

February 2024

Report of the Expert Study Group on NATO and Indo-Pacific Partners



UNITED STATES
INSTITUTE OF PEACE
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About the Expert Study Group

The dynamics of influence, deterrence, and defense in the Indo-Pacific have changed, with potentially far-reaching consequences for peace and security in the region. European allies' recognition of the strategic challenges posed by China; US efforts to invigorate alliances with Australia, Japan, and South Korea; Russia's war in Ukraine; and China's reactions to these developments will play a major role in shaping the Indo-Pacific's future. To increase understanding of these changes and their impacts, the United States Institute of Peace convened a study group consisting of experts from NATO countries and Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and South Korea—the alliance's partners in the Indo-Pacific. The group explored Indo-Pacific partner perspectives on NATO and the opportunities and challenges of NATO and Indo-Pacific partner relations.

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United States Institute of Peace

2301 Constitution Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20037

Phone: 202.457.1700

E-mail: usip_requests@usip.org

Web: www.usip.org

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Report of the Expert Study Group on NATO and Indo-Pacific Partners

Chair

Mirna Galic

Senior Policy Analyst, China and East Asia,
United States Institute of Peace

Expert Study Group Members

Joe Burton

Professor of International Security, Politics,
Philosophy, and Religion, Lancaster University

David Capie

Director, Centre for Strategic Studies and
Professor of International Relations, Victoria
University of Wellington

Jean-Dominique Dulière

Former Head, Crisis Response Systems and
Exercises Section, NATO

Stephan Frühling

Professor, Strategic and Defence Studies Centre,
Australian National University

Gorana Grgić

Senior Researcher, Center for Security Studies,
ETH Zürich; Senior Lecturer, United States
Studies Centre, University of Sydney

Yoko Iwama

Professor and Director, Strategic Studies
Program, National Graduate Institute for Policy
Studies

Kwang-Jin Kim

Brigadier General (Retired), Republic of Korea
Air Force; Chair Professor, Sookmyung Women's
University; Consultant Board Member, Republic
of Korea Joint Chiefs of Staff

Geunwook Lee

Professor of Political Science, Sogang University;
Advisory Board Member, Republic of Korea
Ministry of Defense, Ministry of Foreign Affairs,
and Joint Chiefs of Staff

Jonathan Berkshire Miller

Senior Fellow and Director of Foreign Affairs,
National Defence, and National Security,
Macdonald-Laurier Institute; Senior Fellow,
Japan Institute of International Affairs;
Senior Fellow on East Asia, Asian Forum
Japan; Director and Co-founder, Council on
International Policy

Philip Shetler-Jones

Senior Research Fellow for Indo-Pacific
Security, International Security, Royal United
Services Institute

Luis Simón

Director, Centre for Security, Diplomacy, and
Strategy, Brussels School of Governance;
Director, Brussels Office, Elcano Royal Institute;
Senior Nonresident Associate, Center for
Strategic and International Studies

Michito Tsuruoka

Associate Professor, Faculty of Policy
Management, Keio University; Visiting Fellow,
Strategic and Defence Studies Centre,
Australian National University; Senior Fellow,
Centre for Security, Diplomacy, and Strategy,
Brussels School of Governance

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Letter from the Chair

In the half dozen years during which I have explored relations between NATO and its partner countries in the Indo-Pacific region—Australia, Japan, the Republic of Korea, and New Zealand—focus on the topic has risen exponentially. This is undoubtedly a good thing; awareness of how the interests of US allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific and Euro-Atlantic intersect and complement our own is critical to informing US policy toward regional and global stability. The rise in interest has generally outpaced the level of understanding, however, with the history, nuances, and ambitions of relations between NATO and these four Indo-Pacific countries—bilaterally and as a group—often obscured or misinterpreted. Most importantly, voices from the region have not always been well represented in policy analyses and discussions.

Because our allies and partners are so often with us, US policymakers sometimes assume that the views and interests of these friends are the same as our own. It is worth underscoring that relations between our allies in NATO and our allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific are very much in the interest of the United States, which has supported the growth of the partnerships between NATO and these countries over time. To name just a few benefits, these relations ensure our friends are aware of the security dynamics in each other's regions, which, while still physically separate for them, are both strategically important for US posture and planning. They allow our allies and partners to improve their interoperability and information sharing and to learn from one another's expertise. They increase deterrence by focusing more eyes on regional flashpoints. Maintaining these benefits and creating others, however, requires clearly understanding the relevant political and security dynamics beyond our own, an important part of any long-term US strategy. The views and interests of our friends in Europe and the Indo-Pacific and how they perceive the growing ties between their regions is key to such understanding.

In this regard, the experience of the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) with convening voices from the Indo-Pacific gave the institution a unique opportunity to create this study group. The ability to have experts from each of the four partner countries meet and speak about their viewpoints, learn from each other, and exchange perspectives with experts from NATO countries has been

an enormous privilege. Bringing the output of their discussions to policymakers and the public is the culmination of many months of careful work. I want to thank the study group members for their participation, patience, and exceptional insights, as well as the officials, academics, and experts who lent their views. I am also grateful to USIP for its institutional support and especially to program specialist Alison McFarland, who coordinated our meetings and typed countless pages of notes.

The study group members express their support for the findings and recommendations reached by the group, although a member may not necessarily endorse every statement or argument in the report. The members participated in the group in their personal capacities; the views expressed are their own and do not necessarily represent the views of their institutions or employers. I also want to emphasize that where the report refers to country positions, these may be based on a specific period in time (2022 and roughly the first half of 2023) and on interpretation of the study group's discussions and interviews with government officials and other experts. The report aims to contribute to the understanding of national policymakers, NATO officials, and the interested public about the complexities and opportunities of relations between NATO and its Indo-Pacific partners and to showcase the perspectives from the region that are so vital in continuing to shape this important engagement. I hope that the observations and policy options enumerated in the report will provide a platform for further discourse.

Mirna Galic

Senior Policy Analyst, China and East Asia
United States Institute of Peace

Executive Summary

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and its four partner countries in the Indo-Pacific—Australia, Japan, the Republic of Korea (ROK), and New Zealand—have entered a period of increased engagement. This engagement is taking shape in the context of the war waged by the Russian Federation (Russia) against Ukraine, NATO’s growing awareness of the security challenges posed by the People’s Republic of China (China), and important structural changes in the international system, including the return of strategic competition between the United States and China and Russia. It is occurring not only in bilateral NATO-partner relations but also between NATO and these Indo-Pacific countries as a group, known informally as the Indo-Pacific Four (IP4).

NATO interest in the Indo-Pacific partner countries—bilaterally and collectively—makes sense considering increased attention to the Indo-Pacific region by the United States, Canada, and the European Union. In addition to the unique insights and perspectives on the region these partners bring, they boast qualities that make them attractive counterparts for NATO nations: professional militaries subject to the rule of law, high levels of economic development, and status as established democracies with strong human rights records. For Europe, hearing directly from partners in the Indo-Pacific region about China, the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (North Korea), and regional security realities is invaluable and may be more compelling than hearing about those same topics from the United States—and less influenced by any concerns about US positions vis-à-vis China. For the United States, as the major partner on deterrence and defense for allies in both the Indo-Pacific and Europe, greater understanding between European and Indo-Pacific partners about security dynamics in both regions helps increase resilience and preparedness on both sides. US national security also benefits from US partners around the globe sharing the interoperability, threats assessments, and consultation platforms that engagement at NATO offers. For NATO as a whole, these partners not only provide insight and access to a region of growing strategic importance but also enable the alliance to pull together a more global, like-minded coalition of the kind that has proven critical for Ukraine.

An important element of these developments that remains underexplored is the views of the Indo-Pacific partner countries themselves. To increase understanding of Indo-Pacific partner perspectives on NATO as well as the dynamics of NATO and Indo-Pacific partner relations, the United States Institute of Peace convened an expert study group on NATO and Indo-Pacific partners. The study group brought together experts from Australia, Europe, Japan, the ROK, New Zealand, and North America, many of whom have focused on NATO, the specific nexus between NATO and the Indo-Pacific, or NATO's relations with their individual countries. Between June and November 2022, the study group met three times as a whole, holding additional meetings on a by-country or NATO basis, its deliberations informing this report.

The report also draws on additional research and interviews with officials in Brussels, Canberra, Seoul, Tokyo, and Wellington between January 2022 and May 2023. It examines national-level partner interests in NATO relations given changes in the global security environment, key areas of overlap or dissonance between the four Indo-Pacific partners, the IP4 grouping, and strategic rationales for engagement between NATO and the Indo-Pacific partners that speak to shared interests and concerns. The report may help NATO officials and national policymakers shape their thinking about Indo-Pacific partner and NATO relations going forward as this important engagement continues to evolve.

Key Takeaways

NATO's interests in the Indo-Pacific are both historic—based on relations with regional countries, operations, and transnational threats—and current. These interests precede the alliance's focus on China as a security challenge.

NATO began regular contact with Japan in the 1990s, with New Zealand in 2001, and with Australia and the ROK in 2005. It has also had regular contact with China since 2010. Australia, the ROK, and New Zealand all contributed personnel to the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission in Afghanistan (2003–2014), while Japan was a significant financial contributor for Afghanistan. In addition to ISAF and a follow-on mission in Afghanistan, NATO led three counter-piracy missions in the Indian Ocean, including Operation Ocean Shield (2009–2016). Australia and New Zealand participated in Ocean Shield, and Japan and the ROK, as well as China, ran or participated in parallel counter-piracy missions that coordinated with Ocean Shield.

NATO formalized its partnerships with Australia, Japan, the ROK, and New Zealand by signing Individual Partnership and Cooperation Programme documents with each of these countries between 2012 and 2014. Beyond NATO's operations in the region and Afghanistan, the four countries and NATO connected over shared values and over transnational threats such as terrorism, challenges to maritime security, and cyberattacks, as well as North Korea's nuclear and missile program, which has been a regular subject of NATO summit declarations and North Atlantic Council statements since 2006. NATO did not mention China in a high-level public document until December 2019, after a period of reckoning within Europe about security challenges posed by the country's behavior and

ambitions. By June 2022, China as a challenge to alliance interests, security, and values was formalized in NATO's Strategic Concept. Aside from China, North Korea, existing and emerging transnational threats, and relations with its partners in the region, NATO's contemporary Indo-Pacific interests are based on growing perceived ties between security in the region and in the Euro-Atlantic.

NATO engages with its Indo-Pacific partners both on a bilateral basis and, increasingly, as a group, the IP4. Each partner country's bilateral relationship with NATO is of primary importance and is the product of unique priorities, perceptions, and circumstances. Although the IP4 format, which brings these countries together, is not new, the frequency and levels at which the group meets have increased over time, as have its relevance and visibility.

In terms of bilateral relations, Australia is the most integrated into NATO's military operational structure of the Indo-Pacific partners and enjoys the status of an Enhanced Opportunities Partner. Canberra sees NATO as a partner for crisis response and protecting the rules-based international order, as a more effective way of engaging with the European security community than bilateral efforts with individual nations, and as a platform for specialist technical and professional resources. Japan has had the longest relations with NATO of the Indo-Pacific partners and is the most openly enthusiastic about its association with the alliance. Tokyo's priorities for NATO include informing European understanding of China and of the importance of Indo-Pacific security, and coordinating on transnational security challenges. NATO is also relevant to Tokyo's interest in increasing ties between US alliances in response to China's growing power relative to the United States. Relations between the ROK and NATO have been relatively superficial until recently. Seoul has viewed NATO in a positive light as an extension of the US-ROK alliance and as an organization of states with which it shares values and can undertake political dialogue and cooperation on transnational threat issues of mutual relevance. NATO has seemed largely incidental, however, to Seoul's main security focus, North Korea, and therefore of limited priority. That said, ROK-NATO relations are currently in a dynamic state as a result of external and internal changes, including the war in Ukraine and the Yoon Suk-yeol administration's interest in cultivating supportive partners in Europe. The key benefits of NATO relations for New Zealand include interoperability, capability enhancement of its armed forces, information exchange and dialogue, and the ability to contribute to the global security environment and to the protection of the rules-based international order. Various contextual realities have colored Wellington's perceptions of NATO, including New Zealand's antinuclear stance, its small size, and its attachment to an independent foreign policy. Wellington has traditionally seen the direct practical benefits of NATO partnership as limited for its regional security interests, especially in the South Pacific.

NATO began to engage intermittently with the Indo-Pacific partners as a group of four at least six years before the IP4 grouping burst onto the global stage in June 2022 with the historic participation of the leaders of Australia, Japan, the ROK, and New Zealand in the summit of NATO heads of state and government in Madrid. Although initial meetings focused on North Korea, engagement in the IP4 format subsequently expanded to include such things as transnational threats and China and has picked up considerably since 2019. Meetings have taken place at various levels of the

North Atlantic Council, from ambassadors to ministers and leaders, as well as with the NATO Military Committee. The IP4 grouping is not meant to replace or be privileged above bilateral relations between NATO and each of its Indo-Pacific partner countries, but understanding of the grouping outside narrow policy circles remains limited.

Indo-Pacific partner countries are a relatively cohesive grouping, but their views and interests are far from uniform. In this regard, the four countries' perspectives on China are similar in some respects but differ in others; they have similar basic expectations of NATO on the Indo-Pacific but various nuances beyond these; and they share the most consistency in views on Russia's war against Ukraine.

The expert study group examined the relevant perceptions and positions in the partner countries on several key areas of overlap with NATO—China, expectations of NATO on the region, and Russia's war against Ukraine. All four partner countries appear interested in being invited to participate in relevant internal discussions on China at NATO, although none appear to want their cooperation with NATO to be characterized in terms of China. More broadly, perceptions and positions regarding China reflect each country's unique circumstances, with varying overlap, just as they do for NATO member states. Canberra and Tokyo both proactively engage on China at NATO and tend to see the alliance's increased interest in China as highly positive. Wellington and Seoul both feel vulnerable to disruptions of trade relations with China and have been careful about managing relations with Beijing, although each is growing more willing to push back against China. Traditionally, Seoul's threat perceptions of China have been fundamentally different from those of the other Indo-Pacific partner capitals because of China's perceived importance in addressing the ROK's greatest security threat, North Korea. Although Seoul is cognizant of the threats China poses in the longer term, these concerns have come second to the immediate danger posed by North Korea.

Regarding NATO on the Indo-Pacific, none of the partner countries appear to expect NATO to be a significant direct actor in the region. Instead, they expect the alliance to coordinate with them on issues of mutual concern in, stemming from, or affecting the Indo-Pacific. In this regard, all four appear interested in coordinating with NATO on identified areas of mutual concern such as cyber defense, emerging and disruptive technologies, and resilience. There is also interest in all four countries in NATO increasing public diplomacy efforts toward them and the region. More broadly, Indo-Pacific partner views on NATO and the region are nuanced and varied. On the Russian war against Ukraine, meanwhile, the four countries hold largely similar views. Their governments make up four of only six outside the Euro-Atlantic area to place sanctions on Russia over Ukraine. All have provided financial assistance and nonlethal military aid, and all have channeled some of that assistance through NATO. The war in Ukraine and its impacts on the Indo-Pacific region have greatly raised awareness in all four countries about the security implications of events in Europe on the Indo-Pacific. The war has also raised concerns in all four about growing China-Russia relations. Successful cooperation between Indo-Pacific and European partners on Ukraine may provide a model for potential coordination between the two regions on a contingency in the Indo-Pacific. European understanding of expectations the unified response to Ukraine might create for a future contingency with China in the region appears nascent.

There is little indication that Indo-Pacific partner countries currently see the IP4 grouping as a strategic asset beyond its tactical utility as a platform for information sharing, coordination, and cooperation. The extent of NATO's ambition for the grouping is also unclear. What is clear is that neither NATO nor the partner countries appear interested, at this time, in formalizing the IP4.

Relevant officials are fleshing out areas of practical cooperation between NATO and the IP4. Additionally, the IP4 format has already been valuable as a platform for discussion, consultation, information sharing, and exchange with NATO. The IP4 and NATO have also coordinated positions on issues such as North Korea. The IP4's role as a talk shop and coordination mechanism may have particular added value when demonstrating widespread support and unity on a topic is seen as critical, when all four countries have a stake in an issue and hold similar views or can benefit from one another's input, and when coordination between the partners before engagement with NATO may be beneficial.

Partner country participants were able to identify strategic benefits of IP4 engagement, such as the access, inclusion, and safety in numbers the grouping provides. The four countries get much greater attention and space at NATO as a group than any of them would enjoy alone, and the grouping facilitates valuable diplomatic opportunities on the sidelines of high-level meetings. The IP4 has also served as a platform for Japan-ROK engagement that would have been controversial bilaterally due to tensions between Tokyo and Seoul at the time. Increased ties within the group may also make it more difficult for China to pressure individual countries against closer relations with NATO. However, despite these benefits, there is little indication that Indo-Pacific partner countries see the IP4 grouping as a strategic asset for maximizing national and regional gains from NATO engagement.

Similarly, the extent to which NATO sees the IP4 as a useful unit rather than as just a collection mechanism or a way to emphasize the importance of the Indo-Pacific remains unclear. This may relate to differing views within NATO, where some allies are more ambitious about the IP4 format and some less so. Despite its increased prominence, the IP4 grouping also remains informal, unlike NATO's regionally based, formalized partnership frameworks (Partnership for Peace, Mediterranean Dialogue, and Istanbul Cooperation Initiative). This appears consistent with the views of both allies and partners, however, with no current demand from either side for greater formalization. The benefits of informality include greater flexibility and providing less of a hook for China to raise false alarms about a so-called Asia-Pacific version of NATO.

Understanding of NATO and the benefits of NATO partnership in Indo-Pacific partner countries remains limited, and public diplomacy aimed at these countries has been uneven. Growing disinformation efforts by Russia and China about NATO increases the significance of this issue.

Understanding of NATO's remit, processes, and relevance to national interests is relatively limited at public levels in all four countries and varies even within policy circles across countries. Similarly, although NATO has been meeting with the IP4 grouping for a number of years, this was not readily visible outside diplomatic circles in Brussels or a topic of much discussion in capitals. Since the relatively sudden emergence of the IP4 into public view in 2022, awareness of the grouping has

largely exceeded understanding of it within the partner countries. Although part of the reason for this lack of understanding is a result of domestic factors such as bureaucratic silos, finite government resources for NATO, and sparse interest within expert communities, part is also due to NATO's limited reach into Indo-Pacific partner capitals, including through public diplomacy efforts. In this regard, the contact point embassy model—through which NATO shares information with partner governments and coordinates public diplomacy in partner countries via a designated NATO member state embassy—has not functioned well or consistently across Indo-Pacific partner countries in the past.

High-profile visits by NATO officials to capitals and participation by national officials in high-level NATO events, meanwhile, have raised NATO visibility in public discourse and interest in NATO at all levels in each of the Indo-Pacific partner countries. Intermittent visits by delegations from the NATO Parliamentary Assembly have also provided opportunities to engage lawmakers and the public. It is significant that NATO is aware of shortcomings in its public diplomacy outreach to Indo-Pacific capitals and is working to address them. The inclusion of public diplomacy goals in Individually Tailored Partnership Programs may also help. Such efforts become even more important in light of Russian disinformation efforts and as China increases its negative messaging about NATO.

NATO has used two main narrative frames to communicate the strategic rationale for its relations with Indo-Pacific partner countries over time: transnational threats and shared values. Although these frames are still relevant today, there is room to identify new strategic benefits for mutual engagement between NATO and its Indo-Pacific partners.

Structural changes to the international system that have solidified in recent years and affect both NATO and its Indo-Pacific partners suggest space for the identification of new strategic benefits to mutual engagement that may resonate with both sides. Three additional strategic rationales stem naturally from the changed geopolitical circumstances. One centers around an exploration of the connections between the Indo-Pacific and Euro-Atlantic regions that make them more relevant for each other's security than previously understood. A second has to do with the critical role of the United States in deterrence and defense in both regions and how—given that the return of strategic competition in the international system means that the United States and its allies need to deter two major power competitors simultaneously—deterrence dynamics in the Euro-Atlantic and the Indo-Pacific are more interdependent today than during the Cold War. A third links transnational threats to the return of strategic competition and notes how existing transnational threats may be more acute or take on different relevance in the face of strategic competition and how responses to transnational threats like cyberattacks can have implications for both the threats themselves and for strategic competition.

Policy Options

As Indo-Pacific ministers and leaders meet increasingly in the IP4 format with NATO, partner governments can seize the opportunity to advance national and regional agendas in areas of agreement. To do so, **Indo-Pacific partner governments should identify any common agenda or goals for**

NATO engagement, given both similarities and differences between these partners on key issues like expectations for NATO's role on the Indo-Pacific and threat perceptions regarding China. Track 1.5 dialogues involving experts and officials from the Indo-Pacific partner countries may be a helpful way to approach this task, increasing mutual understanding of national perceptions and highlighting areas where all four countries could benefit from working together with NATO.

Relatedly, **while continuing to maintain a focus on advancing bilateral relations with NATO, Indo-Pacific partner governments should consider internally and then in consultation with one another how they can take greater strategic advantage of the IP4 grouping.** Indo-Pacific partners generally recognize the tactical utility of the IP4 grouping as a platform for information sharing, coordination, and cooperation. The grouping does have strategic benefits as well, however, and is a fact on the ground, even if informal. Rather than interpreting the IP4 format as a convenience for NATO, partner countries should consider how they can take better advantage of its strategic potential so as to maximize the effectiveness of engagement with NATO for their own national and regional benefits.

NATO should increase regular public diplomacy outreach to Indo-Pacific partner countries about what NATO does and how relations with NATO benefit each country's national and regional interests, as well as shared global priorities. Public diplomacy efforts could, inter alia, focus on increasing the consistency and effectiveness of contact point embassies in partner capitals, taking advantage of more regular participation by national officials in high-level NATO events, and, as with much of the effort to deepen relations with the Indo-Pacific partners, making greater use of existing mechanisms such as exchanges between national parliamentarians and the NATO Parliamentary Assembly. In this regard, NATO's already increased efforts regarding public diplomacy for Indo-Pacific countries should be recognized and welcomed. A NATO liaison office in Tokyo, if approved by the alliance, could help further shore up public diplomacy outreach to Indo-Pacific partners.

Relatedly, given Chinese and Russian disinformation about NATO, **NATO officials should publicly both highlight the alliance's long-standing engagement with these partners and their region and clarify the nature of the IP4 grouping.** Messaging about the Indo-Pacific could underscore that NATO's engagement with its Indo-Pacific partners and the region precedes the alliance's acknowledgment of China as a security challenge. Messaging about the IP4 grouping might explain that it is not a formalized, regionally based partnership framework, is not new, and is not meant to replace or be privileged over bilateral relations with Indo-Pacific partner countries. Such messaging is relevant not only for the broader Indo-Pacific region but also for media and domestic audiences in Indo-Pacific partner countries, whose familiarity with both NATO's history regarding the Indo-Pacific and with the IP4 grouping remains low.

In light of the changed geopolitical circumstances that have brought them closer together, NATO and its Indo-Pacific partners should explore new strategic rationales for their mutual engagement that go beyond shared values and transnational threats. Three potential strategic rationales are worth exploring: connections between the regions that make them more relevant for one another's security; the growing interdependence of deterrence dynamics in the Euro-Atlantic and the Indo-Pacific with the rise of strategic competition between the United States and China and

Russia; and the impact of strategic competition on transnational threats. More systemic discussion between NATO and its Indo-Pacific partners on these issues would also help improve each side's situational awareness and coordinate perceptions.

NATO and its Indo-Pacific partners should explore, at least privately, the relevance of successful cooperation between Indo-Pacific and European countries on Ukraine as a potential model for coordination on a contingency in the Indo-Pacific and clarify views and expectations on all sides. NATO and its Indo-Pacific partners have recognized Russia's war against Ukraine as not only a regional European problem but also one with global reach that affects the Indo-Pacific. Any contingency involving China and the United States in the Indo-Pacific region will similarly have global reach and inevitably require economic, political, and diplomatic coordination between Indo-Pacific partners and Europe, as well as the coordination of any nonlethal military assistance. NATO, along with the European Union, is an important Euro-Atlantic institution relevant for this kind of coordination and one through which regular avenues for security consultation with Indo-Pacific partners already exist.

NATO's Indo-Pacific Interests

Until recently, official documents and statements of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) mostly used the term “Asia-Pacific” to describe the alliance's partners Australia, Japan, the Republic of Korea (ROK), and New Zealand, as well as their broader region. (This usage will be seen in some of the quotes cited in this report.) Since NATO's Madrid Summit in June 2022 and the inclusion of the Indo-Pacific in NATO's new Strategic Concept as a region of importance, official documents and statements use the term “Indo-Pacific” to describe the region and NATO's partners there, although NATO officials sometimes still use the “Asia-Pacific” formulation.¹ NATO's interests in the Indo-Pacific are both contemporary and historic and are evidenced by its relations with its partner countries and the People's Republic of China (China), its operations in the region, the statements of NATO officials, and NATO documents.

Among NATO's Indo-Pacific partners, Japan has had regular contact with the alliance since the early 1990s, while Australia and New Zealand joined NATO initiatives during the same decade.² The bulk of the alliance's engagement with countries in the Indo-Pacific, however, began with overlap and collaboration in Afghanistan in the early 2000s. NATO led two consecutive missions in Afghanistan, the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) from 2003 to 2014 and the follow-on Resolute Support Mission (RSM) from 2015 to 2021. Australia, the ROK, and New Zealand all contributed personnel to ISAF, and Japan provided funding for local development projects in association with ISAF provincial reconstruction teams.³ Australia, Japan, and the ROK also provided financial assistance through the NATO-run Afghan National Army Trust Fund.⁴ In addition to undertaking operational coordination with NATO in the field, the three troop contributors, along with Japan, were invited to coordinate with NATO in meetings on Afghanistan at various levels, including NATO summit sessions for ISAF nations.⁵

These summit session invitations were not exclusive to the Indo-Pacific partner countries but extended to all non-NATO member states participating in ISAF starting in 2008, consistent with

NATO's evolving views on partner relations around this time. Although NATO had established formalized, regionally based partnership frameworks in 1994 covering its eastern and southern flanks (Partnership for Peace and Mediterranean Dialogue), the September 11 terrorist attacks and the conflict in Afghanistan showed the alliance how much more readily global threats and out-of-theater missions could be addressed with a global network of partners.⁶ In 2004, NATO launched a third formalized partnership framework, the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative, made up of Persian Gulf nations.⁷ Meanwhile, a broader set of partner states was collected under the moniker of Contact Countries, later renamed Partners Across the Globe. Although the Partners Across the Globe today include Afghanistan, Australia, Colombia, Iraq, Japan, the ROK, Mongolia, New Zealand, and Pakistan, initial references to the Contact Countries/Partners Across the Globe emphasized Australia, Japan, the ROK, and New Zealand specifically, implying an early interest in these Indo-Pacific partners.⁸

NATO also held intermittent political consultations with China starting in 2002, and the two began regular military-to-military staff talks in 2010, though these were outside any of the mentioned partnership frameworks.⁹ NATO-China military-to-military staff talks continue in the present day.¹⁰ At the time of its institution, such engagement with China made sense as a complement to NATO's relevant out-of-area operations, which included not only its missions in Afghanistan but also, starting in 2008 and lasting through 2016, its three counter-piracy operations in the Indian Ocean, including Operation Ocean Shield (2009–2016).¹¹ Australia and New Zealand participated in Ocean Shield while Japan, the ROK, and China ran or participated in parallel counter-piracy missions that coordinated with NATO.¹² NATO's interest in China also included its status as an emerging global power and a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, on the basis of whose mandates ISAF and various other NATO missions operated.¹³ Consequently, NATO staff talks with China have covered a wide range of topics, including the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea), the South China Sea, security perspectives on Afghanistan and Central Asia, China's defense and military reforms, and possible areas for practical cooperation.¹⁴

As NATO started to engage more with its four partner countries in the Indo-Pacific, its political discussions and statements began to increasingly reflect interests and concerns shared with these partners, including those related to their broader region. NATO officials regularly discussed values shared with the Indo-Pacific partners, particularly respect for individual freedoms, democracy, human rights, and the rule of law, as well as the importance of the rules-based international order.¹⁵ Shared perceptions regarding transnational threats were also regularly highlighted, including those related to cyber-attacks, maritime challenges, terrorism, and nuclear proliferation.¹⁶ Such shared interests and concerns featured in the Joint Political Declarations and Individual Partnership and Cooperation Programme documents the Indo-Pacific partners signed with NATO between 2012 and 2014. Additionally, from 2006 onward, NATO summit declarations, as well as statements issued by the North Atlantic Council, NATO's political decision-making body, regularly called attention to threats from North Korea. During Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen's visits to Japan and the ROK in 2013 (the latter the first by any NATO secretary general), he relayed NATO's strong concern over North Korea's belligerent statements, nuclear tests, and missile launches.¹⁷

NATO's Indo-Pacific Partners



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Tokyo in particular was interested from early on in the potential of NATO as a platform for increasing European understanding of security challenges stemming from the Indo-Pacific, not only from North Korea but also from China.¹⁸ Against the backdrop of the annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation (Russia) and the increasing military assertiveness and buildup in the South and East China Seas by China, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe spoke to the North Atlantic Council during a visit to NATO in May 2014. Noting “frequent attempts to unilaterally change the status quo by force or coercion” in the South and East China Seas, he asserted that “China’s foreign policy approach and its military developments have become issues of concern for the international community, including Japan.”¹⁹ Abe also drew parallels between the threats posed by Russia and China, saying with regard to Crimea, “We cannot accept changes to the status quo by force or coercion. This is a global issue that also impacts Asia.”²⁰ Rasmussen too drew a regional connection in subsequent press remarks, stating that “there is no doubt that the security and stability in the Euro-Atlantic and Asia-Pacific regions cannot be treated separately.”²¹ Jens Stoltenberg continued to highlight the notion of connections between the security of the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific when he succeeded Rasmussen as secretary general in late 2014. During an October 2017 visit to Seoul and Tokyo, he said, “The Pacific may literally be on the other side of the world from NATO Headquarters in Brussels. But that doesn’t mean we are not affected by what happens here. . . . We also have close partners in the region whose security matters to us. And with whom we share strategic interests. Japan, the Republic of Korea, Australia, and New Zealand. Our security is bound up with your security.”²²

Although NATO’s official statements on the region remained focused on North Korea rather than China and would continue to be so until late 2019, secretaries general did mention China when talking to the media. In a 2011 interview with Xinhua, the official Chinese news agency, Rasmussen asserted, “I don’t consider China a threat to NATO or NATO allies. On the contrary, I think we could and should cooperate in order to maintain peace and stability.”²³ Stoltenberg similarly mentioned China during a press conference following his 2017 meetings in Tokyo. Reflecting NATO’s long-standing dialogues with China, he said, “China is a growing power with a growing military strength and capabilities. . . . But NATO doesn’t believe in isolating countries like Russia or China; what we believe in is what we have developed in our relationship with Russia, but it’s also relevant with how we deal with other countries, and that is defence and dialogue.”²⁴ By December 2019, however, NATO’s tone on China had shifted, as evident in its first summit-level statement on China. That declaration, from the heads of state and government meeting in London, noted, “We recognise that China’s growing influence and international policies present both opportunities and challenges that we need to address together as an alliance.”²⁵ This statement followed a March 2019 European Commission report on China and the European Union that labeled China “a systemic rival promoting alternative models of governance.”²⁶

Various factors contributed to Europe’s growing awareness of the security and normative challenges posed by China around this time. One was the cumulative effects of a decade of Chinese investment in Europe amounting to more than \$255 billion by 2018, the majority by Chinese state-backed entities and targeting key sectors such as infrastructure, energy, telecoms, and utilities.²⁷ By 2017, China’s extension of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) into Europe entailed BRI-related memoranda

of understanding with 20 European NATO allies and an equal number of European Union member states.²⁸ Such investment started to raise concerns about the potential impact of Chinese-controlled infrastructure and industries on European security, including the risk that Chinese investment in airports and seaports posed for NATO military mobility and operations.²⁹ The political leverage that economic influence gave China over European governments also became increasingly visible. This was especially evident through several instances in 2016 and 2017, when countries with significant Chinese economic investment scuttled European Union efforts to strongly condemn Chinese actions in the South China Sea and on human rights.³⁰

Changing European estimates of China's internal trajectory, global normative impact, and military development were another factor. Since Xi Jinping's rise to leadership in 2012, his consolidation of power had featured harsh measures to quash internal dissent, including the growing use of surveillance technology; crackdowns on activists, journalists, and lawyers; large-scale repression of ethnic minorities in Tibet and Xinjiang; and restrictive national security laws and regulations.³¹ Far from socializing China into Western political values, commercial engagement and China's inclusion in the World Trade Organization had only strengthened Beijing's claims of providing an alternative model of political-economic development.³² Externally, China was advancing sovereignty claims in the South China Sea that undermined international rules and norms in contravention of European interests, including through its refusal to recognize a binding arbitration ruling issued in 2016 related to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea.³³

China's ability to target Europe through cyberattacks was highlighted in 2018 with the discovery of a massive campaign to access European Union diplomatic communications.³⁴ A People's Liberation Army (PLA) branch responsible for cyber capabilities, the Strategic Support Force, was implicated in the hack.³⁵ Its creation in 2015 was part of a broader restructuring of the PLA under Xi aimed at ensuring that "by 2035, the modernization of our national defense and our forces is basically completed; and that by the mid-21st century our people's armed forces have been fully transformed into world-class forces."³⁶ As a result, Chinese military expenditures increased by an average of \$15 billion per year between 2012 and 2019.³⁷ Such developments prompted the European Commission to assess in its 2019 report that "China's increasing military capabilities coupled with its comprehensive vision and ambition to have the technologically most advanced armed forces by 2050 present security issues for the EU, already in a short to mid-term perspective."³⁸

China-Russia and US-China relations also played a role in Europe's growing concern. China-Russia ties became increasingly visible after the 2014 Russian annexation of Crimea, especially on the military front.³⁹ Between 2015 and 2018, China-Russia joint military exercises took place not only in Russia and the seas around China but also in the Mediterranean, Black, and Baltic Seas, well within NATO's traditional area of operations.⁴⁰ China-Russia military-technical cooperation, including defense industry cooperation and the sale of advanced weapons systems by Russia to China, also increased during this period, as did high-level contacts between military officials.⁴¹ Such developments were in stark contrast to European sanctions on Russia's defense sector in the wake of Crimea.⁴² The United States also

pushed Europe, and especially NATO, to consider the implications of China's growing military, technological, and economic power.⁴³ The 2017 US National Security Strategy struck a new, more urgent tone on China than its 2015 predecessor, emphasizing the challenges China posed to American power, influence, interests, and security.⁴⁴ The 2018 US National Defense Strategy, meanwhile, defined China as a "strategic competitor."⁴⁵ US engagement of Europe on China increased markedly as a result and precipitated a NATO review of its relations with China ahead of the 2019 London meeting.⁴⁶

Although the China language in the London declaration was fairly basic, it marked only the beginning of NATO's assessment of China's potential implications for the alliance. The November 2020 report of a reflection group of prominent international experts charged by Stoltenberg to look at NATO's challenges over the coming decade included further thinking on China. Among other proposals, it said, "NATO must devote much more time, political resources, and action to the security challenges posed by China—based on an assessment of its national capabilities, economic heft, and the stated ideological goals of its leaders. It needs to develop a political strategy for approaching a world in which China will be of growing importance through to 2030."⁴⁷ The report also recommended that NATO increase engagement with its Indo-Pacific partners to "heighten coordination on managing the strategic and political implications of China's rise."⁴⁸ The June 2021 Brussels Summit communiqué then devoted two paragraphs to China. It noted that "China's stated ambitions and assertive behaviour present systemic challenges to the rules-based international order and to areas relevant to alliance security" and that "we are concerned by those coercive policies which stand in contrast to the fundamental values enshrined in the Washington Treaty," before discussing China's expanding nuclear arsenal, opaque military modernization, military cooperation with Russia, and duty to act responsibly in the space, cyber, and maritime domains.⁴⁹ The communiqué also noted, however, that "based on our interests, we welcome opportunities to engage with China on areas of relevance to the alliance and on common challenges such as climate change."⁵⁰ The June 2022 Madrid Summit declaration, the third consecutive summit-level statement to include China, noted, "We face systemic competition from those, including the People's Republic of China, who challenge our interests, security, and values and seek to undermine the rules-based international order."⁵¹ The July 2023 Vilnius Summit communiqué, which included 14 mentions of China, continued this trend.⁵²

The biggest indicator of China's subsumption into NATO's agenda was its inclusion in the alliance's 2022 Strategic Concept, a major policy and strategy document that outlines NATO's approach to security, last issued in 2010. The 2010 Strategic Concept named only Russia, but the 2022 version, which also mentioned North Korea for the first time, discussed China at length:

The People's Republic of China's (PRC) stated ambitions and coercive policies challenge our interests, security and values. The PRC employs a broad range of political, economic and military tools to increase its global footprint and project power, while remaining opaque about its strategy, intentions and military build-up. The PRC's malicious hybrid and cyber operations and its confrontational rhetoric and disinformation target Allies and harm alliance security. The PRC seeks to control key technological and industrial sectors, critical infrastructure, and strategic materials and supply chains. It

uses its economic leverage to create strategic dependencies and enhance its influence. It strives to subvert the rules-based international order, including in the space, cyber and maritime domains. The deepening strategic partnership between the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation and their mutually reinforcing attempts to undercut the rules-based international order run counter to our values and interests.

We remain open to constructive engagement with the PRC, including to build reciprocal transparency, with a view to safeguarding the alliance's security interests. We will work together responsibly, as Allies, to address the systemic challenges posed by the PRC to Euro-Atlantic security and ensure NATO's enduring ability to guarantee the defence and security of Allies. We will boost our shared awareness, enhance our resilience and preparedness, and protect against the PRC's coercive tactics and efforts to divide the alliance. We will stand up for our shared values and the rules-based international order, including freedom of navigation.⁵³

Given that the Strategic Concept is a consensus text, it appears that NATO allies are agreed on the challenges that China poses for the alliance. The details of how to address these challenges, however, and NATO's specific role in doing so, are not elucidated in the document, reflecting a continued spectrum of views within NATO. The reasons for this diversity of views are varied but include the importance of China for national economies, desires for European autonomy from the United States on security and defense decision-making, concerns about Russian security threats and the need to focus NATO attention there, and bilateral policies and prerogatives regarding the Indo-Pacific and China.⁵⁴

Aside from China, the alliance's continued recognition of threats from North Korea, existing and emerging transnational threats, and its relations with its partners in the region, NATO's contemporary Indo-Pacific interests are based around growing perceived ties between security in the region and in the Euro-Atlantic. To this end, the Strategic Concept also established the Indo-Pacific as "important for NATO, given that developments in that region can directly affect Euro-Atlantic security," adding that NATO "will strengthen dialogue and cooperation with new and existing partners in the Indo-Pacific to tackle cross-regional challenges and shared security interests."⁵⁵ This notion of security ties between regions and the resultant need for greater coordination and cooperation between NATO and its Indo-Pacific partners has been further elaborated in subsequent statements by the secretary general such as this one: "What happens in the Euro-Atlantic region matters for the Indo-Pacific, and what happens in the Indo-Pacific matters to the Euro-Atlantic. . . . So we must stand together for the rules-based international order."⁵⁶

Relations between Indo-Pacific Partner Countries and NATO

Although NATO's main partnership groupings are regionally based, it also has a catch-all category of Partners Across the Globe, which today includes Afghanistan, Australia, Colombia, Iraq, Japan, the ROK, Mongolia, New Zealand, and Pakistan.⁵⁷ Given their high levels of economic development, professional militaries subject to the rule of law, and status as established democracies with strong human rights records and as key US partners in a critical region, Australia, Japan, the ROK, and New Zealand are clear standouts among the group.⁵⁸ NATO's relations with these four countries encompass both bilateral engagement and, increasingly, engagement of these partners as a group, informally known as the Indo-Pacific Partners (IPP) or the Indo-Pacific Four (IP4), as they are referred to in this report.

NATO is working on new, more detailed partnership agreements, called Individually Tailored Partnership Programs (ITPPs), with each of its Indo-Pacific partners, although the ITPPs are not for the Indo-Pacific partners alone, but are instead a broader partnership initiative, with Colombia completing the first ITPP with the alliance in December 2021.⁵⁹ The ITPPs are lengthier than the previous Individual Partnership and Cooperation Programme (IPCP) documents and more detailed about the areas and activities on which a given country will work with NATO.⁶⁰ They include strategic objectives as well as concrete partnership goals.⁶¹ The ITPPs underscore the continued importance to NATO of bilateral engagement with the individual Indo-Pacific partner countries, something NATO officials are keen to emphasize. Despite the many commonalities between these partners beyond region, their perspectives, threat perceptions, and levels of ambition vis-à-vis NATO are not uniform. As a result, and because it can be far simpler to engage NATO individually, bilateral relations with NATO remain a priority for the countries as well as for the alliance.⁶²

Of the four partners, Japan has had the longest bilateral relations with NATO, with regular exchanges going back to the early 1990s.⁶³ Japan and NATO formalized their partnership with the

2014 signing of an IPCP, last renewed in 2020; Tokyo transitioned to an ITPP in 2023.⁶⁴ Priority areas of cooperation outlined in the ITPP include cyber defense; space; emerging and disruptive technologies; climate change and security; maritime security; arms control, nonproliferation and disarmament; resilience and civil preparedness; and women, peace, and security.⁶⁵ Japan's self-defense forces have had the opportunity to undertake operational cooperation with NATO counterparts during parallel counter-piracy missions in the Indian Ocean as well as passing exercises with NATO standing maritime groups during intermittent training cruises to Europe.⁶⁶ Japan conducted its first international emergency relief operation in cooperation with NATO in 2023, dispatching aircraft to bring relief supplies to earthquake-hit Turkey.⁶⁷ In another notable first, NATO sent observers to the 2022 Japan-US bilateral military exercise Keen Sword, in which Australia also participated, and which the ROK and New Zealand, along with several NATO member states and regional countries, were invited to observe.⁶⁸

Japan participates in NATO's Interoperability Platform, a standing format intended to increase general interoperability with selected partners, and is a member of the NATO Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence, among other areas of collaboration. Japan has also contributed to the NATO Ukraine Comprehensive Assistance Package (CAP) Trust Fund, which provides for nonlethal military assistance to Ukraine.⁶⁹ Additionally, Japan has seconded staff to NATO to increase familiarity with NATO bureaucracy and procedures and enhance information exchange.⁷⁰ It has appointed staff to act as liaison officers to both Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe, the seat of NATO allied command operations, and Allied Maritime Command and regularly sends staff to NATO headquarters in Brussels as voluntary national contributions.⁷¹ Japan's ambassador to Belgium has served as its ambassador to NATO since 2018, though the Japanese government communicated to NATO in 2023 its decision to open a dedicated diplomatic mission to NATO in the near future.⁷²

Regular New Zealand-NATO engagement dates to 2001, with the two sides signing an IPCP in 2012.⁷³ Priority areas of cooperation outlined in the IPCP, which was last renewed in 2018, include terrorism; cyber defense; maritime security; science and technology; and women, peace, and security.⁷⁴ Work is also underway on an ITPP. New Zealand's security forces have contributed to a number of NATO missions, including ISAF and RSM in Afghanistan, Operation Ocean Shield in the Indian Ocean, and Operation Active Endeavor, which focused on deterring terrorist activity in the Mediterranean.⁷⁵ Among other areas of collaboration with NATO, New Zealand participates in the Interoperability Platform and the Science for Peace and Security Programme. New Zealand has also contributed to the NATO Ukraine CAP Trust Fund.⁷⁶ New Zealand's ambassador to NATO is double-hatted as its representative to the European Union.⁷⁷

NATO's regular engagement with both Australia and the ROK began in 2005.⁷⁸ The ROK and NATO signed an IPCP in 2012, last renewed in 2019, and Seoul transitioned to an ITPP in 2023.⁷⁹ Priority areas for cooperation laid out in the ITPP include cyber defense; nonproliferation; counterterrorism; emerging and disruptive technologies; climate change and security; women, peace, and security; and science and technology.⁸⁰ Korean security forces participated in ISAF and coordinated with NATO counterparts during parallel counter-piracy missions in the Indian Ocean.⁸¹ The ROK also participates

in the Interoperability Platform and is a member of the Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence, among other areas of collaboration. Additionally, the ROK has contributed nonlethal military goods to Ukraine through NATO.⁸² In 2022, the ROK designated its embassy to Belgium, the European Union, and Luxembourg as its mission to NATO, the most recent of the four Indo-Pacific partners to do so.⁸³

Australia and NATO signed their IPCP in 2013, last renewed it in 2019, and transitioned to an ITPP in 2023.⁸⁴ The priority areas for cooperation outlined in the ITPP include cyber defense; space; resilience; emerging and disruptive technologies; arms control, disarmament, and nonproliferation; and women, peace, and security.⁸⁵ Australia was the largest non-NATO troop contributor to ISAF for most of the mission's duration.⁸⁶ Australian security forces have also contributed to RSM; Operation Ocean Shield; the NATO Mission Iraq, focused on advising and capacity-building for Iraqi security forces; and Operation Sea Guardian in the Mediterranean, the successor to Active Endeavor.⁸⁷ Given Australia's significant military contributions to NATO, it is one of a small group of Enhanced Opportunities Partners that receive increased access to interoperability initiatives and to opportunities for dialogue and consultation with allies.⁸⁸ Additionally, Australia is a member of the Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence, participates in the Unmanned Systems Initiative, a hub for collaboration on introducing unmanned systems into national navies, and takes part on a regular basis in NATO exercises that are open to partners.⁸⁹ Australia has also contributed to the NATO Ukraine CAP Trust Fund.⁹⁰ Australia's ambassador to Belgium, the European Union, and Luxembourg is also its representative to NATO.⁹¹

Although bilateral relations between NATO and its Indo-Pacific partners remain a priority, the alliance has also undertaken lines of effort aimed at these partners as a group (the IP4). The grouping provides a convenient way for NATO to talk to these partners about shared interests and prerogatives and to gain a regional perspective. NATO began meeting intermittently with the IP4 in 2016.⁹² The initial meetings took place with the North Atlantic Council, and were focused on North Korea, which in 2016 and 2017 conducted three nuclear tests.⁹³ Stoltenberg referred to these meetings in July 2017, noting that "since last December, we have addressed the North Korean threat at two Council meetings with our four Asia-Pacific partners: Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand."⁹⁴ As NATO began more methodically assessing the challenges posed by China, beginning in 2019, engagement with the IP4 expanded to encompass this topic as well. When the North Atlantic Council met at the level of foreign ministers in December 2020, IP4 counterparts were invited to join them.⁹⁵ As Stoltenberg announced, "NATO foreign ministers will also assess the global shift in the balance of power with the rise of China. We will be joined by our Asia-Pacific partners: Australia, Japan, New Zealand and South Korea."⁹⁶ Stoltenberg referred to the need for NATO to engage specifically with its four Indo-Pacific partners on China issues in many of his public statements in 2021. In a typical example, remarking that "not long ago, we hardly addressed the rise of China at all," he noted, "so NATO has stepped up. We address and try to understand, assess and respond, also by strengthening our resilience. Part of that is also, of course, to realise the importance of working with partners. So we are stepping up our cooperation with the partners in the Asia-Pacific, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, South Korea."⁹⁷

NATO ally and partner officials have noted an uptick in meetings involving the IP4 in the past few years.⁹⁸ Such meetings have taken place at various levels of the North Atlantic Council as well as in other venues, such as the NATO Military Committee, the alliance's military advice and guidance body. In May 2022, for example, the Military Committee met at the level of chiefs of defense with IP4 counterparts to discuss security developments in the Indo-Pacific region.⁹⁹ Although North Korea and China have been a significant focus, such meetings are increasingly seen as a way for the Indo-Pacific partners to give voice to various shared priorities with NATO, including Russia's war against Ukraine, cyber defense, maritime security, and climate change.¹⁰⁰ Indeed, the IP4 ministers were invited to a second meeting of the North Atlantic Council at the foreign ministers level in April 2022, which was focused, on Ukraine.¹⁰¹ As Stoltenberg explained, "We will be joined by NATO's Asia-Pacific partners. Australia, Japan, New Zealand and the Republic of Korea. Because this crisis has global implications, which concerns us all."¹⁰² Also around this time, NATO and the IP4 agreed on a document outlining priority areas of cooperation, the Agenda for Tackling Shared Security Challenges (Shared Agenda).¹⁰³ Although the document has not been made public, based on the statements of various NATO officials, the agreed areas likely include emerging and disruptive technologies, countering disinformation, maritime security, hybrid threats, climate change, resilience, space, cyber defense, and innovation.¹⁰⁴ Noticeably, many of these topics are also included in the Indo-Pacific partners' ITPPs.

The IP4 leaders also joined a meeting of the North Atlantic Council at the level of heads of state and government at the NATO summit in Madrid in June 2022. The historic occasion marked the first time the four leaders participated together in a NATO summit.¹⁰⁵ As Stoltenberg said, "For the first time in our history we will invite our Asia Pacific partners, the prime ministers of New Zealand, Australia, Japan and also the President of South Korea will participate in the NATO Summit, which is a strong demonstration of our close partnership with these like-minded countries in the Asia Pacific."¹⁰⁶ NATO's invitation of the IP4 to participate in its Madrid Summit held great symbolism. It underscored the security links between the Indo-Pacific and the Euro-Atlantic and demonstrated that despite Russia's war against Ukraine and the attention this focused back onto the territorial defense of NATO, the alliance continued to stand with its Indo-Pacific partners. At the same time, it showed that NATO's condemnation of Russia's actions had the normative and practical support not just of Europe and North America but also of powerful actors in the Indo-Pacific. The IP4 leaders joined a NATO summit for the second time in Vilnius in 2023.¹⁰⁷

The Madrid and Vilnius Summits also provided an opportunity for the IP4 leaders to meet together as a group without NATO allies when they held quadripartite meetings on the sidelines of the summits. At Madrid, according to Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, the leaders "coordinated how we should cooperate with NATO."¹⁰⁸ At Vilnius, they also issued a joint statement condemning a North Korean long-range ballistic missile launch.¹⁰⁹ Even though the IP4 grouping was based originally on utility to NATO rather than a demand signal from the partner countries themselves, it has thus shown the potential to evolve. Moreover, although it remains informal, the IP4 has also taken on aspects of a de facto regional partner grouping, at least for the time being.

Partner Views, Priorities, and Trends

The Indo-Pacific countries are the most cohesive grouping among NATO's Partners Across the Globe in terms of geography, economic development, stable governance, and shared values such as respect for the rule of law, individual rights and freedoms, and democracy. These countries also all recognize the importance of working with like-minded partners against transnational threats related to such things as cyber defense, terrorism, and piracy, as well as for the protection of the rules-based international order. Additionally, all four are either treaty allies of the United States or, in the case of New Zealand, have strong military and diplomatic ties to Washington. The IP4 as a grouping makes sense from this perspective. As noted, however, the priorities and perceptions of these countries are not uniform. To this end, the expert study group examined views, interests, and priorities in the Indo-Pacific partner countries regarding bilateral relations with NATO. Based on the study group's discussions, as well as interviews with government officials and experts, the following pictures emerged of each country's relations with NATO in 2022 and early 2023. The study group's discussions and the interviews also provided insight into the Indo-Pacific partner countries' relative positions on several key areas of overlap with NATO: expectations of NATO on the region; China; and Russia's war against Ukraine.

Australia

Australia is the most integrated into NATO's military operational structure of the Indo-Pacific partners. From a practical perspective, Canberra has looked at NATO primarily as a platform for three main priorities. Canberra sees NATO as a partner for crisis response to common security challenges such as Afghanistan and for protecting a stable and rules-based international order, with associated interoperability and information sharing imperatives and benefits. In this regard, its Enhanced Opportunities Partner status offers Australia valuable access to relevant NATO operation preparation, interoperability programs, and lessons learned exchanges.¹¹⁰ Canberra also views NATO as a more effective way of engaging with and influencing the European security community than bilateral efforts with individual European countries. Australian participants underlined the value Australia

places on having its voice heard at NATO and sharing perspectives. Additionally, Canberra sees NATO as an entry point to specialist technical and professional communities in the defense and security space through which to exchange knowledge.

Although Australia-NATO relations have grown significantly during their roughly two-decade run, they have not always followed a clear plan. As one participant said, “There were a number of reasons why over the years it just made sense for Australia to engage with NATO. But a longer-term vision as to what Australia is actually trying to achieve here and also how it’s going to resource that is something that has only started to emerge more recently.” Moreover, despite its deep Western ties and orientation, Australia’s identity and immediate security concerns are rooted in its region, with Labor governments in particular focused on regional priorities and engagement. Due to such factors, the NATO relationship has not been a consistent priority for Australia over time. Canberra has also sometimes felt frustrated that partnership with NATO has not been as much of a two-way street as it might like, according to one participant.

At the same time, Russia’s war against Ukraine, Australia-China relations, and China-Russia ties are actively shaping Australian perceptions of NATO. A sensitivity toward Russian aggression embedded in Australia’s national conscience from the 2014 downing of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 has facilitated a sense of common cause with NATO’s renewed Russia concerns.¹¹¹ More importantly, Russian aggression against Ukraine, the Chinese response, and the lessons the war in Ukraine may create for a potential conflict in the Indo-Pacific have underscored for Australia the interlinkages between Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific security. Australia’s interest in the US focus and posture in Asia and how it might be affected by European conflict and European readiness has also highlighted these interlinkages. As one participant put it, “There is a real sense in Canberra that what happens in Ukraine matters for our security at home.” Beyond Ukraine, Canberra is concerned about the impact of Russia and China on the rules-based international order on which Australian security and prosperity rests; it sees this as a necessary area for coordination with Europe and the United States.

NATO’s interest in China and China’s framing in the 2022 Strategic Concept has thus been welcomed in Australia. The rapid deterioration in 2020 of Australia’s relations with China, along with existing concerns about Beijing’s interference in Australian domestic political affairs, precipitated a reckoning on Australia-China relations and a new bipartisan consensus on China in Australia.¹¹² This, as well as concerns about the impacts of an increasingly powerful and assertive China on stability and the rules-based international order in the Indo-Pacific region, has made Australia much readier to push back on China and involve partners in doing so. As one participant remarked, “Nowadays, the ability to have conversations with all the Europeans in the room and influence their thinking on China and on what’s going on here is something that’s really seen as of value.”

Japan

Japan is the most openly enthusiastic among the Indo-Pacific partners about its association with NATO. Often seen as an extension of the US-Japan alliance, NATO has held a positive image in Japan

since the two collaborated in Afghanistan. Tokyo has viewed NATO as a partner that shares values, a successful multilateral defense alliance from which to learn, a place to coordinate on transnational security challenges, and a platform from which to inform European views of the Indo-Pacific security landscape and especially concerns about China.¹¹³ At the same time, Japan-NATO practical and operational cooperation traditionally has been limited by Japan's restrictions on its self-defense forces, the lack of a clear vision for the development of Japan-NATO relations, and limited resources.¹¹⁴ Positive perception of NATO also has not necessarily correlated with high priority in Japan. As one participant noted, "Normally, the level of interest is not that high because Japan is busy dealing with regional problems and many Japanese perceive NATO as an organization in Europe, so as long as they don't pay attention to Europe, they don't think of NATO on a regular basis."

In this regard, awareness of and interest in NATO in Japan has risen significantly since the start of Russia's war against Ukraine. In a practical sense, the war, along with NATO's enhanced focus on its Indo-Pacific partners, has precipitated increased official engagement between Japan and NATO, which has also broadened the spectrum of Japanese government actors interested in NATO. For the Ministry of Defense, this has given new impetus to an existing trend toward greater engagement on NATO. As one participant noted, "Traditionally, Japan-NATO relations have been driven by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, not the Ministry of Defense, but now the Ministry of Defense is on board, so this is good for future strengthening of practical cooperation between Japan and NATO." Strategically, Russia's war against Ukraine and growing China-Russia coordination have fundamentally altered Japanese perceptions of Russia and underscored the importance of demonstrating unity between the Euro-Atlantic and the Indo-Pacific against unilateral changes to the status quo by force. The response to Ukraine, including by NATO nations in coordination with their Indo-Pacific partners, has also provided a model for how such unity can work in practice and might work in a future contingency in Asia. As one participant put it, "Japan feels very exposed to the Chinese military threat, and we feel desperate for any help we can get. . . . Ukraine has given us a different dimension [so] that we also look the other way and see how much we can cooperate."

Indeed, China remains Japan's greatest strategic security challenge, according to its December 2022 national security strategy.¹¹⁵ Tokyo is also concerned about a relative decline of US power vis-à-vis China as the latter continues its military modernization and expansion, and sees this as a reason for various US alliances—including those of NATO and Japan—to seek synergies. NATO's increased attention to China and China's inclusion in the Strategic Concept are thus very welcome for Japan, which continues to focus on informing European security understanding of China and the importance of Indo-Pacific security. Tokyo also welcomed the optics of NATO inviting the Indo-Pacific partners to its Madrid Summit in 2022 and including China in the Strategic Concept despite the overwhelming focus on the war in Ukraine. As one participant noted, "That was a great demonstration that NATO is not only focusing on Russia but also, in broader terms, in the medium and longer term, that the China challenge is very much something that NATO has been working on." Although there is a renewed appreciation for NATO relations in Japan, its practical impact on the bilateral relationship going forward is not fully clear. A participant summarized it this way: "The overall context in which the Japan-NATO relationship is situated has changed, and that has resulted in Japan's heightened interest in NATO. But at the same time, when it comes to the concrete agenda [for cooperation], very little has changed. So

a lot depends on what both sides are prepared and willing to do in the context of the bilateral relationship in the coming months and years.”

Republic of Korea

Although the ROK and NATO have engaged since 2005 and enjoyed formal relations since 2012, the relationship has been relatively superficial, and understanding of NATO in Seoul has been limited outside military circles. ROK-NATO relations have been spurred by the ROK-US relationship and supported by practical benefits such as NATO political support against North Korea’s nuclear program; the potential market NATO members provide for ROK arms exports, which were prioritized under the Moon Jae-in administration (2017–2022); and the platform NATO offers for various conservative administrations’ efforts to showcase the ROK as a responsible member of the international community. Indeed, the ROK-NATO relationship was formalized under the Lee Myung-bak administration (2008–2013) and its Global Korea policy, much as it has been buoyed under the current administration of Yoon Suk-yeol and its Global Pivotal State policy.

Seoul has seen NATO relations as an extension of its relations with the United States. Europe and its regional security concerns, meanwhile, have seemed far away from the ROK and its primary strategic focus, the North Korean nuclear threat. In this regard, although NATO political support on North Korea has been appreciated, it has not been seen as overly influential. Moreover, China is the ROK’s largest trading partner and has been seen as a key influence on North Korea, so although Seoul may recognize the broader security challenges China poses, it has traditionally resisted taking an overt stance against China. One participant commented that ROK-China relations may “complicate the future of ROK-NATO relations.” Overall, Seoul has viewed NATO in a positive light as an organization of states with which it shares values and with which it can undertake political dialogue and cooperate on transnational threat issues of mutual relevance, such as cyberattacks. At the same time, it has seen NATO as largely incidental to its main security concern, North Korea, and therefore of limited priority. As one participant said, although “we share values and good relations with NATO, it’s not that important. Seoul may make efforts with NATO, but the alliance is not of strategic significance in the ROK’s calculations.”

This notwithstanding, ROK-NATO relations are in a period of dynamism. President Yoon’s attendance of the Madrid Summit was accompanied by plans to upgrade ROK-NATO relations in recognition of the benefits of cultivating supportive partners in Europe and in line with his Global Pivotal State policy.¹¹⁶ Consequently, the Ministry of Defense has taken a more active role in NATO affairs, and policymakers and experts in Seoul are working to figure out added areas where ROK-NATO cooperation can produce practical gains.¹¹⁷ In addition to cyber defense, space, and emerging and disruptive technologies, all of which are important transnational security issues for the ROK, participants noted Seoul’s interest in learning from NATO’s experience with extended deterrence and nuclear sharing, relevant in the context of North Korea. This includes the NATO Nuclear Planning Group, which Seoul viewed as a model for a US-ROK counterpart, ultimately launched by the US and ROK governments in April 2023 as the bilateral Nuclear Consultative Group.¹¹⁸ The Yoon administration has also brought

its own approach to Beijing, with a focus on mutual respect, skepticism about how helpful China may be on Seoul's priorities for North Korea, a willingness to push back on China in discrete areas, and concerns about potential dependencies on China in key sectors affecting national security.¹¹⁹ How this may play into the ROK's relations with NATO remains to be seen. When asked about China's opposition to President Yoon's participation in the Madrid Summit, Prime Minister Han Duck-soo responded, "It would be a lack of courtesy for China to say do it or don't do it. It is not in line with mutual respect."¹²⁰

Additionally, although the ROK's immediate neighborhood and the North Korea threat remain Seoul's dominant priority, the impacts of the war in Ukraine vis-à-vis North Korea have become increasingly clear. ROK support to Ukraine and sanctions on Russia have angered Moscow, which has influence over Pyongyang, and North Korea has benefited from weapons sales to Russia, according to the United States.¹²¹ The growing China-Russia relationship, and how it may affect these countries' willingness to curb North Korea, including from within the UN Security Council, is a concern for Seoul. North Korea is also watching how Russia is using its nuclear saber-rattling and to what effect.¹²² As the ROK ambassador to the United States noted, "What happens in Ukraine has very important implications for my country and to our region as well. . . . For example, what kinds of lessons North Korea will learn from Russia's experience in Ukraine, especially in the possibility of threatening the use of nuclear weapons."¹²³ As one participant observed, the war in Ukraine, the strong relationship between Russia and China, and the potential of North Korea to piggyback on this relationship "change the priority of the European security environment in Korea's assessment of our interests." Meanwhile, the Ukraine war has also created a greater market for ROK arms sales to Europe, which has increased interest in interoperability with NATO and greater familiarity with NATO practices and standards.¹²⁴

New Zealand

NATO provides a platform for New Zealand to contribute to the global security environment and the protection of the rules-based international order on which the country relies, a key benefit of New Zealand–NATO relations, alongside interoperability with NATO nations, capability enhancement of New Zealand armed forces, and information exchange and dialogue with the alliance at various levels. New Zealand and NATO also share values and have had common interests in addressing transnational threats related to such things as terrorism and cyber and maritime security. Although collaboration between New Zealand and NATO was quite active through much of the 2010s, particularly on Afghanistan, NATO–New Zealand relations have been less visible since. As one participant said in reference to the NATO secretary general's visit to New Zealand, "When Stoltenberg was here in 2019, there was a bit of a public perception that the things we do with NATO, those are in the past." General awareness within New Zealand about NATO's overall activities and processes is not high, especially regarding how NATO partnership benefits New Zealand's interests closer to home.

Participants noted that New Zealand's foreign policy continues to be shaped by the limited resources the country has for a role outside its immediate region. Wellington's primary security focus is on its neighborhood, which its 2021 Defence Assessment defines as reaching "from Antarctica through to

the South Pacific,” and particularly on the South Pacific.¹²⁵ Aside from the security impacts of climate change, which is a key threat to the region’s island nations, this focus includes how China’s growing economic, political, and military presence in the Pacific challenges New Zealand’s interests. NATO’s potential practical impact in this area has been seen as limited. As one participant speaking about New Zealand’s South Pacific focus put it, “It is difficult to find ways to connect that to New Zealand’s partnership with NATO.” It remains to be seen whether NATO’s inclusion of climate change as “the defining challenge of our time” in its 2022 Strategic Concept and pledge to integrate climate across its work streams, a development participants noted and welcomed, will affect Wellington’s views of the utility of partnership with NATO for its region-specific concerns.

Various contextual realities have also colored Wellington’s perceptions of NATO, including New Zealand’s antinuclear stance, size, and attachment to an independent foreign policy. New Zealand’s opposition to nuclear weapons is strongly embedded in its political culture, and NATO’s status as a nuclear alliance has made navigating NATO relations somewhat tricky for Wellington domestically. Meanwhile, New Zealand’s small size means limited resources for NATO engagement and activities. As a small state priding itself on an independent foreign policy, New Zealand has also preferred engaging through multilateral institutions such as the United Nations and retained a somewhat skeptical view of formal alliances and their potential for leading to entrapment in disputes between larger powers. Although New Zealand–US security relations are again on solid ground, participants emphasized that, unlike the other Indo-Pacific partner countries, New Zealand is not a treaty ally of the United States, a fact that highlighted the country’s position on alliances as well as nuclear weapons.¹²⁶ New Zealand’s independent foreign policy is seen as another way of helping to protect the country from getting caught up in larger powers’ agendas, which has enabled Wellington to navigate a complex regional environment successfully. New Zealand participants noted some anxiety in Wellington about how closer relations with NATO might be seen domestically as constraining that flexibility.

Although the direct relevance of its partnership with NATO to New Zealand’s immediate region has been seen as limited, Russia’s war against Ukraine has underscored for New Zealand that what happens in Europe does distinctly affect its security environment. The war has exposed various parallels between the Indo-Pacific and Europe, including the growing connections between Russia and China; the vulnerabilities of supply chains, prices, and energy security across regions; and uncomfortable comparisons between the war in Ukraine and a potential Taiwan contingency. Moreover, the war in Ukraine has revealed troubling vulnerabilities in the key global instrument for responding to aggression with which New Zealand has traditionally aligned itself, the United Nations, highlighting the imperative to be proactive in the protection of the rules-based international order. “So, Ukraine has really reshaped the environment in which New Zealand is thinking about NATO,” one participant concluded, and has led to “stronger interest in NATO than there has been for a long time.” New Zealand has shown a substantial willingness to work in coordination with NATO members and other Western partners on Ukraine, even imposing unilateral sanctions on Russia, a first for Wellington.¹²⁷

The war and clearer China-Russia ties have also come on the heels of a reassessment by Wellington in recent years of its relationship with China, New Zealand’s biggest trading partner, with which it has endeavored historically to maintain good diplomatic and economic relations. This reassessment

stemmed from, inter alia, growing concerns about the militarization of the South and East China Seas, China's increasing presence in the South Pacific, large-scale human rights abuses in Xinjiang, and political interference by China in Australia and New Zealand.¹²⁸ As a result, though still desiring to walk a careful line on China, New Zealand has become more forward in raising concerns about China's human rights abuses, more wary of China's influence tactics, and more clear-eyed about China's challenges to the rules-based international order.¹²⁹ In this regard, then prime minister Jacinda Ardern's statement in Madrid noted that "China has in recent times also become more assertive and more willing to challenge international rules and norms. Here, we must respond to the actions we see. We must stand firm on the rules-based order, call for diplomatic engagement and speak out against human rights abuses at all times when and where we see them."¹³⁰

Trends: Expectations of NATO

None of the Indo-Pacific partner participants perceived that their countries expected NATO to be a significant direct actor in the Indo-Pacific. There was instead an expectation of NATO coordinating with partners on issues of mutual concern in, stemming from, or affecting the Indo-Pacific. Indeed, the notion of "NATO with the Indo-Pacific not in the Indo-Pacific" was generally accepted, meaning NATO and Indo-Pacific partners sharing knowledge and experiences and coordinating responses rather than intervening in each other's regional military crises, with the Ukraine-related sanctions and aid delivery an example of how the reactions of NATO and Indo-Pacific partners could be synced. Many nuances appeared as participants unpacked this view, however.

Some participants expressed doubts about NATO's capacity or bandwidth to be involved on the Indo-Pacific to any significant extent, especially in the face of the war in Ukraine. As one participant observed, "NATO is still focused on the Euro-Atlantic area and is occupied with the Russia problem given Russia's invasion of Ukraine, so Koreans believe that NATO is too busy." Participants from Indo-Pacific partner countries as well as NATO countries also noted the already crowded field in the Indo-Pacific in terms of overlapping multilaterals such as AUKUS (the trilateral security partnership between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States), the Quad, and those related to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). From the Japanese side, although NATO's increased interest in China was viewed as highly positive, this did not mean that Tokyo expected NATO to be central in countering China or addressing China-related challenges in the Indo-Pacific region. As one participant remarked, "Those sorts of expectations are not quite there in Japan."

Participants from Australia and New Zealand brought up the views of the broader region toward NATO. Speaking of reluctance about NATO in ASEAN, one participant said, "New Zealand is very attached to its commitment to ASEAN and working with ASEAN countries, so there's that sort of triangular relationship there that might be a barrier or an opportunity." Although prefacing with "I wouldn't put this as the highest priority concern," another participant noted the Australian government's prioritization of relationships with ASEAN and Pacific Forum partners and the potential relevance to Canberra of how these countries' governments might feel about NATO's increased interest in engaging with the region. NATO ally participants also took note of ASEAN views of NATO and

offered a variety of assessments, such as “With regard to ASEAN . . . there is a bit of an allergy to the word NATO” and “ASEAN would not expect much from NATO.”

Responses were also nuanced when it came to what Indo-Pacific partner countries wanted from NATO on the region—that is, beyond coordination on areas of mutual concern already included in the Shared Agenda for NATO-IP4 cooperation, such as cyber defense, emerging technologies, maritime security, climate change, and resilience, on which participants generally agreed. In this regard, officials in Canberra further noted a desire for positive NATO engagement with the region in areas such as building resilience, upholding norms, and sharing lessons the alliance has learned about managing changes to the global order.¹³¹ There was also agreement among participants that visits by high-level officials to Indo-Pacific partner countries were generally positive and that NATO could consider sending representation to various regional forums. Additionally, participants generally agreed that more NATO public diplomacy toward Indo-Pacific partner countries and the broader region would be welcome, particularly in the presence of counternarratives on NATO from China and Russia. As one NATO ally participant noted, “There is a narrative that is being pushed very hard that NATO is going to move into your region and turn your countries into Libya, Iraq, Afghanistan.”

Participants from Japan and the ROK registered interest in NATO observation of national military exercises in the region, something that occurred in November 2022, when NATO observers attended the Japan-US bilateral military exercise Keen Sword.¹³² One ROK participant suggested that US exercises with Indo-Pacific partners in the region presented a good opportunity to invite NATO allies in national capacities and other Indo-Pacific partner countries to participate. The same participant also noted that NATO could perhaps dispatch symbolic assets to relevant regional exercises. For Seoul, increased operational cooperation with NATO could help round out its practical relations with Europe, which remain skewed to the economic and political versus security realms. Tokyo also has an interest in the dispatch of NATO assets to the region. Japan already conducts training and exercises with NATO allies active in the region at the national level, including Canada, France, Germany, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom, and has been working to increase such engagements.¹³³ However, officials noted that Tokyo believes assets participating under NATO versus national auspices in the region would be an important deterrence signal.¹³⁴

New Zealand participants shared a sense that when it came to NATO and the Indo-Pacific, Wellington wanted to ensure that its interests were considered and that engagement was appropriate for the region. In this regard, participants noted wariness of any NATO military presence in the region as potentially detrimental to Indo-Pacific security, due to perceptions about containment of China. One participant observed of the Ardern government, “If it thought about a NATO role in the Indo-Pacific, it was uncomfortable.” At the same time, and despite taking place in a different geopolitical context, New Zealand’s participation in NATO’s Operation Ocean Shield in the Indian Ocean suggests that the circumstances and the nature of a military presence may be important factors in Wellington’s decision-making.

A number of participants registered a desire for NATO to be aware of certain regional interests and realities more broadly. In terms of regional stability, one ROK participant remarked that in the likely

absence of new UN sanctions, additional NATO support on North Korea, such as enforcement of existing sanctions or the addition of NATO-wide or Europe-wide sanctions, would be welcomed. A participant from New Zealand said that climate change and its security consequences are one of the most significant challenges facing the South Pacific region and that such transnational threats should not be perceived as simply the soft side of security cooperation: “There are real issues around climate change and [humanitarian assistance and disaster relief] where they provide opportunities for China to leverage some of those issues.” Several participants noted the need for a substantive discussion between Indo-Pacific partners and NATO about how security disruptions in the Indo-Pacific, even if they do not directly involve Europe, can affect Euro-Atlantic security.

Trends: China and NATO

All four Indo-Pacific partner countries are interested in being invited to participate in relevant NATO discussions on China. This interest also extends to discussions about the China-Russia relationship. Such discussions enable Indo-Pacific partner countries and NATO allies to clarify national-level threat perceptions, exchange information and views, share experiences and perspectives, and increase alliance understanding of the security situation in the Indo-Pacific region. Australia, for its part, may see a benefit in having these discussions bilaterally with NATO rather than with NATO and the IP4 in part because of perceived differences in the partners' individual views on China. As one participant noted, “It’s about us engaging Europe in discussions of this kind. . . . It’s a lot easier, to some extent, to do that without having others in the room who have slightly different views of China.” In this regard, Australia, along with Japan, proactively engages with allies on China at NATO.

Although internal discussions on China are welcomed, participants relayed no clear interest among their countries, and indeed some concerns, regarding the notion of characterizing cooperation between NATO and its Indo-Pacific partners in terms of China. In part, this resulted from the view expressed by participants from each of the Indo-Pacific countries that the purpose of cooperation between NATO and the partners is broad and varied. As one Australian participant summarized, “It’s not just about China.” Additionally, participants from both Australia and New Zealand cautioned how domestic audiences might perceive a China-forward approach. One New Zealand participant explained, “My sense is that it’s not helpful to frame things around China or to emphasize that dimension. . . . A country-agnostic approach seems to be probably more politically palatable.” Participants from New Zealand and the ROK, which has experienced Chinese economic retaliation related to its Terminal High Altitude Area Defense system, also expressed concerns about how China would react to such a characterization. As diplomatically phrased by one ROK participant, “In South Korea, there might be some concern about China’s response regarding NATO’s engagement with Indo-Pacific partners.”

In fact, all the Indo-Pacific partner countries feel vulnerabilities related to China that have factored into their relations with NATO, according to study group discussions. Australia’s increasing exposure to aggressive Chinese tactics—from political interference and economic coercion at home to growing Chinese presence in its neighborhood—has increased Canberra’s interest in tapping into

and informing NATO understanding of China's impact on the Indo-Pacific region and the rules-based international order while increasing Australia's willingness to speak out. One participant explained that this differs from earlier years, "when Australia was keen not to do too much at the political level and not get drawn into European affairs and complicating the diplomatic landscape or looking like we're trying to encircle China." A participant from Australia also noted that Australian policymakers increasingly see China, along with Russia, as authoritarian regimes set against the rules-based international order, which makes Canberra more interested in making common cause with NATO on how to counter related security risks. Additionally, Australia is attuned to the return of strategic competition and the security links this creates between the Euro-Atlantic and the Indo-Pacific. As one Australian participant remarked, "NATO and we for the first time in history are roughly at the same point and looking at similar questions about rediscovering the practical aspects of great power conflict. . . . And I think it makes a lot of sense for us to talk and collaborate on that."

For Japan, which is in close proximity to China and whose nautical exclusive economic zone and assertion of sovereignty over the Senkaku Islands are challenged by Beijing, the sense of vulnerability is acute. In response, in addition to strengthening its defense capabilities, Japan has sought solidarity with other countries, making a concerted effort to increase awareness among NATO allies about how security challenges from China, like those facing Japan, also affect European and Euro-Atlantic security equities, as well as the broader rules-based international order. As one Japanese participant explained, "For us to be able to counter or address the challenges caused by the rise of China, we need to involve other partners, so from a Japanese perspective, getting European countries involved is part of our strategy. . . . NATO can be found within this broader picture." Tokyo may also perceive a benefit in China's awareness of NATO's growing attention to Indo-Pacific security as a factor complicating China's calculations vis-à-vis military adventurism. As one participant noted, "The fact that Beijing is getting more concerned about NATO's involvement, that itself is already a great strategic element we can think of." Additionally, Japan, like Australia, is attuned to the return of strategic competition and how it ties the security environments of the Indo-Pacific and Euro-Atlantic closer together, something underscored by Prime Minister Kishida in his remarks at the Madrid Summit, where he said that "the participation of NATO's Asia-Pacific partners including Japan in the NATO Summit expresses the realization that the security of Europe and of the Indo-Pacific is inseparable."¹³⁵

Unlike in the cases of Canberra and Tokyo, NATO's increased interest in China has not necessarily made relations more attractive for Seoul. One participant explained, "Maybe NATO is not officially an anti-China alliance; however, everyone knows the connotation, and that is why the Chinese are not happy about South Korea's engagement with NATO." Participants perceived two main areas where the ROK was vulnerable to Beijing's displeasure, one of which is China's status as the ROK's primary import and export market and an important source of tourism, a reality Seoul felt keenly in the wake of China's economic retaliation against the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense system. China is also the largest trading partner of Australia, Japan, and New Zealand, but unlike those countries, the ROK has traditionally considered stable relations with China as a sine qua non for its national security on account of Beijing's seemingly necessary role in addressing the North Korea threat. ROK participants indicated that Seoul is cognizant of the threats that China's growing nuclear

arsenal and efforts to undermine international rules and norms present in the longer term, but that these concerns have come second to the immediate danger posed by North Korea. This has made Seoul's perceptions of China fundamentally different from those of the other Indo-Pacific partner and NATO ally capitals.

At the same time, ROK exports to China have been declining over several years, while exports to other markets are increasing as the country diversifies its trading partners.¹³⁶ Xi's growing authoritarianism and aggressive regional behavior are also worrying for the Yoon administration, which has drawn the ROK closer to the United States.¹³⁷ Increasing strategic competition between the United States and China, China-Russia collaboration in the United Nations Security Council, and Xi's attitude toward Pyongyang's provocations are also changing Seoul's assessment of how helpful China is willing to be on North Korea, which may reduce Beijing's strategic value for Seoul and further raise its willingness to push back against some of China's most worrying actions. For the ROK, tense US-China relations may also make cooperation to address China's challenges to the rules-based international order in multilateral forums seem less directly confrontational than doing so through the US-ROK alliance. In this sense, NATO may in the future provide a more attractive platform from which to collaborate on mutual concerns related to China (as noted, Seoul is still examining its options and views vis-à-vis NATO). Yet one ROK participant was dubious: "The current administration is focused on building a stronger relationship with the United States, however they are . . . still looking for an answer with regard to the China side. However, with this geopolitical and strategic equation, Korea is not looking for an answer in NATO."

New Zealand generally treads carefully where China is concerned, although one expert interviewed as part of consultations in Wellington noted that the country's stepped-up engagement with like-minded partners over the past five years is in reaction particularly to China's regional posture, even if not explicitly.¹³⁸ As a participant explained, "New Zealand is very wary of being seen as contributing to containing China in any way." Wellington has thus harnessed its independent foreign policy stance, including a more recent approach to foreign policy guided by Māori customary practices and behaviors, to strike a path that sometimes joins other like-minded partners on China and sometimes goes its own way.¹³⁹ There are concerns within New Zealand about overdependence on the Chinese market, and Wellington feels particularly vulnerable to any disruptions of its trade relations with China, especially after the economic retaliation Beijing leveled against Australia in 2020.¹⁴⁰ One participant noted "reservations at least in some quarters in New Zealand" that this vulnerability might increase if New Zealand is seen as drawing closer to NATO. New Zealand is also attuned to the return of strategic competition, which its 2021 Defence Assessment defines as a significant challenge for the country's security interests. Additionally, Wellington's caution does not mean that it is in any way unaware of security challenges from China in its region, China's human rights violations, or threats from China's behavior to the rules-based international order—or that it is unwilling to push back where needed.¹⁴¹ "But at the same time," one participant observed, "there's also a desire to avoid incurring costs unnecessarily for what are uncertain returns."

This sentiment may also translate to NATO-New Zealand relations when it comes to China. Participants pointed out that New Zealand does a lot more with NATO than it advertises, favoring

a “modest approach.” As one noted, “I would say that there is a difference between what New Zealand says and what we do. We’re doing a lot more with NATO than one would have imagined would have been possible four months ago but framed around the Ukraine response.” Additionally, as a small country with limited resources, New Zealand has focused on areas that align with its broader interests but can also address challenges posed by China, such as those related to maritime security. “New Zealand has this strong maritime security interest,” a participant explained. “Part of it is, at least to some of the Indo-Pacific powers, more about addressing China, responding to a situation in Taiwan, et cetera. But to New Zealand, it’s equally fisheries, anti-piracy, anti-trafficking, humanitarian assistance, and disaster relief.”

Trends: Ukraine and NATO

The governments of NATO’s Indo-Pacific partners are four of only six outside the Euro-Atlantic area to have placed sanctions on Russia over its war against Ukraine.¹⁴² All four countries have provided robust financial and nonlethal military assistance to Ukraine, some of it channeled through NATO, and lethal military assistance as well in the case of Australia.¹⁴³ The ROK, although its laws do not permit weapons sales to Ukraine, has backfilled the stockpiles of other NATO allies that have donated equipment to Ukraine, most prominently Poland.¹⁴⁴ The Indo-Pacific partners have been so active on Ukraine for some of the same reasons they are interested in engaging with NATO, not least of all concerns about how the war may affect Indo-Pacific security and the stability of the rules-based international order. As noted earlier, Russia’s war against Ukraine has affected perceptions of NATO and NATO relations in each of the partner countries. Partner country views are perhaps more similar regarding Ukraine than either of the other trends examined here.

Participants from all four countries noted that the war in Ukraine and its various impacts on their region have greatly raised awareness at home about the security implications of events in Europe for the Indo-Pacific. As one participant from New Zealand observed, “In terms of the connections between Europe and the Indo-Pacific, Ukraine has brought them into really sharp relief . . . and not just in the broader secondary effects of prices and food security.” All the partner countries understand the imperative of strong international support for Ukraine, and policy debates within some countries are converging toward what an Australian participant characterized as the point where “the old prism of looking at US engagement in Europe or the Indo-Pacific through a zero-sum lens has almost completely disappeared for the moment.” However, participants from each of the countries noted that some concerns remain within broader policy circles about the effect the longer-term US focus on Ukraine might have on Indo-Pacific security. An ROK participant summarized it this way: “The Ukrainian war could divert precious strategic assets out of a priority theater like East Asia, even though everybody recognizes China as a potential rival to the United States.”

Participants from all the partner countries also noted that the war in Ukraine has increased uneasiness within their governments about growing relations between Russia and China. An ROK participant remarked, “After [the start of] the Ukraine war and the very strong relationship between China and Russia, these kinds of events maybe changed our perspective, so at that time, we may share

some NATO threats and NATO interests.” The convergence of interests between authoritarian regimes in North Korea, Russia, and China is concerning for Seoul, especially its potential impact on stability on the Korean Peninsula. A participant from Australia also noted the convergence of authoritarian regimes as a concern for Canberra, explaining that “this argument that both China and Russia are authoritarian countries that are out to overthrow the international order is increasingly the lens that provides the bipartisan view of what is going on in the world.” Participants from New Zealand, meanwhile, relayed that Russian disinformation about Ukraine and NATO, along with Chinese amplification of these messages, has been a concern in their country. Although pointing out that these views are not mainstream, one participant noted “a narrative in New Zealand about NATO which is also quite harmful. And, yes, it is being echoed by China . . . that NATO is an expansionist organization and it’s to some extent responsible for what is happening in Ukraine.”

Additionally, participants from Australia, Japan, and New Zealand emphasized the repercussions to the rules-based international order from Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine and China’s stance on it. For all three of these countries, the war also raised the specter of a similar regional contingency involving China and made them more eager to sync with Euro-Atlantic partners to ensure that Beijing receives the right messages from the international community’s response. As one Australian participant noted, “We realize that China is viewing our reactions to what’s happening in Ukraine.” Participants from all three countries registered an interest in lessons NATO may be learning from the war in Ukraine that could be applied in a Taiwan contingency. An expert interviewed in Seoul also noted that a Taiwan contingency could ratchet up tensions on the Korean Peninsula, particularly if North Korea, at the behest of China, worked to complicate the situation by threatening the ROK or US troops stationed there.¹⁴⁵ An ROK participant further highlighted Seoul’s concerns about what North Korea is learning from the war and the negative consequences of Russian President Vladimir Putin’s nuclear saber-rattling on norms against the use of nuclear weapons.

Successful coordination between partners in Europe and the Indo-Pacific on Ukraine highlights additional areas of potential cooperation between NATO and these partners. In particular, many participants remarked on the gaps the war in Ukraine has revealed regarding defense industry planning, coordination, and information sharing and how these might be bridged. Participants also commented on both the strengths and weaknesses of strategic messaging around Ukraine and how it shaped a unified response across the Indo-Pacific partner countries and NATO while failing to resonate with large numbers of other countries. Several participants suggested that it might be helpful to examine this strategic messaging effort and see how it could be improved for a future contingency in the Indo-Pacific. Relatedly, successful collaboration on Ukraine raised interest from a number of participants on what forms coordination with Europe on a contingency in the Indo-Pacific might take. One Australian participant observed, “At the political level . . . we are much more keen on discussing with the Europeans about what their role and our expectations may be in case ‘the balloon goes up’ here.”

NATO ally participants had mixed views about European understanding of expectations the unified response to Russia’s war against Ukraine might set for a future contingency in the Indo-Pacific region. When asked whether such an understanding exists, a NATO ally participant responded, “Not so

much. Being dramatically not so much in the case of some members of NATO and the EU.” Another explained, “I think that is understood, but I think that it is complicated to explore such a topic. And it’s one step too far for some allies to approach such a topic.” Noting the likely involvement of the United States in any such contingency, a third participant, referencing the North Atlantic Treaty’s Article 4 on consultation, suggested that “it’s not a two-way street in the sense of IP4 partners expecting NATO allies to do something in Taiwan because they did something over Ukraine; it’s the NATO treaty that is a two-way street. So it would not be difficult to imagine a wide range of Article 4 situations linked to a Taiwan contingency and the United States invoking Article 4.”

Partner Perceptions of the IP4 Grouping

The IP4 grouping will likely continue to exist as a NATO mechanism for engagement with the Indo-Pacific partners on issues of mutual interest for the foreseeable future. Thus, a key goal of the expert study group was to examine the IP4 format as a fact on the ground and assess how it might be useful—or made more useful—for the interests of their countries. Participants came into the study group with differing levels of familiarity with the grouping, which relates to the relatively sudden emergence of the IP4 into public view in 2022. NATO’s engagement with the IP4 before that time was not readily visible outside diplomatic circles in Brussels or a topic of much discussion in capitals. As familiarity with the IP4 grouping in broader circles increases, clarifying what the grouping is and is not will be of growing importance. NATO officials readily emphasize that the IP4 is not a formal grouping in the manner of the Partnership for Peace, the Mediterranean Dialogue, or the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative.¹⁴⁶ They also underscore that it is not meant to replace or be privileged above bilateral engagement between NATO and the individual Indo-Pacific partner countries, but instead to be a complementary avenue of engagement.¹⁴⁷ In this regard, a country’s bilateral relationship with NATO and the strategic and practical benefits it wants to draw from that relationship are the subject matter of its ITPP document.

Reservations and Benefits

Participants within and across the Indo-Pacific partner countries had a range of perspectives on the benefit and desirability of engagement in the IP4 format. Participants from all four countries noted that bilateral engagement with NATO carried certain advantages over IP4 engagement, specifically, the relative ease of bilateral engagement due to differing perceptions, interests, or capabilities between partner countries and the benefit of having a distinct national voice rather than being part of a conglomerate regional view. Participants from Australia and New Zealand expressed the most initial skepticism about the added value for their countries of engaging with NATO together with other Indo-Pacific partners rather than bilaterally. As an Australian participant noted early in the study group’s discussions, “I wonder if Australia is actually the country that has the least to gain or

the least interest in engaging at the level of four with NATO.” In the case of Australia, the assessment related primarily to perceived differences between Australian views and the views of other Indo-Pacific partners on issues like China. Regarding New Zealand, it reflected some of Wellington’s discomfort with NATO, namely, wariness of formal alliances and concern about being seen domestically as compromising on its independent foreign policy. An expert interviewed in Wellington also suggested that New Zealand may be worried about the grouping of these countries together in the context of NATO being seen as anti-China.¹⁴⁸ One participant from New Zealand remarked, “If the IP4 didn’t include NATO and it was just Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and the ROK, would that be preferable to New Zealand? Probably.” A couple of participants also wondered whether increased engagement in the IP4 format in addition to bilateral engagement would tax partner countries’ embassy resources. A NATO ally participant explained that “if there is to be a significant engagement between NATO and the IP4 countries, then there needs to be a separate ambassador to NATO for sure. It’s really key. . . . The second thing is connectivity, too. There needs to be a very good connectivity with the delegations as well as back to capitals.”

Participants from all the Indo-Pacific countries were able to identify potential practical benefits of engagement with NATO as the IP4. There was consensus among participants that the IP4 is a more cohesive grouping than the broader Partners Across the Globe to which these four countries belong. Participants also emphasized access, inclusion, and safety in numbers. In terms of access and inclusion, the four countries as a group get much greater attention and space on NATO’s radar and in the North Atlantic Council than any one of them alone would enjoy. “You’re never going to get an Australian discussion as a regular part of a NATO summit agenda,” one participant observed, “but you could imagine having an IP4 session as a regular part of a NATO summit agenda, so in terms of institutionalizing and regularizing the Indo-Pacific as an agenda item on NATO summits, it’s probably a useful thing.” The IP4 also provides a framework for engagement and deepening of relations between the Indo-Pacific partner countries themselves and facilitates valuable diplomatic opportunities on the sidelines of high-level NATO meetings. As one participant noted, “Those are all very important regional relationships and, deep down, New Zealand has a kind of fear of being left out burned into its DNA, so anything that would provide that framework for engagement with those three other important partners would be welcomed . . . in some way.”

In terms of safety in numbers, participants from both Japan and the ROK observed that the IP4 provides a platform for Japan-ROK engagement that could be controversial if done bilaterally when tensions between these countries are high, as they had been until recently. A participant from the ROK also suggested that the Indo-Pacific partner countries can deflect Chinese displeasure at their engagement with NATO more effectively as a group than individually. The study group examined other areas of potential benefit as well. Participants from Japan and Australia noted economies of scale in engaging with NATO and Indo-Pacific partners on important issues simultaneously, what one Japanese participant characterized as “more bang for the buck.” As an Australian participant explained, such issues “would come up anyway in a lot of the discussions that Australia would inevitably have with these critical partners in the region.” Several participants also raised the importance of US allies (or key partners, in the case of New Zealand) engaging more with one another as the traditional US hub-and-spoke alliance system in the region develops increasing internal links.

Types of Engagement between the IP4 and NATO

The study group further explored the question of what engagement as the IP4 looks like. Participants identified three main types of engagement between the IP4 and NATO that may be useful: discussion, coordination, and practical cooperation. The first two are already quite visible between NATO and the IP4. Consultation, exchanging views and best practices, and information sharing all fall under discussion engagement. NATO and the IP4 have been undertaking discussion engagement since the early days of the grouping on subjects such as North Korea, China, and climate change. Coordination engagement, meanwhile, can be on positions or actions. The IP4 and NATO have coordinated on positions before, for example, in a joint statement regarding North Korea in 2016.¹⁴⁹ In terms of both discussion and coordination engagement, participants saw potential added value to engagement as the IP4 in areas where all four countries are affected or interested and all four hold similar views or can benefit from one another's input. Participants also noted that there may be particular utility to engagement as the IP4 in areas where demonstrating widespread support and unity on a topic is seen as critical, such as North Korea or Ukraine. Likewise, it may be especially useful in areas that could benefit from coordination between the Indo-Pacific partners before engagement between the IP4 and NATO. For example, in a potential exchange between NATO and the IP4 on lessons from Ukraine for a regional contingency, there may be value in the Indo-Pacific partners first discussing together any specific areas that would be important to highlight from a regional perspective, such as ASEAN's views or Beijing's perceptions. Here, the potential of the group to magnify common views and interests beyond what a single country's voice could do also stood out.

In addition to the lessons of Ukraine for the region, participants identified other potential areas for IP4-NATO discussion or coordination engagement. Some of these—climate change, disinformation, cyber security, maritime security, resilience, and emerging and disruptive technologies—overlapped with the Shared Agenda agreed between NATO and IP4 officials in 2022. Participants raised additional ideas as well, based on areas of common interest between the Indo-Pacific partners in which NATO is active or interested. Several participants highlighted nonproliferation and arms control as an area where showing unity might be important. One participant from Japan noted that “there is quite a positive meaning in IP4 here once more reaffirming the importance of nonproliferation, how much that means in Asia and especially in the Korean Peninsula context but also in the China context. I see quite a possibility there of some kind of common initiative, that we can speak as one voice inside the NATO community.” Participants also identified NATO norm and standard setting in areas such as emerging and disruptive technologies, cyber security, and artificial intelligence as an arena for possible discussion and coordination engagement. A number of participants mentioned missile defense as a growing concern in the Indo-Pacific region on which NATO has expertise. Several participants also flagged China-Russia relations and strategic messaging around a future contingency in the Indo-Pacific as areas where Indo-Pacific partner countries may have unique insights. Participants even considered discussion or coordination on the polar regions, given Australia and New Zealand's engagement on Antarctica and Japan and the ROK's engagement on the Arctic, China's interests in both the Arctic and Antarctica, and NATO's strategic interests in

the Arctic. One participant from New Zealand explained, “What happens in the High North [NATO’s term for the Arctic] doesn’t stay in the High North, and vice versa. There is a strategic connectivity between the [polar regions] particularly because of what China is doing.” Additionally, participants registered the importance of discussions between NATO and the IP4 on defense- and deterrence-related dynamics in one another’s regions given the security ties between the Indo-Pacific and Euro-Atlantic highlighted by Russia’s war against Ukraine.

Some of the areas flagged for discussion and coordination engagement are also relevant for practical cooperation engagement, particularly those that overlap with the Shared Agenda document. Practical cooperation on the Shared Agenda has begun, according to officials in Brussels, and is evolving through regular discussion between NATO and Indo-Pacific partner governments.¹⁵⁰ Participants discussed one such area of overlap—space—at length. One participant from the ROK suggested, “So far, IP4 countries and most NATO allies are already invested in space development, and currently, space has become a target for national security and a new business market. So as a security and business matter, space cooperation would be a good candidate for a new frame to develop cooperation between IP4 and NATO allies.” Another area from the Shared Agenda that participants highlighted was climate change. Speaking about climate security and work toward decarbonizing militaries, one participant from New Zealand noted that “three of the four IP4—Australia, Japan, and New Zealand—are also pivotal nations in the South Pacific, where climate is the most pressing security issue for regional states. . . . So it’s another way of just demonstrating that commitment to climate action, but also showing a way that militaries can be part of it.” Participants also raised other ideas for areas of practical cooperation engagement, including supply chains, given supply-chain vulnerabilities in the Indo-Pacific, and artificial intelligence, which NATO will be increasingly integrating into its military operations and functions. Additionally, as a NATO ally participant suggested, Indo-Pacific partners can also look for areas where the IP4 and NATO can “leverage our comparative advantage and the advantages of others” in a resource-constrained environment. In this regard, participants discussed defense industry planning and coordination and defense supply-chain management. As one ROK participant noted, “All NATO countries and IP4 countries have interest in the defense industry. And they share interoperability with the United States. And also these countries share some general concerns about the lack of conventional weapons available for national stockpiles given transfers to Ukraine and NATO arms donors.”

Future of the IP4 Format

Participants from all the Indo-Pacific partner countries conveyed the impression that their national officials were open to the IP4 meeting together on the sidelines of future high-level NATO meetings to which they are invited, building on the IP4 leaders’ meetings in Madrid and Vilnius. As a Japanese participant stated, “As long as we happen to be in the same city for NATO meetings, then the opportunity cost for those four countries to meet together is close to zero.” However, participants largely shared a lack of enthusiasm about formalizing the IP4 grouping to a greater extent—a view that appears to be mirrored in IP4 governments. Asked about the matter at an event hosted by the United States Institute of Peace in July 2023, none of the three ambassadors or deputy mission

chiefs on the panel (from Japan, the ROK, and New Zealand) subscribed to the idea of making the IP4 a formal organization.¹⁵¹ Instead, one of the diplomatic representatives noted, “[A panelist] this morning used a word which I thought was very apt, and that word was ‘community,’ building a community, and I think that’s quite a helpful way to think about it, with habits of dialogue, habits of cooperation, habits of engagement.”¹⁵² A number of study group participants raised the benefits of keeping the IP4 grouping informal, particularly the flexibility informality gives to the grouping and to the topics the IP4 leaders and representatives can discuss at their meetings. Informality also makes it harder for China to play up its narratives about a so-called Asia-Pacific version of NATO.¹⁵³ In addition to the absence of a demand signal for greater formalization from the Indo-Pacific partners, NATO itself is not focused on elevating the IP4 to a formal regional partnership grouping.¹⁵⁴

Participants also explored the notion of making the grouping more active in the region beyond just a NATO context, perhaps as an informal way for these regional countries that are also US and NATO partners to coordinate with one another on relevant issues. For example, participants mentioned IP4 partners transferring NATO knowledge, standards, and practices to regional partners in joint capacity-building efforts or military exercises, acting as a bridge between beneficial aspects of NATO and a region that may not be comfortable with NATO itself. Several participants also mentioned Indo-Pacific partners potentially meeting as a group in the region ahead of NATO gatherings to coordinate on relevant issues or convening on the sidelines of regional meetings. Interestingly, IP4 defense authorities did meet on the sidelines of the Seoul Defense Dialogue in September 2022, in what the Japanese Ministry of Defense called a “Breakfast Meeting with the Representatives of the Four Asia-Pacific Partners (AP4) of the North Atlantic Organization (NATO).”¹⁵⁵ Although no participants expressed direct opposition to the idea of Indo-Pacific partners meeting in the IP4 format in the region, a number noted that the region is already crowded with minilaterals such as AUKUS and the Quad and that there may not be capacity to add another grouping to the mix. As one participant from New Zealand cautioned, “I think maybe there’s some issues about replication and complication there as well, and it’s hard to keep track of all these dialogues that are going on and who is involved in them.”

All of this gets back to questions about what the IP4 grouping is or should be and the ambitions of both the Indo-Pacific partner countries and NATO in this regard. The perceptions of participants from Indo-Pacific partners seemed to indicate that for their countries, treating the grouping as an additional avenue for engagement with like-minded partners and NATO on issues of mutual importance, with bilateral relations taking a clear front seat, was fine overall, and that the grouping could produce added value in certain areas. If accepted as a mechanism to facilitate NATO’s ability to gather its member states together with four partners from an important region, the IP4 grouping made sense. The idea that the Indo-Pacific partner countries could equally take advantage of this grouping to maximize the effectiveness of relations with NATO for their own national and regional benefits, however, did not quite land for most participants, though it did more so for some. One Japanese participant suggested to the group that “using and taking advantage of this framework is in everyone’s interest.” A strategic rationale that all these partners could recognize that might make engaging with one another within the context of NATO more interesting and relevant and that went beyond long-repeated refrains on shared values and transnational threats seemed to be missing.

When pressed, participants could certainly identify areas where engagement as the IP4 could be useful, but many retained doubts about national priority or capacity to invest too deeply in the grouping. As a NATO ally participant commented on the study group’s discussions on this topic, “Up until now. . . it’s mostly just a continuation of those four countries’ bilateral relationships to NATO but in a new kind of box. But the added value of being IP4 together doesn’t seem to be emerging in any visible way.”

This status may well change as NATO and its Indo-Pacific partners implement their ITPP documents and clarify plans regarding the Shared Agenda for NATO and IP4 cooperation. NATO’s ambitions will also be relevant, however. That NATO wants to make space for Indo-Pacific partner voices at the table because it helps to have their views is clear, and the alliance has long recognized these four countries as special among the Partners Across the Globe. At the same time, the extent to which NATO sees the IP4 as a useful unit, rather than just a collection mechanism or a way to emphasize the importance of the Indo-Pacific region, remains unclear. The issue may simply be competing views within NATO, where some allies are more ambitious about the IP4 format and some less so, leaving NATO’s international staff to navigate a middle ground. As a NATO ally participant explained, “I don’t think there is a single view of what to expect from the IP4 format—I think there would be slightly different views and that the consensus still needs to be found on what to pursue with the IP4 format and what to prepare with them.”

Public Diplomacy and Strategic Narratives

Messaging came up in two main ways during the deliberations of the expert study group. First, participants discussed the understanding within partner countries about NATO's remit, processes, and relevance and the effectiveness of communication from the alliance to partner countries on these topics. Second, participants examined the strategic benefits of Indo-Pacific partner engagement with NATO and how to frame these in a way that could have resonance for both partners and allies.

Public Diplomacy

A number of Indo-Pacific partner participants cited a lack of communication about the benefits of NATO partnership, especially at the public level. Several also mentioned limited understanding about NATO outside narrow policy circles, even within parts of government. As an Australian participant summarized it, "You shouldn't overestimate the familiarity even now of the security community with what NATO actually does." Participants offered various explanations for this from the partner state side, including silos within bureaucracies between European and North American affairs, finite resources for Brussels representation, limited bureaucratic bandwidth, and sparse interest within the expert community. Participants also cited NATO's limited reach to Indo-Pacific partner capitals, including through its public diplomacy division. In this regard, several participants familiar with the NATO contact point embassy model, through which NATO shares information with partner governments and coordinates public diplomacy in partner countries, questioned how well or consistently it had functioned in and across Indo-Pacific partner countries over time. Relatedly, a set of studies on perceptions of NATO in Indo-Pacific partner countries from 2017 found limited NATO visibility, weak public communication, and inadequate efforts to engage media in Australia, New Zealand, and the ROK particularly and "low-moderate visibility of NATO and its narratives across countries, media types, and text sources" overall.¹⁵⁶

Participants from all the Indo-Pacific partner countries did note that visibility of NATO in public discourse and interest in NATO at all levels rose with high-profile visits by NATO officials to capitals and with national-official participation in high-level NATO events. Although Secretary General Stoltenberg has made a concerted effort to visit Indo-Pacific partner capitals during his tenure, such visits are difficult to regularize given distance, demands on the secretary general's time, and the preparation necessary. However, the uptick in other high-profile NATO visits to the Indo-Pacific region in recent years and the increasing frequency with which Indo-Pacific partner foreign ministers have been included in meetings of their NATO counterparts, on top of a second participation by Indo-Pacific leaders at a NATO summit meeting in Vilnius, suggest that visits by officials may grow to be a more reliable platform for highlighting NATO in the years to come.¹⁵⁷ One participant noted that in Japan, intermittent visits by delegations from the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, a parliamentary forum in which Australia, Japan, and the ROK hold observer status, have also provided opportunities to engage lawmakers and the public.

Participants briefly considered other options for increasing the visibility and understanding of NATO in Indo-Pacific partner countries, including greater NATO social media presence, more extensive embedding of partner staff at NATO headquarters, military exchanges between Indo-Pacific partner countries and NATO allies, and stronger national representation in Brussels, but suggested that a more comprehensive study of options would be beneficial. Officials in Brussels indicate that NATO is already working to improve public diplomacy outreach to Indo-Pacific partner capitals, including through NATO contact point embassies.¹⁵⁸ The ITPPs also appear to cover public diplomacy goals, which may help address perceived deficits in the understanding of the rationale for and benefits of NATO partnership.¹⁵⁹ A NATO liaison office in Tokyo, if approved by the alliance, could help further shore up public diplomacy outreach to Indo-Pacific partner countries as well as the broader region.¹⁶⁰ Such efforts become even more important in light of Russian disinformation and as China picks up the pace of its negative messaging about NATO, which was almost twice as high in 2022 as in the previous 19 years combined.¹⁶¹

Strategic Narratives

The narrative framing of a strategic rationale for relations between NATO and its Indo-Pacific partners is a higher level of messaging. A strategic rationale for relations with common relevance for both sides can have an important impact on the priority the respective actors accord to these partnerships and can create a bridge over the geographic divide between the Indo-Pacific and Euro-Atlantic. A couple of primary narrative frames have communicated the strategic rationale for NATO's relations with its Indo-Pacific partners over time. One is the narrative of global partners for global problems, also known as the transnational threats narrative, which can be generally summarized as: global problems require global solutions and thus cooperation with partners from beyond NATO's immediate geographic area, and problems of a transnational nature cannot be solved by any single state or region but require multilateral cooperation. This narrative, which came to prominence during the first decade of the 2000s, is still used today. The second narrative, which was also increasingly used during that period, is that of shared values. This narrative generally holds that countries sharing

values, such as respect for democratic freedoms, human rights, and the rule of law, and upholding those values in their foreign policies have a natural basis for cooperation. The shared values narrative is still actively referenced by both NATO and individual Indo-Pacific partner countries today and has placed an increasing emphasis on protection of the rules-based international order.

These two narrative frames have been useful in providing a straightforward rationale for policy-makers and publics for engagement between NATO and the Indo-Pacific partners. During the many years that these narratives have been active, however, they do not appear to have boosted the priority of NATO and Indo-Pacific partner relations beyond a certain threshold, from either the side of NATO or that of the individual partner countries. As noted, a strategic rationale that all the Indo-Pacific partners could recognize that might make engaging with one another within the context of NATO more interesting and relevant has yet to emerge. Granted, narrative itself is not determinative, with relations also influenced by national interests, capabilities and resources, and geopolitical circumstances. In this regard, the structural changes to the international system that have solidified in recent years—increased economic interdependence, the rise of China, and the return of strategic competition between the United States and China and Russia—have had a clear impact on both NATO and its Indo-Pacific partners. Considering the changed geopolitical circumstances, the study group explored whether new strategic benefits for mutual engagement could be articulated that might resonate within both Indo-Pacific partner countries and NATO member states.

The discussions converged around three main arguments. The first was about the connections between the Indo-Pacific and Euro-Atlantic regions that make them more clearly relevant for each other's security than previously understood. This "security connectivity" rationale is a natural outgrowth of the realization within each of the Indo-Pacific partner countries that Russia's war against Ukraine affects their region and respective security concerns, despite a previous sense of European security being somewhat removed from their direct interests. Participants underscored that the connectivity flows both ways, with Euro-Atlantic and European security similarly vulnerable to disruptions in the Indo-Pacific arena. The participants highlighted several examples of cross-regional connections. One was global shocks, such as food and energy security implications flowing from conflicts in the Euro-Atlantic, supply-chain and financial disruptions flowing from conflicts in the Indo-Pacific, and health impacts flowing from either region. Another example was growing China-Russia political and military cooperation, including the lessons these countries—along with North Korea—might learn from one another's actions and the international community's response and the potential for one of the countries to exploit a crisis involving the other by making simultaneous opportunistic moves in its own region.

A third example of security connections between the regions related to the salience of both direct and indirect impacts by Russia and China on security in the Indo-Pacific and Euro-Atlantic, respectively. Russia's nuclear and missile capabilities have global reach and can readily access the Indo-Pacific, given the country's geographical span. Russia has also sent military assets to the Indo-Pacific region to cooperate in exercises with China. Additionally, Russia has friendly relations with North Korea and can exert influence there. These are all avenues by which Russia can directly affect Indo-Pacific security. With its actions in Europe via the war against Ukraine, however, Russia is having an

indirect but profound impact on Indo-Pacific security, including through global shocks, messages its actions send to China and North Korea, and the undermining of the rules-based international order. Similarly, China's nuclear and missile arsenal is of direct concern to Europe due to its numbers and capabilities. China's activities in and around Europe, including its infrastructure investments and cyber and influence operations, have direct security repercussions. So too does China's response to Russia's war against Ukraine. As one NATO ally participant pointed out, "Without China's tacit support, Russia's aggression against Ukraine and its ability to withstand sanctions would be a lot harder to sustain." China's actions in the Indo-Pacific, however, can have an indirect but profound effect on European security as well, just as the Ukraine case has shown. A final example of cross-regional connections was the critical role of the United States in deterrence and defense in both the Indo-Pacific and Euro-Atlantic and the implications of deterrence dynamics in one region for the other region through their effects on US strategy, posture, and planning.

Participants further refined the discussion around the US role in deterrence and defense in both regions into a second, separate rationale for mutual engagement between NATO and its Indo-Pacific partners based on the return of strategic competition in the international system. Per this "strategic competition" rationale, deterrence dynamics in the Euro-Atlantic and the Indo-Pacific can be seen as more interdependent today than during the Cold War because the United States and its allies need to deter two major power competitors simultaneously, where before they faced only the Soviet Union. A world with two major power competitors means that the United States and its allies may need to address simultaneous threats in Europe and Asia from two competitors with entirely separate sets of resources, whereas—in a simplified example—during the Cold War, if the Soviet Union focused on the European theater, it had fewer resources and less capacity to focus on the Asian theater. As a result, deterrence dynamics in one region should be of greater relevance to the other region now than ever before.¹⁶² As one NATO ally participant suggested, "The question is not which region matters most, because they are related. So US allies in Europe and in the Indo-Pacific have a stake in the security of each other's region and also US dominance over the maritime domain and the global commons, which is critical to project power into both regions and uphold the deterrence architecture." This state of affairs underscores the need for a more systematic dialogue between NATO and its Indo-Pacific partners to improve each side's situational awareness of how deterrence dynamics in each region may evolve and what this means for the United States and for the other region.

A third rationale for mutual engagement between NATO and its Indo-Pacific partners linked the transnational threats narrative to the return of strategic competition and the consequent impact on deterrence and defense. According to this "strategic connectivity" rationale, understanding the convergence of strategic competition and global security challenges is fundamental to the security environments of both the Euro-Atlantic and the Indo-Pacific. Such understanding requires not only thinking through how existing transnational threats may be more acute or take on different relevance in the face of strategic competition (e.g., cyber security seen in the context of heightened geopolitical tensions between the major powers or nonproliferation in the context of Russian nuclear saber-rattling) but also identifying how responses to global challenges such as maritime security have implications for both strategic competition (e.g., supporting freedom of navigation

in international sea lanes) and transnational threats (e.g., addressing piracy or humanitarian assistance and disaster relief). A New Zealand participant concluded, “I think it would be perhaps more credible for NATO to have a narrative that recognizes the linkages between those two things: great power competition in an era of globalized and globalizing security challenges.” Such a strategic connectivity rationale would allow partners to incorporate the reality of strategic competition into their national narratives about NATO relations without having to emphasize it as much as the strategic competition rationale does. It would also better connect the increasingly important geostrategic dimension of Indo-Pacific partner relations with NATO and the practical cooperation dimension, between which, as several participants pointed out, there has been a growing separation. To the extent that strategic competition with China is not something that various European or Indo-Pacific partners necessarily want to highlight, a modified version of the strategic connectivity rationale could simply replace “the convergence of strategic competition and global security challenges” with “the convergence of deterrence and defense and global security challenges.” This shift would address how existing transnational threats may be more acute or take on different relevance given increased deterrence and defense imperatives and how responses to challenges like maritime insecurity have implications for both deterrence and defense and transnational threats.

To some degree, this mixing of strategic competition into existing narratives is already visible in the shared values narrative, if only implicitly. Values such as democratic freedoms, human rights, and the rule of law shared by NATO and its Indo-Pacific partners are not shared by Beijing or Moscow, and Indo-Pacific partner countries and NATO members states recognize that these values are under threat from both China and Russia. Referring to those values implicitly distinguishes NATO and its Indo-Pacific partners from China and Russia—as well as North Korea—and referring to protecting those values implies protecting them against China and Russia, among others. In this regard, as NATO’s relations with its Indo-Pacific partners become more visible on the international stage, participants discussed the extent to which emphasizing the values narrative is helpful in the context of the broader Indo-Pacific region. As one Japanese participant commented, “Yes, emphasizing values is good for our solidarity, but at the same time, it could alienate other countries like, for example, Indonesia or Malaysia, which are quite important players in the region. So, to what extent we should emphasize values, that’s also something we might want to think about.” A NATO ally participant, referencing US efforts to build a more cohesive global grouping of democracies to counter authoritarianism, remarked, “If you look in this part of the world and especially in ASEAN, democracy is scarce, so I think there is going to be a big framing challenge if you look at framing things as democracy challenging authoritarians.” A participant from New Zealand agreed, noting that “on one hand, democratic solidarity could be an animating framework. . . . But I think that drawing a hard line—the government has been pretty careful about saying we’re not buying into this competition of systems that the world is falling into two camps, so in New Zealand there would probably be some pushback.”

Ultimately, any of the three strategic rationales discussed by the study group—or other formulations—could be incorporated into new or modified narrative frames for relations between NATO and its Indo-Pacific partners. Of the three, the security connectivity rationale may have the broadest appeal among the Indo-Pacific partners in that they are already receptive to the notion of connectivity between their region and the Euro-Atlantic because of Russia’s war against Ukraine. Also,

nothing is particularly sensitive about security connectivity between regions as a concept. The strategic competition rationale, in contrast, may appeal more to Indo-Pacific partners that are already thinking more systematically about major power deterrence—perhaps Japan and Australia. The third rationale, strategic connectivity, likely falls somewhere between the other two and may therefore have fairly broad appeal across the four partner countries. This may be even truer with the modified version of the rationale that replaces strategic competition with deterrence and defense. As the simultaneous deployment of the transnational threats and shared values narratives demonstrates, it is also not necessary to choose just one strategic rationale or narrative frame. One NATO ally participant concluded, “One of the things about strategic narratives is that they are not necessarily mutually exclusive.”

Notes

1. Contrast, for example, the secretary general's remarks at a press conference for the April 2023 meeting of the North Atlantic Council at the foreign minister level and his statement with representatives from the Indo-Pacific partner countries at the same meeting. See North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), "Press conference by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg following the meetings of NATO Ministers of Foreign Affairs," press release, April 5, 2023, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_213478.htm; NATO, "Statement of the NATO Secretary General with representatives of Australia, New Zealand, Japan and South Korea," press release, April 5, 2023, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_213474.htm.
2. On Japan, see Masashi Nishihara, "Can Japan Be a Global Partner for NATO?," RIPS Policy Perspectives no. 2, Research Institute for Peace and Security, December 2006, https://www.rips.or.jp/en/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/RIPS_Policy_Perspectives_No.2.pdf. New Zealand had individual officers and soldiers participating in the NATO-led Implementation Force (IFOR) and Stabilization Force (SFOR) in Bosnia and Herzegovina via special arrangement with British forces. See SFOR, <https://www.nato.int/sfor/docu/d981116a.htm>; Oystein Paulsen, "SFOR Kiwis," *SFOR Informer* #72, October 13, 1999, <https://www.nato.int/sfor/sfor-at-work/kiwis/t991017d.htm>. Australian personnel participated in SFOR under a similar arrangement with British forces. Australia also joined NATO's Sea Sparrow consortium in 1990 and the Munitions Safety Information Analysis Centre in 1994. See SFOR; Tim Adams, "Australians in Mrkonjic Grad," *SFOR Informer* #92, July 19, 2000, <https://www.nato.int/sfor/indexinf/92/austral/t000719a.htm>; Stephan Frühling and Benjamin Schreer, "The 'Natural Ally'? The 'Natural Partner'? – Australia and the Atlantic Alliance," in *NATO: The Power of Partnerships*, ed. Håkan Edström, Janne Haaland Matlary, and Magnus Petersson (London: Palgrave Macmillan 2011), 40–59.
3. Australia and New Zealand also contributed troops to RSM. NATO, "International Security Assistance Force (ISAF): Key Facts and Figures," November 15, 2010, https://www.nato.int/isaf/placemats_archive/2010-11-15-ISAF-Placemat.pdf; Mirna Galic, "Navigating by Sun and Compass Policy Brief One: Learning from the History of Japan-NATO Relations," Japan Institute of International Affairs, June 11, 2019, https://www2.jiia.or.jp/en/article_page.php?id=20.
4. NATO, "Media Backgrounder: Afghan National Army (ANA) Trust Fund," June 2021, https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2021/5/pdf/2105-backgrounder-ana-e.pdf.
5. Japan, Australia, and New Zealand starting in 2008 and all four starting in 2010; the ROK's contribution to ISAF did not begin until 2010. See Daniel Fried, Assistant Secretary for European and Eurasian Affairs, "The Bucharest Summit and the Way Forward for NATO," testimony before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on Europe, April 23, 2008, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/p/eur/rls/rm/103935.htm>; NATO, "Summit meetings of Heads of State and Government Bucharest, Romania," April 4, 2008, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/events_7344.htm; NATO, "Monthly press briefing by NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen," press release, October 11, 2010, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_66734.htm?selectedLocale=en.
6. Galic, "Learning from the History."
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About the Expert Study Group on NATO and Indo-Pacific Partners

The dynamics of influence, deterrence, and defense in the Indo-Pacific have changed, with potentially far-reaching consequences for peace and security in the region. European allies' recognition of the strategic challenges posed by China; US efforts to invigorate alliances with Australia, Japan, and South Korea; Russia's war in Ukraine; and China's reactions to these developments will play a major role in shaping the Indo-Pacific's future. To increase understanding of these changes and their impacts, the United States Institute of Peace convened a study group consisting of experts from NATO countries and Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and South Korea—the alliance's partners in the Indo-Pacific. The group explored Indo-Pacific partner perspectives on NATO and the opportunities and challenges of NATO and Indo-Pacific partner relations.



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