

BRIEF

NATO AND THE INDO-PACIFIC REGION

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Amid Russia's war in Ukraine, NATO has paid much less attention to global security issues, such as China's potentially menacing activities in the Indo-Pacific region. But there too, the deteriorating geopolitical environment calls for NATO to take a stronger cooperative and consultative role. This brief explores why NATO is deepening cooperation with the Indo-Pacific partners. It discusses both NATO's and individual Allies' security concerns in the region and compares them with those of Australia, Japan, the Republic of Korea, and New Zealand (the AP4).¹ It also outlines the development of NATO's Indo-Pacific partnerships with the AP4 as part of its cooperative security agenda, from the early 2000s to the present day. Finally, it considers how NATO's cooperative security dialogue is likely to develop in the future and what might be expected at the forthcoming Vilnius Summit.

WHY IT MATTERS FOR NATO

Cooperative security is one of NATO's three core tasks, alongside collective security and defence, and crisis management.² Beginning with the 2004 Istanbul Cooperation Initiative, and followed by the 2006 Riga and 2008 Bucharest Summits, NATO's global partnerships have expanded widely, globalising its cooperative security agenda.³ This agenda remained the subject of strong political focus from 2006 to the 2014 Wales summit.⁴ Currently, NATO has partnership programmes with 19 different countries globally, with the AP4 forming an important core. In addition, in the Indo-Pacific region, NATO has developed partnership policies

with Mongolia, Pakistan and Afghanistan, and seeks to expand its relations with India.⁵

The Indo-Pacific is a large region encompassing the Indian Ocean, the western sector of the Pacific Ocean, and the part of south-west Asia that connects them together. It has tremendous geopolitical and geoeconomic importance globally, being home to 60% of the world's population, and generating approximately 60% of the world's GDP and two thirds of its global growth.⁶ It includes three of the four largest economies outside the European Union.⁷ The AP4 countries are not only important partners for NATO because of their economic significance, however, they are also like-minded partners in a community built upon democracy, the rules-based international order, free market economies, and respect for human life. This forms the basis for a trusting and reliable cooperation between NATO and these partners.⁸

The AP4 countries also increasingly share security concerns with NATO regarding China.⁹ These concerns include the erosion of arms control regimes, cyber security, the increased spread of disinformation, dependency on critical

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infrastructure and supply chains, and the violation of the rules based international order. Although each of the Indo-Pacific countries has its own particular security concerns based on its geopolitical location, four potential crisis scenarios merit more attention.¹⁰ Two are more regional in focus: they are unresolved due to

ambiguities in international law but potentially have global repercussions.

First, China's unilateral attempts since 2013 to use both coercive and retaliatory measures to change the status quo in the region, such as building artificial islands in waters claimed by Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan, and Vietnam, have weakened the security situation in the South China Sea. China is bending international law to claim that it has the same rights as archipelagic states, a status conferred by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea on only 22 countries (not including China) that are mainly made up of islands.¹¹

Second, the ongoing territorial dispute between Japan and China over the possession of the Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea.¹² After Japan acquired this group of islands from a private owner in 2012, hundreds of instances of Chinese vessels illegally entering the territory have been registered.¹³

Third, the precarious situation over the island of Taiwan, which has increased tensions particularly between China and the US. Taiwan is a key US trading partner and a leading technological powerhouse in the region.¹⁴ For

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the US, China's approach of coercion and undermining the rules-based international order is problematic. Like the AP4 nations, it cannot accept unilateral changes to the status quo in the region.¹⁵

Any crisis in Taiwan would have global economic repercussions. Its pivotal location in the Taiwan Strait means that any conflict would have a severe, disruptive impact on global shipping and logistics, and international trade. In terms of security of supply, Taiwan is one of the most significant producers of advanced semiconductors and electronic goods. For example, 60% of the world's network devices are manufactured there.¹⁶

Fourth, the most dangerous threat in the region stems from North Korea's possession of ballistic missiles and nuclear weapons. The UN has sanctioned North Korea, but the neighbouring Republic of Korea and Japan are understandably concerned about its reckless behaviour.¹⁷ Its nuclear tests and launches of ballistic, cruise and (claimed) hypersonic missiles are menacing to all actors in the region and a risk to international security. NATO has fully condemned these actions.¹⁸

NATO AND COOPERATIVE SECURITY IN THE REGION

NATO's relations with the AP4 countries can be largely grouped under three major thematic areas: building capabilities and interoperability; supporting NATO-led operations and missions; and broader measures for security cooperation.¹⁹ Practical efforts have tackled issues such as arms control, climate change, cyber, maritime security, societal resilience, and the challenges posed by disruptive technologies.²⁰

NATO's most active AP4 partner has undoubtedly been Australia, an 'Enhanced Opportunities Partner' since 2014 (this status is granted in recognition of particularly significant contributions to NATO-led operations and activities). NATO and Australia have, however, cooperated both politically and in operational theatres for nearly two decades.

Australia was one of the largest non-NATO troop contributors to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan and took a leading role in the Uruzgan Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) in the south of the country. It also participated in NATO's follow-on Resolute Support Mission (RSM) to train Afghan security forces, and supported NATO-led capacity building efforts aimed at strengthening the security institutions and armed forces of Iraq.²¹

Neighbouring New Zealand has taken similar roles, albeit on a somewhat smaller scale. It was an active participant in both ISAF and RSM, as well as a contributor to Ocean Shield, NATO's counter-piracy operation off the Horn of Africa, Active Endeavour, its counter-terrorist operation

in the Mediterranean, and its Stabilisation Force in Bosnia and Herzegovina.²²

Japan, by contrast, has focused more on capability and military interoperability-based cooperation with NATO. Practical areas of cooperation have included cyber defence, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, maritime security, non-proliferation measures and science and technology. But Japan has also, for instance, trained its maritime self-defence squadrons with NATO off the Spanish and Baltic Sea coasts. It has posted liaison officers to Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers in Europe in Mons, and to NATO's Maritime Command in the UK, and established a designated mission to NATO.²³ Japan was also a major donor to NATO's reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan, and in the Balkans in the 1990s.²⁴

The Republic of Korea has intensified its political dialogue and practical cooperation with NATO in a number of areas, including cyber defence, counter-terrorism, chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear defence, non-proliferation, and civil preparedness, resilience and disaster relief.²⁵ In addition, in June 2023, the two parties signed an agreement to strengthen cooperation in the field of air safety.²⁶ The Republic of Korea also led a PRT in Parwan, just north of Kabul, and has provided escorts to NATO-led vessels in the Gulf of Aden as part of counter-terrorism operations.

PROSPECTS

As part of the 'NATO 2030' agenda, the Alliance has sought to strengthen cooperation with likeminded global partners in defending the rules-based international order and its institutions.²⁷ Like the AP4 countries, NATO has followed China's development with a worried eye. China was first mentioned in NATO's London (2019) and Brussels (2021) summit declarations but it was not until the NATO 2022 Strategic Concept, that NATO explicitly recognised its potential to challenge global security.²⁸ The Strategic Concept also noted that developments in the Indo-Pacific region could directly affect Euro-Atlantic security and stressed the importance of strengthening dialogue with old and new Indo-Pacific

partners.²⁹ This was further emphasised at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore in June 2023.³⁰

NATO may be united in its support for cooperating with the AP4 countries, but the Allies clearly do not share a common view of the Alliance's interest and role in the Indo-Pacific region. One illustration, apparently trivial but masking deeper divisions, is that the Allies even found it difficult to agree on the opening of a NATO liaison office in Tokyo, which was blocked by France.³¹

The US has by far the most robust military posture in the region, but the UK and France also maintain a presence: the UK having a stronger foothold in the maritime domain, and France having an interest in safeguarding its overseas territories. However, other Allied nations, notably Germany and the Netherlands are also showing a growing interest and have adopted regional strategies.³² Whether NATO itself will be

The Allies clearly do not share a common view of NATO's interest and role in the Indo-Pacific

able to agree on a more forward-leaning policy for the region, or whether other regional, minilateral or ad-hoc coalitions of the willing will emerge, are open questions. But any rebalancing in favour of NATO's out-of-area tasks at the expense of collective defence in Europe would pose a major challenge in terms of resources and political will for many Allies, especially those to the east of the Alliance that feel most keenly the threat from Russia.

Most importantly, however, the Indo-Pacific countries are closely following the developments in Russia's brutal war in Ukraine. Ukraine is an important test case of whether and how far the international community is ready to act when the international rules-based order is violated. Forming a strong consultative dialogue with the Indo-Pacific countries will be vitally important if NATO is to support—and perhaps even enforce—these values globally.

The presence of the Indo-Pacific leaders at the forthcoming Vilnius summit is a signal of the desire for a deepening relationship and wish for stronger political dialogue by both sides. While major new initiatives related to the Indo-Pacific

are not expected at Vilnius, the gradual strengthening of dialogue builds the basis for a stronger, more practical partnership if Allies wish. The implications are potentially far-

reaching: what is at stake in Europe today, might be at stake in years to come in Asia.

ENDNOTES

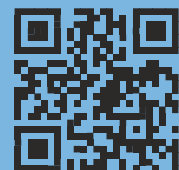
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