



European Defence Engagement in the Indo-Pacific: A View from Tokyo

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The need for Japan to cooperate with like-minded partners has never been more urgent. There is no sign of China's creeping and opportunistic expansion coming to an end. The latest target is Taiwan. There were nearly 150 incursions of Chinese aircraft into Taiwan's Air Defense Identification Zone between 1 and 5 October 2021. The Taiwanese Defence Minister said on 6 October that China will have capacity for full invasion of Taiwan by 2025. North Korea's missile activities also continue. On 19 October, Pyongyang fired a ballistic missile, possibly from a submarine, for the political purpose of "deterrence, trumpeting its technological prowess, generating prestige and legitimacy, and underscoring the foresight and accomplishment of the regime".¹ Between 18 and 25 October, Russia joined in a bilateral naval exercise with China. Their vessels passed jointly around Japan, just during a political vacuum created by the run-up to the general election of the House of Representatives. This represented the first China-Russia joint patrols in the Western

Pacific "to demonstrate the state flags of Russia and China, maintain peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific region, as well as protect the objects of maritime economic activity of the two countries".² Most recently, Japan's Defence Minister Kishi said the international community must be aware of a possible Crimea-style invasion of Taiwan by China. With the objective of realizing a free and open Indo-Pacific, the six-nation naval exercise that took place near Okinawa and the South China Sea among Japan, the US, the UK, the Netherlands, Canada, and New Zealand between 2 and 9 October for air defence, anti-submarine warfare, communications, and replenishment-at-sea must be understood against the background of this intense military environment.

MILITARY EXERCISES AS STRATEGIC MESSAGING

Against this background, European vessels steaming to the Indo-Pacific region could not have come at a better time.

Indeed, 2021 has seen an impressive record of European presence in the region.

With France

In May, at the occasion of French deployment of *Mission Jeanne d'Arc 2021*, the Amphibious Rapid Deployment Brigade of Japan's Ground Self-Defense Force (JGSDF) conducted its first ever joint amphibious exercises with the French Army along with the US Marine Corps, in order to enhance their tactical skills for defending remote islands around the western waters and airspace of Kyushu. In parallel, JMSDF trained with the French, Australian, and US navies in the East China Sea for air defence, anti-submarine warfare, and landing exercises. Though this was the first training for JGSDF and their French counterpart to train together on Japanese soil, Japan and France have steadily been accumulating joint training experience in the last several years. Against the background of increasing Chinese grey zone maritime activities, Japan's amphibious operational capability was formally established in 2013 and they have been steadily sharpening their skills bilaterally with the US (for example in *Exerzise Iron Fist* and *Exerzise Dawn Blitz*) and trilaterally with Australia (*Exerzise Talisman Sabre*).

Back in 2015, JMSDF conducted its first ever joint amphibious manoeuvres with the French and the US navies as *Exerzise Katsune*. Then again in May 2017, this time with the UK joining, France led the four-nation coalition to exercise for island defence. This first-ever quadrilateral military exercise focused on "amphibious landings, delivering forces by helicopter and urban patrols"³ as well as "to crystalize the four countries' support for freedom of navigation and for free and open maritime order confirmed repeatedly in the past, making it a very meaningful training exercise"⁴. France and Japan have been conducting bilateral naval exercises annually around the Japanese waters ever since.

While the quadrilateral training *La Perouse 2019* took place in the Bay of Bengal, the 2021 iteration took place

around the East China Sea, just off the coast of Okinawa, which has seen increasing Chinese assertive activities. The *Mission Jeanne d'Arc 2021* was not only operationally important for France, it was also about sending a political message to China. The *Exerzise ARC21* is really the latest of the ongoing annual engagements by France in the Indo-Pacific.

With the UK

In August, the visit by HMS *Queen Elizabeth* Carrier Strike Group (CSG21) to Yokosuka was another historical event, not just for Japan but for the UK, as it represented "a powerful demonstration of [its] close and enduring partnership with Japan and [its] commitment to maritime security in the Indo-Pacific"⁵. For the UK, as part of the maiden voyage of the CSG21 from the North Atlantic to the Indo-Pacific, the overall aim of this deployment is "to demonstrate to the world that the UK is not stepping back but sailing forth to play an active role in shaping the international system of the 21st Century"⁶. Notable was the international component of the CSG21 as a US Navy destroyer, a Dutch frigate and a squadron of US Marine Corps F-35B jets were integrated.

For Japan, the British deployment was a timely visit as Tokyo "seek[s] to expand its military cooperation beyond its traditional alliance with the United States as China's navy expands and increasingly presses its territorial claims"⁷. Spanning a period of two months, there were several joint training and exercises which took advantage of the British presence. Ahead of the CSG21 visit to Japan, on 11-12 July, there was a quadrilateral anti-piracy training among the navies of Japan, the Netherlands, the UK, and the US in the Gulf of Aden.

Taking place from the end of August to the beginning of September, the *Exerzise Pacific Crown 21* was a five-nation exercise among the navies of Japan, the UK, the US, Canada, and the Netherlands. Departing from the southern waters of Okinawa for communications training to start off the multinational drill, the joint fleet

headed north to the East China Sea conducting various tactical exercises, then west to the waters near Shikoku and the southern part of the Kanto region for air defence and anti-submarine warfare, then finally up north near the Kanto region for landing exercises. It was followed by the six-nation training from 2 to 9 October 2021, including the New Zealand Navy in the formation, from waters off Okinawa to the South China Sea as mentioned earlier. Ignoring Chinese warnings, the CSG then headed to Singapore for “exercising together in the international waters of the southern reaches of the South China Sea”.⁸

HMS *Queen Elizabeth* which led the CSG21 made a port call on 4 September at the US base in Yokosuka, while other auxiliary vessels visited the ports of JMSDF Yokosuka, Maizuru, and Kure, as well as the US base in Sasebo, taking full advantage of the benefits provided by the Japan-US security arrangement. Defence diplomacy is also a significant aspect of the British engagement as various high-profile exchanges took place among the UK Ambassador to Japan and the Fleet Commander of the US 7th Fleet, as well as Japan’s Defence Minister along with the senior military officers.

With Germany

On 5 November, Tokyo warmly welcomed the visit by the German Frigate *Bayern*. Japan’s Defence Minister Kishi said Germany “demonstrated its resolve to contribute to peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific”.⁹ The current deployment of Frigate *Bayern* to the Indo-Pacific, carrying 230 personnel, has several objectives. One is to conduct monitoring and surveillance activities against North Korean’s illegal ship-to-ship transfers from mid-November for about three weeks, which make it its first participation in this international monitoring operation. Another is to conduct joint training with JMSDF just south of the Kanto region in order to improve individual tactical skills as well as to strength the partnership with each other. A reception took place aboard the *Bayern* hosted by the German Embassy to Japan to celebrate 160 years of German

and Japanese Friendship, representing an important ceremonial aspect of the deployment.

Germany sees the Indo-Pacific as the region “where the international order of the future will be decided” and it wants to “help shape it and to take on responsibility for upholding the rules-based international order”.¹⁰ Vice Admiral Kay-Achim Schönbach stated that this visit reflects Germany’s concern that freedom of navigation and the rules-based international order are being threatened and to show support for Japan, the US and other partners in the region. He also revealed that the *Bayern* will pass through the South China Sea, following the British move, and that Germany may dispatch a fleet of frigates to the region once every two years if politically possible. It is no coincident that the *Bayern* visit to Japan came at the end of the era of Chancellor Angela Merkel who was always careful not to antagonize China. It was indeed a bitter pill to swallow for Germany when China rejected its request for a port visit to Shanghai. But this rejection arguably made Germany realize that trying to appease everyone simply does not work. Ironically, thanks to the rejection by China, it encouraged Germany to make a bold political decision to reverse its earlier plan and send the ship to the South China Sea. As the German Navy Chief stressed at the Japan National Press Club, the significance of this deployment lies in the political decision made by the German government.

While a single vessel and a few joint exercises may pale by comparison with the British and the French activities with Japan in terms of the level of ambition and the size and the complexity of the deployment, it is nonetheless the political messaging that matters. Even if the German deployment to the Indo-Pacific region was finally realized by pressure coming from its European partners and Japan, the timing of its presence to this region is more significant than the earlier French and British presence, amid the ever-deteriorating regional strategic landscape and over the Taiwan Straits in particular. In addition, even if the *Bayern* visit to Japan may have been a “missed opportunity”¹¹ of the

possibility for a coordinated European presence with the British, French and Dutch, a staggered European presence – the French in May, the British and Dutch in August-September, and finally the Germans in November – has effectively sent a sustained message to China that collectively Europe takes this region seriously, showing solidarity with their partners such as Japan, the US and others. Even if it was not planned this way, the sustained European presence for nearly six months at the end of the day is arguably much more strategically significant than a one-shot European presence with a lot of pomp and circumstance that then disappears over the horizon.

ENDURING RELEVANCE OF JAPAN'S FREE AND OPEN INDO-PACIFIC VISION

While this sustained European presence was appreciated and has provided reassurance to Japan and other like-minded states in the region to a degree, it is a whole other question whether they are willing and ready to be part of a joint coalition in case of a contingency. Germany would be the first one to be out of that discussion if it happens. How about the French? The primary purpose of their presence with 8000 personnel in the Pacific is to protect the French territories. With not even a direct flight from New Caledonia to Tokyo, they may likely conclude this is none of their business. HMS *Queen Elizabeth* CSG just left the Indo-Pacific. When will they come again? Even if they have the intension, they may be really busy in their own backyard when Tokyo needs them next. After all, the UK is a European player whose primary responsibility is to protect Europe. The EU? Nobody expects Brussels to act in a contingency in the Indo-Pacific, save a joint statement of criticism.

That said, the EU can still play a meaningful role in peacetime. In light of the recent EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, which is largely economic-driven, focused on non-traditional security, there are at least three potential areas of cooperation.

First, the EU's CRIMARIO maritime security capacity building project is a good place to start, which has been extended to South and Southeast Asia. In September, the EU joined for the first time the Thailand-US bilateral Exercise CARAT. One of the US components is the Expeditionary Strike Group, which is forward deployed to Sasebo, Japan, assigned to the US 7th fleet. There, JMSDF and the Australian Navy could be plugged into this defence engagement with the EU in the next iteration. Second, the EU can cooperate with Japan through its Pacific Islands Defence Dialogue. The first dialogue took place online in September and the leaders decided to work together in the area of human resources development in maritime security and disaster relief, and security challenges resulting from climate change. France and the UK are already part of this group. Third, the EU should cooperate with the Quad (the quadrilateral security dialogue grouping of Australia, India, Japan, and the US) on the very important topics of vaccine, climate change and critical and emerging technology.

Many of the major European states and the EU have already converged with Japan on the big picture of promoting a Free and Open Indo-Pacific. Now is the time to continue and accumulate various cooperation in networked ways to protect this Free and Open Indo-Pacific region because increasingly, bilateral alliances are no longer sufficient, and the line between peacetime and crisis is blurred.

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ENDNOTES

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