation by the United Kingdom and Australia to codevelop a new AUKUS-class submarine to enter into service in 2040; and the joint multibillion-dollar pledge by all three countries to scale up the capacity of a trilateral submarine industrial base [5].

To adversarial counterpart, especially China, the establishment of AUKUS is perceived as destabilizing in general. Indeed, China viewed AUKUS as danger overall, and the Chinese Foreign Minister and State Councilor Wang Yi described AUKUS as presenting five harms to the Indo-Pacific, including 1) Triggering the risk of nuclear proliferation; 2) Inducing a new round of arms race; 3) Undermining regional prosperity and stability; 4) Sabotaging the effort of building a nuclear-free zone in the region; and 5) Leading to the revival of the Cold War mentality [6].

To China, AUKUS and any United-States-led coalition-building in Indo-Pacific is dangerous as it intensifies the arms race in the region. While the Chinese military buildup may have been to counter or undermine the United States regional military interference, such military buildup has led regional actors, especially those having maritime disputes with China to seek military buildup, too, in form of new or more weapons, mostly supplied by the United States [7].

Specifically, in response to the AUKUS partners' announcement of the deal on nuclear-powered submarines for Australia, China expressed strong disapproval. The Chinese mission to the United Nations issued a statement accusing the three countries of fueling an arms race and displaying "textbook case of double standard". Later, China's foreign ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin described the deal of the three countries as demonstrating their own geopolitical interests while completely disrespecting the international communities' concerns and moving deeper into the path of error and danger [8].

Even before the deal occurred, China had perceived the possibility of Australia obtaining nuclear-powered submarines as threatening because that is the starting point for the United States to receive rising demands from allies and partners in the region for supply of newer and more advanced weapon systems [7]. This could be critical to China's core interest in Taiwan issue. Indeed, after the announcement

of nuclear-powered submarines deal for Australia, Taiwan's foreign ministry expressed said its warm welcome of the continued advancement of the AUKUS partnership, while emphasizing that Taiwan is *"at the forefront of the fight against authoritarian expansion"* [8].

2.2 Perceived Instability Regarding Forces Buildup Posture

Besides general perceived destabilizing effect of the maritime forces buildup generally by adversarial counterparts, the issue of perception regarding force posture also matters. Theoretically, John Mearsheimer made an attempt to distinguish between offensive and defensive force capabilities. Specifically, offensive sea control capabilities may include strike carrier battle groups, major amphibious assault capabilities, nuclear-powered submarines, and strategic missile platforms, while defensive sea control capabilities may include destroyers, frigates, and land-based patrol aircraft, and submarines that are not armed with destabilizing strike weapons, such as supersonic Anti-Ship Cruise Missile and sea-launched cruise missile [9]. Meanwhile, Eric Grove emphasized more on the extent of the reach capabilities of the weapons carried, individual platforms in the fleet, and the fleet itself [10]. In addition, David Mussington and John Sislil described offensive force posture as any acquisition of capabilities that result in decreased warning time, provide one side with breakthrough capabilities, enable a broadening of target sets, reduce chance of effective countermeasures, allow one side better intelligence regarding adversarial military preparations, and create hostile environment [11].

However, in Indo-Pacific context, regardless of how peaceful or defensive the maritime forces buildup was intended to be in the first place, it is difficult for adversarial counterparts, or even general observers, to meaningfully draw offense-defense distinction of the force posture based on specific framework above given the hostile geopolitical background that essentially forms the backdrop of the forces buildup. Such malign regional environment is composed of strategic trust deficit in the United States-China rivalry, on the one hand, and among maritime claimant states in regional flashpoints—South China Sea and East China Sea—on the other hand.

2.2.1 Explicit Offensive Force Posture

Indeed, many maritime forces buildup in Indo-Pacific are explicitly offensive in posture. The case in point is the increasing militarization of artificial islands by China. Those islands have been equipped with sophisticated military-related infrastructure, including runways, support buildings, loading piers, and satellite communication system, serving China's deployment of aircraft, missiles, and missile defense systems for expanded naval power projection sufficient to launch offensive strike against targets in South China Sea [12]. Thus, the island forces buildup is largely destabilizing to the less militarily sophisticated Southeast Asian South China Sea claimant states [13].

In addition, other Chinese forces buildup are also considered highly offensive. They include China's YJ-18 Supersonic Anti-Ship Cruise Missile introduced in 2014, which drew nervous reaction from the United States [14]. Also, the Chinese H-6K nuclear-capable, long-range strategic bomber carrying guided air-launched cruise missiles is highly capable of precision striking. With its strike range enhanced from the base 3,500 kilometer-range to a heightened 5,000 kilometer-range through incorporation of the air-launched Land-Attack Cruise Missile (LACM) for conventional or nuclear strike, the H-6K can reach other Indo-Pacific states in the first island chain—Singapore, Thailand, the Philippines, Vietnam, Indonesia, and Malaysia—from the Chinese bases in the South China Sea. The Chinese H-6K strategic bomber, when equipped with short-range ballistic missiles, surface-to-air missiles, and a ground-launched missile, is detrimental to India's maritime trade connection with Southeast Asia [15]. Plus, Chinese long-range offensive striking capabilities is also advanced through strategic DF-41 Inter-Continental Ballistic Missile with a range between 12,000 kilometers and 15,000 kilometers with a conventional or nuclear payload capacity of 2,500 kilograms. Operating from China's Western theater command, it could reach the central part of India in less than five minutes and any location in India and the Indo-Pacific region at large [16]. Moreover, targets in the Indian Ocean littoral region are also within reach of China's next-generation tactical nuclear weapons [17].

2.2.2 Controversial Force Posture

Besides those explicit offensive force postures, other defensive maritime forces buildups are quite controversial as they could be interpreted as offensive or destabilizing to adversarial states in the region. For example, the People's Liberation Army Navy of China has categorized its theater missile defense (TMD) as a layered maritime defensive system to cover defensive layer in East China Sea and South China Sea, ranging from 540 to 1,000 Nautical miles. However, countries within the range and having contested maritime disputes with China, including Japan, the Philippines, and those along Straits of Malacca strait would not perceive it as purely defensive at all [18].

Another example is Japan Counterstrike security strategy announced in three official documents—the National Security Strategy (NSS), National Defense Strategy (NDS), and the Defense Buildup Program in 2022 preparing Japan for procurement of intermediate-range ground attacking capabilities. Such capabilities will not include pre-emptive first strikes but are limited to only minimally credible counter-strike capabilities with conventional warheads to disrupt the adversarial missile launch sequences. The United States will be involved in this strategy through missile development, upgrade, and procurement, the most immediate of which would be the intermediate-range ground attack capabilities—the US ship-launched Tomahawk cruise missiles. Along with Japanese indigenous developments, such as the upgrade of Type-12 ground-to-surface and ASM-3 air-to-surface missiles, these attack capabilities would enhance Japan's anti-ship defensive posture along the Okinawan islands chain [19]. This strategy of Japanese forces buildup is perceived as largely defensive in posture by Southeast Asian states, who have reacted positively to Japan's expansion of regional security roles in the past years. The latest State of Southeast Asia Survey in 2023, for instance, shown that Southeast Asian states in general perceive Japan as the most trusted

major power in the region [20]. However, China perceives the Japanese move as destabilizing, violating the principles and spirit of the four China-Japan political documents, thus provoking regional tension and confrontation. Moreover, China even reacted hostilely by sending an aircraft carrier-led six-ship flotilla through a key strategic waterway near Okinawa main island and to the Pacific Ocean [21].

This indicates that any kind of maritime forces buildup in Indo-Pacific could be perceived as inherently destabilizing among adversarial counterparts, regardless of whether the force postures are offensive or defensive in intention or technical design. That is only further complicated by the difficulty and ambiguity in differentiating between “hostile act” and “hostile intent” in maritime spheres, especially in a region disrupted by maritime disputes and competition like Indo-Pacific. Such inherent or perceived offensive nature of naval buildup only further obstructs confidence building efforts in the region.

3. Stabilizing Impacts of Maritime Forces Buildup in Indo-Pacific

3.1 Intra-Regional Deterrence

One stabilizing effect of the maritime forces buildup is to narrow the gap of naval power imbalance and increase intra-regional deterrence. If implemented by only a certain state or few states, the maritime forces buildup would have expanded substantial imbalance of power—the cause of war based on Realist assumption [22]— among conflicting states in the region. However, that is not the case as all naval powers in the region—small and big—have embarked on naval forces buildup, though with varying extent. Thus, such regionwide forces buildup has contributed to enhancing maritime deterrence and higher restraint, resulting in reduction of direct maritime armed confrontation.

A case in point is that between South and North Korean navies (RKN and KPN). Between 1999 and 2010, many surface clashes occurred between the two navies, compelling South Korean navy to adjust to various threats from the North to gain operational advantages in the dangerous littoral waters of the peninsula, including upgrade in submarine warfare and multi-functional platforms under the blue-water modernization program guided by the Defense Reform 2020 and beyond [23]. Such maritime forces buildup serves largely as deterrence against the north’s maritime aggression, which played a huge part in the absence of major incidents along the Northern Limit Line between South and North Korea in the past decade.

Coupled with increasing economic interdependence, such deterrence effect is displayed beyond the Korean peninsula. Notably, regional economic and military powers—China, Japan, South Korea, India, and Indonesia—are highly reliant on South China Sea route for their maritime trade [24]. Hence, maritime trade flow within and across the Indo-Pacific—accounting for 60 percent of global maritime trade volume [25]—stays uninterrupted amidst growing maritime forces buildup. This proves Indo-Pacific maritime stability remains a precondition for sustained global economic activity, incentivizing intra-regional states and external partners to prioritize an open, free, and peaceful Indo-Pacific over counter-productive

conflicts. It also explains why all adversarial states, including China, who is quite ahead of many others in the region in maritime forces buildup and the most likely to be highly provocative, still exercise high restraint in causing unnecessary large-scale disruption to avoid overwhelming economic costs trade [24].

Thus, wars have been prevented, and the economic interdependence and deterrence generated from mutually destructive naval capabilities have limited any kinetic confrontation only to actions short of wars in the form of gray zone situations. These confrontations did occur frequently yet only involved less sophisticated tools short of the upgraded military facilities, platforms, or weaponry as part of the modern maritime forces buildup.

For example, in 2010, the Chinese trawler collided with a pair of Japan Coast Guard vessels in waters near the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, as part of other documented incidents of Chinese trawlers collectively in huge swarms brawling with Japanese patrols off the contested areas [26]. Another case was the poaching by Vietnamese fishing vessels in waters of the Natuna Islands in 2017, and later apprehended by the Indonesian fishery patrol vessel. The incident drew intervention from the Vietnamese coastguards, who sent a patrol vessel into one of the detained trawlers and evacuated most of the apprehended fishermen and detained one of the Indonesian fishery patrol officers. Negotiations and joint investigations pursued and the incident was deescalated through intensive diplomatic channels [27]. These cases are exemplary of other naval clashes in the region, which are constrained from actually utilizing the highly sophisticated naval forces acquisition or buildup. This proves that the maritime forces buildup in Indo-Pacific plays more role in deterring large-scale wars rather than encouraging them.

3.2 Enhanced Cooperation from the Enhanced Forces Buildup

In addition to deterrence effect, maritime forces buildup in Indo-Pacific is stabilizing in the sense that it enhances capabilities to jointly address common security problems at sea, while the buildup itself also requires certain level of military procurement, and thus cooperation on production deals.

3.2.1 Enhanced Joint Combat against Crimes at Sea amidst Bifurcated Indo-Pacific

The maritime forces buildup in Indo-Pacific enables states to enhance their defense capacity against crimes at sea, including illegal smuggling; Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated (IUU) Fishing; and TRAPS (Theft, Robbery, and Piracy against Ships). This not only fosters their cooperation dynamics, but also brings more stability for regional navigation and maritime trade. The IPMDA (Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness), for instance, was announced by the United States in mid-2022 as an initiative to collaborate with Quad members and partners in Indo-Pacific to enhance joint waters-monitoring capabilities with greater maritime situational awareness in real-time through advanced technologies in information and data sharing [28]. In this context, the regional maritime forces buildup

will be highly complementary to the IPMDA as effective response to crimes at sea requires not only more efficient joint monitoring but also joint highly modernized navies.

Unfortunately, such maritime cooperation exists against the backdrop of a bifurcated Indo-Pacific with the United States on the one hand and China on the other. Because the IPMDA is linked to the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad)—a strategic security dialogue between Australia, India, Japan and the United States—it is inevitably not cordially appreciated by China, who has been resisting this multilateral security grouping. For instance, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi described Quad as the *“Indo-Pacific NATO”*, whose Indo-Pacific strategy poses a big underlying security risk to the region. To China, the Quad is threatening because its effort to establish a multilateral coalition of resistance in Indo-Pacific is potential in creating regional division. One alarming scenario for China is when Quad evolves to be coherent and comprehensive enough to effectively balance against it [29]. If that is the case, the implication for other small states in the region is the concern about being inadvertently drawn into a counter-China containment if they wish to align with the Quad at large and the IPMDA in particular.

3.2.2 Regional Maritime Military Procurement Cooperation

Also, the maritime forces buildup in Indo-Pacific paves the way for deeper maritime cooperation through procurement. Though having certain degree of self-sufficiency in certain areas of maritime force modernization, lesser naval powers would find procurement cooperation with other regional maritime powers more appealing than depending entirely on their nascent domestic maritime defense-industrial complex. For example, South Korea’s naval shipbuilders have been contacted to engage extensively, in the last 2 decades as primary supplier for the Philippines naval modernization and main actor in supporting Indonesia’s state-owned defense enterprise to acquire autonomous shipbuilding capabilities based on South Korean designs and technology. Moreover, along its path to a regional manufacturing and export hub, Indonesia even supplied to the Philippines Naval buildup through amphibious landing and transport ships under a 2014 contract worth \$92 million [30].

Meanwhile, even China, viewed by some as potentially assertive in maritime domain, also cooperated with Malaysian navy, who engaged China Shipbuilding and Offshore International for production of four littoral mission ships in the 2016 deal, which was favorable to the Malaysian navy budget shortfall [31]. Even though the deal has turned out to be unsatisfactory—failure of Transfer of Technology arrangements to build remainder parts in Malaysia and Malaysian dissatisfaction with the Chinese-built vessels—the deal already indicated that the forces buildup is also linked to certain level of cooperation between the two conflicting parties in the South China Sea.

4. Conclusion

Overall, the maritime forces buildup in Indo-Pacific is characterized by both competitive and cooperative dynamics in terms of their interactions with regional geopolitics. That being said, such forces

buildup is inherently more destabilizing with limited stabilizing impacts due to hostile geopolitical context of Indo-Pacific.

First, the destabilizing impacts inevitably stem mainly from the persistent perceived instability in general among adversarial counterparts in the region, most importantly the adversarial rivalry between China and the United States. It is reflected through China's perception of the United States-led initiative to enhance allies' maritime forces buildup as destabilizing to China's interest and regional security at large. Specifically, the malign maritime geopolitical context of Indo-Pacific shapes the maritime force posture to be perceived as inherently offensive among maritime conflicting states in the region, including both platforms that are explicitly offensive and those that could be defensive in purpose. Such negative perception is only exacerbated by the difficulty and ambiguity in distinguishing between hostile act and hostile intent in maritime spheres.

Second, the stabilizing impacts include intra-regional deterrence enhanced by the forces buildup. The forces buildup means any violent confrontation will increasingly involve more destructive platforms and weapons. Coupled with the robust economic interdependence of Indo-Pacific, this creates stronger maritime deterrence and thus higher restraint. That is evident by the drastic reduction of direct maritime armed confrontations or wars at sea, while violent clashes, if any, have been limited to mostly traditional trawlers or vessels short of the highly sophisticated naval forces lately acquired. Moreover, enhanced forces buildup also contributed to enhancing cooperation in the region in the form of joint combat against crimes at sea and military procurement. However, even the joint cooperation for common security at sea is also bifurcated due to the United States-China rivalry, which seriously limited its potential from being full-fledged and region-wide, while the military procurement cooperation is in a stage too early and minimal to claim concrete impact to stabilize the region.

All in all, the forces buildup is inevitable given the intensity of maritime conflicting interests in the region, so it is not realistic nor fruitful to resist against this trend. Instead, it is in the concerned states' interests to work on governing the buildup and confidence building to ensure the buildup serves peaceful purposes and security of states—the prime initial objective of the buildup itself. That can be done through more active and sincere diplomatic efforts, growing economic partnership initiatives, strengthening more inclusive joint combat against crimes at sea, and enhancing naval modernization cooperation.

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