



## **Hotspot Indo-Pacific: Asian and European Perspectives**

### **Interview Ralph D. Thiele with Dr Peter Roell**

**June 2021**

#### **Summary**

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Following the Thiele-Roell interview in March 2021 on the hotspot Indo-Pacific, entitled Situation Assessment and US Interests, the present interview focusses on the interests and ambitions of the PR China; the discussion sheds light on the relationship between Peking and Washington with a detailed analysis of the developments of the so-called Quad, the informal alliance of the USA, Australia, India and Japan, as well as the relations to the PR China and the USA. The German, French, and Dutch Indo-Pacific strategy as well as that of the EU and NATO within the region are also discussed.

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## Interview

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**Thiele:** Dr Roell, the interview “Hotspot Indo-Pacific: Situation Assessment and US Interests” of March 2021 focussed on the ambitions of the USA in the Indo-Pacific region. Today, I would like to discuss the interests of Asian and European states in this part of the world. Generally speaking, how would you characterise the core interests of the PR of China?

**Roell:** What the Chinese leadership have in mind above all else is to maintain the power of the Communist Party of China (CCP) together with perpetuating the Chinese-style socialist system. Here, stability – both domestically and abroad – along with the maintenance of Chinese sovereignty, territorial integrity and national unity are of fundamental importance. Added to this is the securing of economic growth and social developments in accordance with the guidelines stipulated by the party.

As part of its global strategy and foreign policy interests, the ambition of the Chinese leadership is to continue to pursue its goal of becoming the dominant regional power in 2021 and the pre-eminent global power by 2049.

**Thiele:** How does Peking assess the US strategy with respect to the PR China and in the Indo-Pacific?

**Roell:** In the eyes of the Chinese leadership, the USA is implementing diplomatic, economic, military and cultural means to assert its position as the dominant power in Asia and the Indo-Pacific. According to the Chinese, this hostile strategy of the USA, bolstered by its considerable military presence in the Indo-Pacific, is aimed at containing China’s ascent, a policy which thus threatens Beijing’s core interests. Hence, the PRC asserts the right – within the framework of its sovereignty claims in the South China Sea – to install military bases and to station naval and air forces within this region.

With this, the Chinese leadership claims to reinforce its assertion of power, to expand its influence within the region and to strengthen its strategic position vis-à-vis the United States of America.

**Thiele:** What, in your view, is the current mood between Washington and Beijing?

**Roell:** The initial meeting in Anchorage on 18 and 19 March 2021 between US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, and Foreign Minister Wang Yi and China’s top diplomat Yang Jiechi, a Politburo member since October 2017, was marked by mutual accusations and a somewhat cool atmosphere.

Whereas the US condemned China for its human rights violations of the Uighurs in Xinjiang, its crackdown in Hong Kong, unfair trade practices, cyber-attacks on the US and Beijing’s expansionism in the Indo-Pacific, Yang levelled critique at the flagging democracy in the US, poor treatment of minorities, and foreign and trade policies. Yang said: “You abuse the idea of so-called national security to impede normal trade and incite some countries to attack China.”

Relations between the USA and China have evidently hit a low ebb. There is profound distrust on both sides, best characterised by an attitude of “us or them”. There are, nevertheless, areas in which both sides could cooperate, such as climate change, contending with the Covid 19 pandemic and bolstering the economy in the wake of the Corona crisis.

**Thiele:** How does the Chinese leadership perceive the development of the “Quadrilateral Security Dialogue” or Quad (the informal alliance of the USA, Australia, India and Japan) the objective of which is to guarantee free and open access to the Indo-Pacific region?



**Roell:** Just three years ago, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi forecast that the Quad was a mere headline-making exercise, that the group would soon dissolve like the froth in the sea. Wang Yi now issued an emphatic warning against US penetration of the Indo-Pacific with its objective to establish an Asian equivalent of NATO. This, he said, poses a grave security risk to regional stability.

**Thiele:** How can this shift in Wang's thinking be explained?

**Roell:** The origins of the Quad date back to 2004, the year in which the tsunami hit the Indian Ocean resulting in the deaths of 200,000 people. In response, the four countries in question coordinated rescue efforts. They met in Manila in 2007 to carry out a major, joint military naval exercise. Following considerable pressure from the PRC, Australia announced to the Chinese leadership in 2008 that it no longer planned to hold further meetings with the remaining Quad partners, and consequently enthusiasm for the initiative faded.

After a steady deterioration in PRC-US relations in the years that followed, rising tensions between Tokyo and Beijing that turned on claims over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands, Australia's denouncement and criticism of PRC interference in its internal affairs, and skirmishes between India and China in the Himalayan border region, the Quad resumed its dialogue in 2017; this was followed up by bilateral and trilateral agreements and military manoeuvres. Australian naval forces participated in the Malabar Manoeuvre for the first time in 2020.

One event that was sure to have piqued China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi was the virtual summit conference of the Quad Group on 12 March 2021, attended by President Biden, Australian Prime Minister Morrison, Indian Prime Minister Modi and Japanese Prime Minister Suga. Biden emphasised the crucial importance of the Quad for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific. In a first-ever joint statement, "The Spirit of the Quad", the heads of government pledged their commitment to democracy in the region and to a "free and open Indo-Pacific" founded on international maritime and air law in the East and South China Seas.

Although China was not mentioned by name, it is evident which country poses the greatest geopolitical challenge to the USA, India, Japan and Australia.

**Thiele:** And what was your assessment of the results of the summit?

**Roell:** Initiated by Joe Biden, the virtual summit dovetails well with the US President's foreign policy concept of increased cooperation among allies and partners. The mere fact that of the meeting being held at such a high level for the first time should be regarded as a success. At the end of the year, the talks, described by all parties as "historic", are to be resumed in the framework of a face-to-face meeting.

The Quad's ambitious mutual objectives are the working groups on vaccine expertise, critical and innovative technologies, international standards and the working group on climate change and the spectrum of related aspects, all of which remain a challenge. The task at hand is to consolidate existing security cooperation, to boost and expand economic partnerships and to act jointly at the multilateral level.

**Thiele:** On 16 April 2021, US President Joe Biden received Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga at the White House for the first time since the former's inauguration. What might we infer from this visit?

**Roell:** In making this diplomatic gesture, the American president attested to the importance the US attaches to Japan as a security partner; one might go so far as to say that Japan is the most vital US ally within the region. Both sides emphasised that they would face the challenges emanating from China together so as to guarantee the future of a free and open Indo-Pacific. Moreover, the US reiterated its commitment to protect Japan, including the use of nuclear weapons if necessary. This commitment to protection also extends to the Senkaku



group of islands in the East China Sea. Military exercises on the part of the Americans, such as took place in February of this year in the vicinity of the Senkakus, are likely to increase in the future.

While neither made explicit reference to Beijing, the joint statement on the significance of the Taiwan Strait for peace and stability is bound to have sounded harshly in the ears of the Chinese leadership. Here, Suga's statement that in this tense situation in the Taiwan Strait and around the Senkaku Islands a peaceful solution is a priority, is noteworthy; that Taiwan was mentioned for the first time in 52 years in a joint statement is, indeed, remarkable!

Washington is well aware of the deep economic ties and dependencies between Japan and the PRC. It may well be part of the new US approach to take Suga's cautious tactics seriously and to respect them.

China's response was not long in coming. The following day, the Chinese Embassy in Washington issued strong objection to the joint statement by the US and Japan condemning the interference in China's internal affairs. He went on to add that the statements of the USA and Japan transgress the framework of their bilateral relations and are damaging to the interests of third parties; that they harmed the interests of third parties, the mutual understanding and trust among regional countries, and the peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific region.

The issues regarding Taiwan, Hong Kong and Xinjiang constitute domestic affairs, while the issues regarding the East and South China Seas concern China's sovereignty and maritime interests. These amount to China's fundamental interests and should not be interfered with.

In this regard, no news from China!

As for the North Korean nuclear programme, the US plans detailed consultations with Japan and South Korea, whereby the Biden team is highly sceptical as to North Korea's denuclearisation process.

**Thiele:** To what extent did Suga offer concessions on the military issue?

**Roell:** Suga assured Biden of an increase in Japan's defence capabilities as aimed at enhancing alliances and regional security. This commitment points to the purchasing of offensive and defensive state-of-the-art US military technology. Thus, Tokyo is considering the purchase of new F-35 B "stealth jets" to be stationed on Kyushu near the Senkaku Islands in 2024. As part of Japan's defence strategy, these aircraft – a total of eighteen – are particularly well-suited for deployment on remote islands by virtue of their take-off and landing capabilities.

The "Host Nation Support Agreement", which regulates the long-term stationing of American forces in Japan, also requires amendment. This is also in light of the USA's plans to deploy its military potential more extensively throughout the Indo-Pacific region.

There are also initial indications that Japan will no longer adhere to the policy of 1% of GDP for defence purposes.

**Thiele:** On 12 April 2021, 25 Chinese aircraft provocatively flew into Taiwan's Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ). How do people in Taiwan perceive Beijing's actions?

**Roell:** The Chinese leadership is watching with great suspicion the strengthening relations between Washington and Taipei, such as the new US guidelines of 9 April 2021 facilitating interactions between government agencies. A White House statement refers to Taiwan as an important security and economic partner of the US, a vibrant democracy and a force for good in the world.



On 29 April 2021, President Tsai Ing-wen attended the handover of the new patrol vessel Chiayi to the Kaohsiung Coast Guard, thus reiterating her government's determination to protect the country's territorial waters. In this context, she underscored the signing of a memorandum between Taiwan and the US on the establishment of a Coast Guard working group.

According to Foreign Minister Joseph Wu, China is stepping up pressure on Taiwan through information campaigns, hybrid warfare and increased grey-zone activities. In response, Taiwan is set to enhance its defence capabilities and augment its exchange with other countries such as Japan, the UK, the EU and the US.

**Thiele:** So how do senior US military and other high-level decision-makers appraise the threat to Taiwan?

**Roell:** In January of this year, following a threat from the People's Republic of China that "independence would mean war" with Taiwan, the Pentagon underscored that the situation would not change under the new Secretary of Defence, Lloyd Austin. Washington would hold fast to its commitment to provide military support to Taiwan. In March 2021, the outgoing commander of US forces in the Indo-Pacific, Admiral Philip Davidson, sparked spirited discussion in Congress when arguing that the threat from the PRC in the Taiwan Strait may manifest within the next six years.

Similarly, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan made it clear on 30 April 2021 that the US would adhere to the "One-China Policy": the full implementation of the Taiwan Relation Act and the six assurances. Washington would oppose unilateral revisions to the status quo.

Kurt Campbell, White House National Security Coordinator Indo-Pacific, remarked in May 2021 that a military conflict in the Taiwan Strait would be almost impossible to contain geographically and would thus wreak havoc on the global economy.

I expect the US would seek to deter China from attacking Taiwan by investing heavily in a network of precision missiles along the so-called first and second "island defence chains". Among other things, it seeks closer cooperation with Japan in countering Chinese submarines.

**Thiele:** Let's briefly turn to Australia's Indo-Pacific strategy.

**Roell:** Current relations between the People's Republic of China and Australia are at a low point. When it comes to China's interests, and when open criticism is voiced, the Chinese leadership reacts somewhat oversensitively: when, for example, the government in Canberra criticised China's territorial expansion and militarisation in the South China Sea. In 2018, Huawei and ZTE were banned from launching their 5G network. Beijing was particularly vexed last year when Australia proposed an independent investigation into the source of the Corona virus. Beijing countered with threats and trade sanctions.

Further disagreements between Australia and China surfaced in the spring of 2021, when the government announced it would review and possibly cancel a Chinese company's 99-year lease of the strategic port of Darwin. Currently, the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs is investigating over 1000 PRC-related projects. The department is also invoking legislation to scrap the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) infrastructure projects on grounds of national security.

Australia's new Defence Minister Peter Dutton has adopted a more hard-line stance towards the PRC, stating that a conflict over Taiwan could not be ruled out.

Australia's turn towards the United States of America is clear, in spite of the fact that the Indo-Pacific region is



and remains of great importance due to Australia's geographical and geopolitical position. Canberra is set to allocate the equivalent of 580 million US dollars for the expansion of military bases and for joint exercises with the USA.

The latest developments, namely, the PRC's indefinite suspension of the so-called strategic economic dialogue with Australia, is not merely a signal to Australia, but may also be understood as a warning to Western democracies.

**Thiele:** In its foreign policy, India has customarily adhered to the principle of non-alignment. Do you observe any changes in this respect?

**Roell:** US Secretary of Defence Lloyd Austin's visit to New Delhi from 19 to 21 March 2021 together with his high-level discussions with the country's political and military leadership underlines the highly constructive relations between the two countries that have developed in recent years. Compare this with India's very strained relations with the PRC. As India's Foreign Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar stated in an interview on 20 May 2021, improving relations with the PRC hinge on developments along the "Line of Actual Control".

Among the issues discussed were mutual logistical support, artificial intelligence, cyber activities, US defence equipment, intelligence cooperation, military manoeuvres, etc.

From the Indian perspective, the provision of high-quality intelligence and defence equipment by the US during the Himalayan crisis last year was entirely positive. Austin also commended India's importance in the Quad, referring to the country as a "great partner". A "free and open" Indo-Pacific region is among the US president's priorities, he said.

The two sides deemed the talks profitable and Prime Minister Modi even hailed the partnership between the two countries as being a "force for global good".

**Thiele:** In consultations between the Foreign and Defence Ministers of Germany and Japan on 13 April 2021, the ministers discussed security and stability in the East and South China Seas as well as developments on the Korean Peninsula. Would you elaborate further on these issues?

**Roell:** Foreign Minister Heiko Maas expressed his views as follows: "For Germany and Europe to continue having an active role in shaping the world in the future it is essential that we also become more involved in Asia, where important global decisions are being taken in this century. Unless we become more active, the rules of the future will be written by others – not only economically, but also politically and in terms of security policy. We seek to avoid hegemonic domination and the formation of blocs; instead, we advocate a rules-based, transparent and inclusive order in the Indo-Pacific. Cooperation with Japan has an important role to play here, since Japan represents a key value partner for Germany with respect to multilateralism, the rule of law and human rights."

As Defence Minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer stated, "The situation in the Indo-Pacific is of concern to us all. Respecting the rules for free trade routes and territorial integrity as well as strengthening our democratic partners are in German and European interests. The joint German-Japanese monitoring of the United Nations arms embargo against North Korea constitutes an important commitment to security in the Indo-Pacific region. The strategically significant new intelligence accord between Germany and Japan affords us important opportunities for cooperation between intelligence services, but no less so with respect to armaments, technology and cybersecurity."



Both statements highlight the great importance Berlin attaches to the Indo-Pacific region. As a political and symbolic gesture, the frigate “Bayern” is scheduled for deployment to the Indo-Pacific in August of this year. So as not to overly provoke the Chinese, the dispatch of the frigate is, indeed, more “symbolic” than anything else. To date, the German government has not complied with the US request that Germany participate in “Freedom of Navigation Operations” in the South China Sea. From 2022, the German Air Force is also scheduled to show its colours with long-range deployments of fighter jets and tanker aircraft to Australia.

The intensification of intelligence relations between Germany and Japan is welcome, whereby the USA is and will remain Japan’s most important partner, especially in the SIGINT domain.

**Thiele:** And what of France’s policy in the Indo-Pacific?

**Roell:** France is present in the Indo-Pacific region by way of its overseas territories. Ninety-three per cent of its exclusive economic zone (EEZ) is located in the Indian and Pacific Oceans. A total of one and a half million French nationals lives in the region; 8,000 soldiers are stationed there. Thus, France sees itself not only as a European nation, but also as a Pacific nation.

On 2 May 2018, President Macron unveiled France’s strategy in the Indo-Pacific region in a speech at the Garden Island naval base in Sydney. This strategy is based on four pillars:

1. strong French involvement in the resolution of regional crises, the security of key shipping routes and the struggle against terrorism, radicalisation and organised crime;
2. strengthening and intensifying strategic and global partnerships in the region;
3. a greater role for France in regional organisations with a view to contributing to the development of multilateralism;
4. commitment to promote common goods (climate change, environment and biodiversity, health, education, digital technology, quality infrastructure).

Now, three years on, the French government assessed its Indo-Pacific strategy positively. Further details are available in the Ministère de L’Europe et des Affaires Étrangères document “France’s Partnerships in the Indo-Pacific”.

**Thiele:** And to what extent have our neighbours, the Dutch, been developing an Indo-Pacific strategy?

**Roell:** The Dutch Foreign Office outlined the government’s intentions in a document released on 13 November 2020. The power struggle in the Indo-Pacific region necessitates new strategic cooperation. The Netherlands and the EU should therefore deepen their relations with other like-minded partners such as Australia, New Zealand, South Korea, Japan and India, as well as with the ASEAN states, especially Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia and Vietnam. Here, the Netherlands likewise emphasise the major economic, trade and security sea lanes in the East and South China Seas. By dispatching a frigate to the region, the Netherlands thus underlines its interests and ambitions.

**Thiele:** Turning to the European Union. What objectives is the EU pursuing in its Indo-Pacific Strategy?

**Roell:** Throughout the years, the EU has fostered a comprehensive relationship with its partners in the Indo-Pacific region. The new EU Indo-Pacific Cooperation Strategy, launched in April 2021, has a renewed focus on



the region with the aim of contributing to stability, security, prosperity and sustainable development underpinned by the furtherance of democracy, the rule of law, human rights and international law.

Cooperation covers areas such as trade and investment, climate change and support for connectivity with the EU. In the field of security and defence, the EU intends to further develop partnership relations in the Indo-Pacific region, including such areas as maritime security, cyber-attacks, disinformation, new technologies, terrorism, and organised crime.

To mitigate the economic and human impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and ensure an inclusive and sustainable socio-economic recovery, the EU is set to work in close collaboration with its regional partners.

**Thiele:** Since NATO is both a military and political organisation, how would you characterise the general approach of the Brussels headquarters to the Indo-Pacific?

**Roell:** The meetings of NATO foreign ministers in April devoted special attention to China. As previously mentioned, while Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg reiterated that NATO does not consider China an adversary, the rise of the Middle Kingdom has direct consequences for the security of the alliances. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken announced that China would feature prominently in NATO's new strategic approach.

A study "NATO 2030: United for a New Era", for which NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg in April 2020 commissioned an independent group of experts, examined the extent to which NATO's political dimension could be strengthened.

With regard to the Indo-Pacific and Asian partnerships, the following was noted: NATO should deepen consultation and cooperation with Indo-Pacific partners – Australia, Japan, New Zealand and the Republic of Korea. This could be affected by way of the existing NATO + 4 format or the NATO-Pacific Partnership Council, or else through NATO engagement in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, and possibly include other regional states such as India. Such a format could help reinforce coordination in addressing the strategic and political implications of China's rise, including enhancing information sharing and establishing consistent dialogue on technological cooperation and the pooling of research and development in specific domains.

NATO should begin internal discussions on a possible future partnership with India as the world's largest democracy, a country that shares fundamental interests and values with the Alliance, assuming, of course, that India is interested in such a dialogue. A similar internal discussion should be initiated on NATO's future relations with the countries of Central Asia, some of which are already NATO partners.

I should also note that NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg is already in discussion with India, and sees the country as a heavyweight in the Indo-Pacific region. There is enormous potential for NATO to cooperate with India in a variety of ways without actually becoming an integrated partner in cooperation.

**Thiele:** To conclude, I would like to ask a question in connection with espionage and counterespionage on the part of the PRC. I came across an article in the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung of 28 April 2021 that referred to an expansion of the competences of the Ministry of State Security (MSS). According to the article, the security authorities are drawing up a list of companies, authorities and organisations which, in their estimation, could become targets of espionage and "foreign infiltration". What do you make of this article?

**Roell:** From the standpoint of Chinese counterintelligence, any measure that serves to raise awareness of possible targets that might be the focus of foreign intelligence services makes sense. However, intelligence also has something to do with being intelligent: intelligence services can be particularly successful in this field if they



dispose over sufficient financial and human resources. Since the geopolitical centre of gravity has shifted from West to East, developments in the PRC and the Indo-Pacific are of major importance. We can expect there to be an increase in intelligence procurement activities as well as the exchange of information between Western partner services.

**Thiele:** Dr Roell, many thanks indeed for the discussion.

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**Comment:** The article reflects the personal views of the author.

See also:

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## About the Author

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Dr Peter Roell has been President of the Institute for Strategic, Political, Security and Economic Consultancy (ISPSW) in Berlin since January 2006. His former post was as Senior Advisor for Foreign and Security Policy at the Permanent Representation of the Federal Republic of Germany to the EU in Brussels. While in Germany, he served the German Government as Director of the Asia-Pacific, Latin America and Africa (Sub-Sahara) Department and at German embassies in the Near and Middle East, and in Asia.

Dr Roell studied sinology and political sciences at the universities of Bonn, Taipei and Heidelberg. He gained his Ph.D. from the Ruprecht-Karls-University, Heidelberg. He is an Ancien of the NATO Defence College in Rome and the Federal Academy for Security Policy (BAKS) in Berlin.



## Interviewer

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Ralph D. Thiele is President of EuroDefense, Germany, Chairman Political-Military Society, Germany and Managing Director StratByrd Consulting, Germany.

In his military career, Ralph Thiele has served in major national and international security and military policy, planning and academic assignments, including on the Planning Staff of the Minister of Defence, in the Private Office of the NATO Supreme Allied Commander Europe, as Chief of Staff at the NATO Defense College, as Commander of the Bundeswehr Centre for Transformation and as Director of Teaching at the German Armed Forces Command and Staff College. In his honorary and business functions he advises on Defence Innovation and Cyber issues in times of digital transformation. He has been frequently consulting, publishing and lecturing in Europe, America and Asia.

Ralph D. Thiele is also a member of the ISPSW Speaker Management Team. Further information at ISPSW website: <http://www.ispsw.com/en/speaker-management/>

