



Legal Vigilance Dispatch

USINDOPACOM Counter Lawfare Center

Promoting the Rule of Law to Ensure a Free and Open Indo-Pacific

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Perouse 25 brings together nine nations to exercise SLOC protection.

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forums in the Indo-Pacific provide opportunities for legal professionals to engage and build consensus.

A Wave of Cable Incidents Shine Light on Critical Undersea Infrastructure

A series of incidents damaging undersea cables, most notably in the Baltic Sea and Taiwan Strait, has prompted nations to take decisive action to safeguard critical undersea infrastructure. While investigations continue into the cause of these cable disruptions, the incidents have intensified scrutiny on Russia's high-risk maritime activities and its destabilizing collaboration with the People's Republic of China (PRC).

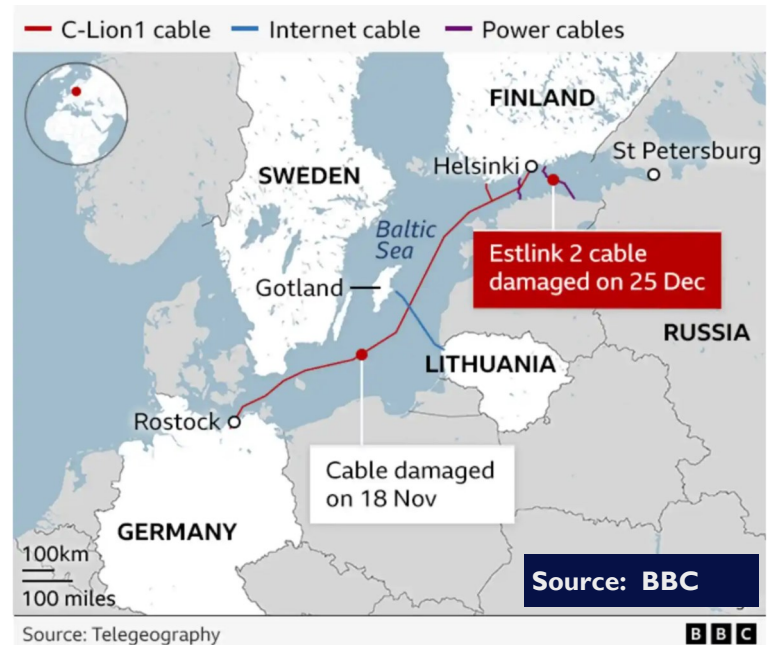
Notable recent incidents:

Taiwan Incident

January 3, 2025: An undersea cable off the northeast coast of Taiwan was damaged, with [Taiwan assessing potential criminal or civil actions](#) against the Hong Kong-owned cargo ship *Xing Shun-39*. While the vessel was not detained, the incident heightened concerns over potential PRC strategies to isolate Taiwan.

Baltic Sea Incidents

December 25, 2024: A submarine power cable between Finland and Estonia experienced an unplanned failure. Finnish authorities suspect the oil tanker *Eagle S*, believed to be part of Russia's shadow fleet, caused the damage by dragging its anchor. The incident also disrupted four telecommunications cables.



The *Eagle S* was [successfully detained by Finnish authorities](#). The *Eagle S* may have carried [signals intelligence \(SIGINT\) systems](#), according to a *Lloyd's List* report.

November 17–18, 2024:

Two undersea fiber-optic cables were severed in the Baltic Sea, connecting Lithuania to Sweden and Finland to Germany. The damage was near-simultaneous, prompting suspicions of the nearby PRC-flagged vessel *Yi Peng 3*.

These incidents have prompted increased surveillance and protective measures, but also energized interest in deterring and disrupting high-risk maritime

activities by Russia's shadow fleet, [a collection of roughly 600 aging, poorly regulated ships used to evade sanctions and generate illicit revenue for Russia's war in Ukraine](#). Over the last three years, Russia has significantly expanded its shadow fleet, resulting in negative impacts to other nations. For example, in December 2024, two shadow fleet vessels caused environmental damage near the Kerch Strait during a storm—[one sinking, the other running aground](#). On January 11, 2025, a [loaded oil tanker associated with the shadow fleet lost power in German waters](#) and had to be towed into port by German maritime

(continued on page 2)

Critical Undersea Infrastructure, continued...

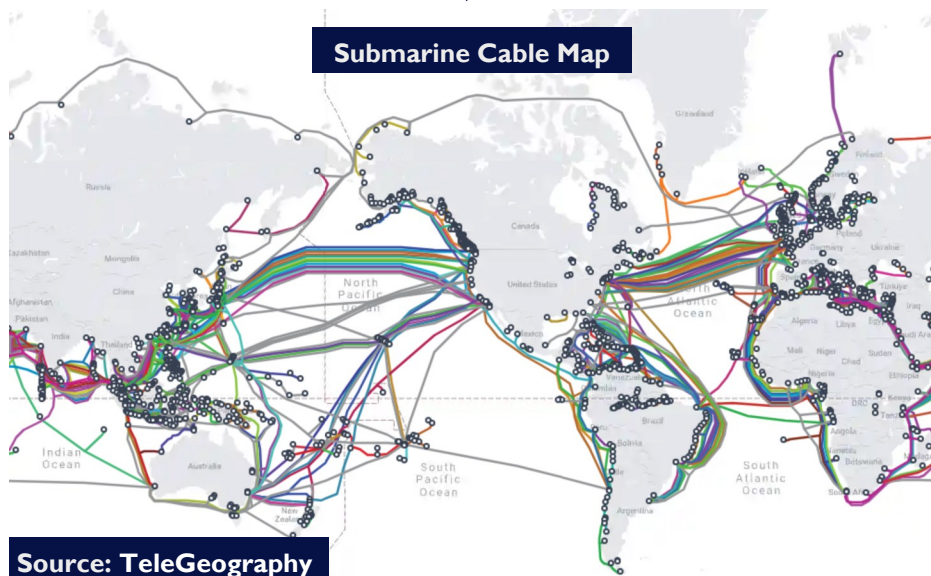
authorities.

Enhancing Deterrence and Enforcement Mechanisms

Existing international [legal frameworks](#), such as the [1884 International Convention for the Protection of Submarine Telegraph Cables](#), provide some protection for submarine data cables, but enforcement mechanisms are [limited](#). Notably, the only publicly reported use of the Submarine Cable Convention's boarding authority occurred in 1959 when the USS *Roy O. Hale* (DE-336) boarded a Soviet trawler suspected of severing multiple submarine cables.

Recognizing the limited options under the law of the sea to deter and disrupt modern threats like shadow fleet operations, States are now exploring new mechanisms to address increasingly complex threats.

In November 2024, the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), in partnership with the International Cable Protection Committee (ICPC), established the [International Advisory Body for Submarine Cable Resilience](#). This body aims to enhance the resilience of submarine telecommunications cables by bringing together governments, industry leaders, and technical experts to develop best practices. The ITU and ICPC efforts are in addition to a host of [NATO and European Union efforts](#) also underway to



Source: TeleGeography

address undersea infrastructure.

Additionally, NATO recently launched "[Baltic Sentry](#)," a multi-domain maritime response involving ten ships equipped with advanced surveillance technologies, including naval drones and submarines. The operation, bolstered by contributions from member states, aims to deter further sabotage and protect critical undersea infrastructure. NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte underscored the alliance's resolve: "Any potential threats to our infrastructure will have consequences, including possible boarding, impounding, and arrest."

A coalition of Western nations has also implemented targeted sanctions and expanded maritime enforcement.

Key measures include:

Sanctions: On January 10, 2025, the [U.S. Treasury sanctioned Russian oil producers](#) *Gazprom Neft* and *Surgutneftegaz*, along with 183 associated vessels. This resulted in immediate disruptions, with dozens of shadow fleet oil tankers halting operations worldwide.

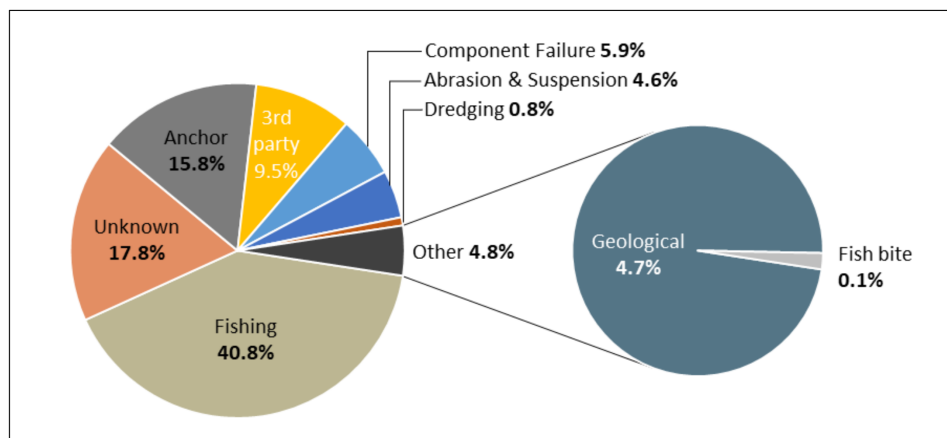
Enhanced Inspections: [Insurance documentation checks](#) are now routine in transit areas such as the English Channel, Danish Straits, and Gulf of Finland.

AI Tools: The [Joint Expeditionary Force](#) launched [Nordic Warden](#), a UK-led AI system that assesses risks posed by vessels in high-threat areas.

A Unified Response

The Baltic Sea's role as a critical energy and communication corridor has made it a flashpoint for geopolitical tensions. NATO's enhanced presence and unified enforcement measures by allied nations underscore their resolve to deter hybrid warfare and protect global infrastructure. This comprehensive response integrates sanctions, technological innovation, and international cooperation, all while upholding international law and safeguarding legitimate commerce. This coordinated approach holds immediate promise for the protection of Europe's critical undersea infrastructure, and provides key lessons for future efforts in the Indo-Pacific.

Cause of Undersea Telecommunication Cable Faults (1959 to 2021)



Source: Recreated by CRS, from Mike Clare, *Submarine Cable Protection and the Environment*, International Cable Protection Committee (ICPC), March 2021, p. 7, https://www.iscpc.org/publications/submarine-cable-protection-and-the-environment/ICPC_Public_EU_March%202021.pdf.

La Perouse 2025

Strengthening Lawful Sea Control and Securing Global Trade

In January 2025, [nine Indo-Pacific navies joined forces for La Perouse 25](#), a biennial multinational maritime exercise [focused on protecting Sea Lines of Communication \(SLOCs\)](#)—the vital trade and military routes that connect the world's oceans. Led by the **French Navy Carrier Strike Group (TF 473)**, the exercise brought together the United States, Australia, Canada, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and the United Kingdom to practice coordinated lawful sea control operations across strategic chokepoints in the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea.

Why SLOC Protection Matters

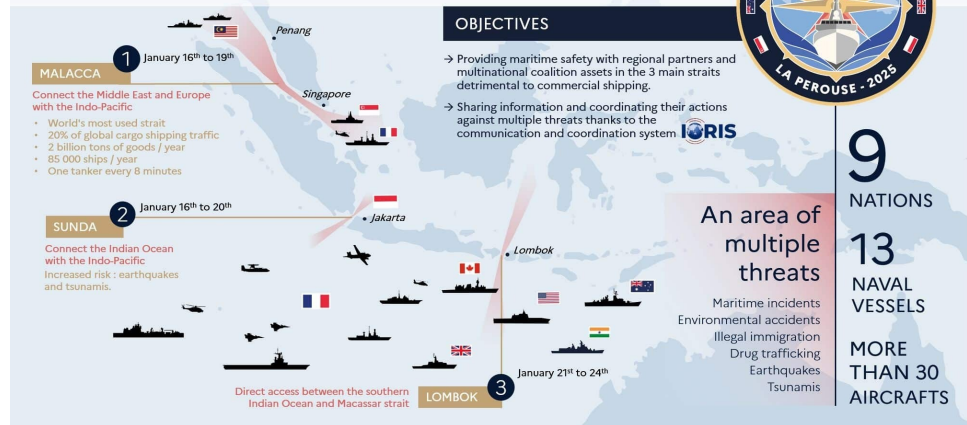
SLOCs are the arteries of global commerce and security, enabling the free flow of trade, energy supplies, and military operations. One-third of the world's maritime commerce—including essential energy resources—passes through key chokepoints such as the **Malacca, Sunda, and Lombok Straits**. Any disruption in these areas would have severe economic and security consequences for nations worldwide.

Ensuring the stability of these routes is essential to *uphold the stable international system that has supported global security for nearly a century*. The [lawful protection of SLOCs](#) is not just about military



A French Navy destroyer, right, and an Indonesian Navy frigate approach the Lombok Strait during exercise La Perouse 25. Photo from French Navy.

TOGETHER, TRAIN TO SECURE STRATEGIC MARITIME ROADS IN THE INDO-PACIFIC



Source: French Navy

power—it is about maintaining the peace and security in the Indo-Pacific that has allowed economies to thrive and regional stability to endure.

How U.S. and Partners Use Lawful Sea Control to Protect SLOCs

The core principle behind La Perouse 25 is **lawful sea control**, which allows participating navies to keep vital waterways open while denying their use to adversaries when necessary. The exercise included **maritime interdiction operations, simulated warfare drills, search-and-rescue missions, and live-fire exercises** to refine interoperability and response coordination among allies and partners.

The **U.S. Navy and its partners** operate in accordance with international law to deter unlawful interference in these waters. This includes [Freedom of Navigation Operations \(FONOPS\)](#), which challenge excessive maritime claims and reinforce the right of all nations to transit international waters freely. Through exercises like La Perouse, allied and partner forces enhance their ability to swiftly and effectively respond to threats, ensuring that SLOCs remain secure.

Contributing to a Secure and Prosperous Indo-Pacific

La Perouse 25 highlights the **shared commitment of Indo-Pacific nations to maintaining peace, security, and stability**. As threats to maritime security grow—ranging from the People's Republic of China's (PRC) [aggressive and destabilizing attempts to enforce](#)

[excessive maritime claims](#) in the South China Sea, to [Russia's high-risk and illegitimate shadow fleet operations](#)—multinational cooperation is more important than ever. By demonstrating **readiness and resolve**, participating nations send a clear message that they will not allow coercion or aggression to disrupt the free flow of trade and navigation.

Detering PRC Aggression

While not explicitly aimed at any single actor, La Perouse 25 takes place against the backdrop of **the PRC's growing assertiveness in the South China Sea**. The PRC has sought to expand its influence through **unlawful maritime claims, militarization of disputed territories, and interference with commercial and military navigation**. By conducting joint exercises in key maritime choke points and in waters beyond the territorial seas of any nation, where high seas freedoms apply, the U.S. and its allies strengthen deterrence and reinforce a free and open Indo-Pacific.

La Perouse 25 is **more than a military drill—it is a demonstration of commitment to a stable, prosperous, and secure Indo-Pacific**. By working together to protect SLOCs, the U.S. and its partners are ensuring that the **Indo-Pacific remains a region of opportunity, security, and prosperity** for generations to come.

Russia and PRC Military Cooperation in Arctic Sends “Concerning Signals”

While most countries have distanced themselves from Russia in response to its military aggression in Ukraine, the People's Republic of China (PRC) continues to deepen its "no limits" partnership with Moscow. This growing collaboration, which includes diplomatic, economic, and military ties, is [increasingly destabilizing the Arctic region](#). In November 2024, the U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for Arctic Affairs warned that expanding Russia-PRC military cooperation in the region sends “[concerning signals](#).”

The Arctic's vast [resource wealth](#), estimated to contain 13% of the world's undiscovered oil and 30% of its natural gas, drives both countries' ambitions. Russia, facing heavy Western sanctions, sees these resources as a vital economic lifeline. The PRC, despite not being an Arctic state, has declared itself a “near-Arctic state” and aims to be a “[polar great power](#)” by 2030. Its [2018 China Arctic Policy](#) outlines plans to establish a military presence under a “military-civilian mixing” strategy, exploit emerging shipping routes, and develop a “[Polar Silk Road](#)” to expand its geopolitical and economic influence.

The PRC's ambitions are not purely economic. The PRC's history of militarizing the South China Sea raises concerns that it may pursue a similar approach in the Arctic. While it [promotes its Arctic activities as peaceful](#), it has deployed three icebreakers for dual-use research missions, conducted joint Arctic military exercises with Russia, and in October 2024, participated in the first-ever [Russia-PRC Coast Guard patrols](#) through the Bering Strait. Russia has also increased its Arctic militarization, including the development of [armed combat icebreakers](#) equipped with 76mm AK-176MA guns and missile launch systems for Uran anti-ship missiles and Kalibr-NK cruise missiles.

The growing Russia-PRC alignment in the Arctic stands in contrast to actions taken by Arctic Council states. In March 2022, seven of the eight Arctic Council states—Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, and the U.S.—announced an [indefinite pause on cooperation](#) with Russia in response to its invasion of Ukraine. This move reflected a rejection of Russia's violation of the Council's core principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity. Although some non-Russian Arctic projects have resumed, cooperation with Moscow remains [largely suspended](#).

As Arctic Council states have sought to isolate Russia, the PRC has exploited the diplomatic vacuum to bolster its own presence in the region. This [includes](#) increased energy and mineral exploration, investments in Arctic infrastructure, and maritime security cooperation with Russia. In August 2024, Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin and Chinese Premier Li Qiang [reaffirmed plans](#) to expand Arctic collaboration in shipping, navigation safety, and infrastructure, further solidifying their strategic alignment.

Recognizing these rising challenges, the U.S. has significantly shifted its Arctic strategy over the past decade. The [2013 National Strategy for the Arctic](#) emphasized cooperation and environmental protection,

but the [2022 update](#) marked a shift toward military readiness and strengthened alliances. In July 2024, the U.S. Department of Defense released an [updated Arctic Strategy](#), reinforcing its commitment to keeping the Arctic “peaceful, stable, prosperous, and cooperative.” That same month, the U.S., Canada, and Finland finalized the Icebreaker Collaboration Effort ([ICE Pact](#)), enhancing collective Arctic shipbuilding capacity, similar to the AUKUS submarine-building agreement between the U.S., U.K., and Australia.

In September 2024, [U.S., Swedish, and Norwegian Air Force commanders](#) highlighted the need for greater Arctic deterrence, emphasizing enhanced domain awareness, technological innovation, and stronger alliances. These efforts align with broader NATO initiatives to counter Russian military expansion and PRC influence in the region.

As Russia and the PRC deepen their Arctic cooperation, the region remains a focal point of great-power competition. While Arctic Council states work to uphold governance norms and prevent regional destabilization, Moscow and Beijing continue to expand their influence. The PRC's militarization of the South China Sea signals its intentions for the Arctic, underscoring the urgent need for global action to preserve regional stability and uphold international governance.



Breaking Sanctions

DPRK's Shadow Role in Russian Aggression

In stark defiance of international law and United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolutions, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) deployed troops to support Russia's illegal invasion and ongoing military aggression in Ukraine. This collaboration marks a significant escalation in the conflict, with estimates suggesting [thousands of DPRK personnel are actively engaged in combat operations](#), with some reportedly wearing Russian military uniforms.

The DPRK's direct support for Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, besides showing Russia's desperate efforts to compensate for its losses, marks a dangerous expansion of the conflict, with serious consequences for European and Indo-Pacific peace and security. It is also a further breach of international law, including the most fundamental principles of the UN Charter.

Reports from Ukrainian officials indicate that [DPRK troops have been deployed to Russia's Kursk region](#), and that they have received Russian military training in a coordinated effort to bolster Moscow's strained resources. As of late December, the U.S. Department of Defense [assessed](#) that at least 1,000 DPRK soldiers have either been killed or wounded in the Kursk region.

DPRK's provision of munitions and military support to Russia, in exchange for financial aid, food, and potentially advanced technology, is yet another (though more escalatory) example of the DPRK's [growing involvement in global arms transfers and illicit military activities](#). As Pyongyang's economy has declined, the DPRK has increasingly relied on arms sales and military cooperation as sources of revenue amidst its economic decline.

DPRK's troop deployment and arms transfers violate key [UNSC resolutions](#), including:

Resolution 1718 (2006): Prohibits DPRK from exporting arms and military equipment and imposes restrictions on nuclear-related activities.

Resolution 1874 (2009): Expands the arms embargo and prohibits all arms transfers to and from DPRK, as well as the provision of financial services that could contribute to these activities.

Resolution 2087 (2013): Strengthens restrictions on the export and transfer of military-related items and bans financial transactions that could support DPRK's missile or nuclear programs.

Resolution 2270 (2016): Further broadens the arms embargo, prohibits any form of training or military assistance by DPRK, and bans the transfer of certain conventional weapons technologies.

Resolution 2371 (2017): Reinforces prohibitions on arms and related material exports, including to countries like Russia, and bans work authorization for DPRK nationals employed to generate revenue for the regime.

Resolution 2375 (2017): Prohibits all joint ventures and partnerships with DPRK entities and further restricts the transfer of military-related goods and personnel.

Resolution 2397 (2017): Expands sanctions on oil imports and reiterates the ban on DPRK military cooperation, including the export of workers and munitions.

Russia's facilitation of these violations further complicates enforcement, particularly [following its veto of a UNSC resolution to renew the mandate of the Panel of Experts](#), the body responsible for monitoring compliance with DPRK sanctions. Additionally, the DPRK's recent [ratification of a major defense treaty between Russia and DPRK](#), stipulating

mutual military aid, raises further concerns.

The [U.S. Department of the Treasury recently sanctioned](#) entities involved in this illicit collaboration. A Treasury press release highlighted DPRK's use of front companies and covert networks to disguise the origins of arms shipments, enabling both regimes to bypass international sanctions. These activities reinforce [Congressional Research Service \(CRS\) findings](#) on DPRK's evolving tactics to evade enforcement and sustain its illicit weapons programs.

The alliance between Russia and DPRK, and DPRK's arms transfers and support for rogue regimes, undermine regional stability, particularly in East Asia, where Pyongyang's actions heighten tensions with South Korea and Japan. Meanwhile, Moscow's reliance on DPRK assistance underscores the strain on Russia's military capabilities as it faces prolonged resistance in Ukraine.

The U.S. Treasury's recent actions to sanction entities facilitating the Russia-DPRK partnership are a critical first step, and broader international cooperation through strengthened multilateral enforcement mechanisms (including enhanced monitoring of arms transfers and coordinated sanctions efforts targeting illicit networks) will go a long way in the effort to address the evolving dynamics of this destabilizing alliance.



Russia's President Vladimir Putin and North Korea's leader Kim Jong-un attend an official welcoming ceremony in Pyongyang, North Korea, June 19, 2024. Photo from Vladimir Smirnov/Reuters.

Legal Diplomacy Continues to Bolster Indo-Pacific Security

Two recent initiatives in the Indo-Pacific underscore the growing importance of multinational collaboration to maintaining regional security and prosperity.

In September 2024, United States Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM) launched a new counter-lawfare initiative, designed to deepen engagement with multinational partners in countering the misuse of law for coercive purposes. A key element of this effort is the formation of the Counter Lawfare Coordination Group (CLCG), comprising legal advisors from Australia, Canada, France, Japan, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The CLCG focuses on exposing and countering states' manipulation of the law, particularly targeting the PRC's legal warfare strategy. Its core mission is to promote a secure and prosperous Indo-Pacific by coordinating legal vigilance to monitor, expose, and counter misuse of the law for coercive ends.

The CLCG's multinational framework serves as a force multiplier, strengthening the collective ability to address the

threats posed by legal coercion across different regions and languages. This collaboration has already led to tangible results, including better alignment of legal frameworks to counter malicious legal practices. Initiated by Commander, USINDOPACOM, and organized by the USINDOPACOM Counter Lawfare Center (CLC), the CLCG uses legal diplomacy and support to information-related activities to identify and thwart attempts to exploit international law for aggressive or deceptive purposes. Its ultimate goal is deterrence, denying competitors the ability to use legal warfare as a tool for coercion or pretext for aggression.

In the same multinational and collaborative spirit of the CLCG, in December 2024, military legal advisors from Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and the United States held multilateral talks in New South Wales, Australia, aimed at enhancing legal interoperability, fostering legal diplomacy, and countering legal warfare. These discussions provided a vital platform for sharing expertise, identifying opportunities for closer

collaboration on legal training, and advancing capacity-building initiatives.

The legal advisors left the meeting with a renewed commitment to strengthening multilateral cooperation and reinforcing the rule of law in the Indo-Pacific, highlighting the critical role of legal diplomacy in addressing regional challenges and ensuring long-term stability.



Legal advisors from Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and the United States pose for photo during multilateral legal talks. Photo courtesy of CMDR Jacqueline Swinton, RAN.



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What is Legal Vigilance?

Legal vigilance refers to the monitoring and assessment of the legal environment. Maintaining legal vigilance ensures the United States Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM) and its allies and partners are able to identify threats (including "legal warfare" by the People's Republic of China), integrate across the combined joint force, and implement action to uphold the rule of law.

The Legal Vigilance Dispatch is an informal, non-comprehensive survey of open-source information on the legal environment. Unless otherwise noted, all content is produced by the USINDOPACOM Office of the Staff Judge Advocate (OSJA) and does not necessarily reflect official positions of the U.S. government.

In addition to identifying threats in the legal environment, the Legal Vigilance Dispatch highlights cooperative efforts by the United States and its allies and partners to uphold the rule of law. USINDOPACOM OSJA is committed to building legal partnerships and working with allies and partners to preserve peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific. If you have comments, feedback, or vignettes to share, please contact us.

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