

## NATO's role in Asia: a work in progress

### Interview with Camille Grand



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**Question 1: How does NATO perceive its role in Asia particularly in light of the region's increasing geopolitical significance and security challenges but also the consequences of the Ukraine war for the European theatre?**

Historically and under the Washington Treaty provisions (which contains a geographic focus on the Euro-Atlantic area), NATO has no specific role in Asia. Nevertheless, after the Cold War, NATO has gone increasingly "out of area" including with large and long deployments in Asia (twenty years of presence in Afghanistan) and has developed partnerships with a number of Asia-Pacific nations including Japan, the Republic of Korea, Australia and New Zealand going beyond its traditional "partners" which were located in Europe, Central Asia and the Middle East.

This evolution is currently confronted with two conflicting trends. First, the Russian war against Ukraine has profoundly altered the European security environment, forcing NATO to go back to its core mission of collective defence of the European continent. In terms of priorities, it means a renewed focus on territorial defence and on the Russian threat to

European security. NATO's enlargement to Finland and Sweden further strengthens this renewed focus on European security.

Second, NATO has recently (since the Madrid Summit in 2022) developed a growing interest in the security challenges associated with China. This came from the long-term reprioritisation of the US ally on the Indo-Pacific theatre with a "pivot to Asia" finally happening more than a decade after President Obama's speech, and a strong bipartisan American push on US Allies, including in Europe, to pay more attention to China. Many Allies acknowledge a need to respond positively to this US demand (if only to secure a continued US commitment to European security). Beyond the US, other NATO Allies have an interest in the Indo-Pacific: some are Pacific nations as Canada (with its Pacific shore) and France (with numerous overseas territories in the Indo-Pacific); others also recognise that security in the Indo-Pacific has potential implications on their trade and prosperity. Moreover, China appears more active in the European environment, creating security concerns not only in the outer space and cyberspace, but also in the vicinity of Europe with the Chinese navy sailing in the Mediterranean and Baltic seas.

In this context, NATO started redefining its role in Asia. While all Allies recognise that NATO's role will not be central, the Alliance has strengthened its Asia expertise and pursued a closer partnership with the Indo-Pacific partners, expanding the depth of the partnerships and, more modestly, looking at ways to reinforce its presence in the region. It remains nevertheless clear in the current security environment that NATO will not "shift to Asia" and only has limited resources and bandwidth for Asia.

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**Question 2: What specific initiatives or partnerships has NATO undertaken to engage with Asian partners, particularly Japan?**

In order to engage partners in the Indo-Pacific, NATO is building up on pre-existing relationship created in the context of the NATO operation in Afghanistan with a focus on four like-minded Asian and Pacific democracies: Australia, Japan, the Republic of Korea and New Zealand. The strengthened partnership takes multiples forms. It provides for wider opening of NATO's activities to the four aforementioned partners by expanding the number of opportunities to join NATO's work strands at multiple levels from the expert committees to the North Atlantic Council, including in its ministerial format, and going beyond the comparatively modest role of the partners missions to NATO in Brussels. It has now become customary to have the leaders of these four nations take part in the NATO Summit as in Vilnius in 2023.

This can also include cross-participation to exercises (mostly in the form of observers and experts) and, more importantly, technical cooperation on issues of mutual interest such as standards or missile defence. In addition, NATO is working on expanding its presence in Asia through regular dialogues and visits. It has also proposed the opening of a permanent liaison office in Tokyo (still under discussion amongst Allies). Altogether, this entails a significant upgrade of the nature of the partnership with the four Asia-Pacific countries in a context where European, Eurasian, and Middle Eastern partners were traditionally privileged in the large and diverse group of 38 NATO Partners.

### **Question 3: What are the limits of a deeper cooperation between NATO and its Allies, particularly Japan, in Asia?**

Despite its genuine political interest in developing the cooperation with Asian partners, deepening it will encounter several limits. The first is resources. NATO is a small organisation with limited human and financial resources, and its ability to build up and sustain a deep relationship with Asian partners is likely to remain resources constrained, especially as competing priorities associated with the European security situation are likely to require most of NATO's bandwidth. Moreover, NATO relies on the Allies to develop any significant military cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, and only a handful of Allies have the ability and the capabilities to have more than a symbolic presence in the region. This also limits NATO's involvement in exercises.

Second, there is a lack of clear US leadership on the role of NATO. The US, while being the strongest advocate of NATO's involvement in Asia, has so far failed to express a clear demand signal to its European Allies beyond the call for political support and awareness about China. Washington has so far failed to define the level of engagement expected from its European Allies.

Third, there are unclear and competing demands from Asian partners. The four Indo-Pacific partners fail to express a single and unified view about the partnership with NATO. New Zealand and the Republic of Korea's lack of appetite contrasts with the strong commitment of Japan and Australia. All countries balance between strong bilateral ties or unilateral cooperation (AUKUS) with the US and specific European countries. In that context, AUKUS and the "five-eyes" construct appear as much more robust framework for defence cooperation with Australia than NATO will ever be. Altogether and seen from Brussels, Japan stands out as the country with the strongest interest in developing a partnership with NATO.

Lastly, the NATO Allies themselves are not perfectly aligned. Many Allies endorse publicly the development of the partnership with Indo-Pacific countries to please Washington but express private concerns as they prefer to see NATO focused on Europe. Most have a limited understanding of the region and very little to offer to the partnership. Some (UK, France, and to a lesser extent Germany) have their own national agenda in the region, including when it comes to the relationship with Beijing. While supporting the strategic importance of the region, France has even expressed doubts about the added value of NATO and sometimes distances itself from the US approach. And last but not least, many NATO Allies who are also EU member states also insist on the EU dimension in their relations with the

region. Japan as the other like-minded partners in the region therefore need to balance well between those multiple frameworks for cooperation.

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