NATO and the IP4 – Closer Cooperation Incoming?

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In mid-April, the largest NATO delegation, comprising around 30 ambassadors to NATO, visited East Asia to deepen bilateral ties among NATO members and other countries. During the visit, the envoy met with Japanese Cabinet ministers and high-ranking officials to further discuss shared security concerns and discover potential for closer cooperation. NATO members and East Asian countries are not only challenged by the ongoing Russian attack on Ukraine, but also by evolving tensions in the Middle

East. The latter has severe economic impacts, threatening energy security and driving up energy prices. East Asian and Southeast Asian countries are facing an additional severe security challenge due to China's increasing assertiveness in the South China Sea. The ambassadors' visit to East Asia, although not organised by NATO, was welcomed by the organisation.

Even with East Asian countries' formal accession to NATO out of sight and not in the interest of countries such as South Korea or Japan, the desire for closer cooperation and collaboration on both sides remains. However, it is not only countries in East Asia that are in favour of closer cooperation with NATO; the other members of the so-called Indo-Pacific Four (IP4) – namely Australia and New Zealand – are also in favour.

NATO has been strengthening relations with countries in the Indo-Pacific, the so-called IP4, namely Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand. Based on common values and the shared interest in upholding the international rules-based order, NATO has stepped up cooperation since the four Heads of State and Government participated in the NATO Summit 2022 in Madrid. Two key documents were signed: the Agenda for Tackling Shared Security Challenges in 2022 and the NATO 2022 Strategic Concept. NATO maintains relations with the IP4 nations individually, through the Individually Tailored Partnership Programmes.

Relations with Japan have been especially fruitful. In January 2025, the Japanese government established a special Japanese Mission to NATO in Brussels. The mission's key focus is to deepen ties with NATO and to advance defense industrial cooperation among NATO countries and Japan. To push the already fruitful relations, multiple obstacles need to be overcome. Relations so far have been based on dialogue and general political cooperation. However, actual cooperation beyond this level remains sparse. Defense industrial relations are a key area which the Japanese Mission to NATO is actively addressing. Since the Japanese Mission to NATO was established, Japan has increased its political dialogue activities. Japan's interest in closer ties with NATO should not be understood as a sole reaction to the Chinese military buildup. Japan has long considered China a security threat. It is also not Japan's only security threat, as it is in close proximity to be reached by North Korean missiles, or is facing continuing disputes with Russia over islands in the north of Japan. Additionally, the days when the US was considered a reliable security guarantor are over, and Japan is actively seeking new partners, such as NATO, not to defend Japan, but rather as a psychological deterrent. Closer cooperation with Japan on the NATO side was hindered by France, which blocked the establishment of an office in Japan by arguing that NATO should focus on its territory. The desire for greater cooperation is there, and it is now on both sides to turn political dialogue into more measurable outcomes.

NATO and South Korea have been working closely across the domains of cyber defence, arms control and non-proliferation, and innovation and technology, among others. A key factor of cooperation between NATO and

South Korea has been arms deals. However, the current political situation in South Korea, with the new President pursuing a rather balanced China policy and being less forthcoming on security and defence cooperation than his predecessor, Yoon Suk-yeol. Interoperability remains a key challenge between NATO and South Korea. NATO needs to be ready to potentially defend itself against Russian aggression. In the event of such aggression, NATO needs the full political support of the IP4 countries. If South Korea will be able to live up to these expectations, especially when confronted with an additional security threat from North Korea, remains to be seen. In the past, South Korea has sometimes been hesitant to engage more closely with NATO, especially when invited to support Ukraine. In February, South Korea was asked to support NATO in buying U.S. weapons for Ukraine. Government officials have reportedly claimed that South Korea's stance on supporting Ukraine is centered around humanitarian aid and nonlethal military equipment. Further straining ties with Russia has been one of the reasons Seoul has refrained. Value-based alignment that was very much on the agenda under Yoon, who also visited Ukraine during his tenure before he was removed from office, is not the key driver of Lee's foreign policy agenda. Lee has softened Seoul's rhetoric towards Russia and has also skipped the NATO Summit at the presidential level. Ties between NATO and South Korea have been closer; another rapprochement depends on Seoul's foreign policy agenda.

Relations with Australia and New Zealand have continued to deepen within NATO's Indo-Pacific framework, though their engagement reflects differing strategic priorities and domestic policy objectives. Both countries have participated in NATO summits since 2022, underscoring their alignment with NATO's emphasis on the interconnectedness of Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific security. On top of that, Australia and New Zealand are key partners of the Five Eyes. This is an alliance between the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand, designed for intelligence sharing and security cooperation. With the exception of the two Pacific Island states, the rest of the members are part of NATO. This makes both countries crucial for intelligence collection across the Asia-Pacific region.

Australia remains one of NATO's most advanced and capable partners in the region. Under Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, Australia has pursued a defence policy centred on what could be described as a "strategic equilibrium": simultaneously strengthening deterrence while avoiding escalation in great-power competition, particularly with China, a country that remains deeply engaged with Australia's economy. This approach is grounded in the 2024 National Defence Strategy, which emphasises a shift from a balanced force to a focused force capable of projecting power, defending Australia's strategic interests, and contributing to regional stability. A central pillar of this policy is the expansion of Australia's defence industrial base and long-range strike capabilities. Defence spending is set on an upward trajectory,

with significant investments in missile systems, cyber capabilities, and naval power. AUKUS, that is, the strategic special cooperation with Britain and America, remains critical, particularly for access to nuclear-powered submarine technology and advanced defence innovation. Nevertheless, Canberra has also signalled its intention to rebuild cooperation with other European actors, amid growing antagonism toward the United States due to Trump's unpopularity among Australians. This positions Canberra as a key part in a broader Western defence-industrial network that includes European NATO members. Within the NATO context, Australia has consistently sought to translate political alignment into operational contributions. It has shown support for Ukraine through economic aid and weapons, participated in NATO exercises, and deepened interoperability with Allied forces. Nevertheless, Albanese's government has maintained a pragmatic approach toward China, focusing on stabilising diplomatic relations while continuing to frame China's military modernisation as a key strategic challenge. NATO cooperation is thus embedded within a broader networked security strategy rather than representing a shift toward formal alliance structures in the Indo-Pacific.

In contrast, New Zealand's engagement with NATO under conservative Prime Minister Christopher Luxon reflects a more security-forward posture than previous Labour governments, while still retaining elements of New Zealand's traditional cautious approach. Luxon's government has signalled a stronger emphasis on defence and security, including commitments to increase defence spending and modernise military capabilities. This marks a shift toward closer alignment with partners such as Australia, the United States, and, by extension, NATO. Luxon has framed New Zealand's foreign policy around the need to respond to a more contested strategic environment, explicitly acknowledging rising geopolitical tensions in the Indo-Pacific. Similar to Australia, New Zealand is vital to maintain a stable contact network with the island nations of the Pacific. While maintaining economic ties with China, his government has taken a much firmer tone on security issues, including concerns over regional militarisation and the importance of upholding international law. This has created greater political space for deeper engagement with NATO compared to previous governments. In practical terms, New Zealand continues to focus its NATO cooperation on maritime security, cyber defence, and peace support operations. However, under Luxon, there is growing openness to increase interoperability and participate in more advanced defence initiatives, particularly alongside Australia. Defence cooperation between the two countries has intensified, reinforcing their role as a coordinated regional pillar within NATO's broader partnership network. Luxon has also showcased his desire to explicitly increase defence procurement from European countries. Despite this shift, several structural limitations remain. New Zealand's defence industrial base is relatively small, and its strategic culture continues to favour multilateralism and diplomacy over hard power

projection. For instance, Prime Minister Luxon had to assure that the increase in military spending was not due to NATO pressure. This signals that the public's desire for a more assertive security policy remains weaker. As a result, its contributions to NATO are likely to remain more selective and niche compared to Australia's.

Another important factor to consider when reviewing NATO's role in the Asia-Pacific region is its approach to industrial relations in matters of security. The growing role of NATO weapons manufacturers and defence companies has had a significant and increasingly complex impact on the Asia-Pacific region. Traditionally dominated by imports from the United States and Russia, the region is now deeply embedded in a globalised defence-industrial network in which European firms are playing an ever-increasing role. This influence operates through arms exports, industrial partnerships, technological diffusion, and geopolitical signalling. It is also a signal of a gradual increase and presence of the European defence sector.

First, NATO-linked defence companies remain key suppliers of advanced military equipment to Asia-Pacific states. European firms such as BAE Systems, Thales Group and Leonardo S.p.A. contribute to a rapidly expanding market driven by rising regional tensions and military modernisation, as well as a desire for diversification. The Asia-Pacific defence market accounted for roughly 40 per cent of global defence spending in 2025, reflecting a sustained procurement and capability development across major powers such as India and Japan. European suppliers are particularly competitive in high-end technologies such as sensors, naval systems and electronic warfare, which complement local industrial capabilities. On top of this, while NATO companies have seen growing exports into the Asian market, they also face growing competition from regional defence industries. Countries such as South Korea, Japan and India are increasingly producing their own systems and even exporting them abroad. For instance, Asian firms have rapidly climbed the global rankings, with more than 20 companies now among the world's top 100 defence manufacturers. This creates a dual dynamic in which European companies both shape and are challenged by Asia-Pacific defence markets. In some cases, collaboration replaces competition, with joint ventures and co-production agreements becoming more common. This is leading to a situation in which European defence companies influence the Asia-Pacific through industrial cooperation and supply chains. Increasingly, European firms are not only exporting finished systems but also partnering with regional actors for local production, maintenance and technology transfer. This reflects a broader trend towards "strategic autonomy" in Asia, where governments seek to retain more defence spending within domestic economies. This can be seen in agreements involving missile systems, naval platforms and aerospace technologies across countries such as India and Australia. Another good example of this is the recent agreement between the Polish Bumar-Labedy and the South Korean Hyundai for the development of tanks. However, it

must be said that supply chain interdependence creates vulnerabilities. European defence production depends on critical materials and components sourced from Asia, particularly China. Recent developments illustrate this risk. China has imposed restrictions on exports of dual-use items to several European defence entities in response to arms cooperation with Taiwan, highlighting how geopolitical tensions can disrupt industrial flows . Such measures demonstrate that the defence-industrial relationship between NATO and Asia-Pacific is not purely cooperative but also subject to strategic competition and economic coercion.

This is followed by the fact that European defence companies contribute to technological diffusion in the region. Advanced capabilities in areas such as cyber defence, artificial intelligence, and surveillance systems are increasingly shared through partnerships and exports. This accelerates military modernisation across the Asia-Pacific, enabling states to enhance their deterrence capabilities. At the same time, it contributes to an arms dynamic in which neighbouring countries respond to each other's upgrades, reinforcing a cycle of military investment. The broader NATO-linked defence market in the Indo-Pacific is projected to grow substantially, reaching over $ 600 billion by 2034, underscoring the scale of this transformation. On top of this, the presence of NATO defence companies carries important geopolitical implications. Arms exports and industrial partnerships are not neutral transactions; they signal political alignment and strategic partnerships. European defence cooperation with countries such as Japan, South Korea and Australia reinforces a broader network of security relationships aligned with NATO principles. This contributes to a gradual integration of the Asia-Pacific into a wider Western-oriented security architecture. At the same time, however, it runs the risk of heightening tensions with China, which views such cooperation, particularly involving Taiwan, as a direct challenge to its interests. Unlike with Russia, NATO does not necessarily envisage wider-scale conflicts with China, which makes it difficult to assess these implications.

In conclusion, NATO's engagement with the Indo-Pacific is no longer exploratory but a structural reality. Nevertheless, its trajectory remains limited by design. This paper shows that cooperation with the IP4 countries is expanding across political, military, and, increasingly, industrial domains. However, this does not amount to the emergence of a NATO role in the Indo-Pacific that is comparable to its position in the Euro-Atlantic. Instead, what is taking shape is a flexible and objective-based network of partnerships, driven less by formal alliance-building and more by shared strategic concerns and practical cooperation. The variation among partners is central to understanding this dynamic. Japan and Australia are moving towards deeper, more operational cooperation, including in defence industrial integration, while South Korea and New Zealand maintain more cautious, selective approaches shaped by domestic politics and regional constraints. This uneven engagement confirms that NATO's Indo-Pacific strategy is

not uniform; instead, it adapts to the specific partners in question. At the same time, the growing role of European defence industries represents the most tangible and durable dimension of this cooperation. Arms exports, joint production, and technological partnerships are embedding European actors into the region's security architecture in ways that go beyond political signalling. These industrial linkages both reflect and reinforce the broader strategic convergence between NATO members and key Indo-Pacific states.

Yet important limits persist. Economic interdependence with China, diverging threat perceptions, and NATO's continued prioritisation of European security constrain the depth of engagement. As a result, NATO is unlikely to evolve into a formal security actor in the Indo-Pacific. Rather, the evidence suggests that NATO's future role will be that of a connector: facilitating interoperability, industrial cooperation, and political alignment across regions. Closer cooperation is therefore not only incoming, but already underway, though in a form that is networked, selective, and strategically bounded rather than institutionalised.

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