Tomorrow's Affairs
Analysis of today
Assessment of tomorrow

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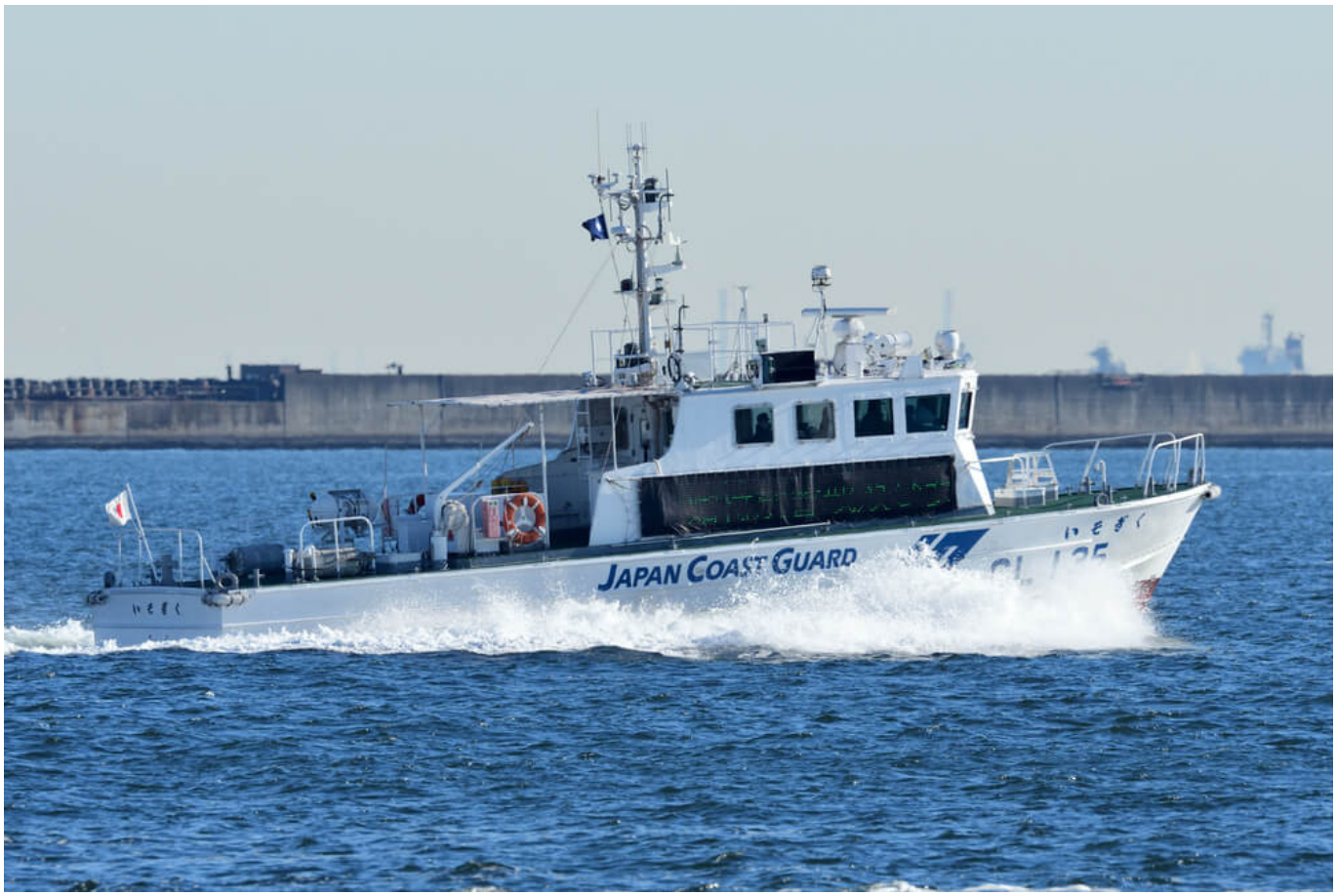
The new Indo-Pacific doctrine: coast guards assume the role of war fleets



While most analysts focus on the number of aircraft carriers and the alliances of major navies, a more significant change is occurring in the Indo-Pacific, one that is crucial for real maritime security.

The coast guards of the region's countries are taking over roles previously held by war fleets.

Their mandate now extends beyond rescues and customs controls to include protecting undersea infrastructure, monitoring suspicious activity, and rapid response to incidents that occur in the grey area between peace and armed conflict.

This shift is driven by practical considerations. In recent months, Japan, Taiwan, and AUKUS allies have made it clear that protecting undersea cables is now a matter of national security.

The Japanese government has decided to support the NEC company in purchasing cable-laying and maintenance vessels, covering up to half the cost of each.

This reduces the country's reliance on foreign fleets and provides its own capacity for monitoring and emergency repair of the network that carries almost all Japanese and international Internet traffic.

A clear distinction between accident and sabotage

At the same time, Taiwan has introduced a legal framework that was previously lacking.

After cables between the main island and Penghu were damaged, the coast guard conducted an investigation, and the prosecution brought charges against the captain of the merchant ship.

The swift delivery of the verdict established a clear distinction between accident and sabotage for the first time in the region.

> Incidents no longer go unnoticed or end in diplomatic silence but instead enter the process of institutional accountability

This practice sets a precedent: incidents no longer go unnoticed or end in diplomatic silence but instead enter the process of institutional accountability.

Last August, on the other side of the Indo-Pacific, partners from AUKUS (a security agreement between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States) tested the mutual compatibility of autonomous undersea systems.

During these exercises, British and Australian teams remotely piloted the XLUUV (a large unmanned undersea vehicle) using a joint command and control network.

When coast guards take the lead

Technology created under Pillar II of AUKUS, which includes advanced tools like artificial intelligence, quantum solutions, and unmanned systems, is now being used in real-life situations.

It enables the monitoring and assessment of damage to undersea infrastructure without the need to send warships to the area.

In such situations, coast guards and civilian technical services can take over surveillance, document the incident, and prepare the area for the cable ships, while naval fleets remain in the background.

This is the essence of the new practice: a constant presence that does not increase the risk of escalation.

> The speed of response determines the outcome

This practice is not the result of new alliances but of experience. When several undersea cables were cut in the Red Sea in September, the global flow of data and financial transactions slowed for several days.

The material damage was significant, but the lesson is more important: the speed of response determines the outcome.

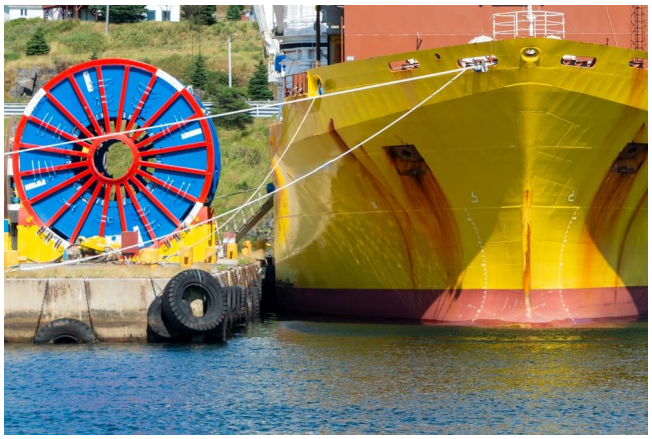
A state that can quickly secure the scene of an incident and determine the cause takes real control over the consequences.

A network of surveillance, data sharing, and joint action

The United Kingdom has a natural role as a partner in this change. The 2025 National Security Strategy identified the protection of undersea infrastructure as a national priority, while a parliamentary inquiry into cable resilience raised concerns about domestic capacity and international coordination.

The British approach is not based on expanding naval presence but on exporting knowledge and technology.

The country has a developed industry in undersea sensors, ROVs (Remotely Operated Vehicles), sonar equipment, and software for analysing maritime traffic and monitoring the so-called shadow fleet – merchant and tanker ships that change their identity or conceal their routes.



The number of damaged undersea cables in the Indo-Pacific is steadily increasing, and most incidents occur in the so-called "grey zone", where intent cannot be formally proven

These capacities form the basis of a new model of cooperation with partners in Asia, centred on training, joint exercises, data sharing, and agreed-upon incident response protocols.

This change is not based on assumptions. The number of damaged undersea cables in the Indo-Pacific is steadily increasing, and most incidents occur in the so-called "grey zone", where intent cannot be formally proven.

The line between sabotage and accident is often blurred, but the consequence is the same: loss of confidence in the infrastructure.

In such situations, the coast guard has a clear advantage: it operates lawfully in a civilian environment and can quickly secure the area until technical teams take over repairs.

For the United Kingdom and NATO, this experience serves as both a warning and an opportunity.

Maintaining a presence in the Indo-Pacific no longer depends on deploying large ships but on investing in capabilities that enable a fast, precise, and legally sound response to incidents.

Cooperation with the coast guards of Japan, the Philippines, Australia, and Taiwan now holds greater strategic importance than symbolic military missions.

Such partnerships create a network of surveillance, data sharing, and joint action that helps prevent crises before they escalate.

Making this model a permanent practice

The next step will be to make this model a permanent practice. Japan plans to complete the procurement of the first ships from the state programme during the next year and integrate them into the national coast guard.

Taiwan is preparing legislation to specify procedures for rapid inspection and forensic analysis of damaged cables.

AUKUS will continue testing autonomous undersea systems, with the intention of sharing technology and training with partner countries in the region.

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At the same time, the British government is developing a strategic resilience fund to support research and the export of technologies aimed at protecting undersea infrastructure.

If these initiatives are connected, a new maritime security system is emerging – based on technology, rapid information sharing, and clearly defined roles.

Its value will not be measured by the strength of its fleet but by the speed and precision of its response.

The Indo-Pacific is becoming a space where it will be determined whether states can keep critical infrastructure operational and under control. Those who can achieve this will have a real advantage in any future crisis.