

The Western Pacific Naval Symposium and Regional Naval Cooperation

Zhang Wei †

As the highest-level institutionalized multilateral naval forum in the Western Pacific region, the Western Pacific Naval Symposium (WPNS) offers an important platform for countries in the region to present their naval development and discuss cooperative initiatives. In recent years, it has played a pivotal role in regional maritime security cooperation, especially in naval cooperation.

I. WPNS MILESTONES

The origins of the WPNS lie in the 1987 International Seapower Symposium (ISS)¹, where Australia proposed to the Western Pacific Syndicate for separate naval meetings in alternate years to the ISS. The initiative was well received, and in 1988 the WPNS was inaugurated in Sydney. Its initial membership consisted of 12 participants of the ninth ISS—Australia, Brunei, China, Japan, New Zealand, South Korea, Singapore, Thailand, the US, Indonesia, Malaysia and Papua New Guinea.

In the early years, WPNS discussions were reported by host countries at the subsequent ISS meetings. This made the WPNS somewhat closely related to the ISS as a parallel session. At that

† Zhang Wei is a Senior Research Fellow at the Collaborative Innovation Center of South China Sea Studies, Nanjing University.

time, the WPNS activities were mainly biennial symposia and workshops held in alternate years, an arrangement to ensure workshops could prepare for the following symposia.

Since the end of the Cold War, WPNS has been adapting to the evolving regional and international security environment with an increased focus on maritime security cooperation. The third symposium in 1992 featured discussions on coordinative efforts in marine search and rescue, marine pollution prevention, and unprecedentedly, confidence-building measures. The relevant measures were further examined at the 1994 symposium in Penang, Malaysia. The fifth symposium, which was held in Tokyo in 1996, also marked a breakthrough with first-ever discussions on regional naval cooperation and the proposal to avoid incidents at sea by developing a multilateral regional guiding principle for maritime security operations. This led to a joint proposal of Japan and Australia for the *Draft Measures on the Prevention of Incidents at Sea*. At the 1997 workshop in the Philippines, New Zealand suggested taking a step further and developing the draft into the *WPNS Guidelines for Maritime Operations*, which consisted of 18 parts including definitions and guiding principles for warships, special zones, communications, information exchange, and military operations.

At the sixth symposium hosted by South Korea in October 1998, members examined the regional maritime security landscape, naval missions in the 21st century, and the prospect and forms of regional naval cooperation. Specifically, proposals were made for multilateral naval cooperation on peaceful uses of forces, such as mine countermeasures, anti-piracy, joint training for humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, and coordination between navies and coast guards. During the meeting, Australia made a keynote speech themed “Guiding Rules of Behavior at Sea.”

The 2000 WPNS in Christchurch, New Zealand was a milestone in the history of WPNS. It witnessed the adoption of the *WPNS Business Charter*, which specified the purpose and objectives of the WPNS and the responsibilities and activities of its members and observers. The charter clarified that: the WPNS “aims to increase cooperation and the ability to operate together, as well as to build

trust and confidence between Navies by providing a framework to enable the discussion of maritime issues of mutual interest, the exchange of information, the practice and demonstration of capabilities, and the exchange of personnel”;² the WPNS symposium is for the Chiefs of Navy and convened biennially, and the workshop is held annually; it has been further defined that major issues including applications for member and observer statuses shall be referred to all WPNS members for approval, which means every member has the veto power over new member admission.

Under the charter, WPNS activities have taken four forms: the biennial symposium attended by the Chiefs of Navy and their designated representatives; the annual workshop leading up to the symposium for officers at the Captain or Colonel level; specific seminars on topics such as mine countermeasures, maritime search and rescue, humanitarian assistance; and military exercises based on the themes of seminars. These activities have been carried out increasingly frequently over the years.

Since 2002, the symposium has integrated the All Partners Access Network (APAN) into its framework as a platform for information sharing. Members whose liaison officers have registered at the US-developed website can enjoy “free” access to the APAN network of communities.

By 2014, the WPNS had 21 members and four observers.³ Some of them are outside of the Western Pacific region, including Canada and Chile from the East Pacific and India and Bangladesh from the Indian Ocean region. This came as the charter was revised at the 2010 symposium in Australia to loosen the membership criteria from “a Navy of a state with territory and strategic interests in the Western Pacific” to “a Navy of a state with territory in the Western Pacific; or a Navy of a state with significant strategic interests in the Western Pacific and which borders the Pacific Ocean.”⁴

Over the past three decades, WPNS has developed into the most prominent and influential multilateral naval cooperation platform with improved procedures and enhanced cooperation among members.

II. THE CODE FOR UNPLANNED ENCOUNTERS AT SEA (CUES)

As is seen from the development course of WPNS, its most significant achievement is arguably the *Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea* (CUES). Prior to it, there were the 1972 *Incidents at Sea Agreement* and the 1989 *Prevention of Dangerous Military Activities Agreement* between the United States and the Soviet Union, as well as the Japan-Russia and China-Russia ones that modeled on them. But unlike its bilateral predecessors, CUES is multilateral in nature, and this is what makes it unprecedented.

The WPNS and CUES discussions were largely driven by America's existing and potential partners including Australia, Japan, South Korea, New Zealand, Singapore, and the Philippines, not the US itself. Nevertheless, the US idea of strategy-guided tactical and technical development and tactics-enabled strategy design still features heavily in the WPNS.

The development of CUES is an obvious example. Its origins could be traced back to the 1997 ISS, where participants discussed maritime security and naval challenges in the age of information and globalization under the theme of "Seapower and Common Security in the 21st Century". During the meeting, the *Multinational Maritime Operation* prepared by the US Naval Doctrine Command was released.⁵ The publication offered systematic guidance for multinational maritime operation in terms of its nature, role, command and control, internal operational procedures, planning and logistics. Particularly, the doctrine manual recommended the "1000 EXTACs"⁶, a series of multinational maritime manuals on operation guidelines and specific tactics and procedures such as command and communications. The idea behind the series was to support NATO's post-Cold War eastward expansion by ensuring the "interoperability of equipment and procedures" in joint operations of NATO and its nontraditional maritime partners. These documents reflected America's strategic consideration and tactical and technical preparations for strengthening its leadership in response to the coming information age.

The result was a profound deviation from prepared topics at the 1998 WPNS hosted by South Korea. The symposium was supposed

to see discussions over issues predefined at the 1997 workshop in the Philippines, including mine countermeasure cooperation (proposed by Australia), anti-piracy cooperation (Singapore), coordination between navies and coast guards (the Philippines), the concept paper on humanitarian assistance and disaster relief joint training (the US), and guiding principles for maritime activities (Australia). However, a workshop was held in April 1998, where a decision was made to replace the pre-determined topics with those more pertinent to the theme of the 14th ISS, such as the current Western Pacific maritime security landscape, naval mandates in the 21st century, and the potentials and means of naval cooperation among WPNS members. These discussions brought the 1998 symposium up a notch with such increased strategic depth that they almost made it an intensive strategic training for naval chiefs.

Specifically, Australia made a keynote speech on the rules of behavior at sea. Based on the *Measures on the Prevention of Maritime Incidents* it proposed jointly with Japan in 1996 and the *WPNS Guidelines for Maritime Military Operations* proposed by New Zealand in 1997, Australia presented the draft of CUES, and drew up an Annex for communication procedures on the lines of the *Maritime Maneuvering and Tactical Procedures* in the “1000 EXTACs” to develop a practical guidance with operability for unexpected naval encounters.

During the meeting, members also set out the subjects for the next symposium, which included establishing common rules of maritime operations among WPNS members; reviewing the WPNS maritime information exchange guide; developing effective regulations for incident prevention and handling; and application and standardization of information and communication technologies among members. Clearly, these topics were designed to accelerate the adoption of CUES. In other words, the US strategic intentions shown in the 1997 ISS were largely taken into action at the 1998 WPNS.

At the 1999 workshop hosted by Singapore, the first version of CUES was endorsed in principle. This was quite unusual, since such a major decision was not supposedly made in a workshop. After the meeting, Australia was tasked with revising and

promulgating the code. As explained by the Australian Chief of Navy upon promulgation, the WPNS did not intend to make CUES binding under international law, but it did strongly recommend its members and observers to adopt the code.

The US proactively pushed for the development and widened application of CUES. Its strategic calculation was clear—to translate America’s tactical edge into strategic advantages by bringing the codes of conduct and communication procedures of all Western Pacific navies into a US-dominated established framework.

This came amid an increasing risk of unplanned naval encounters between the US and China. Since 2000, China has constantly questioned the intention and legitimacy of America’s surveillance activities in and over its exclusive economic zone (EEZ). Incidents of unexpected close encounters were on the rise, represented by the shocking China-US midair collision in 2001.

In the absence of bilateral military coordination mechanisms and communication protocols, the *International Regulations for Preventing Collisions at Sea*, the *International Code of Signals*, and communications at the internationally accepted radio frequencies became the only tools navies could rely on to prevent unplanned encounters. However, they were far from enough, and the risk of such encounters was rising.

That was why the US advocated so hard for the revision, adoption and use of the CUES and its communication procedures, not only on such multilateral occasions of WPNS activities, but also during bilateral events with China, including exchanges of high-

The US proactively pushed for the promulgation and widened application of CUES. Its strategic calculation was to translate America’s tactical edge into strategic advantages by bringing the codes of conduct and communication procedures of all Western Pacific navies into a US-dominated established framework.

level naval officer visits and maritime military security consultations.

Such proposal was not met with immediate response from China—and understandably so. By bringing under an established framework the rules of behavior and communication procedures of China's naval forces, the CUES could serve as a tool for US reconnaissance activities in China's EEZ, potentially undermining China's national security, especially when China was in a disadvantageous position in terms of naval equipment, technology, and English proficiency. Out of concerns for its national security, China would undoubtedly seek to revise the code. The same was true with other emerging powers in the region, for example, Russia and India. Such conflicts of interests made revising CUES a lengthy process—the CUES was officially adopted at the 14th WPNS in 2014, 16 years after the concept was initiated and 14 years after the revising efforts began.

The 14th WPNS, where CUES was approved, opened in the Chinese city of Qingdao on April 22, 2014. Themed with “Cooperation, Trust, and Win-Win”, the event brought together over 150 naval chiefs and representatives from 25 countries, including 21 WPNS members, three observers, and Pakistan, an applicant for observer status. On April 23, a multinational naval exercise was also organized to mark the 65th anniversary of China's navy, involving 7 countries and 14 vessels.

The achievements of the symposium included the approval of Pakistan Navy's observer status application, discussion on the meeting summary, confirmation of the arrangement activities of the WPNS in 2012-2024, and most importantly, the adoption of the CUES.

As the Chinese media pointed out, the CUES “specifies the legal status, rights and obligations of naval ships and offers instructions on safety procedures, communication plans, signals, and basic maneuvering for unplanned encounters at sea. In doing so, it helps reduce misunderstanding and miscalculations of naval activities during peacetime and avoid incidents, which ultimately contributes to regional peace and security.”

China's active support for the code comes from considerations for its national interests. To begin with, the increasing risk of

unexpected encounters with foreign forces including the US and Japan makes it necessary to have a simple code of behavior and communication procedure to protect Chinese naval vessels. In addition, China's widened engagement in bilateral and multilateral drills also creates the need for such multilateral agreements as CUES. Finally, as its national and sea power rises, it is in line with China's strategic interest to assume a cooperative and active role in the development of regional rules.

This makes the adoption of CUES a satisfactory outcome both for China and for the US and its allies who were working towards the goal for over a decade. That is why adopting CUES could be hailed as a landmark achievement of the WPNS.

As its national and sea power rises, it is in China's strategic interest to assume a cooperative and active role in the development of regional rules.

III. THE FUTURE OF WPNS AND REGIONAL NAVAL COOPERATION

As the only institutionalized multilateral governmental forum in the Western Pacific, WPNS has contributed heavily to regional maritime security and cooperation over the past three decades, and is poised to do so in the future.

First, WPNS is expected to see continued growth in the geographical coverage of its membership and influence. Back in 1987 when it was initiated under the proposal of the US and its allies for strengthened practical naval cooperation and regional maritime security, the symposium only had 12 members, namely Australia, Brunei, China, Japan, New Zealand, South Korea, Singapore, Thailand, the US, Indonesia, Malaysia and Papua New Guinea, and all of them were Western Pacific countries with territories west of 160°E. This was changed in 2000, when such countries outside of the region as India and Chile were admitted as observers, extending the WPNS coverage to countries along the east coast of the Pacific Ocean and the Indian Ocean. Since then, the membership has grown to include not only all the countries in

the Western Pacific region, but also those out of the region, such as France, Canada, Peru, Bangladesh, Mexico, and Pakistan. The 2010 revision of the WPNS charter also updates the membership criteria to pave the way for admitting countries neighboring the Western Pacific. In response to the trend, at the 2014 symposium China proposed to change the name of WPNS to “Pacific Naval Symposium” to attract more participants. Along with such expansion in geographical coverage will come increasing strategic influence spread geographically outwards.

Second, the confidence, cooperation and technical compatibility among navies will be enhanced under the WPNS framework. The *WPNS Business Charter* adopted in 2000 set out procedures for workshops and symposia. Later that year, it was revised to include seminars and exercises in its list of activities. This marked a significant shift from a platform for discussions to one for pragmatic actions of regional naval cooperation. Currently, the WPNS activities are organized at least 3-5 times a year, including irregular seminars and joint exercises on a wide array of topics, ranging from search and rescue at sea, mine countermeasures and submarines rescue, to anti-piracy, disaster mitigation and relief, and medical cooperation. These activities are conducive to reinforcing the trust and cooperation among participating navies.

Particularly, the adopted CUES offers a tool of standardized communications not only for avoiding misunderstanding during unplanned encounters at sea, but also for multinational naval operations. It will lead to improved naval technical compatibility, established contingency response mechanism that coordinates disaster relief efforts, and enhanced cooperation against terrorism and piracy. This may even herald a new type of navy-to-navy relations of closer partnership.

The implication of the CUES has gone beyond WPNS. The code is increasingly valued and recommended at other multilateral events such as the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium and ASEAN Plus Three Summit. This will boost naval tactical and technical cooperation and confidence at a larger scale, while enhancing the global influence of WPNS.

Third, with WPNS and CUES in place, countries in the region

will address their shared and conflicting interests more rationally. Navy-to-navy relations among WPNS members are dictated by state-to-state ties and ultimately, national interests, and this makes them a zero-sum game in nature. In recent years, China's rising influence has met with skepticism from some countries, and the frequent maritime disputes have inflamed tensions in China's relations with the US, Japan, and ASEAN countries.

However, the tension has somewhat been eased under the frameworks of WPNS and CUES, where navies realize that they have more common ground than conflicts and accordingly address conflicts more rationally, seeking common interests and avoiding misunderstandings.

Particularly, CUES plays a prominent role in bilateral agreements. For example, under the *US-China Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on the Rules of Behavior for the Safety of Air and Maritime Encounters* and the important consensus reached by the state leaders, the US and China agreed on codes of conduct for naval ships and aircrafts at unplanned encounters in 2015 and 2016, respectively. The technical norms and communication procedures in these documents are essentially drawn from CUES. The code is also predicted to find its way into the China-Japan naval communication mechanism, which is reported under development, and a China-ASEAN code of conduct in the South China Sea. Such wide application is a testimony that CUES is in line with the common interests of all nations to maximize maritime security and operational safety at sea.

But this does not mean that the conflict of interests is by any means eased. It is still there: the US continues to champion "freedom of navigation" in the disputed waters of the South China Sea, while China shows no sign of stopping patrols and expulsion activities, leading to occasional diplomatic rows. However, the new code is working; so is the rational thinking which lies behind. And this is what matters—to avoid unpredictability and prevent unplanned clashes from escalating into military conflicts and jeopardizing regional security.

A China-ASEAN code of conduct in the South China Sea is also expected to be based on the CUES.

¹ The International Seapower Symposium (ISS) was launched by the US Navy in 1969. Since then, it has been held at the United States Naval War College as biennial meetings of naval chiefs and leaders of naval academies worldwide.

² *Western Pacific Naval Symposium Business Charter, 2000.*

³ As of 2014, the 21 members were Australia, Canada, Chile, France, Indonesia, Japan, Cambodia, Tonga, Malaysia, Brunei, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, China, Peru, the Philippines, South Korea, Singapore, Russia, Vietnam, Thailand and the United States; the four observers were Bangladesh, India, Mexico and Pakistan.

⁴ *Western Pacific Naval Symposium Business Charter (2010).*

⁵ The US Naval Doctrine Command, *Multinational Maritime Operation.*

⁶ The US Naval Doctrine Command, “1000 EXTACs”, also known as the *Multinational Maritime Manuals*. The series was prepared to support NATO’s post-Cold War expansion eastward by ensuring the “interoperability of equipment and procedures” in joint operations of NATO and its nontraditional maritime partners. It consisted of 15 publications, and the most influential one was the *EXTAC 1000, Maritime Maneuvering and Tactical Procedures.*