

Indivisible but Not Identical: A conversation with Dr. Eva Pejsova

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Eva Pejsova

NATO's growing dialogue with its Indo-Pacific partners has become one of the most closely watched developments in contemporary security policy. To understand what is really driving this relationship, Marco Tauro spoke with Dr. Eva Pejsova, who leads the Japan Chair at the Centre for Security, Diplomacy and Strategy (CSDS) at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel and lectures at Sciences Po Paris, where her research focuses on Indo-Pacific security, Japan and maritime affairs. The conversation ranged from the origins of NATO's interest in the region to the concrete capabilities that

could shape cooperation with the so-called IP4 partners — Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand.

Pejsova traced the current debate back to 2022, when NATO adopted its new Strategic Concept at the Madrid summit. “This whole conversation about NATO’s expanding interest or even expansion to the Indo-Pacific is really kind of dating back to 2022,” she explained, noting that the document mentioned China for the first time — in two brief paragraphs describing it as a challenge linked to “coercive policies, notably in the field of hybrid and cyber operations, but also disinformation and attempt to control some of the key technologies and critical infrastructure.” She was careful to draw a distinction: “It’s not referring to China as a threat or an adversary.”

The war in Ukraine sharpened that picture considerably. Pejsova pointed to North Korean troops fighting alongside Russia and to NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte’s description of China as “a decisive enabler of Russia’s war in Ukraine.” Yet she insisted the framing of “NATO in the Indo-Pacific” is misleading. “It’s never been about NATO expanding to the Indo-Pacific or going to the Indo-Pacific, but more the Indo-Pacific challenges coming to NATO,” she said, citing Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida’s often-quoted warning that “Ukraine today can be East Asia tomorrow.”

Beyond geopolitics, Pejsova highlighted a demand-side driver that is frequently overlooked: the IP4 countries themselves have been pushing for closer ties. “They have been facing a rapidly deteriorating security environment in their neighbourhood over the past decade, and they need to multiply security guarantees,” she said, noting that cooperation with Japan, in particular, predates 2022 by decades, dating back to the early 1990s. A third driver, she added, is industrial: “Today Korea supplies 6.5% of NATO’s or European arms imports, which is pretty much comparable to one of France.”

Japan: “Most on the Demand Side”

Of all the IP4 partners, Pejsova said, Japan stands out. “Japan is the one who is most on the demand side,” she said, describing a country surrounded by “Russia, North Korea, China —three powers who are, of course, having a very complex relationship, also historically, with Japan” and are, in her words “nuclear powers, quite openly hostile at this point.”

She linked this posture to a shift that began under Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s second term in 2015, with Japan’s policy of “proactive contribution to peace.” While the United States remains, in her words, “the core security umbrella for Japan,” Tokyo has since sought what Pejsova called “allies of an ally” in Europe and Australia, with NATO fitting into that category— “not to seek alternatives, but really just to provide an additional leg to its alliance with the US.”

The NATO-Japan relationship, she argued, is “by far the most advanced” among NATO’s Indo-Pacific partnerships. She pointed to concrete milestones: a fully staffed Japanese mission to NATO established in Brussels in January of last year, Japanese Air Self-Defense Force fighters joining Exercise Atlantic Eagles, and, most recently, Japanese Self-Defense Forces personnel stationed within a NATO command in Wiesbaden at the end of May.

“Japan is definitely one of the drivers, or pulling the cart, basically, when we talk about NATO and the Indo-Pacific,” she said — while again cautioning against reading this as NATO expansion into Asia: “The operational theater remains very strictly the Northern Atlantic.”

“Indivisible” Security, With Limits

Asked about the concept of indivisible security between the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific theatres, Pejsova offered a clarification. “When we say interconnected, it basically means that what happens in one region affects or impacts what can happen in the other region,” she said. “It doesn’t mean that the threats or the challenges are anyhow similar, same, or symmetric.”

She was equally direct about the limits of this framework in an actual crisis. “There’s a bit of this illusion to think that the NATO IP4 is some sort of a coherent grouping. It’s not,” she said.

“Any crisis that will emerge in one or the other region will need to be primarily managed by the region itself.” The real value of the relationship, in her view, lies elsewhere: “The primary purpose and the real payoff is in peacetime. We need to shape a stable strategic environment before a crisis emerges.” That, she explained, means better deterrence and a stronger individual capacity to defend, through access to new technologies, pooled ammunition, logistical corridors and interoperability.

“NATO’s real comparative advantage is more on the consultation, signaling, interoperability, and the political coordination,” she said, “not related to any sort of a direct operational role in the Indo-Pacific.”

Nor is the IP4 itself a unified bloc, she added: “Each has a very different threat perception, a very different threat environment,” and no formal alliance structure binds them together. On the steps NATO and its Indo-Pacific partners should prioritise, Pejsova returned to fundamentals.

“The basis would be information sharing,” she said. “It might sound very basic... intelligence, information sharing is really the basis of any enhanced security defense partnership. And it’s easier said than done.” Working primarily with Japan, she pointed to a fragmented intelligence architecture: Japan still lacks an anti-espionage law, and its national intelligence agency was only approved in March of this year. “It’s baby steps, but getting there”.

“Just to agree on what counts as a warning sign, agree on channels to compare the readings of a threat environment, so basically try to establish like a shared early warning or threat indicator framework,” adding that

Japan is already pursuing similar coordination with the EU and European states on economic security, including compiling lists of private entities targeted by economic coercion.

On concrete capabilities, Pejsova named three priority areas: drones, cyber and undersea infrastructure. She pointed to NATO's Drone Edge initiative announced at the Ankara summit — "40 billion over 5 years allocated to drone development" — and to a Japan-Ukraine joint drone production agreement reached in July. On cyber, she noted that all four IP4 countries took part in the Cyber Champion summit in Prague. On undersea infrastructure, she said the Baltic Sea experience is "providing a lot of lessons for the Indo-Pacific Four, who are also very much dependent on this domain."

Maritime Security: "The Great Connector"

For Pejsova, maritime security sits at the heart of the relationship. "The maritime realm is the great connector," she said. "Free, open, secure maritime routes are really the kind of common interest between them all." She described a steady rhythm of European naval deployments to the region — joint exercises with the IP4 partners that also serve, in her words, to test "China's reactions."

The stakes are high because, as she put it, "any major next possible crisis in the region will inevitably be maritime, whether it is the East China Sea, the South China Sea, or the Taiwan Strait." This is also where some of the most significant industrial contracts are emerging, she said, citing Japan's sale of Mogami-class frigates to Australia as its first major defence export contract, alongside growing European interest in unmanned systems, reconnaissance and satellite-based surveillance. She also pointed to the Arctic and seabed cooperation as an adjacent area where "Japan, but also South Korea, for instance, have a say," noting that the Arctic in particular falls naturally within NATO's own operational theatre.

Japan's Reforms: "Smoothly Sailing Ahead"

Concluding the discussion of what political or legal constraints might still limit Japan's operational integration with NATO, Pejsova acknowledged familiar obstacles: constitutional limitations, a restrictive reading of the right to collective self-defense, export controls, bureaucratic hurdles and an intelligence architecture that "has not been really shaping up until recently."

But she stressed that the pace of reform since 2015 — and especially since the 2022 National Security Strategy — has been striking. "Japan has lifted its export control legislation in March of this year," she noted, adding that approval is still required on a case-by-case basis but that the trajectory is clear. With the establishment of the national intelligence agency and Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi's government now revising all three core security documents, Pejsova was upbeat about the trend: "Things are

really moving ahead... we are smoothly sailing ahead, and it's impressive what Japan managed to achieve within the NATO framework."

About the Interviewed: Eva Pejsova is a leading political analyst and researcher specializing in Indo-Pacific security and EU-Asia relations. As the Japan Chair at the Centre for Security, Diplomacy and Strategy (CSDS) in Brussels, she bridges the gap between academic research and actionable foreign policy. A widely published expert with a PhD in Strategic Studies, she regularly advises European institutions on maritime security, regional defense dynamics, and multilateral diplomacy in East Asia.

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