

## **Summary of the June 17, 2022 “Maritime Security in the Asia Pacific Region: Enhancing Maritime Security in the Asia Pacific Region” Discussion**

### **Introduction**

On June 17, 2022, the Center for Asia Pacific Strategy (CAPS) hosted “Maritime Security in the Asia Pacific Region: China’s Belt & Road Initiative,” the last of a four-part series of roundtable discussions that address current and future approaches to maritime security in the Asia-Pacific region. The discussion’s moderator was General Urs Gerber, Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Center for Asia Pacific Strategy, and panelists were Dr. Frédéric Grare, a senior policy fellow at the Foreign Council on Foreign Relations and the non-Resident Senior Fellow of the South Asia Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International as well as the National Security Center of Sri Lanka; Vice Admiral Lutz Feldt who served as the Chief of Naval Staff for the German Navy; and Dr. Collin Koh Swee Lean, who is a research fellow at the Institute of Defense and Strategic Studies which is a constituent unit of the S Rajaratnam School of International Studies based in Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.

Mrs. Hee-Eun Kim provided opening remarks, while General Urs Gerber introduced the panelists and moderated the discussion.

### **Setting the Scene: Initial Statements**

Dr. Frédéric Grare began by stating that the “Asia Pacific” term is not the way the French would frame the region because it is a strategic concept and the French have territories in the Indian Ocean and in the Pacific and they need to ensure continuity in the security of those nations. He outlined that the threat in the region is a mix of traditional (great power rivalry to pursue geopolitical interest) and nontraditional (human/drug trafficking, etc.). He argued that the position of France is not necessarily seeking to counter China, since the perspective of France is that it is larger than just the military dimension. Therefore, if the threat has a hybrid nature and every activity serves a political purpose, then it makes sense to give those activities clearly defined controls to make sure they are not used against French interests. He described partnerships that France has had in the past with different countries and emphasized the importance of having multiple aspects articulated in one strategy. This strategy should balance the possibility for a state to pick and choose with the weakening of the strategy through this method. He finished by concluding that state relations are what they are, but unless there’s a minimum level of trust, it doesn’t really work out, and that has been the problem with relations in the Asia Pacific.

Vice Admiral Lutz Feldt stated that the main issue that Europe must address when analyzing the Indo-Pacific region is sea blindness, or the failure to appreciate the essential maritime component in most human activities. Maritime security is made up of three English words for safety: internal safety is in relation to a ship, while security goes in the other direction to defense, but maritime security is between a defensive and a safety strategy dealing with all aspects of the maritime domain. He pointed out that resources’ exploitation is very important for some nations in the Indo Pacific due to climate change, in particular the transportation of goods on highways. Next, power projection, especially due to the war in Ukraine, has limited the issue of maritime security

to a military dimension. Looking towards the future, the Asia Pacific region has already created a lot of very important relationships and organizations where they can exchange information, and where they are having bilateral discussions based on trust and confidence. He concluded by stating that maritime security has a little to do with maritime defense and a little to do with maritime safety, but it has a lot of measures and governmental capabilities that are not purely military but are part of other responsibilities of governments. There is an existing maritime security system between developed states, while the political desire and the military capability for implementation is there, and in some areas the Indo Pacific situation is a little bit ahead of the European situation.

Dr. Collin Koh Swee Lean began by stating that he would try to cover the Singaporean perspectives of maritime security in the region, but at the same time, he will try to speak in his perspective when it comes to Southeast Asia. He broadly stated that the region is best represented by the ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) outlook on the Indo Pacific that was published in response to the competing Indo Pacific concepts that were floated around by regional powers. He argues for a sub-regional perspective, dividing the Indo Pacific into different complexes: Northeast Asia, Southeast Asia, South Asia, and Oceania. Because there are different perceptions with different national maritime interests as far as prioritization, it is very difficult to come up with a monolithic perspective on regional maritime security. When outlining high-profile problems in the region, he described China as “the elephant in the room, especially when you're talking about Southeast Asia.” The war in Ukraine may not have an immediate impact on the likelihood of conflict in the South China Sea and to some extent Taiwan. For all the assumptions that China may have made regarding Taiwan, the Ukraine war may have forced China to pause to analyze the situation and then go back to the drawing board. On the South China Sea situation, Dr. Koh argues there is no likelihood of potential war in the area because China appears to be more preoccupied with doing two things: reaching out to friends and potential friends in Southeast Asia to ensure that they not undermine its interests, and exercising maritime coercion to its South China Sea rivals. On the other hand, the South China Sea problem is not a high priority issue for many Southeast Asian countries because of more pressing daily issues such as drug trafficking, smuggling, piracy and armed robbery against ships in the South China Sea. Generally, countries in the region tend to rely on self-help and increasingly on extra regional powers due to the economic impact of COVID-19 and the inflation caused by the Ukraine war. Dr. Koh concluded by discussing contributions by extra-regional powers in Southeast Asia. Even the freedom of navigation operations conducted by the U.S. is not discussed frequently, the general sentiment is acquiescence. Many countries are concerned about the potential risk of conflict between China and the U.S. given the continued posturing and counter-posturing in the South China Sea by these two powers, while ASEAN has been shunted more to the sidelines. While capacity-building assistance is very much welcomed by these countries, they have sensitivity towards sovereignty and jurisdictional rights.

### **Comments on a Comprehensive Maritime Security Strategy**

General Urs Gerber asked Dr. Grare if it would be possible that we would come up with a comprehensive maritime security strategy in the region. He elaborated that this strategy would not only be from European or other perspective, but a strategy in which all countries would be included and there would not be a regional distinction as Dr. Koh mentioned.

Dr. Grare responded that the main difficulty will be not to align interests but to make sure the strategy is implemented correctly, and all states will follow the strategy. With a set of policies that should not necessarily have equal capacity, the natural tendency for each country will be to pick and choose according to their needs of the moment. While Dr. Grare argued that on principle France fully agrees with Dr. Koh, the question will be to make sure it does work for the common interest. Furthermore, Dr. Grare sees an implicit redefinition of Europe's relation with the Indo Pacific, a much more cooperative approach; because of Europe's limited capacities, they do have to make sure that the respect of the sovereignty of each country served the common goal. He concluded that he very much agrees with Dr. Koh that there is a lot which is being opened up by the internal situation of each and every state by the deficiencies of their own lack of capacity.

General Gerber then turned to Admiral Feldt to expand on his statements about the Ukraine war limiting views on the comprehensive challenges of maritime security. He also asked what might be the approaches that these views are not too much blurred, that all these so-called nonmilitary aspects of maritime security get lost and that we could focus on these issues and challenges that have been mentioned by the three panelists together.

Admiral Feldt stated that by looking at bilateral and multilateral treaties between different regions, the number of nations which had joined this system is something which gives at least the chance of monitoring the region good perspective. On the other hand, he argues that the outcome of the Ukrainian war will give a clear signal to countries which are like-minded that they can change borders by force. Therefore, the question that countries are now asking themselves is how much they have to be reliant on countries like Russia and China in order to pursue policy. While Indo Pacific countries have to find a way for cooperation, they have to be aware as well. Admiral Feldt does not think that looking to the military is a solution, but all countries must be prepared from the military perspective as well. Finally, Admiral Feldt concluded that climate change will, in the medium term and in the long term, cause a lot of changes, even for China and for Russia despite their policy of ignoring that to a high degree.

General Gerber finally turned to Dr. Koh to address his impressions and conclusions from the Shangri-La sessions. Specifically, what processes and ideas on strategies that would enhance maritime security in the Asia Pacific were presented at the conference?

Dr. Koh began his answer by stating that this dialogue was different because it was the first Shangri-La dialogue held in person after 2019 and because the focus was quite overwhelmingly on Ukraine. The discussion on maritime security at the Shangri-La dialogue did not yield any conclusion regarding the new maritime security framework going forward but narrowed the situation down to a few potential factors. Discussion on the South China Sea has reached a certain point of stasis because nobody seriously talked about a maritime security approach. In the Indo Pacific, it is very difficult to come up with a consensus on whether any particular maritime security problem requires focus or emphasis. Dr. Koh recommended building on this existing architecture to see how best to deal with common security challenges. Furthermore, all the actors in the region come with their own individual concerns on maritime security, reduced to the "lowest common denominator" or multilateral dialogue within ASEAN, because no one wants to

talk about the larger issues. These revolve around the U.S. sphere of influence and existing ASEAN maritime security cooperative arrangements that are more unilateral than multilateral. Dr. Koh concludes that what we're seeing is a hodgepodge of different approaches that are conducted at the bilateral, unilateral, and multilateral level that are overlapping, which will be the same going forward.

## **Concluding Statements**

General Gerber invited the panelists to present final messages to conclude the Roundtable. He first invited Dr. Grare to speak.

Dr. Grare recognized the lack of coherence of the approach to maritime security. He also stated that the crisis in Ukraine indicates how a show of unity goes a long way. Dr. Grare argued the panelists agree on the direction and the diagnostic, but don't yet coordinate sufficiently yet we are far away from where we were only a year ago. France asks their friends in the Indo Pacific to not give up, keep talking to France, and keep pushing for things to go in their desired direction.

Second, Admiral Feldt highlighted recent government policy guidelines put out by the German government for the Indo Pacific region as the first time that the government focused on the region. He foresaw that the German military should establish new connectivity and new relations to the states in this region from a military perspective, using naval diplomacy. However, the policy guidelines are very comprehensive in dealing with all aspects which were previously mentioned in the discussion. He concluded that by naval diplomacy, Germany is inviting other parts of the societies of our country which we are visiting so it is not a purely military issue.

Finally, Dr. Koh reiterated that that the Indo Pacific is a very complex region that has sub regional nuances to consider. Approaching the Indo Pacific with a one-size-fit-all framework will frequently face resistance. Even though it takes more effort to reach out to countries to promote maritime security by taking to account sub-regional aspects, it is very effective. Dr. Koh then argued that the approach to diplomacy in maritime security has two aspects. First, practical security cooperation is an aspect that scholars discuss frequently (search and rescue operations, counter piracy operations). However, what is lacking is the emphasis on confidence and security building measures. Precisely because of the lack of trust, we need these mechanisms. Dr. Koh suggested that regional countries should put more emphasis on the need for these mechanisms and hopefully a sort of a framework could be put in place for the entire region.

General Gerber agreed that with his own experience in the region, there is a lot of room for improvement. He further stated that CAPS should consider this topic of finding a solution to regional confidence in maritime security in the near future, addressing issues where there is a lot of experience, particularly in Europe, as there is knowledge, expertise and capability available. He closed the session by thanking the panelists for the thought-provoking discussion.