INDO-PACIFIC OCEANS WORKSHOP
IPOW 26
"Underwater Opportunities and Threats"

10-12 March 2026
Summary/Report

NEAR EAST SOUTH ASIA (NESA) CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES
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BLUF:
NESA conducted the Indo-Pacific Oceans Workshop from 10-12 March virtually for 81 participants from over 30 countries, most of whom hailed from navies, coast guards, and national security institutions. The workshop focused on the underwater domain with a particular interest on the protection of critical underwater infrastructure (CUI), exploring underwater domain awareness (UDA), and detailing the emerging threats from the underwater domain that impact maritime security operations. Participants discussed how subsea cables can be better protected, how the increasing amount of maritime data can be effectively translated into more precise operations, how grey zone tactics are present in the underwater domain, and how various technologies and technical tools can help counter subsea threats, among other topics.

Key data points detailed during discussions include:

- The maritime domain remains plagued by a host of threats primarily undertaken by non-state actors that strain the ability of maritime security institutions to counter. These include challenges like Illegal, Unregulated, and Unreported Fishing (IUUF), trafficking at sea, and illegal dumping. The methods used to counter such threats increasingly rely upon effective data/information accumulation and international cooperation, as the threats are transnational in form.

- The necessity of trust remains paramount for maritime security communities, which is now defined as much by how we can build mechanisms to develop trust through joint exercises, training, and standards, as it is through vetting the data that is currently available to the maritime community. There are more "bad actors" as ever before and more contributing partners than ever before, but the sheer scale of the enterprise for maritime security has grown.

- Current realities mean that maritime security professionals, to some degree, must become technologically fluent. The integration of emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence, unmanned systems, and commercial sensing, means that institutions charged with protecting the seas must understand how such tools work, how they can be integrated into operations, and the best means by which they should be introduced into our work patterns.

- Critical Underwater Infrastructure (CUI) will remain a particular problem set for all littoral states and speaks to the importance of the underwater domain. Damage to cables, whether by accident or deliberately, has an ever-increasing set of costs associated with it. Such damage puts additional workload on other cable/communication tools, can impede core economic exchanges that determine financial stability, and can disrupt a host of other everyday economic processes. CUI can also be used to propel underwater domain awareness (UDA), exposes a host of public-private partnerships that must be fostered (as most cables are owned and maintained by private sector companies), and cables can also be vulnerable to variety of malign cyber activities.

- Maritime security is not merely about new gadgets and technological innovation – it remains an enterprise tied to tried-and-true methods for keeping our waters safe. It also remains a domain where geopolitics plays out. Competition between the United States and China in the Indo-Pacific, for instance, cannot be ignored and all littoral states must navigate the status of ties between Washington and Beijing. The current conflict in Iran has demonstrated once more (in an unfortunate manner) how much of the world economy relies upon freedom of navigation and who is in control of strategic chokepoints.

- The legal regime and norms that govern our seas are perpetually tested. UNCLOS remains the cornerstone of state activities at sea, but there can be no avoiding the gaps that UNCLOS creates. International organizations like the International Maritime Organization seek, with a mixed record, of addressing these gaps, as do a host of other minilateral and multilateral efforts (Combined Maritime Forces, the Djibouti Code of Conduct, the Yaounde Process, and so forth).

- Our own domestic laws governing maritime activity are also being tested due to the increasing number of actors involved in the maritime (and underwater) domain. Are our laws proven at addressing subsea activities that violate sovereignty? Can we effectively prosecute when violations occur?

- Maritime security remains a fundamentally cooperative enterprise, as no single actor has the scale and knowledge to secure our oceans. How can we work with all legitimate stakeholders in this effort? States are the prime actors for maritime security, but so too are international organizations, non-government organizations, shippers, fishers, technology firms, imagery firms, and even open-source intelligence enterprises, among others. Can we all get on the same page and do so in a way that advances our accomplishments collectively? Relatedly, how does the maritime community effectively communicate the intricacies of maritime security to our policymakers to facilitate our efforts? This is related to funding, but also to lawmaking, policy provision, diplomacy, and convening.

- Based upon a merging of inquiries and statements from the gathered participants, there are some ways forward that came out of this engagement.

- First, and most obviously, there need to be more forums like this very one – where maritime security professionals gather for education, community, and the exchanging of ideas.
- Joint exercises, routine information sharing regimes, and multinational training must not just continue, but be invigorated.
- While in an age of new tools and technologies, the maritime security community cannot ignore the various capabilities of states in adoption. States that lead must facilitate ways to build up the global community or else we risk becoming further siloed and "bad actors" will have even more gaps and vulnerabilities to exploit.
- Practitioners and operators must also keep maritime security firmly rooted in the act of patrolling and monitoring our seas, as physical presence brings knowledge and capabilities that remain unmatched.
- There remains much more to be done, but at the heart of this community is the age-old tradition of responding to another in distress at sea. This is a bedrock of the community, and we must operate in that spirit. The commercial revolution across domains has revealed much about our oceans that state actors may not be thrilled is out in the open, but this is the reality that we live in. We should use this to further fuel our cooperation, training, skill accumulation, and information sharing. In that spirit, NESA will not be remiss and is building its own tools to share information and sustain a committed maritime security community. To gain access to these tools, any should simply reach out to the email address at the start of this report. We hope others of you receiving this document will engage in similar activities meant to expand our collective security.

PROGRAM AGENDA:

<u>**Indo-Pacific Oceans Workshop:**</u>
"Underwater Opportunities and Threats"
10-12 March 2026
VIRTUAL

DESCRIPTION/CONCEPT:
Amidst the challenges facing those that seek to keep our waters safe, there has been an increasing interest in what is occurring beneath the surface of our waters. Possibly because access to information of our world beneath the surface is more readily available or because technology has made human impacts upon that domain more established, there are more eyes than ever before peering into the depths.

Those who work on the security of the global commons are aware of how essential the underwater reaches are for understanding the overall security of the maritime domain. The health of the subsurface realm dictates the scale of food security for millions around the world. Global communications rely upon subsea cables, and their disruption can create isolation, infrastructure strain, and large financial losses. Our digital age relies upon a host of critical minerals, many of which are estimated to be concentrated in various locations along the ocean bed.

The goal of this conversation is to dive into the security of the undersea domain in reference to the overall effort of maritime security. We shall discuss how we enhance underwater domain awareness (UDA), how to protect critical underwater infrastructure (CUI), what security impacts come from the increasing interest in the mineral deposits beneath the surface, what actors are looking to the depths with the intent of disruption, damage, or exploitation, and how we can cooperate to counter the threats beneath the surface.

Participants will leave this conversation with a greater understanding of the following:
- What does the U.S. and its partners see as the key variables defining underwater security and UDA.
- What actors engage in actions that threaten the underwater domain, whether they come in the form of state actors or non-state actors?
- Who are the stakeholders in the underwater domain and how can they be rallied together for coherent action to further security?
- How does technology, including technologies anchored to non-maritime domains, inform maritime security.
- Finally, what actions need to be taken by policymakers to make real progress towards solutions to the threats emerging.

ALL TIMES ARE WASHINGTON, DC LOCAL
*All conversations adhere to the Chatham House rule of **non-attribution**. Participants are encouraged to draw attention to the event's occurrence, but are not allowed to cite the statements, questions, or communications of any participant.*

Tuesday, 10 March

0600 – 0615   Introduction of Workshop
Speaker:
- Jeffrey Payne, NESA

0615 – 0630   Dean's Welcome
Speaker:
- Dr. Roger Kangas, Dean, NESA

0630 – 0800   1st Session: The Maritime/Underwater Domains
This session will serve as an introductory session for our conversations. The speakers shall lay out the variables that define the current nature of conversations regarding the maritime/undersea domains.
Moderator:
- Jeffrey Payne, NESA
Speakers:
- CAPT (ret) Sarabjeet Parmar, Distinguished Fellow, CSDR; Distinguished Fellow, United Service Institution of India

- Ms. Maisie Pigeon, Nonresident Senior Fellow, Africa Center, Atlantic Council

0800 – 0815   Break

0815 – 0945   2nd Session: Technology, Data, and the Maritime Domain
In our second session, the ways in which emerging technologies are seeking to define, inform, and rely upon the maritime domain will be examined.
Moderator:
- Jeffrey Payne, NESA
Speakers:
- Mr. Ray Powell, Director, SeaLight
- Mr. Simon Bateman, Expert Associate, National Security College, Australian National University and

Wednesday, 11 March

0600 – 0610   Welcome and Announcements

0610 – 0755   3rd Session: Infrastructure and Our Reliance on the Underwater Domain
Our 3rd session will explore how contemporary economies, states, and communities rely upon the underwater domain and how the unfortunate widespread lack of data regarding that reliance has proven to delay effective policy.
Moderator:
- Jeffrey Payne, NESA
Speakers:
- Ms. Jane Chan, Senior Fellow, Coordinator of Maritime Security Programme, IDSS, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University
- Dr. Christian Bueger, University of Copenhagen

0755 – 0810   Break

0810 – 0955   4th Session: The Actors that Threaten the Subsurface
Our 4th panel will explore who fills out the listing of the actors who seek to exploit, disrupt, or threaten the underwater domain.
Moderator:
- Jeffrey Payne, NESA
Speakers:
- Mr. Jason Wang, Chief Operating Officer, ingeniSPACE
- Dr. Sarah Kirchberger, Academic Director & Department Manager, Center for Asia-Pacific Strategy and Security, ISPK

Thursday, 12 March

0600 – 0610   Welcome and Announcements

0610 – 0745   5th Session: Policymaking for the Maritime/Underwater Domain
Our penultimate session looks to what constitutes effective policy for securing the surface and underwater domains.
Moderator:
- Jeffrey Payne, NESA

Speakers:
- Mr. Nick Childs, Senior Fellow for Naval Forces and Maritime Security, The International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS)
- Prof. Avv. Ilaria Tani (PhD), Università degli Studi di Milano-Bicocca, Dipartimento di Giurisprudenza (School of Law)

0745 – 0800   Break

0800 – 0930   6th Session: Cooperation for Securing the Maritime/Underwater Domain
Our concluding session examines how both state and non-state actors can cooperate – from sharing information, best practices, lessons learned and coordinated action.
Moderator:
- Jeffrey Payne, NESA

Speakers:
- Mr. Chris Hickey, Senior Maritime Domain Awareness Advisor, US Navy Maritime Domain Awareness Program Office
- Mr. Adam Hudson, Planet Federal

0930 – 1000   NESA MARSEC Tools Briefing
Speaker:
- Jeffrey Payne, NESA

1000 – 1015   Remarks by NESA Director
Speaker:
- Ambassador (ret) John Desrocher, Director, NESA

1015 – 1020   Farewell and Thanks
Remarks:
- Jeffrey Payne, Assistant Professor, NESA

1020   Event Concludes