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THE WESTERN PACIFIC NAVAL SYMPOSIUM

Naval cooperation is increasingly seen as one of the most useful means for countries to manage regional security issues, since maritime issues may affect a number of countries simultaneously, and because some threats are beyond the scope of one country to manage. The framework for this cooperation takes many forms, ranging from informal arrangements, bilateral and multilateral activities, to formal Government to Government agreements. The Western Pacific Naval Symposium (WPNS) is an example of a multilateral activity, set up during the Cold War, that is slowly adapting to the new regional security environment.

At the ninth International Seapower Symposium (ISS) held in 1987, the US Chief of Naval Operations raised the notion of separate regional meetings in alternate years to the ISS. Vice Admiral Mike Hudson, the Australian Chief of Naval Staff, took the initiative in relation to the Western Pacific, and invited a number of regional navies to the inaugural WPNS in Sydney in 1988. The rationale was to have the leaders of regional navies meet for frank and open discussions to promote mutual understanding and to discuss common challenges. It was recognised at this early stage that debate would be on common issues affecting naval professionals and not on political issues, nor on the maritime confidence and security building measures occupying the minds of those concerned with second track diplomacy.

Initial membership of the WPNS was based on those members who attended the ninth ISS (Australia, Brunei, China, Japan, New Zealand, South Korea, Singapore, Thailand and the US) and three additional members (Indonesia, Malaysia and Papua New Guinea). Membership grew progressively and membership criteria were developed, based on the applicant navy having the capacity to engage with current WPNS navies and contribute to the Symposium. Two categories of membership were agreed. The criteria for member status required that the navy be from a state with territory in the Western Pacific area and have a strategic interest in the region. For observer status, criteria were somewhat more flexible, with an assessment of the likelihood of applicant navies being motivated to make a strong contribution to the WPNS. Critically, all existing members have to support the application for membership but there is neither lobbying nor a vote. There are currently 18 members and 4 observers.¹

Importantly, the WPNS is a forum for naval professionals and aims to increase naval cooperation in the Western Pacific by providing a forum for discussion of professional issues, generating a flow of information and opinion leading to common understanding and potential agreements. To achieve this, the WPNS has four major objectives:

- to discuss and elaborate cooperative initiatives, and

identify those that warrant further consideration and development;

- to explore new ways of enhancing friendship and professional cooperation;
- to develop Navy to Navy relationships at a working level and maintain informal liaison among delegates between successive Workshops and Symposia; and
- to discuss professional areas of mutual cooperation.

It was originally envisaged that these objectives would be met primarily through successive Symposia (attended by Service Chiefs), centred on briefings by navies on their activities or issues of concern. After the second Symposium in 1990 the Chiefs established a work program, and in 1992, Workshops were introduced to carry this work forward. Mid-level officers attend the Workshops, where initial navy positions on issues are presented, debated and a consensus reached. These proposals are then referred to the next Symposium for consideration and adoption. Importantly however, WPNS decisions are non-binding and adoption of initiatives is voluntary. There have been nine Symposia and 14 Workshops held to date.

Since its inception in 1988, WPNS has undergone a transformation in the issues it considers and the activities it undertakes. At the strategic level, the early Symposia were concerned with identifying relevant programs of work, using small steps to explore the potential for cooperation. The WPNS has long been concerned with the threats posed by non-state actors, and sea robbery and transnational crime were the subject of seminal papers presented by Singapore in the 1990s.

At the 1992 Workshop, members examined a number of concepts for documents that would inform and assist navies when dealing with each other. Australia proposed the development of a *Maritime Information Exchange Directory* (MIED) that would provide guidance on what information navies wished to have reported to them and how this information should be provided. The rationale for this proposal was to provide a ready means of reference on specific time-critical information participating navies would find useful when in the littorals of other navies. More recently Australia proposed the development of an interoperability matrix, outlining the equipment each navy could make available for humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, search and rescue, and mine countermeasures taskings, which will be incorporated into the MIED. Malaysia developed a *Replenishment at Sea* (RAS) *Handbook*, which detailed ships' layouts and RAS procedures. During the Cold War, the Soviet Union and the US had agreed procedures for the prevention of incidents at sea (INCSEA). Despite some suggestions that an INCSEA might be useful in the WPNS context, Chiefs did not see the need for that type of document, principally because INCSEA related to bilateral tensions and were agreements at a political level, whereas the



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WPNS related to multinational cooperation at a professional level. A cooperation at sea doctrine was then proposed and Australia was tasked with developing what became the Code for Unalerted Encounters at Sea (CUES). CUES was presented at a Workshop in South Korea in April 1998 and later endorsed by the Chiefs for voluntary adoption by members and any other navy. The US also sponsored the development and promulgation of a simple *Tactical Signals Manual* for use by all WPNS members, which was subsequently revised with input from other members.

At the fourth Symposium, hosted by Malaysia in 1994, the WPNS continued to examine non-military security issues. This meeting saw the extension of the debate to include maritime security, rescue at sea, and environmental issues including prevention of sea pollution. Importantly, the WPNS avoided examination of confidence building measures, and developed the cooperative approach to issue identification through the Chiefs' Symposia and the work programs that would be produced during these meetings. Recently, Symposia have also examined humanitarian assistance and disaster relief.

At the sixth Workshop in 1997, Australia proposed that mine countermeasures (MCM) cooperation could be a significant area for cooperation, given the emergence of like capabilities in the region, especially in South East Asia. This initiative was also significant from the positioning of MCM as a common naval capability in otherwise quite differently structured navies. MCM cooperation was also significant as de-mining is seen as an important area for peaceful uses of naval forces. This was a major advance in WPNS activities leading to the provision of training seminars and more importantly to WPNS exercises. The concept was developed within the RAN and internationally through a workshop held at HMAS *Waterhen*, where the notion of an exercise based on international doctrine was explored. It was subsequently agreed to hold such an exercise and Singapore in conjunction with Indonesia co-hosted MCMEX and DIVEX 2001 during June 2001. The exercise involved 16 countries, 15 ships and 1500 personnel. The program included mine hunting and mine sweeping operations, MCM diving, sea riding and medical exchange programs. Singapore and Indonesia hosted MCMEX and DIVEX 2004 during April-May 2004, conducted in the Singapore Strait and off the Indonesian Island of Pulau Bintan, involving 18 countries, 20 ships and 1600 personnel. In addition to the 2001 elements, these exercises included: combined maritime explosive ordnance disposal training, live mine disposal charge firings at sea, and shore-based training on formation minesweeping tactics. In December 2005, Australia hosted an international MCM Seminar in Sydney.

Since its inception, WPNS has grappled with how to improve maritime cooperation and understanding at a practical and useful level. WPNS members have been keen to develop mechanisms for their personnel to learn from and train with other navies. This has taken four forms: personnel exchanges, attendance at overseas Staff Colleges, study visits and tours (including visits by naval units), and senior officer visits. As WPNS members become more accustomed to working together, sea riding in foreign vessels is being introduced. All mechanisms are

regarded as useful, but all require financing.

The key to naval cooperation is trust and understanding between navies. WPNS provides this in a number of ways. The Symposia provide the opportunity for the Chiefs of Navy to meet and discuss issues. This occurs formally through presentations, where they gain an understanding of issues facing each navy as well as each country's respective views. More important, perhaps, is the personal contact, where Chiefs can engage their counterparts and talk privately about specific issues. This allows each Chief to brief his own Government on regional concerns and how countries might react to particular events. Moreover, with the trust gained, Chiefs are able to contact each other to forestall problems or quickly solve them on a one-to-one basis.

Collaboration through multilateral activities including disaster relief, and search and rescue, provides an understanding of how each navy thinks and operates, and of their capabilities. It also provides an opportunity for personnel to interact, exchange ideas and professional expertise, and gain an understanding of each other's cultures. Competency building through activities such as MCM seminars and exercises allows navies to train together to further enhance their skills. Cooperation and capacity building allow more experienced navies to pass on knowledge and expertise to other members. Importantly, 'experience' is not limited to larger navies; rather it is based on specific skill sets across a range of navies.

There are, of course, constraints in any multinational activity. Notwithstanding the criteria for membership of WPNS, particularly 'the capacity to operate with other member navies', there remains the issue of whether members make an active or passive contribution to WPNS. The availability of funding remains the most critical issue: can members afford to host a Workshop or Symposium, can they fund personnel exchanges, and can they attend seminars and exercises? Some are unable to and therefore have to take a more passive role, resulting in a smaller core of navies actually 'driving' WPNS.

Interoperability was an early issue for WPNS. Given the disparate levels and broad origin of hardware capability across members, the harmonisation of procedures and development of manuals appears the most suitable option at this stage to evolve interoperability.

In the current regional maritime security environment of increasingly violent sea robbery and fears of a maritime terrorist attack, WPNS might need to reconsider the focus of some of its activities. Many regional countries possess coastguards for maritime law enforcement, yet the basic structure of WPNS with its naval focus may limit its ability to deal with such considerations. WPNS may therefore need to consider how the maritime security environment is changing and how to adapt its processes to engage other civil agencies with responsibilities for maritime security, to find ways and means of engaging with them on regional maritime security issues in the future.

¹ Members: Australia, Brunei, Cambodia, China, France, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, Republic of the Philippines, Republic of Korea, Russia, Singapore, Thailand, Tonga, the United States, and Vietnam. Observers: Bangladesh, Canada, Chile and India.

