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Indo-Pacific Cooperation  
with European NATO Countries:  
**Security Partnership  
Initiatives and  
Perspectives**





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## Summary

- Security and defence partnerships in the region have developed most actively over the past decade under the Japan-led idea of “Free and Open Indo Pacific” (FOIP) among the “like-minded partners.”
- Various initiatives mainly focus on maritime security, emerging domains such as cyber and space, and defence industry cooperation.
- Other partnerships outside of FOIP are mainly bilateral agreements on defence equipment procurement or modernization of defence sector, like in the case of the Philippines or Vietnam.
- There is a significant potential for Lithuania to establish partnerships in the cyber security domain and fight with disinformation.
- Bilateral cooperation channels with Japan or through NATO with Japan may be the most direct way to the region.

This study offers an overview of defence cooperation arrangements and initiatives between the European NATO member states and selected countries in the Indo-Pacific region; specifically, the ten ASEAN states, Japan and South Korea. In recent years, NATO has intensified its efforts to ensure cooperation with the countries in the Indo-Pacific region, amid the growing perceived tensions with China. This study does not include the security initiatives established between the US as a NATO member and the countries in the region, considering that the bilateral cooperation between the US and these countries is often well-regulated by bilateral alliance treaties or decades-long security relations, and thus, these initiatives are more intensive and deserving of a separate study. However, it is important to observe an emerging trend in the defence and security cooperation between other NATO member states and the Indo-Pacific, as well as to evaluate its progress so far. In this way, this study presents a background for Lithuania to consider potential cooperation within the Indo-Pacific region, by joining the already existing frameworks or setting up new partnerships.

A very brief review of the historical security links between the European states and the region, in Part One below, is followed in Part Two by a detailed review of the most advanced cooperation frameworks between Japan and France, as well as between Japan and the UK. Under the umbrella of the Japan-promoted “Indo-Pacific” concept, which was later framed as the “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” (FOIP), France and the UK have been at the forefront of establishing cooperation with the region. Part Three discusses how these security and defence initiatives have expanded geographically, both in Europe and in Asia, in recent years. Part Four presents a structured overview of the major areas of security and defence cooperation. Before a summary of the key points and recommendations for Lithuania’s engagement with the region, Part Five of this study briefly reviews other security and defence initiatives between the European and Asian states that have been formed outside of the Indo-Pacific idea or the FOIP.

## 1. Early development of defence and security partnerships

A number of the security and defence partnerships between European and Asian countries were first established decades ago, often as a result of the his-

toric relations between the countries. For example, as a part of the Five Power Defence Arrangements, the UK maintains the British Defence Singapore Support Unit, a naval support facility at Sembawang in Singapore operated by the Strategic Command (previously the “Joint Forces Command”). It is the facility that remained in the region after the other permanent bases were closed following the UK government’s decision in 1968. At the time when its bases in the Persian Gulf, Oman, Seychelles, the Maldives, Singapore and Malaysia were being closed, the UK government remained committed to maintaining defence links with Singapore and Malaysia, through the signing of the Five Power Defence Arrangements in 1971. Furthermore, as Brunei remained a British Protectorate until its independence in 1984, the British Army has maintained an infantry battalion training site there since then. Along with the British Indian Ocean Territory, that has been made available for UK and US defence purposes following the agreements signed in 1966, the UK has maintained these two bases in the Pacific region. In addition, France has continued its long security presence in the region via its overseas territories, where 8000 soldiers are stationed. With 93 percent of its exclusive economic zone (EEZ) located in the Indian and Pacific Oceans, France has held a maritime security presence in the region for decades.

Moreover, both France and the UK have been exposed to Japan in their security and defence interactions in the region, as they were signatories of the *Agreement Regarding the Status of United Nations Forces in Japan (UN-GOJ SOFA)* in 1954. According to this Agreement, the UN Sending States were entitled to the use of seven military bases in Japan for the purpose of logistic support. To date, the two European states still participate in monitoring the enforcement of the UN Security Council resolutions. Since 2018, the UK and France have been using the Futenma military base for monitoring and surveillance activities by aircraft targeted against illicit maritime activities, including ship-to-ship transfers with North Korean-flagged vessels that are prohibited by the UN Security Council resolutions. Starting on 2021, Germany has joined in the monitoring and surveillance activities against these illicit maritime activities.

The decades-long partnerships and presence in the region have tended to evolve and expand over time, as is shown in the next section in the case of France and the UK, which appear to be at the forefront of the defence and security cooperation within the region.

## 2. Proliferation of security and defence initiatives in recent decades

### 2.1 Concept of the “Indo-Pacific” and Japan’s FOIP

For a long time, security and defence cooperation between the European states and Asia-Pacific countries was rather limited, with a notable exception of France. However, over the last decade, security and defence initiatives between the two sides have proliferated, with Japan welcoming European states into the so-called “Indo-Pacific” region. The term “Indo-Pacific” was suggested by the Japanese Prime Minister, Shinzo Abe, on the occasion of a state visit to India in 2007. It can be viewed as the latest attempt to conceptualise the current geopolitical situation in the region, in the context of the changing international system. As the competition between the two power centres – the US and China – has grown, other terms formerly used to define the region after the end of the Cold War, e.g. East Asia and Asia-Pacific, no longer capture the situation in the 21st century, with new power centres and bilateral or multilateral networks existing between like-minded countries. With the US’s announcement that the 21st century would be its “Pacific Century” in 2011, this term captures the new geopolitical dynamic in the region, i.e. a transition away from engagement with China to an attempt to counter its phenomenal growth over the last few decades<sup>1</sup>.

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1. Since the establishment of diplomatic relations between the United States and the People’s Republic of China in 1979, the United States has implemented a so-called engagement strategy with China, based on the idea that China will gradually “socialise” and accept the established rules and norms as it is integrated deeper into the international system. However, after several years of intense debate, it was concluded that the engagement strategy towards China had not produced the expected results. On the contrary, the measures taken by the US and other liberal states have only helped China to strengthen its power, which can be used to change the rules and norms established after World War II. From the long-lasting engagement strategy, the USA switched to an approach based on strategic competition. Japan, the ally of the US in the post-WW II era, has redefined China as an “unprecedented challenge” in the review of its national security strategy in December 2022.

The concept was further defined by Japanese Prime Minister Abe in 2016, with the introduction of the “free and open” region in the two oceans. The concept of the “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” (FOIP) has three pillars: (1) promotion and establishment of the rule of law, freedom of navigation and free trade; (2) pursuit of economic prosperity, mainly by improving connectivity; and (3) a commitment to peace and stability. In terms of security, the Japanese Ministry of Defence has declared its goals as: (1) to secure stable use of major sea lanes through defence cooperation and exchange activities; (2) to prevent contingencies through confidence building and mutual understanding; and (3) to contribute to peace and stability through active engagement in the region, in cooperation with its partner countries.

As Japan has welcomed European states into the region under the umbrella of the FOIP, its security and defence initiatives with the European states have expanded rapidly.

### 2.2 France and the UK at the forefront of defence and security cooperation with Japan

The cooperation between France and Japan can be considered as a ground-breaking security and defence cooperation between a European and an Asian state. Since 1997, France and Japan regularly held Politico-Military (PM) Dialogues between the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and the Ministries of Defence. Since 2014, the two sides have also maintained a regular Foreign and Defence Ministers’ Meeting (“2+2”). At the first meeting, France and Japan confirmed that security in Europe and security in Asia were closely intertwined. The ministers present at the meeting underscored the importance of easing the tensions that were emerging in the region, particularly in the East China Sea, and the importance of a peaceful resolution of disputes through dialogue and consultations, in accordance with international law. They recalled their commitment to the exercising of freedom of navigation and overflight in the areas where it is provided for in accordance with international law. The ministers also agreed on the importance of international aid in the event of major natural disasters, in addition to a discussion on the major security challenges in the world.

Since 2019, relations have been developing under the “Exceptional Partnership between France and Japan”. Its major component has been the *Japan-France Comprehensive Maritime Dialogue*, which was first held in 2019. At that time, the two sides expressed concerns over the situation in the disputed East and South China Seas, and agreed to continue to cooperate in their efforts to deal with North Korea’s denuclearisation. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Japan-France Comprehensive Maritime Dialogue, held in February 2023, discussed cooperation in maritime governance, port security and naval joint-interactions, as well as coordination on crime at sea and piracy, among other maritime issues.

**The UK** was another pioneer that entered the region through security initiatives with Japan in the 2010s. As Japan’s review of its guidelines on the overseas transfer of defence equipment in late 2011 opened the door for the country’s overseas defence cooperation, the UK and Japan launched a discussion on their *defence industrial collaboration*. In 2012, while the European states were still paying little attention to the Indo-Pacific region, a Memorandum between the United Kingdom’s Ministry of Defence and the Japan Ministry of Defence relating to defence cooperation was signed. By that time, “shared values” has already emerged as a semantic bridge to link these two geographically distant countries. Furthermore, the memorandum included what has now become the basis for the FOIP – a shared commitment to the universally-agreed principles of international law including the UNCLOS, freedom and safety of navigation, and the peaceful settlement of disputes. Immediately after concluding the memorandum, the two states launched a bilateral *cyber security dialogue*. It followed a joint statement on *Internet Policy Issues* by the prime ministers of the two countries earlier that year, in which they emphasised the importance of the free flow of information.

The 2012 Memorandum has become the basis for the further expansion of security and defence cooperation between the UK and Japan. In 2015, the format of a regular Bilateral Foreign and Defence Ministers’ meeting (“2+2”) was established, which further defined the two countries’ commitment to the values underpinning the concept of the Indo-Pacific – to work together to defend and protect the *global common spaces (on the high seas, in cyberspace and in outer space)*, and to *support an international system based on the rule of law and international norms*, including the peaceful resolution of maritime disputes in the South China Sea. In 2017, the UK and

Japan announced their Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation, indicating at least 16 areas of cooperation. Among them, joint exercises and efforts to strengthen maritime security and safety including maritime domain awareness (MDA) and counter-piracy measures were implemented, when multilateral counterpiracy exercises were held by Japan, UK, US and the Netherlands in the Gulf of Aden in Summer 2021. In early 2023, Japan and the UK signed a defence agreement that allows forces from both countries to be deployed to the other country for training, joint exercises and disaster relief activities. This access agreement was the first of its kind that Japan has concluded with a European partner.

## 2.3 Expanding the geography of defence and security initiatives

As Japan promoted its idea of cooperation between like-minded partners in the Indo-Pacific region, France and the UK were the first actors from Europe to take part in this initiative. Nevertheless, over the past few years, other European NATO members have established contacts with Japan, in many cases at the level of the defence minister or the defence vice minister. As more “2+2” format meetings between the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and the Ministries of Defence were held, the Japanese media reported that “Japan’s got the 2+2 bug.” **Germany** entered the Indo-Pacific region by deploying its navy frigate “Bayern” in 2021 and the German Air Force Eurofighter in 2022. Japan actively communicated the concept of the FOIP to the European states, e.g. in a conference held in Slovakia as well as in meetings with European officials. As a result, since 2022, the geography of Japan’s defence contacts has expanded. The Japanese Minister of Defence has held meeting with counterparts from **Italy, Finland** and **Poland**, while vice-minister level meetings were held at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore in June 2022 with the **Czech Republic and Lithuania**. *Regular military-to-military dialogues* have also been maintained between Japan and France, Italy and Finland.

It remains to be seen how these initial contacts will develop further, but one can expect substantial progress if not at the bilateral level, then through NATO or the EU. This potential for defence cooperation through NATO and the EU has also been noted on several occasion in bilateral meetings between the

European states and Japan, e.g. during a defence minister meeting between Japan and Poland. Furthermore, NATO has declared its aim of strengthening relations with its like-minded partners in the Indo-Pacific (AP4 – Japan, Australia, New Zealand and Korea) as an important aspect of the NATO 2030 agenda. The two sides have already agreed to “step up the political dialogue and practical cooperation in several areas, including in relation to *cyberspace, new technologies and countering disinformation*”. AP4 participated in a NATO summit for the first time in Summer 2022, while Japan and NATO have held regular High-Level Consultations since 1993. At the EU level, in early 2023, the Japanese Vice Minister of Defence for International Affairs hosted the Secretary General of the European External Action Service to discuss “the way forward for Japan-EU security cooperation and exchanges”.

Geographically, security and defence initiatives are also broadening in Asia. During a bilateral meeting held on the sidelines of the NATO summit in Summer 2022, the UK and the Republic of Korea signed a Bilateral Framework for Closer Cooperation, which sets out areas of further cooperation, including security ties. Its security and defence section provided for closer military-to-military exchanges, as well as cooperation in the cyber domain and space, while also countering terrorism, weapons of mass destruction and non-proliferation issues.

The UK and South Korea intend to strengthen their mutual cooperation across the region, by building on their respective frameworks of the Indo-Pacific strategy. Notably, the two sides have reaffirmed their support for *ASEAN centrality and the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP)*, in a similar manner to what was done earlier at the Sixth Japan-France Foreign and Defence Ministers' Meeting (“2+2”). The concept of “ASEAN centrality” refers to the role of the ASEAN as a regional leader and facilitator in Asia’s regional cooperation.

### 3. Areas of security and defence cooperation

As the number of initiatives and cooperation frameworks proliferated, they expanded into different domains. It is possible to identify a certain structure of the cooperation between the European and Asian states, especially the members of AP4 – Japan and Korea (AP4 also includes Australia and New Zealand). For clarity, a more structured overview of these specific areas of cooperation is provided below.

#### 3.1 Focus on maritime security

The concept of the Indo-Pacific region emphasises the importance of the maritime domain, as opposed to the earlier terms used to define the region, e.g., East Asia or the Asia-Pacific, that referred to the continental landmass. Thus, in the bilateral initiatives, significant attention is dedicated to maritime security and safety, including maritime domain awareness (MDA) and counter-piracy measures. For example, the *Roadmap for a France-Japan exceptional partnership* outlines specific initiatives in the cooperation to enhance maritime security. The first goal is to *strengthen the interoperability of armed forces* between the Japanese Self-Defence Forces and the French Armed Forces, by the potential participation of ground, naval and air force personnel in exercises held by either side, port calls, and security cooperation between Japan and the EU in the Indo-Pacific, as well as between Japan and NATO based on the *Japan-NATO Country Partnership and Cooperation Plan* (IPCP). Multilateral joint naval exercises have already been held between Japan, France, Belgium and the US in the Gulf of Aden and the Arabian Sea in 2021, between France, Japan, the US and Australia in the East China Sea, as well as bilateral joint naval exercises between France and Japan and between Germany and Japan designed “to show its close cooperation and to uphold and reinforce the Free and Open Indo Pacific”, to reenforce the freedom of navigation, or increase the interoperability of the navies in its partner states. Taking part in port calls to a partner state has also been on the agenda.

Other areas of cooperation on maritime security include information-sharing and strengthening the capacities of the countries in the Indo-Pacific region. While these are not necessarily limited to maritime law enforcement, both France's and the UK's partnerships with Japan include this point. The roadmap for a France-Japan exceptional partnership states that the two countries will seek to strengthen the capacity of coastal states in the Indo-Pacific region, and to develop joint cooperation for the defence and domestic political stability of other countries in Asia and Africa.

### 3.2 Attention to emerging domains and their regulation

There has been growing awareness that non-democratic countries like China are seeking to shape the establishment of international rules and norms in emerging domains. Democracies both in Asia and Europe have recognised that these domains are transforming the security landscape, and have therefore incorporated these issues in their security initiatives.

First, the *cyber domain* has received significant attention. As mentioned above, the UK and Japanese Prime Ministers raised the importance of a *free cyber space and internet policy* as early as in 2012, likely with China and other authoritarian regimes in mind. It is also likely that there will be more coordination with regards to the international regulation of this matter. The UK and South Korea hold an annual Cyber Security Dialogue, aimed at *deepening cooperation on a regional and international cyber policy* and also *coordinating efforts in multilateral fora to guarantee the future of a free and open, rules-based cyberspace*. More specifically, they are seeking to counter cyber threats, including cyberattacks, from the DPRK and other countries.

The Japanese Ministry of Defence has held cyber dialogues with its counterparts from France, the UK, Germany and Estonia, in order to exchange views on the threat awareness and relevant initiatives being carried out by each country. More broadly, the Japanese Ministry of Defence carries out initiatives with NATO "looking at possible future operational cooperation, such as establishing a cyber dialogue between defence authorities called the Japan-NATO Expert Staff Talks on Cyber Defence." Japan

also participated as an observer in a cyber defence exercise (Locked Shields) organised by the NATO Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence (CCDCOE) based in Estonia, where the MOD has dispatched personnel since March 2019.

In addition, *space* is an emerging domain for cooperation. In 2015, Japan and France agreed to strengthen their bilateral dialogue on space-related issues. Two years later, at the 2<sup>nd</sup> Japan-France Comprehensive Space Dialogue, the two countries signed a technical arrangement on *information sharing pertaining to the space situation and awareness*. In 2022, the Royal Air Force and the Republic of Korea Air Force (ROKAF) signed Terms of Reference outlining the future cooperation between UK Space Command and the ROKAF in the space domain. This arrangement will cover areas such as operational knowledge sharing, collaborative exercises and training, and personnel exchanges. It also sets out a mutual desire for the sharing of *space-related information, through future information-sharing agreements*. Notably, this partnership addresses the issue of international norms and regulations pertaining to the use of space use, as the two countries have committed to <...> "expand the existing joint work to set *internationally-agreed responsible space behaviours*."

### 3.3 Cooperation on defence equipment

Bilateral and multilateral initiatives are also promoting cooperation in the development of defence equipment. For example, Japan and the UK have been discussing a potential merger of the UK's Future Combat Air System (FCAS) and Japan's F-X fighter jet programmes. In 2022, the UK, Japan and Italy agreed to develop and deploy a common fighter jet, thereby merging their previously separate sixth-generation projects. The possibility of Sweden joining the programme was also brought to the table. Furthermore, the "Finland-Japan Defence and Space Industry Seminar" held in 2022 suggests that these two countries are deepening their cooperation in this sector.

Other declared areas of cooperation include the issues of weapons of mass destruction and non-proliferation, terrorism, organised crime and major event security.

## 4. Other bilateral security and defence partnerships

As security and defence cooperation initiatives have proliferated over the last decade under the umbrella of the FOIP, other bilateral partnerships between European and Asian states may be becoming overshadowed. However, there have been a number of notable exchanges predating the FOIP or taking place outside of its scope. Many of them are bilateral arrangements that fit the needs of a specific country, and do not fall under a broader coordinated framework of cooperation, at least for the time being.

Among them, Spain has a decades-long relationship in defence-equipment manufacturing with Indonesia. Initially, in 1972, the Indonesian president considered the C-212 aircraft made by the Spanish company Construcciones Aeronáuticas SA (CASA) as appropriate for the needs of Indonesia at that time. Ever since, CASA has helped develop the Indonesian aerospace industry through a joint venture and the two countries cooperation in industrial defence has developed steadily.

Vietnam also has maintained cooperation agreements with some European states for the past few decades. Its agreement on defence cooperation with Belgium dates back to 2002, while it has maintained a strategic partnership with the UK since 2010, as well as with France and Germany. These partnerships are focused on training and *peacekeeping operations*, strategic exchanges and a settlement of the war legacy. On the other hand, some initiatives have been dedicated to maritime security, including maritime law enforcement capacity building. It remains to be seen if these partnerships will be absorbed under the FOIP. Vietnam shares the same views as much of what the FOIP stands for; mainly, maintaining international rules-based order in the region, and the importance of freedom of navigation and overflight in the South China Sea. Vietnam and its strategic partners have agreed that all disputes in the South China Sea, where China's perceived aggressive and bullying actions have been criticised, must be solved through peaceful means, according to the UNCLOS and the full and effective implementation of the Declaration of Conduct of the parties in the South China Sea that was agreed upon in 2002.

As of the time of writing this paper, the Czech Republic and the Philippines are discussing potential assistance for the extensive modernisation to the Philippine Armed Forces that could also include technology transfers and aircraft sales. Their defence cooperation is based on the 2017 *Defence Cooperation Agreement* that established the Joint Defence Committee, and the subsequent *Memorandum of Understanding* in 2021 designed to establish a framework for future partnerships in the defence sector. Reportedly, the initiative has been guided by “the security situation currently at play in Europe and Southeast Asia, and the efforts by these countries to develop their own militaries.” Earlier, in 2013, Germany offered military training to the Philippines, and in 2016 France agreed with the Philippines on assistance to modernise the Philippines' defence force, as the situation in the South China Sea was growing increasingly tense. In 2011, Indonesia announced it was advancing its defence cooperation with Spain, France and Germany, in an effort to develop its own defence industry.

Defence diplomacy aimed at strengthening a country's own defence capabilities has often guided bilateral relations. For example, last year Poland signed a defence procurement agreement with South Korea, aimed at increasing its defence capabilities as Russian's invasion of Ukraine continues.

## Concluding notes

- Security and defence initiatives between the two regions have proliferated over the last decade. This process has been facilitated by Japan's promotion of the Indo-Pacific concept, which was later defined as the “Free and Open Indo Pacific” (FOIP). Countries with historical ties to the region, which are mainly France and the UK, have been at the forefront of cooperation with the region.
- Security and defence initiatives are expanding beyond these three countries, as the German navy entered the region, while other European states have also opened up channels of communication with Japan, and South Korea formalised its partnership with the UK.
- Considering Japan's proactive position on the FOIP and the already-existing initiatives of the Japanese Ministry of Defence, cooperation with Japan may be the most effective entry point into



the region. Furthermore, a partnership with Japan may be a bridge to reach other countries in the region.

- As security and defence initiatives have expanded over the last decade under the umbrella of the “Indo-Pacific”, significant attention has been dedicated to maritime security. Defence diplomacy is being carried out to enhance maritime defence capabilities, such as joint exercises.
- Nevertheless, there are other issues that re-occur in the bilateral initiatives. One of the key elements is international norm setting and the regulation of emerging domains, such as a free and open, rules-based cyberspace.
- The other element in the cooperation on critical security domains is knowledge-sharing. The biggest potential for Lithuania to engage with the region could be its expertise in cyber security and countering disinformation. Cyber security is essential in bilateral partnerships, while countering disinformation has been indicated as one of the areas of cooperation between NATO and AP4. Thus, both bilaterally and through NATO, Lithuania could potentially engage with the region on these issues and areas.

- Capacity building of the coastal states in the Indo-Pacific is also a shared goal between the European and Asian partners. While often this pertains to maritime security and maritime law enforcement, these efforts are not limited to maritime issues. Therefore, it is recommended to consider the options, in order to contribute to the capacity building of the states in the region in different aspects and to share good experience.
- Finally, defence initiatives are being promoted with the goal of strengthening the country’s defence industry, through cooperation on defence equipment and technology transfers. In some cases, such cooperation is taking place outside of the FOIP framework and is intended to meet the goal of a particular state. Thus, in specific cases, it may be worthwhile considering what capabilities Lithuania may have to engage in this field.