

Roundtable: Western approaches to security cooperation in the Indo-Pacific

Wednesday, 5 June 2024 15:00 (1h 30m)

Problematisation of Western approaches to security cooperation in the Indo-Pacific

The challenges that the emergence of competition between the United States and China will pose on a global level will be significant for the evolution of the international system in the coming decades. This evolution will particularly affect the Western world, whose geo-economic weight will see an important balancing act due to the emergence of new global players. Starting with conceptualisation of the Indo-Pacific as the new geopolitical scenario where much of the competition between the US and China will be concentrated, the West has responded by proposing its aspirations for this region. The numerous strategies and policy documents that are entirely dedicated to the Indo-Pacific, or deal with parts of it, focus heavily on the one-sided relationship between the promoting states and regional partners, united by values or interests. However, the growing Western frustration with many Indo-Pacific actors refusing to adapt to the US-China field choice, sees some Western actors embarking on a new phase of adaptation to this process. The creation of the AUKUS, on the strategic-military side, constitutes a first step towards the definition of new medium- to long-term balances that are truly capable of confronting Chinese expansionism.

Since the launch of the U.S.-led Indo-Pacific Framework for Prosperity (IPEF) in 2022, the framework has been touted by the Biden administration as “writing new rules for the 21st century”, with the aim of making the economies of the participant countries “grow faster and fairer” (cite). IPEF membership currently represents 40% of the world’s GDP. The framework has been described by some analyses as a response to the criticism faced by the Obama era ‘Pivot to Asia’ policy where the policy largely focused on defence matters. The region is home to many Southeast Asian (ASEAN) countries who all have varied historical relations with China and the US, as well as varied levels of domestic economic development and political stability.

At the heart of this new phase lies the ability of Western actors, who recognise themselves in the international rule of law regime, to cooperate together in the region. At the academic level, the study of cooperation, its characteristics as well as its limits, in cooperation between Western actors is still at an early stage. Especially in those areas, economic-infrastructure cooperation, maritime security, and the relationship with multilateral entities such as ASEAN that are constituent features of the Indo-Pacific. The case of the United Kingdom and the European Union, medium-sized actors with strong ambitions of presence and influence in the region, is of particular interest. Indeed, it makes it possible to study the concept of cooperation applied to this region by declining it within the innovative framework of the study of medium-sized powers and their role in the international system. At the same time, the peculiarity of the post-Brexit relationship between the United Kingdom and the European Union, between a medium power and a supranational organisation, opens the research scenario to new dimensions of understanding an international system increasingly characterised by mini-lateral initiatives, at a time of unprecedented multipolarity.

Proposed panel – questions, expertise, aim

This panel aims to discuss various developments, perceptions and responses in the Indo-Pacific region around the main question: what are the characteristics of UK-EU cooperation in the Indo-Pacific? What are the perceptions of regional, and external actors of this cooperation? What are the tangible results, and the limits of this cooperation? Panel members will each contribute from various country and sub-regional perspectives, followed by a discussion on the implications on the future of the region’s economic and political stability.

Composition and function

Chair - Professor Christophe Jaffrelot, Professor of Politics and Sociology, King’s India Institute, King’s College London; Lead of the Indo-Pacific research group.

Panelist – Dr Zeno Leoni, Lecturer in Defence Studies, Defence Studies Department, King’s College London; Lead of the KCL Middle Powers research group.

Panellist – Mauro Bonavita, Ph.D. candidate in International Relations, Department of War Studies, King's College London; researcher KCL Indo-Pacific research group.

Panellist – Cristina De Esperanza Picardo, Ph.D. candidate in International Relations, Department of European and International Studies, King's College London and National University of Singapore; Researcher KCL Indo-Pacific Research group.

Panellist – Anna Tan, Ph.D. candidate in International Relations, Defence Studies Department; Researcher KCL Indo-Pacific research group.

Track Classification: War Studies Working Group