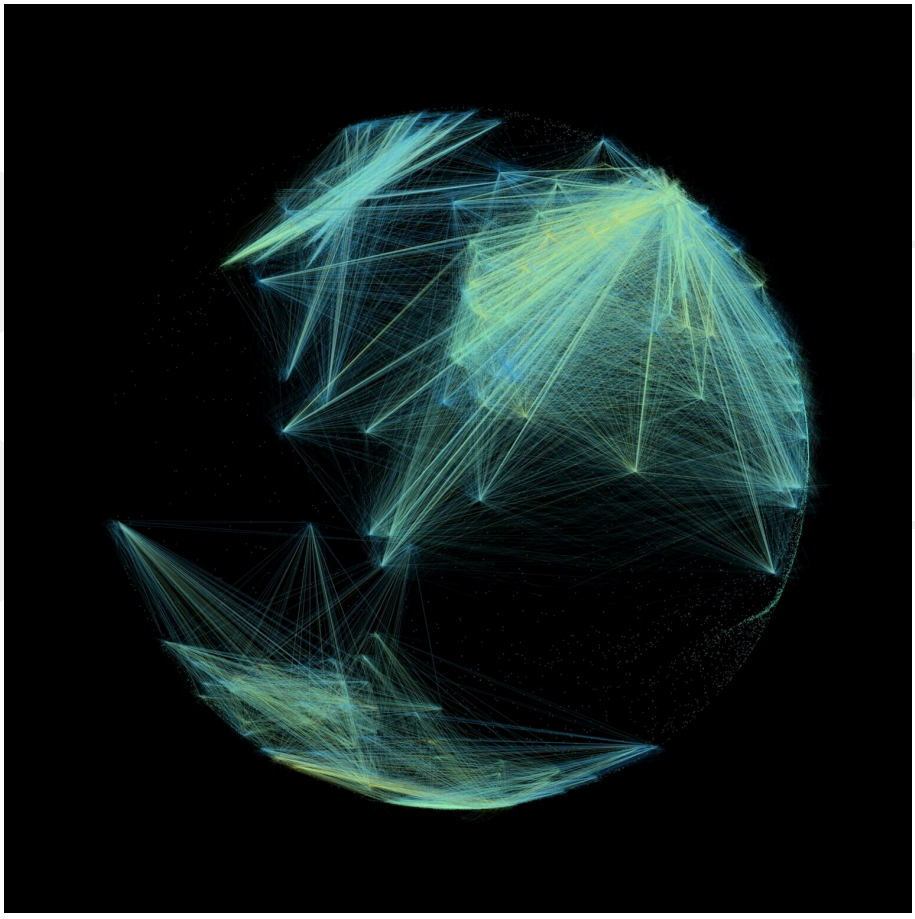
Bridging Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific Security

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ABSTRACT

Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the deepened alignment between the Axis of Autocracies (Moscow, Beijing, and Pyongyang) have dissolved the analytical separation between the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific security.

NATO has responded by progressively tightening its relationship across four successive summits with the recently formalised Indo-Pacific Four (IP4): Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and the Republic of Korea. This article argues that the political and institutional conditions now exist for a more comprehensive integration of the NATO-IP4 partnership, offering tangible advantages in supply chain resilience, maritime security, intelligence cooperation, and coordinated deterrence. While intra-NATO divergences, domestic constraints in IP4 capitals, and the risk of entering a dialogue trap are present, none are insurmountable. As confidence in American leadership erodes on both sides of the Atlantic, the case for institutionalising direct NATO-IP4 mechanisms while the political conditions still allow it is stronger.

1. INTRODUCTION

When former Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida declared at the 2022 Shangri-La Dialogue that "today Ukraine might be East Asia tomorrow" (Kishida, 2022), he was not speaking in abstractions. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine had already exposed something that Western strategists had yet to acknowledge: the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific security tracks are not parallel, but now the same one, with North Korean troops and artillery in Russia and China supporting Moscow's war economy. The strategic alignment between the Axis of Autocracies made it impossible to treat European and Pacific security as separate issues requiring distinct coalitions.

NATO's response to this entanglement has been gradual. Since 2022, the alliance has regularly invited the four most prominent Indo-Pacific democracies (Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and the Republic of Korea) to its annual summits, shaping what is now referred to as the Indo-Pacific Four (IP4). The relationship has strengthened across successive summits, from Madrid 2022 to The Hague 2025, as a joint NATO-IP4 statement reaffirmed commitments on supply chain security, maritime cooperation, and deterrence.

This article argues that the political and institutional conditions now exist for a more comprehensive NATO-IP4 partnership, offering tangible strategic and logistical advantages as NATO considers shifting towards a more alliance-based model, less dependent on American leadership. While challenges remain, they are not insurmountable. The groundwork has been laid; what remains is the political will to build on it.

2. THE IP4: ORIGINS AND INSTITUTIONAL EVOLUTION

Madrid 2022 marked the point at which NATO's engagement with the Indo-Pacific Four shifted from diplomatic symbolism to a strategically grounded partnership. The 2022 Strategic Concept, adopted at the Madrid Summit, named China a "systemic challenge" to Euro-Atlantic security for

the first time, aligning the alliance's worldview with long-standing concerns in Tokyo, Canberra, Seoul, and Wellington about coercive Chinese behaviour and the erosion of the rules-based order (NATO, 2022; Grgić, 2024). Against that backdrop, inviting Australia, Japan, the Republic of Korea, and New Zealand to Madrid was not diplomatic courtesy but rather a logical response to the growing fusion of Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific security theatres. The IP4's repeated presence at subsequent summits distinguishes them from one-off invitees like Jordan or the Philippines, whose attendance signalled issue-specific cooperation rather than a sustained, multi-year strategic project.

At the Vilnius summit in 2023, every IP4 partner concluded Individually Tailored Partnership Programmes (ITPPs) with NATO, providing their cooperation with a solid framework, biennial review cycles, and a menu of priority areas from maritime security to emerging technologies (NATO, 2024; Vale, 2025). The same year, France vetoed plans for a NATO liaison office in Tokyo because such a presence would stretch the alliance's North Atlantic mandate, exposing an internal fault line that still shapes how far and how fast Indo-Pacific cooperation can proceed (McCurry, 2023; Grgić, 2024). This episode clarifies where resistance lies and how advocates might reframe IP4 cooperation: a contribution to European resilience and deterrence against Russia, rather than as geographic overreach to bring sceptical allies like Paris and Berlin along.

By Washington 2024, the relationship had acquired both a strategic narrative and tangible industrial content. The inaugural US-Japan Defence Industrial Cooperation, Acquisition and Sustainment (DICAS) forum offered a concrete template for "co-development, co-production, and co-sustainment" (Kim, 2024). The Hague 2025 crystallised this evolution with a joint NATO-IP4 statement that elevated supply chain resilience, maritime cooperation, and emerging technologies to shared priorities.

In only three years, the IP4 had moved from ad hoc diplomatic signalling to an institutionally anchored partnership within NATO's broader cooperative-security architecture. The foundation now exists; the question is how quickly both sides are willing to build on it.

Figure 1: *Geographic spread of IP4 members relative to NATO member states.*

3. QUAD, AUKUS, AND WHAT MAKES IP4 DISTINCT

The IP4 sit within a crowded ecosystem of Indo-Pacific minilaterals, the most politically visible of which is the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue. The QUAD (Australia, India, Japan, and the United States) was designed to be flexible, informal, and explicitly non-allied, with leaders repeatedly stressing its focus on public goods, norms, and resilience rather than collective defence (Cannon, 2025). Nonetheless, India's doctrine of strategic autonomy, in contrast to the other three members' alignment, constrains

the QUAD's ability to respond coherently to hard-security crises (Lee, 2020) and precludes the binding commitments that NATO and the IP4 are beginning to explore.

AUKUS sits at the opposite end of the spectrum: deeply institutionalised, technologically ambitious, and deliberately exclusive (Toropchin, 2025). Pillar One, focused on enabling Australia to acquire nuclear-powered submarines, represents the most far-reaching transfer of naval propulsion technology since the original US-UK agreement of the 1950s, with major implications for alliance undersea warfare and industrial base planning. Pillar Two widens the aperture to advanced capabilities, from AI and quantum to cyber and undersea systems, where the circle of trusted partners can be expanded incrementally, but always under tight political and export-control constraints (Brooke-Holland, 2023). AUKUS's exclusivity is a feature from the perspective of technology protection, yet a structural flaw: key regional partners like Japan and South Korea remain outside its core, fuelling perceptions of an Anglo-centric security club. Moreover, its focus on military "hard power" against China creates a security dilemma in the region, which is avoided through a more flexible trans-regional security agenda-setting that the IP4 enables.

The IP4 is the only Indo-Pacific grouping formally embedded in NATO's partnership architecture. Through the ITPPs and associated flagship projects, each of the four partners has a standing work programme with the alliance spanning defence planning, interoperability, resilience, and advanced capabilities (NATO, 2024). This institutional anchoring gives the IP4 what QUAD and AUKUS lack: direct access to NATO's integrated military structure, political decision-making, and standardisation processes, while still allowing for differentiated agendas that reflect diverse national priorities as well as biennial reviews (Vale, 2025). Geographically, the IP4 together extend NATO's partner network from the Korean Peninsula across critical Northeast Asian chokepoints to the Tasman Sea and the South Pacific, a span no other of the aforementioned minilateral partnerships covers. Operationally, all four states have histories of working alongside NATO in Afghanistan, maritime security operations, or in support of Ukraine, providing an existing base of interoperability and trust (Rolfe, 2024; Hoshino, 2024).

In functional terms, despite the differences, the three groupings are complementary. QUAD is best suited to coordinate norms, resilience, and public goods provision among a mix of US allies and non-allied partners, without raising expectations of mutual defence. AUKUS is a specialised mechanism for cutting-edge technology transfer among a very small set of highly trusted states. IP4, by contrast, is the bridge between Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific hard security. It is the only format that directly connects key Indo-Pacific democracies to NATO's institutional machinery and planning processes, allowing the alliance to internalise Indo-Pacific dynamics

and the IP4 to plug into Euro-Atlantic deterrence in more structured ways (Grgić, 2024). Getting that bridge right is NATO's strategic opportunity.

Figure 2: *Membership overlap between IP4, QUAD, and AUKUS, with NATO as institutional anchor.*

4. STRATEGIC AND LOGISTICAL OPPORTUNITIES

4.1 Supply Chain and Defence Industry

The NATO-IP4 Hague statement in 2025 explicitly elevated supply chain security and defence industrial resilience from a background concern to a central pillar of the partnership. For European allies struggling to replenish stockpiles after large-scale transfers to Ukraine, the ability to tap IP4 industrial capacity without creating new single-supplier dependencies has become not just desirable but strategically necessary (Grgić, 2024; Vale, 2025). South Korea stands out as the most dynamic producer of IP4 munitions. Between 2021 and 2024, Seoul's defence exports roughly quadrupled, with artillery shells, self-propelled howitzers, and armoured platforms heading in significant volumes to Poland and other European states (Nemeth & Kim, 2024). The Korean industry has demonstrated the ability to scale production quickly, meet NATO standards, and deliver on tight timelines, turning the country into a world-class munitions scaler rather than a niche supplier. The 2024 DICAS forum between Japan and the United States offers a model for deeper defence production integration, co-producing key systems, harmonising regulations, and sharing supply-chain data that could be extended to European partners and other IP4 states (Mastro, 2025). Australia's AUKUS-related shipbuilding and undersea industrial ecosystem, though centred on nuclear-powered submarines, creates design, workforce, and component capacities that could feed into a broader NATO-IP4 industrial framework if properly connected (Brooke-Holland, 2023). The strategic opportunity is to connect these dots into a coherent lattice rather than a set of bilateral deals, creating reciprocal interdependence that makes any future political decoupling more costly for all sides.

4.2 Maritime Security

IP4's geographic footprint provides NATO with access to a continuous arc of maritime spaces central to both regional stability and global trade. Japan and South Korea sit astride Northeast Asian chokepoints and contested waters (the Sea of Japan, the East China Sea and the approaches to the Taiwan Strait) where Chinese, Russian, and North Korean forces challenge the status quo through incursions, grey-zone tactics, and missile tests. Australia and New Zealand anchor the southern Indo-Pacific and the Pacific Islands region, where illegal fishing, climate impacts, and strategic competition intersect with under-resourced local maritime forces. No other

NATO partner grouping spans this range of waters while also sharing deep institutional ties with the alliance. Building on these geographic advantages through joint AUV development, common logistics standards, and shared training for naval task groups (Huygens et al., 2025) would turn NATO-IP4 maritime cooperation into a genuine force multiplier.

4.3 Intelligence, Cyber and Space

Australia and New Zealand are established Five Eyes members, bringing long-standing habits of intelligence sharing, common security standards, and deep experience fusing signals, imagery, and open-source intelligence across domains (Vale, 2025). New Zealand, though a smaller player, also contributes to Five Eyes maritime awareness in the South Pacific and Southern Ocean, particularly regarding fisheries enforcement and transnational crime (Battersby & Ball, 2023). Japan and South Korea, while not part of Five Eyes, would also benefit from deeper intelligence-sharing integration with NATO, to the detriment of the Axis of Autocracies. The Hague statement highlighted autonomous underwater vehicles, AI-enabled maritime domain awareness, and dual-use start-ups as priority areas for cooperation, recognising that technological advantage in undersea cables, seabed infrastructure, and orbital assets will be critical in any future crisis (NATO, 2025). A more structured NATO-IP4 framework for cyber exercises, space situational awareness, and the protection of critical undersea infrastructure would deter adversaries and create shared standards that are extensible to other partners.

4.4 Coordinated Deterrence

The Russia-China-North Korea alignment is deliberately designed to exploit seams between theatres and alliances. North Korean artillery shells and troops fed Russia's war against Ukraine; Chinese economic and diplomatic support softens the impact of Western sanctions; joint exercises and technology transfers among the three signal a willingness to coordinate coercion across Eurasia (Ha & Shin, 2022). If NATO and the IP4 respond in uncoordinated, theatre-bound ways, they risk validating the very strategy their adversaries are pursuing. Joint planning for sanctions, export controls, and military signalling, as well as more regular NATO-IP4 combined exercises in air, maritime, cyber, and space domains, would make it harder for Beijing, Moscow, or Pyongyang to calculate that aggression in one theatre can be compartmentalised and managed.

5. OBSTACLES AND LIMITS

5.1 Intra-NATO Divergence

The push for a deeper NATO-IP4 partnership confronts real fault lines inside the alliance. France's 2023 veto of a NATO liaison office in Tokyo,

justified publicly as a defence of the alliance's North Atlantic geographic mandate, crystallised concerns in Paris that an Indo-Pacific turn could dilute NATO's core mission and entangle it in US-led containment of China. Germany, meanwhile, voted against EU tariffs on Chinese electric vehicles in October 2024, underscoring how deeply commercial interests can constrain security alignment even among core NATO members (Rinke, 2024). These divergences shape how IP4 cooperation must be framed inside the alliance. An Indo-Pacific narrative centred on China and maritime power projection is likely to trigger reflexive resistance from those who fear NATO mission creep and further deterioration in EU-China relations. By contrast, presenting IP4 cooperation as a fortifier of European supply chains, a diversifier of critical dependencies, and an enhancer of resilience against Russian aggression offers a more compelling story for Paris and Berlin (Grgić, 2024).

5.2 The Problem of Australia

Domestic politics and economic exposure also limit how far the IP4 can move and at what speed, as Australia simultaneously deepens its AUKUS commitments and manages a careful diplomatic rapprochement with Beijing. Canberra has clear interests in deterring Chinese coercion and strengthening defence ties with the United States, the United Kingdom, Japan, and others, but it also depends heavily on Chinese markets (Yi & Yang, 2023). Albanese's consecutive absences from NATO summits are best read as signals that his government is cautious about highly visible steps that might be framed domestically or regionally as joining a Western containment bloc.

5.3 The Dialogue Trap

The NATO-IP4 relationship has so far generated an impressive density of summits, communiqués, and conceptual work, but far fewer operational deliverables. This is the dialogue trap: the risk that the partnership becomes a high-visibility talking shop, generating expectations among publics and elites without producing concrete outputs. A second Trump administration compounds both the risks and the opportunity. On the one hand, a more transactional, inward-looking United States is likely to reduce Washington's willingness to serve as the primary conduit between NATO and the IP4, forcing European and Indo-Pacific partners to organise more directly (Grgić, 2025). On the other hand, that very reduction in US mediation strengthens the case for institutionalising NATO-IP4 mechanisms now, while political conditions still allow for experimentation. Without concrete deliverables in the next few years, sceptics will be able to argue that the partnership has failed to justify the diplomatic and political bandwidth it consumes.

6. CONCLUSION

The political and institutional conditions now exist for a deeper, more structured NATO-IP4 partnership; the constraint is no longer imagination but political will. Madrid 2022 put China and the Indo-Pacific on NATO's agenda, Vilnius 2023 and Washington 2024 gave the IP4 distinct institutional and industrial footholds in the alliance, and The Hague 2025 elevated supply chains, maritime security, and emerging technologies to shared priorities. At the same time, divergences inside NATO, domestic constraints within the IP4, and the ever-present dialogue trap have kept the partnership from realising its full potential.

Three conditions are essential if this window of opportunity is to be seized. First, an intra-alliance consensus must be built by framing IP4 cooperation as a contribution to European resilience and deterrence rather than as an open-ended geographic expansion into Asia. Second, the partnership needs sequenced deliverables: a small set of high-visibility co-production projects and joint capabilities that demonstrate value quickly and build momentum. Third, it must rest on genuine reciprocity, treating the IP4 not as appendages to a Euro-Atlantic project but as co-architects of a latticework security order spanning Eurasia. The shift from alignment to cooperation is already underway; whether it matures into an operational partnership will depend on decisions taken in the next few summit cycles.

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