

THE INDO-PACIFIC IMPERATIVE :

BUILDING CREDIBLE CAPABILITY BEFORE CRISIS

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

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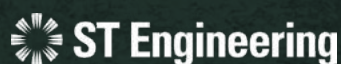


Major General Mick Ryan served more than 35 years in the Australian Army, commanding at every level from troop to brigade. His operational experience spans East Timor, Iraq, Afghanistan, and service on the U.S. Joint Staff in Washington. A distinguished graduate of the U.S. Marine Corps School of Advanced Warfighting and Johns Hopkins SAIS, he is widely recognised for his writing on strategy, innovation, and future warfare – including *War Transformed*, *White Sun War*, and *The War for Ukraine*. He now advises defence organisations across Australia, the UK, and the U.S., while completing a PhD in creative writing.

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I. How are Indo-Pacific nations translating defence strategies into operational credibility, and where are the most significant gaps between ambition and capability?

There has been a wide variety of responses in the Indo-Pacific to the lessons from Ukraine and the increasing military and economic aggression from the People's Republic of China. The two most active and forward leaning nations have been Japan and Taiwan. Both have issued expansive, clear defence strategies which clearly identify China as the major threat to their security and prosperity.

Both Japan and Taiwan have increased their defence spending in recent years. The new Japanese Prime Minister has just secured parliamentary approval to accelerate the doubling of Japan's GDP spent on defence to 2%. This will now be achieved in this financial year. Likewise, Taiwan has increased its spending, accelerated its planned increases, and as the Taiwanese President committed in a recent Washington Post opinion piece, will increase defence spending to 5% of GDP. Both nations are investing in a mix of traditional land, air and naval platforms but are also increasingly investing in strike missiles, hypersonic systems and uncrewed vehicles.

The rest of the Pacific region is a mixed bag. The Republic of Korea primarily focuses its strategic attention and military force structure on North Korea and is concerned about the lessons North Korea has gleaned about modern warfighting from Ukraine. Vietnam continues to implement its "Four No's" policy: no military alliances, no siding with one country against another, no foreign military bases, and no use or threat of use of force in the conduct of its international relations. The Philippines has returned to a closer alignment with the United States in recent years. It has engaged in more military exercises on a bilateral and multi-lateral basis with nations such as America, Japan and Australia. It has been at the forefront of Chinese bullying in the South China Sea and has also been forward leaning in publicly naming and shaming Chinese conduct there. It is modernising all three military services, with a focus on the Navy, and has just procured Indian long-range strike missiles. It has also welcomed U.S. Army Typhon missile systems being based on its territory.

Countries in Southeast Asia, such as Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia are all undergoing military modernisation programs, although these are occurring at different speeds. There are differences in their foreign policy settings, such as Indonesia's neutrality, but in the main all four are seeking not to take sides in the China-America strategic competition.

Australia, as the South Pacific regional power, is engaged in a large-scale military modernisation program. Not only is this delivering new equipment to all the military services, but it has also procured new long-range strike

missiles, engaged more deeply with the U.S. on space capability issues and has deepened capability collaboration and military exercises with America, Japan and Britain. The defence spending profile for Australia however is stubbornly locked at just over 2% of GDP, which is in stark contrast to the current government's strategic document's prognostications about the military threat posed by China.

Overall, the region can be defined as "those closest to China are accelerating their defence spending and U.S. interaction the most. Other nations that are not immediately proximate to China are prioritising economic over defence issues, allowing them increasingly to be manipulated by Chinese ambitions. Across the region there are gaps in spending, gaps in imagining the full gamut of threats posed by China and gaps in learning from the war in Ukraine.

2. With precision-strike, unmanned, and electronic threats growing across the Indo-Pacific, which aspects of land-air readiness such as integrated air defence, logistics resilience, and command survivability require the most urgent development in the next two to three years?

The most compelling gaps are in new era digitised command and control. While programs to enhance aerial and maritime domain awareness are being undertaken by many nations, the linking up of all the various sensitive and open-source sensors with response capabilities – including long-range attack systems – is lagging across the region. Japan and Taiwan probably have the most integrated systems, but the security of these systems is open to question.

Resilience of national C2 systems outside of Taiwan, Korea and Japan is highly questionable. There is little evidence that most political leaders across the region take seriously the threat of more aggressive Chinese subversion or sabotage operations, such as those that Russia has engaged in across Europe. Given Chinese military doctrine reserves a central place for systems destruction warfare and the removal of enemy leadership teams at the beginning of a conflict, this is evidence of cognitive dissonance in the political class in most regional nations.

At the same time, the resilience of military systems including hardening of airfields, munitions storage and fuel stocks remains an incomplete undertaking across the region.

3. How can Indo-Pacific defence industries strengthen production depth and sustainment capacity to support high-tempo operations and reduce dependence on external supply chains?

Most regional nations have policies about indigenous production of defence materiel. Countries like Singapore, Korea and Japan all design and build their own armoured

vehicles, naval vessels and in some cases, aircraft and missiles. These are the most sophisticated and advanced defence manufacturing hubs in the western Pacific (with the exception of China), and there is a large gap between these nations and the capacity of all others.

A second tier of nations, such as Australia, Indonesia, Thailand and Taiwan have developed and are implementing defence industrial policies, but their capacity for advanced design and manufacturing is limited. Capacity for even simple manufactures, such as munitions, missiles and drones, lags in these nations with the exception of Taiwan.

There is unlikely to be any collective update of industrial policies or some kind of standardisation similar to NATO industrial policies and standardisation agreements. That is inconceivable in the region. What is possible is groupings of 2 to 3 nations, such as Australia and Japan, or Japan and America, that might collaborate on specific programs. Anything more than that is probably beyond nations in the region at this point.

4. Which lessons from Ukraine's rapid industrial mobilisation and adaptive command models are most applicable to the Indo-Pacific context?

There are several aspects of the Ukraine industrialisation over the past four years that need to be separated before their application in the Indo-Pacific might be considered.

First, and most importantly, existential threat has driven Ukraine's defence re-industrialisation in the past four years. Before 2022, despite threats from Russia, Ukraine's defence industry was largely moribund. It had high levels of both real and perceived corruption, which the Ukrainian president has recently announced investigations into. With the exception of Japan, Taiwan and Korea, no other nation feels an existential threat, which degrades the political will to invest too much in onshoring defence production.

Second, Ukrainian defence production was initially driven from the bottom up. This included drones but also a range of other simple defence manufactures and programs (for EW, ISR, info sharing) which government then sought to invest in and systematise. The problem now is the defence industrial base is extraordinarily diverse and comprised of large companies and many backyard manufacturers as well. This is very similar to the industrial situation in Japan and Germany in WW2. It is not a model we should replicate.

Third, Ukrainian consumption of defence material mixes indigenous and foreign materiel. This is an appropriate model for Indo-Pacific nations because not every country will be able to produce everything it needs – not even Japan. Each nation however will be capable of a different balance of indigenous and foreign defence materiel design and production.

With regards to command and control, there are several lessons from Ukraine.

First, their operational command and control, which is very applicable to the disaggregated battlespace in the Indo-Pacific, has not been a great success. For much of the war, between brigades and the general staff has been a hodgepodge of ad hoc headquarters and command staffs. Only in 2025 did Ukraine really demonstrate the will to establish standing operational headquarters and trained staffs (corps and groupings of forces above corps). It will take some time for Ukraine achieve high levels of competency at this level of warfighting. And, this is just in the ground environment, although there is some air-land integration.

Second, there is limited true joint command in Ukraine. While the Grouping of Forces in the northeast of Ukraine is called Grouping of Force – Joint Forces, it is in reality an aggregation of army and other ground force formations.

Third, there is no coalition warfighting operations in Ukraine. Thus, there are no coalition warfighting arrangements, such as higher level C2, logistics, fires and other important aspects of fighting in a coalition which are obvious from Ukraine. The Pacific will be a joint, coalition war, with a mesh of alliances and security partnerships and will require different C2 models for different relationships and regions.

Ukraine has however, provided an excellent example of how to learn how to learn better – at multiple levels - as does Russia. Adaptation battle between these two has now metastasised into a global adaptation war where Russia and its authoritarian partners are sharing tactical and strategic insights more quickly.

5. What practical steps are needed to accelerate the fielding of advanced ISR, autonomous systems, and digital command networks without fragmenting interoperability across the region?

There are already a range of programs in different nations to implement these in countries across the region. And fragmentation of interoperability is not really a problem because interoperability is more limited among Indo-Pacific nations than in Europe.

Japan stands out as a nation that is investing heavily in a range of systems. Its annual defence white paper provides excellent insights into these programs, their funding as well as the rationale for why they are needed. This document is available at this link: https://www.mod.go.jp/en/publ/w_paper/index.html

Taiwan and Korea have both made moves to speed up their modernisation. For example, in its 2025 Quadrennial Defence Review, the authors describe how Taiwan should

become more resilient in the advanced technologies that underpin modern digital C2 (including AI), missiles and drones:

The semiconductors, AI, defense industry, and information security in the Five Most Reliable Industries are identified by the MND as priority investment areas. Developing advanced semiconductors and AI applications, forging a UAV supply chain, and creating a standard-compliant information security infrastructure will boost domestic demand and help upgrade industries. The MND also maintains diversified acquisition channels to support both military security and self-reliant defense.

Australia too has advanced its industrial policy to support more manufacturing at home. For example, in 2025, Anduril established a factory to build large uncrewed underwater vessels in Sydney, with a commitment to build 'several dozen' at least. Australia has also designed and built the Ghost Bat uncrewed aerial vehicle, and it has committed to the manufacture of missiles for its new HIMARS system as well as other advanced missiles.

Australia's Defence Industrial Development Strategy can be found at this link: <https://www.defence.gov.au/about/strategic-planning/defence-industry-development-strategy>

However, we should condition our expectation of these nations and others in the region. None of them are involved in a direct war like Ukraine and few feel the direction existential threat that Ukraine does. Without this existential threat, the political will to accelerate the procurement and absorption of these technologies is likely to be found wanting.

Finally, while advanced technologies such as drones, digital C2 and hypersonic missiles offer the risk of further gaps in the ability of regional nations to work together, the biggest technological risk is AI. America, which works with almost every nation in the region, is moving at a rapid speed to absorb AI into its tactical, operational and strategic decision-making systems. No other nation is able to match

this pace of AI absorption, and a gap is already obvious. This gap will only widen over time without US assistance to its regional partners, and more attention to investment in AI by regional nations.

6. How can nations strengthen deterrence through cooperation and technology sharing without eroding sovereignty?

Major training exercises are a key method for achieving better trust and understanding between different military forces across the region. The big three exercises that America conducts with its regional allies – Yamasakura in Japan (Australia also attends), Alon in the Philippines (Japan and Australia participate) and Talisman Sabre in Australia (Japan and other regional / European nations now attend) are crucial for building understanding about the capabilities of regional partners, trust between them and further on, greater levels of interoperability.

Individual training exchanges are regional staff colleges and other professional institutions are also crucial. Almost every nation in the region operates regional engagement programs including exchanges of staff college and war college students. At the same time, there are many bilateral training exchanges conducted by regional armies, navies and air forces. These are also important because of the foundational trust and understanding that they foster.

Technological interaction is much rarer in the region. While Japan is now making a foray into selling military equipment with its sale of Mogami frigates to Australia, and South Korea has sold material to Australia and other nations, cooperative R&D is limited. The US-Australia technological relationship is close, characterised by the AUKUS Pillar 1 and Pillar 2 initiatives. But these kinds of programs need to be broadened.

The recent example of America agreeing to assist South Korea with the design and production of nuclear-powered submarines is an example of next generation technological cooperation. More is needed.

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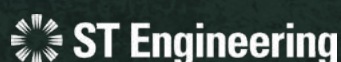
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