



Networked defense in the Indo-Pacific: Deepening security and defense relations between Australia and Japan and the role of Norway

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Brief summary

- The Indo-Pacific security architecture is developing into a more networked constellation involving a combination of overlapping bilateral, trilateral, minilateral and multilateral arrangements.
- Deepening defense cooperation between Japan and Australia parallels Europe and Norway's heightened engagement and presence in the Indo-Pacific region.
- Norway's engagement in the Indo-Pacific involves gaining deeper insight into a region of increasing strategic importance and the opportunity to promote its own defense industry.

Introduction

The Indo-Pacific security environment is shaped by the growing strategic assertiveness of China and uncertainty about the long-term reliability and posture of the United States as the region's primary security guarantor. Over the past decade, the NATO alliance and European Union (EU) have increasingly prioritized their involvement in the Indo-Pacific. The drivers of the closer engagement are diverse but in the case of the EU have been primarily related to the Indo-Pacific's economic growth and its expanding markets. NATO's involvement is attributed more to the implications of China's expanding military growth for both Europe and global stability. While the Indo-Pacific has come increasingly into focus for Europe's reigning multilateral institutions, the heightened involvement of individual European states in the region is still the most predominant trend.

In the Indo-Pacific, several likeminded states have made significant upgrades to their defense profiles, including increasing national defense budgets, the strengthening of military posture, and more integrated

contributions to regional deterrence and defense in conjunction with the United States (US). At the same time, companies in the European defense industry are working to position themselves to contribute to the defense upgrades that are planned and underway in the Indo-Pacific. This development is taking place in parallel to an increased involvement of European states in military exercises in the Indo-Pacific.

Among the European states that are heightening their defense engagement vis-à-vis Indo-Pacific partners, the Nordics have assumed a more prominent role. Norwegian defense industry companies, such as Kongsberg Defence and Aerospace, have secured military sales and contracts with several states in the region over the past decade. Norwegian manufacturers have also provided defense solutions such as the Naval Strike Missile, unmanned gun turrets, and drones to American forces in the Pacific. Beyond the US, Australia and Japan stand out as the most prioritized local defense contract customers for Norway.

Australia and Japan have recently deepened their security and defense relations committing to a new 'strategic defense' framework in December 2025. In this brief, we assess this deepening bilateral defense partnership and consider Norway's increasing role in the Indo-Pacific.

Networked defense in the Indo-Pacific: A deepening Australia and Japan partnership

The traditional security architecture in the Indo-Pacific had been characterized as a hub and spoke system with the US in the center ("hub") and strong bilateral ties to select allies ("spokes"), including Japan, South Korea and Australia. Today, a more multifaceted system has emerged involving a complex network with several actors. Often referred to as a "latticework" or "networked" security architecture, this structure involves stronger regional partnerships directly between compatible states. Australia and Japan's deepening defense relationship is a prime example.

Japan and Australia situate their deepening defense cooperation within a broader regional posture that involves close coordination with the US and other likeminded partners, including Norway. Both Tokyo and Canberra articulate the importance of deterrence against unilateral attempts to alter the regional status quo by force and emphasize diplomatic resolutions to crises such as confrontation in the Taiwan Strait. Their cooperation contributes to a *networked defense approach* in the Indo-Pacific blending (1) bilateral, (2) trilateral (with the US), and (3) minilateral/multilateral engagements to uphold security, trade routes, and

international norms.

Within this networked security constellation, the US still plays a critical role with an extended deterrence regime covering formal allied states to the US: Australia, Japan and South Korea, as well as the Philippines and Thailand. The US, together with Australia and Japan, is also involved in several minilateral constructs – such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) and AUKUS Pillar I and II – that are increasingly understood to be forms of strategic adaptation to the region's broader geopolitics. Beyond the region, Australia and Japan have established dialogue and regular cooperation with multilateral institutions in Europe, such as NATO and the EU.

Bilateral/trilateral dynamics

Japan and Australia have significantly deepened their bilateral defense cooperation over the past decade, driven by shared strategic interests in maintaining a free, open, and rules-based Indo-Pacific, and in response to evolving regional security challenges, particularly the rise in Chinese military activity in mainland Asia and in the Pacific- and Indian Oceans. Australia-Japan defense cooperation involves several agreements and meeting formats that support and reinforce their growing defense industrial collaboration which consist of both more frequent high-level political exchanges as well as more regular joint military exercises to enhance interoperability.

The first pillar of cooperation involves agreements and meeting formats. Japan and Australia formalized a *Special Strategic Partnership* through the Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation (JDSC), originally signed in 2007 and renewed/expanded in 2022, which underpins broad defense and security cooperation across multiple domains. Offshoots of the JDSC are the Japan–Australia 2+2 Foreign and Defense Ministerial Consultations ("2+2"), a consultative framework has led to several bilateral agreements: the Australia–Japan Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA) of 2023 and the Framework for Strategic Defence Coordination (FSDC) of 2025.

The second pillar of cooperation is joint exercises. Australia and Japan regularly conduct joint bilateral military exercises, as well as trilateral exercises with the US. For instance, the trilateral Exercise Bushido Guardian (fighter aircraft deployment) and the bilateral Exercise Keen Edge (command post exercise). In addition, Australia and Japan also participate in several multinational military exercises in the Indo-Pacific such as the Talisman Sabre (joint), "RIMPAC" - the Rim of the Pacific (maritime warfare), Pacific Dragon (air and missile defense), Pitch Black (air operations) and Cope North (air operations). Participants in these multinational exercises usually include several Indo-

Pacific states, and in the last decade European states also have contributed quite frequently.

The third pillar of cooperation is related to defense industrial collaboration. In 2025, Australia awarded Japan's Mitsubishi Heavy Industries a AUD\$10 billion contract to provide upgraded Mogami-class frigates to the Royal Australian Navy — one of the largest defense industrial agreements between the two nations and a landmark agreement for Japan's developing industry. This deal includes phased construction in Japan and Australia, bolstering defense industrial base cooperation and supply chain integration.

The fourth pillar is collaboration developing cross-domain collaboration and system research. Australia and Japan are also collaborating on defense science and technology initiatives, such as the joint research project on robotic and autonomous systems for undersea warfare under the bilateral RDT&E framework.

In sum, defense cooperation between Japan and Australia is deepening and multi-faceted, encompassing strategic policy coordination and legal frameworks, military exercises, defense industrial partnerships and research. This broad cooperation reflects mutual recognition of shared security interests and a commitment to a stable Indo-Pacific.

The increasing role and presence of Norway's defense industry in the Indo-Pacific

Since 2021, European states have participated more regularly and frequently in military exercises in the Indo-Pacific. 2024 was a peak year of involvement with European states deploying a total of 13 naval vessels and 95 military aircraft to participate in military exercises in the region. France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain and the United Kingdom are among the European nations that most frequently contribute to exercises in the Indo-Pacific. Other European countries, such as Norway, have exercised a more occasional military engagement. For instance, Norway deployed its Fridtjof Nansen-class frigate HNoMS Roald Amundsen to the Indo-Pacific as part of the UK Navy-led Carrier Strike Group (CSG25) in 2025 and while in the region also participated in exercise Talisman Sabre in Australia in July 2025. Prior to these exercises, Norway deployed a frigate to the region in 2014 to joint RIMPAC.

Recognizing that the Indo-Pacific region is of increasing strategic importance, Norway's participation in such exercises allows not only for deeper insight into regional developments but also the opportunity to promote its own defense industry. Moreover, agreements such as the MoU on defense equipment and

technology cooperation signed between Japan and Norway in 2024 have facilitated deepening bilateral cooperation on defense issues. In August 2025, Norway's operational naval deployment as part of CSG25 was combined with a port call in Tokyo to host bilateral meetings and defense industrial related events, including the Norway-Japan Defense Industry Day, where Japanese and Norwegian defense companies discussed opportunities for cooperation in defense equipment and multi-domain situational awareness.

Norway also served as a provider of military systems and weapons to the Indo-Pacific market, primarily exporting two different missile systems produced by the Norwegian company Kongsberg Defence and Aerospace (KDA). The Naval Strike Missile (NSM) has been sold to Australia, Indonesia, and Malaysia. In addition, the U.S. and Canadian Navies, as well as the US Marine Corps, have also ordered the NSM, primarily to meet operational requirements in the Asia-Pacific. The Royal Australian Navy conducted its inaugural live-fire test of the NSM at RIMPAC 2024 and is already deploying the missiles on the Hobart-class destroyers and Anzac-class frigates.

The Joint Strike Missile (JSM) is a stealth air-to-surface cruise missile that was developed through a partnership between KDA and the American company Raytheon Missiles & Defense. The JSM has been sold to Japan, the US, Australia and Germany. Japan has been a steady JSM customer, signing its initial contract in 2019 for a significant order of JSMs for use on its F-35 Lightning II fighter aircraft. KDA and Japan signed a fifth follow-on contract in December 2025 that was valued at more than NOK 800 million. Australia's decision in September 2024 to acquire the JSM for its Royal Australian Air Force was announced around the same time as KDA opened a 2,500-square-meter facility in Adelaide, Australia. The facility will support Australian defense programs with both procurement and maintenance of anti-ship missiles, air defense systems, and remote weapon stations. The programs supported include the NSM, the National Advanced Surface to Air Missile System (NASAMS), CORTEX C4 for Protected Mobile Fires, and the Protector remote weapon stations.

To facilitate both Australia and Japan's commitment to arming their F-35 aircraft with JSM cruise missiles, another new KDA factory will also be built in Newcastle, Australia. The factory, which will both produce and maintain NSM and JSM, will be one of only two facilities globally capable of building both missiles (the other is in Kongsberg, Norway).

The NSM, which is already in use by the Australian Navy, is now also being considered as an option for the primary anti-ship weapon for the 11 new Australian Mogami-based frigates which are being produced

in Japan, and which will replace the existing Anzac-class. The Australian decision to procure frigates from Japan triggers a need for reciprocal offset contracts. If the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF) also acquires the NSM missile for their own naval vessels it can meet the requirement for procurements from Australia due to the local KDA production and support facilities. The existing bilateral agreements between Australia and Japan form a framework of a common missile solution. However, Japan will ultimately make their procurement decisions based on threat scenarios and operational requirements.

Conclusion

The Indo-Pacific region is in the midst of a defense architecture transformation where the traditional hub and spoke system is being replaced by a more networked, latticed constellation. In this new constellation, states that have previously had a less prominent role in the region's defense are emerging, including Norway. Whereas other European states such as the UK have been regular contributors to exercises in the region, Norway's role is best described as one where military assets are selectively and occasionally deployed and where it is both an opportunity to develop a deeper understanding of the region's strategic dynamics and to promote Norway's defense industry, which has a substantial and increasingly prominent role and footprint in the Indo-Pacific defense market, in particular in Australia and Japan.

Australia and Japan are among the regional states establishing closer bilateral relationships with formal

agreements, evolving military interoperability through participation in joint exercises, and a historical, emerging defense industrial collaboration. Common bilateral procurement of identical systems will open up savings in life-cycle operating costs and presents an opportunity for the Norwegian industry. The principle applies to both platforms as naval vessels and military aircraft and their weapon systems. Given this, the Norwegian defense industry should continue to position itself well in the rapidly growing defense markets in the Indo-Pacific through bilateral and multilateral arrangements and with local presence, as demonstrated by KDA's engagement in Australia and Japan.

Finally, the role of the US in the Indo-Pacific has important implications for Europe. On the one hand, USA signals that it intends to remain the region's primary security provider and encourages European partners to focus on challenges closer to home. On the other hand, recurring uncertainty about the scale and durability of US commitments also encourages closer cooperation between European and Indo-Pacific partners such as Japan and Australia. This dynamic simultaneously reinforces a division of labor while creating incentives for greater cross-regional collaboration.

Funding

This research was supported by the Norwegian Ministry of Defence, through the project 'Japan's Shifting Role in Regional Defence and Global Security'.

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