

# Commentary



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## Hard constraints: The supply and demand of NATO in the Indo-Pacific

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Analysts and policy-makers increasingly recognize that the Euro-Atlantic and the Indo-Pacific are theatres that are much more interconnected than what the physical distance from one another would imply.

For one, China has expanded its global reach, with new military assets and foreign policy instruments that could be used against targets in Europe. As North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg declared in 2019, “there’s no way that NATO will move into the South China Sea, but we have to address the fact that China is coming closer to us” (Ellyatt 2019). Cyber, space, and even missile capabilities give China the wherewithal to unsettle members of the Euro-Atlantic community.

For another, questions abound over the degree to which Russia and China collaborate militarily. They declared that their strategic partnership has “no limits” in February 2022, just prior to Russia’s fateful launch of a full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Even if Beijing and Moscow are not tightly coordinating their actions as extensively as often asserted, their animosity towards liberal

democracy and the prevailing territorial order has prompted unease among Canada's allies and partners across the two regions.

NATO may not be moving into the South China Sea, but it has spent the last few years improving its links to US treaty allies and Canadian partners in the Indo-Pacific. NATO already has established a network of partnerships involving countries through multiple formats like the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council (EAPC), the Mediterranean Dialogue, and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative. However, those called “[p]artners across the globe” have assumed greater importance for NATO in the current international environment (NATO 2024), with Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and South Korea now cast as the Asia-Pacific Four (AP4) (Kim 2023). Leaders from those countries attended a NATO Summit for the first time ever in Madrid in 2022. They also took part in the subsequent summit in Vilnius, Lithuania, in 2023.

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Encapsulating how NATO has increased its ties with the Indo-Pacific has been its intent to establish a liaison office in Tokyo, something that had been promised for 2023 but is yet to come to pass due to disagreement within the Alliance about its purpose and need.

Informed by our conversations and workshops conducted in Brussels, Tokyo, and Ottawa in 2023 and 2024, our report focuses on how NATO relates to the Indo-Pacific. The central argument we make is that the Alliance faces hard constraints on what it can do there on both the supply and demand sides. On the supply side, NATO will never give the Indo-Pacific significant attention because it is not its Area of Responsibility. Enough of its own members will be reluctant to deepen NATO's involvement in the Indo-Pacific if it means risking tensions with China or stretching those resources that could otherwise go to Europe. NATO's need for consensus to make strategic decisions will thus restrict what the Alliance collectively can offer. On the demand side,

NATO's partners in the Indo-Pacific may not be keen to receive too much from the Alliance either. Members of the AP4 themselves vary in how much they see China as a threat. Some perceive risks associated with NATO – a formal military alliance – being too involved in their region because of the militarization it might imply.

We elaborate these points in our report. We do not argue that China and the Indo-Pacific are irrelevant to NATO, or that they present such difficult Alliance challenges as to be unworthy of taking up. We argue instead that expectations for what NATO can do in the Indo-Pacific, and for what its partners in the region want from it, should be modest. In elaborating this argument, we first describe NATO's engagement in the Indo-Pacific to date. We then discuss the supply- and demand-side constraints that the Alliance confronts in addressing the rise of China and enhancing its links to partners in the Indo-Pacific. Thereupon we conclude.

## **NATO and the Indo-Pacific**

Article 6 of the Washington Treaty – NATO's founding document – defines the Alliance's geographic scope as the Atlantic area north of the Tropic of Cancer, thereby providing coverage to Europe, North America, and Turkey to the exclusion of Latin America. The Washington Treaty covers Alaska and its non-continental archipelago but not Hawaii since the latter is a jurisdiction that has no connection to North America. From its inception to the present day, NATO's primary Area of Responsibility (AoR) has thus been the Euro-Atlantic theatre. After all, concerns about the Soviet Union and its perceived willingness and ability to pursue expansionist aims in Europe encouraged the formation of the Alliance in the first place.

The end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union led to a flourishing of international cooperation. NATO used its institutional assets to go about cultivating defence partnerships in multilateral and bilateral formats. This process of institutional adaptation did not arise simply for the Alliance to remain relevant in the post-Cold War period. Amid concerns about state failure, democratic consolidation, and nationalist or ethnic conflict, NATO had the assets to help its members tackle those challenges, with partnerships providing the vehicle for cultivating broader defence cooperation, albeit with varying results (Wallander 2000).

The Partnership for Peace initiative encompassed former members of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Treaty Organization. Many countries would become full-fledged NATO members via Partnership for Peace. The Mediterranean Dialogue (1994) and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (2004) were developed to establish a framework involving various North African and Middle Eastern countries. Besides forging partnerships with Colombia, Pakistan, and Iraq that endure to this day, NATO also established official partnerships with formal US allies like Australia, (2005), Japan (2013), New Zealand (2001), and South Korea (2005). Previous partnerships with Afghanistan and Mongolia no longer exist.

NATO was becoming more of a global actor, but its preoccupations were still within Europe and, after 2001, along the front lines in the global “War on Terror” in Afghanistan and Iraq. Nevertheless, the 2010 “Strategic Concept” made no mention whatsoever of China (NATO 2010). This omission was unsurprising: at the time, most, if not all, of NATO believed that China could become a “responsible stakeholder” whereby its autocratic system of government would not prevent it from playing a constructive, positive-sum role in international politics. Over the course of the 2010s, views of China steadily became less favourable within NATO (Friedberg 2018). Territorial disputes with neighbours in the East and South China Sea, increased repression and authoritarianism at home, and economic gamesmanship have turned public opinion against China, especially in the United States. The Trump administration identified China as a strategic competitor in its 2018 *National Defense Strategy* (U.S. Department of Defense 2018), with President Donald Trump himself alleging that China was engaging in unfair trade practices, responsible for the COVID-19 pandemic, and intent on using telecommunications and cyber technologies to gain a strategic advantage over it and its allies (Rogin 2021).

NATO members differed in their own assessments of China while Trump was president between 2017 and 2021. Crudely put, such variation was largely a function of whether they disliked the Trump administration more generally for its policies and whether they continued to see in China a significant trading partner with whom they could, or needed to, do business. Nevertheless, the Trump administration put pressure on the Alliance, using the threat of exit from NATO to incite members into spending much more on their own militaries (Sperling and Webber 2019). Partly because the Trump administration attached more official priority to China, the Alliance could no longer ignore China.

Yet saying that NATO only came to care about China because of Trump would be an overstatement. China's buildup of its security services and military forces has created vulnerabilities within the Alliance. Chinese-origin cyber activities have intensified, affecting companies and governments alike across the Euro-Atlantic. European attitudes towards China did become more critical over the course of the 2010s, albeit at a slower pace than those in the United States (Meijer 2022). China also developed a large suite of missiles, with some types having enough range to hit targets in Europe (Edelman et al. 2022). That China and Russia were stepping up their military cooperation was also cause for concern. In 2017, the two countries had a joint naval drill in the Baltic Sea (Weitz 2017). The geopolitical repercussions of China's rise became more perceptible in the Euro-Atlantic. Still, members of the Alliance equivocated over the problem set that China poses, and so, in the 2019 London Summit Declaration, NATO simply agreed that "China's growing influence and international policies present both opportunities and challenges" (NATO 2019).

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Despite Trump's departure from the White House in January 2021, NATO's interest in China and the Indo-Pacific did not lessen. To the contrary, it grew, even amidst Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Leaders from Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and South Korea attended their first-ever NATO Summit in Madrid in 2022, and returned for the subsequent summit held the following year in Vilnius. The 2022 Strategic Concept adopted much more strident language on China than ever before. It noted that "[t]he People's Republic of China's (PRC) stated ambitions and coercive policies challenge our interests, security and values," before adding that "[t]he PRC's malicious hybrid and cyber operations and its confrontational rhetoric and disinformation target Allies and harm Alliance security" (NATO 2022). In wishing to have a regular presence for information exchanges, NATO announced its intent in early 2023 to have a liaison office in Tokyo, a plan co-developed by the Japanese government (Moller 2023). However, opposition from some members shelved the plan for the time being. As of writing in early 2024, there are no signs that the Alliance will come to an agreement soon on the issue.

## Supply-side constraints

The saga surrounding the Tokyo liaison office is indicative of the limits that NATO will have to confront if some of its members wish for the Alliance to play a greater role in the Indo-Pacific. NATO is a consensus-based organization that respects the sovereignty of each member. Every ally must agree for any Alliance-level decision to be made. This need for unanimity has meant that Ukraine and Georgia could not receive Membership Action Plans at the 2008 Bucharest Summit due to the opposition of France and Germany. Hungary and Turkey were similarly able to delay the Finnish and Swedish accession to the Alliance after the two Nordic countries applied for formal membership in 2022. France took much of the public blame for NATO's failure to achieve consensus on the Tokyo liaison office, but it was hardly alone in its objection. Still, it only takes one ally to veto any Alliance decision.

The unanimity rule is a double-edged sword for NATO. On the one hand, when countries do agree on a course of action, the decision has the collective weight of the entire membership. This is no small matter considering the economic and military heft of the Alliance in its entirety. On the other hand, NATO can be cumbersome and move slowly. The equivocal language on China contained within the 2019 "London Declaration" exemplifies the tendency towards the lowest common denominator that consensus decision-making can encourage. Accordingly, NATO member states sometimes create alternative formats to go about advancing their shared security objectives more speedily (Simón, Lanoszka, and Meijer 2021).

Consensus decision-making is obviously of lesser importance if everyone already agrees on a threat and what to do about it. However, that is not the case with how NATO members relate to China. Much variation characterizes European NATO members' policies towards China. On one end of the spectrum, Lithuania has been a strong supporter of Taiwan, with the result that it had to bear the brunt of China's subsequent campaign of economic coercion (Shattuck 2023). On the other end, Hungary has welcomed, even encouraged, Chinese investments despite the security concerns raised by its EU partners and NATO allies (Hompot 2023). Those countries that have nevertheless grown more wary of China in the last decade remain uneasy with the prospect of greater conflict with China. German Chancellor Olaf Scholz openly sought "economic reconciliation" with China when he became the first G7 leader to visit China since the beginning of the COVID-19

pandemic in November 2022 (Lemaître 2022). In personally meeting Xi Jinping in April 2023, French President Emmanuel Macron noted that “the worst thing would be to think we have to be followers and must adapt to the American rhythm and a Chinese overreaction.” Given that his remarks came around heightened tension around Taiwan, Macron received criticism for being soft and breaking with Western unity over the island country (*Courrier International* 2023).

Finally, that Indo-Pacific is not NATO’s AoR suggests that threat perceptions will remain relative to what a country might face closer to home. For example, Lithuania will ultimately prioritize the Euro-Atlantic over the Indo-Pacific, especially since it shares a land border with a revanchist Russia. The intensity of the Russo-Ukrainian War, as well as long-standing concerns about US alliance reliability, will focus more attention on the practice of deterrence and defence on the European continent.

With such mixed views on China, the inability of European NATO members to move in lockstep with the United States is unsurprising. France and Germany were skeptical of the need and usefulness of the liaison office planned for Tokyo. This skepticism was not because it had the potential of embroiling NATO in disputes local to East Asia. From the perspective of Paris, the plan seemed half-formed with unclear benefits, although the premature announcement of the liaison office in the press was also irksome (McCurry 2023). Regardless of the reasons, the take-away is simple: if NATO has trouble agreeing on instituting the sort of liaison office established elsewhere in the world, “a man in a room with a laptop” as one interlocutor described the idea to us, then it might not be able to offer more substantial security goods to the region.

## **Demand-side constraints**

A conventional wisdom seems to have emerged that because East Asian countries are wary of China’s rise, they want more NATO presence in East Asia. After all, China is currently undergoing a major military buildup, having reclaimed new islands and relitigated long-standing territorial disputes in the South and East China Seas. Greater investment and attention on the part of NATO members should be more of a stabilizing force.



Yet this emerging belief is misleading. Certainly, the military ambitions of China do provoke unease among many NATO members. Consider the AP4. Japan has reformed its national security structures and relaxed constitutional strictures so that it can better respond to the “pacing threat” that China represents. Australia, too, has been alarmed by China’s growing capabilities. It seized upon the opportunity to deepen its military-technical collaboration with the UK and the US by way of a novel security arrangement called AUKUS. Elsewhere the picture is mixed. South Korea is much more preoccupied with the challenge that North Korea poses. China is a major trading partner. Its relationship with China has been at times rocky, most notably when China imposed significant sanctions on South Korea after the United States first deployed Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) systems to the Korean peninsula. Nevertheless, as much as anti-Chinese sentiment has grown in South Korean society, Seoul has been careful in managing its relations with China (Grossman 2023). New Zealand has historically been relatively dovish toward China, but that has changed amid concerns over Chinese political interference and the promise of greater cooperation that AUKUS signals (Hickey 2023; Grossman 2024).

“ *They are wary of any steps undertaken by NATO members in their own region that could be provocative and escalatory.* ”

Our conversations with officials from most of the AP4 countries revealed some hesitation about what they wanted from NATO. All agree that consultations and dialogue are useful given that China represents a global challenge that has implications for the Indo-Pacific and the Euro-Atlantic theatre alike. Indeed, the liaison office planned for Tokyo is but a modest step in this direction. Beyond such exchanges, however, the desires of AP4 countries are unclear. One permanent representative to NATO explicitly said that military support was not needed from the Alliance, which is admittedly odd considering that NATO is a military pact. Japanese officials have also been somewhat circumspect. That careful attitude may yet be a function of their realistic appraisal for what NATO could provide in view of its internal



decision-making procedures. Nevertheless, they are wary of any steps undertaken by NATO members in their own region that could be provocative and escalatory. The nuclear brinkmanship played by Trump and North Korean Leader Kim Jong-un in 2018 may have impressed upon local officials that greater involvement on the part of external powers could backfire.

## **What needs to be done**

NATO could only provide so much to the Indo-Pacific while its partners in that region only want so much. That is not to say that NATO should simply put the Indo-Pacific on the back burner. The challenge now presented by China is too significant for NATO to dial the clock back to 2010. Inspired by our meetings with officials and experts from the two regions, we outline several modest areas of collaboration that should fix the attention of NATO and the AP4.

### ***1. How divisible is security?***

As per Article 6 of the Washington Treaty, NATO's AoR is strictly within the North Atlantic. However, several NATO members do have political and territorial interests in the Indo-Pacific region. If those interests come under direct attack, there may yet exist a moral compulsion or a sense of political obligation on the part of the Alliance to offer some support, regardless of what specific legal commitments do exist. To avoid misunderstandings, NATO members and the AP4 should consider their expectations in the event of such a contingency.

Creating a mechanism that enables regular consultations and coordination with AP4 partners, devising standard operating procedures among the allies that can be followed during a contingency in the Indo-Pacific, and identifying rules of engagement (which may need to remain classified) before a crisis occurs will be important to reduce the likelihood of misunderstandings, delays in response, and policy paralysis.

### ***2. The threat of disinformation***

Both NATO and AP4 face ubiquitous disinformation campaigns from authoritarian adversaries. Those adversaries, primarily Russia and China, also learn from each other and amplify each other's propaganda and disinformation campaigns. NATO countries, particularly those in the Eastern Flank, have extensive experience with Russian disinformation

campaigns and developed sophisticated ways to counter Russian campaigns and make their societies more resilient. Similarly, AP4 countries (as well as Taiwan) have been at the receiving end of increasingly robust Chinese “information operations.” Sharing best practices between NATO and AP4 countries in countering Russian and Chinese disinformation is low-hanging fruit in terms of cooperation that is also likely to be perceived as low-risk politically. The NATO Strategic Communications Center of Excellence in Riga, Latvia, might be the logical hub for such coordination. Canada can take a leading role in this endeavour as it is a target for both Chinese and Russian disinformation and interference campaigns.

### *3. Enhancing diplomatic dialogues*

Official engagement by NATO in the Indo-Pacific may be fraught with both the supply- and demand-side concerns as highlighted above. However, different types of diplomatic activities that bring together experts, diplomats, military and civilian officials, as well as the private sector, are less encumbered by such concerns. Regularizing workshops, conferences, working groups, field trips, and joint projects that are supported by NATO and the AP4 provide low-cost (both politically and fiscally) yet important mechanisms for understanding divergent threat perceptions, political and economic concerns, and emerging issues, while improving coordination and habits of interoperability among the officials. Among the ways for fostering closer links between NATO and its Indo-Pacific partners is to have a “NATO-Indo-Pacific Cooperation Fund” that supports such activities in addition to an annual “NATO-AP4 Public Forum” that rotates between AP4 partners and more robust inclusion of AP4 participants in the NATO Public Forum during NATO Summits.

### *4. Enhancing dialogue beyond the AP4*

The nascent but impressive engagement between NATO and AP4 is moving at pace, with some individually tailored partnership programs (ITTP), a leaders’ summit, and other side programs. However, it will be important for the Alliance to look at broader ways to engage the expansive region in areas of transnational concern, such as cyber resilience and even maritime domain awareness.

### *5. Liaison office is important – but harping on it misses the point*

Throughout our engagements, much discussion centred on a potential liaison office for NATO in the region. For various reasons, the idea of the office – originally proposed in Tokyo – was rejected by NATO members at the last NATO Summit. However, the levers of collaboration between the Alliance and its partners in Asia continue to grow regardless through ITTPs and other engagements. At this stage, it will be important to look at substantive engagement with the AP4 as the first goal. **MLI**

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