



Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments

ANALYSIS

Indo-Pacific Geopolitics

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Related Expert: Iskander Rehman

In this interview – part of European Geostrategy's now long-running interview series

(<http://www.europeangeostrategy.org/interviews/>) – James Rogers discusses Indo-Pacific geopolitics;

Australia's geostrategic location in relation to future American and British overseas basing requirements;

Australian security policy in the Indo-Pacific; Taiwan's role in East Asia; and European interests in the Indo-Pacific, with Iskander Rehman, a Research Fellow at the Centre for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments.

JR: You have written extensively on the emerging geopolitical situation in the Indo-Pacific zone. To what extent do you think the region is currently undergoing significant geopolitical change?

IR: For brevity's sake – and for that of your readers – I would simply observe that we have been experiencing a tectonic shift in wealth and power toward Asia. In 2012, for the first time in modern history, Asian states spent more on their armed forces than European ones. By 2030, eighty-five percent of global energy consumption will come from the Indo-Pacific region, and China may well boast the world's largest economy. A huge proportion of the world's population will live in crowded Asian megacities, and heavily concentrated along some of the world's littorals most likely to be affected by climate change. The rise of mass media in countries such as India, Vietnam and China has already demonstrated both positive and negative effects, improving their populations' general awareness of their international surroundings, but also exacerbating ethnic and national jingoism. The persistence of numerous territorial disputes has led to troubling displays of Chinese assertiveness, and to widespread concerns over the risk of inadvertent escalation. Meanwhile, conventional and nuclear firebreaks may be gradually eroding (<http://www.csbaonline.org/publications/2013/04/nuclear-conventional-firebreaks-and-the-nuclear-taboo/>) as countries such as Pakistan and North Korea expand their arsenal and lower their threshold for nuclear use. Naturally, there is a lot more to say, but that might end up filling several pages!

JR: What role do you think Australia will play in the Indo-Pacific zone during the twenty-first century? What is stimulating the interest of outside powers like the United States (US) and United Kingdom (UK) in gaining access to military facilities in northern Australia?

IR: There is no doubt that Australia will come to play an increasingly important role in the Indo-Pacific century. Part of it, as you suggest, is linked to its strategic location. Located at the confluence of the Indian and Pacific Oceans, Australia appears ideally positioned to act as gatekeeper to the Indo-Pacific commons. Beyond the unique nature of its geography, Australia has a lot to offer the wider region, and the world. It is become something of a cliché (and has a tendency to irritate some Australians) to say that Australia is a 'middle power' that 'punches above its weight', but like all clichés, such assertions contain kernels of truth. For a nation of only twenty-two million people, Australia boasts a highly capable military, a strong democracy, and a relatively robust economy. Traditionally, Canberra has played a highly positive and stabilising role in both Southeast Asia and the South Pacific, and its vibrant strategic community has a deep understanding of regional security issues. The very term 'Indo-Pacific', for example, which has resulted in a more holistic understanding of Asian security affairs, was originally an Australian intellectual construct. My colleagues and I have argued that Australia can play a vital *bridging* role in Asia, whose deepening ties with rising democratic countries, such as India and Indonesia, can perform a vital role in ensuring the future of regional stability. Australia's relations with Indonesia have recently taken a turn for the worse but my overall sentiment is that this constitutes a temporary – albeit regrettable – setback, rather than a permanent one. I hope I am right on that front.

JR: Apart from functioning as a giant moated citadel at the intersection of the Indian and Pacific oceans for its allies, how might Australia contribute to Indo-Pacific security?

IR: My colleagues and I identified four manners (<http://www.csbaonline.org/publications/2013/11/gateway-to-the-indo-pacific-australian-defense-strategy-and-the-future-of-the-australia-u-s-alliance-2/>) in which Australia can make better contributions to regional security and deterrence, and we categorised these roles as follows: First of all Australia can, as you mentioned, function as something of a supportive sanctuary. By capitalising on its advantageous geographical position, strategic depth and highly developed infrastructure, Australia can play an indispensable role providing access, training opportunities, logistics and repair facilities to support friendly military forces.

The country's unique geography and decades of close intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) cooperation with the US (and the UK, for that matter) can also provide the foundation for expanding its role in reconnoitring the Indo-Pacific, space and cyber domains. Third, Australia's proximity to key South-East Asian waterways and considerable experience in the conduct of challenging amphibious and littoral operations place it in an ideal position to work alongside Indonesia in safeguarding archipelagic waters and the Sunda and Lombok Straits. Finally, Australia's extended coastlines and position put in an ideal location from which to conduct peripheral campaigns in the Indian Ocean, such as maritime interception operations, in the event of conflict breaking out in the Indo-Pacific.

It is important to note that we identified these roles as being strongly complementary, rather than distinct. The report purposely focused on conflict scenarios and operational issues, but Australia's military will naturally continue to play an important peacetime role, whether in terms of humanitarian and constabulary operations, or regarding military diplomacy. In particular, with the delivery of the Canberra class helicopter carriers, Australia will be able to play a much more important disaster recovery role throughout its maritime periphery. This will probably become a higher priority mission for the Royal Australian Navy as its Southeast Asian and Southern Pacific neighbours suffer the worsening effects of climate change.

JR: What would happen if Taiwan – arguably the central lynchpin in the East Asian geopolitical system underpinned by the US – were to be forcibly 're-integrated' with Mainland China?

IR: There is a regrettable tendency amongst certain American academics to both overlook Taiwan's considerable strategic importance, and to dismiss its chances at ensuring its continued autonomy in an era characterised by Chinese military expansion. Many have argued that US disengagement from Taiwan, while regrettable in the short term, would be more beneficial in the long term, as it would remove one of the most contentious – and potentially dangerous – issues currently plaguing China-US ties. I strongly disagree (<http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/why-taiwan-matters-9971>) with these assertions, and for several reasons.

First, abandoning Taiwan would likely fail to improve the China-US relationship. There are certain core issues troubling this relationship that extend far beyond the Taiwan Strait. Whether it is Beijing's assertiveness towards its neighbours

(http://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/05/world/asia/philippine-leader-urges-international-help-in-resisting-chinas-sea-claims.html?_r=0), some of whom, like Japan and the Philippines, are treaty allies of the US, or issues related to cyber-espionage and human rights, the challenges currently testing the bilateral relationship are profound and numerous. China is a revisionist power (<http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/international/countriesandterritories/china/territorial-disputes/>) – and its claims on the international system do not end with Taiwan.

Second, the abandonment of Taiwan might considerably enhance China's geostrategic position in Asia and endanger that of the US and its allies. If China were to occupy Taiwan, Chinese naval and air forces could finally break out of the psychological and geographic barrier formed by what Chinese naval strategists commonly refer to as 'the first island chain'. Moreover, China would be able to directly threaten Japan's southwestern approaches, and potentially sever its aerial and maritime communication lines. After winning control over the Taiwanese islet of Itu Aba in the South China Sea, which forms the largest island in the Spratlys, the Chinese would also be in a position to exert stronger pressure on smaller littoral states throughout maritime South-East Asia. Chinese submarines stationed at the Taiwanese deep-water bases at Hualien and Su Ao would enjoy unfettered access to deep Pacific waters, both expanding their operational reach and rendering them more difficult to detect and prosecute in the event of conflict. US forces might then find themselves wrestling with a similar challenge to that faced by the Royal Navy following the fall of France in the Second World War. Indeed, in the summer of 1940, German U-boats, which had previously been primarily confined to the North Sea and English Channel, were berthed in newly acquired deep-sea ports along the French Atlantic coastline. From these new bases along the Bay of Biscay, they could rapidly disperse into the deeper waters of the Atlantic Ocean, enabling them to pose a far greater threat (<http://militaryhistory.about.com/od/worldwari1/p/World-War-II-Battle-Of-The-Atlantic.htm>) to allied shipping. Chinese occupation of radar sites on Taiwan's mountaintops would also allow the Chinese to monitor and target American and Japanese naval deployments with greater ease. More importantly, the Taiwan Strait would become an inland waterway, allowing China to interdict the heavy flow of container traffic that transits through the strait on a daily basis. Thus, in many ways, a Chinese occupation of Taiwan would amount to nothing less than a tectonic shift in the geostrategic balance of power in Asia, much as a successful Ottoman absorption of the isle of Malta would have transformed the entire equilibrium of forces in the Mediterranean (http://books.google.com/books/about/Empires_of_the_Sea.html?id=xzfl6Hbv6AQC) of the sixteenth century.

Last but not least, forsaking the small island democracy would severely erode American credibility in the Indo-Pacific, add fuel to an ongoing regional arms race, and encourage nuclear proliferation. Taiwan policy cannot be compartmentalised, and viewed in isolation from the pivot and US policy towards Asia. Decision-makers in Seoul, Tokyo, and Manila would naturally question Washington's resolve and commitment to their security in the event of an abandonment of Taiwan. Japan, in particular, would feel threatened (<http://www.hoover.org/publications/policy-review/article/139396>) by the stationing of Chinese forces on Taiwan – in essence losing a valuable geopolitical buffer – in such close proximity to its south-western approaches. Heightened threat perceptions in Tokyo, if combined with a lack of faith in the credibility of US conventional and nuclear deterrence, could lead Japan to acquire a nuclear-weapons capability.

JR: To what extent do you think Europeans – or particular European countries like France and the UK – will be involved in Indo-Pacific affairs in the coming years? Should they become more involved?

IR: I firmly believe that there is a need for Europeans to be more actively engaged in Asia. Where I might differ, however, with some of the editors at *European Geostrategy*, is on the nature of that engagement. For example, I don't think it would yield much, in the way of strategic dividends, to forwardly station or deploy European military assets east of the Strait of Malacca, where they could only contribute very marginally to crisis stability. I would much rather see those limited resources concentrated in places where they can bring strong added value, such as the Gulf, the Eastern Mediterranean, and frontline Eastern and Northern European countries.

I am strongly wedded to the idea of a more effective 'division of labour' within the Atlantic Alliance. Europeans can best contribute to crisis stability to Asia by taking care of their own extended neighbourhood, thus facilitating the US rebalance toward Asia. In order to do so, European military powers such as France and the UK must first reduce their dependency on US logistical assistance for regional interventions. This will require further investments in certain key areas such as strategic airlift and in-flight refuelling and the deepening of their inventory of precision-guided munitions. The widespread diffusion of precision strike has led to the emergence of regional reconnaissance strike complexes in places such as Iran and raised the costs of military action. This should prompt European armed forces to invest more strategically in certain areas, such as standoff strike and electronic warfare, and to strengthen their ability to engage in the suppression of enemy air defences and penetrate contested environments. Meanwhile, European Special Forces and intelligence operatives will no doubt play an increasingly important role in a number of 'shadow wars' taking place along the European periphery, whether in Africa or the Middle East. Both France and the UK need to ensure that such forces are preserved as 'crown jewels', even in the face of rising fiscal pressures.

Moving beyond the simple question of military deployments and capabilities, I think that there is a number of ways in which Europeans can play a more important role as an 'off the horizon' stabiliser in Asia and help positively shape the security environment.

First of all, there needs to be an ongoing, institutionalised, dialogue, between the European Union (EU) and the US on the question of European arms sales to Asia. At a time when a number of Asian nations are investing heavily in high-end European weaponry, ranging from subsurface assets to precision-strike, the absence of a clear, strategically-driven, transatlantic approach with regard to this issue is troubling. There is a need to move beyond purely mercantilist considerations and to engage in a thoughtful examination of the geopolitical effects of these sales and technology transfers. Which partners or allies of the US can best benefit from the acquisition of certain European technologies? Which countries should not be gaining access to certain weapon systems? Can the EU fulfil something of a 'Neo-Nixonian' role in the Indo-Pacific, not only via weapons sales, but also through military training and military diplomacy? As some observers have rightly noted, military diplomacy constitutes something of a 'missing link' in the EU's approach toward Asia. Individual nations such as France and the UK play an extremely active role in this domain, but there is a need for a more concerted approach at the EU level. European armed forces are undergoing drastic reductions in their conventional force structures, but many remain highly experienced and capable in certain niche areas (special forces, submarine and anti-submarine warfare, amphibious operations, cyber, etc...). After a careful assessment of the various strategic ramifications, some of that expertise could be shared with certain select nations, and the EU could play a role equivalent to what is termed 'Foreign Internal Defence' in Pentagon parlance, by strengthening the ability of smaller, weaker states throughout the region to protect themselves from both internal stability and external aggression.

European governments can also support their partners in Asia by more vigorously defending certain shared norms, such as freedom of navigation and the respect for human rights. The fact that EU nations operate at a relative distance from the region's complex web of alliances, may in fact provide them with more diplomatic manoeuvrability than the US to act as a mouthpiece on these sensitive issues at various international forums.