



***NO NATO IN ASIA: THE COSTS AND
CONSEQUENCES OF COUNTERING
CHINA***

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Last week NATO heads-of-state gathered in Washington for the alliance's 75th anniversary summit. While summit deliverables were predictable, China has a surprisingly central role in summit deliberations. The Asian superpower was a top agenda item for NATO, increasingly called out for any number of perceived sins, including the People's Liberation Army's bellicose behavior in the East China Sea and South China Sea, its strategic partnership with Russia and attempts to undermine the so-called rules-based international order.

"The People's Republic of China's (PRC) stated ambitions and coercive policies continue to challenge our interests, security and values," NATO stressed in its [joint communique](#). NATO's invitation to the Indo-Pacific Four (IP4) grouping of Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and South Korea for a third consecutive year demonstrated NATO's intent to increase coordination and collaboration with Asian powers on China. While the United States and NATO leadership did not explicitly frame the meetings as a counter-China effort, the subtext was certainly there.

Europe and East Asia—one domain?

In recent years, a growing number of experts and officials have argued that Europe can't be walled off from East Asia—and vice-versa. A security crisis in the South China Sea, the logic goes, could negatively

impact Europe's economic health; a conventional conflict in Europe could allow China to press its advantage while the West finds itself distracted. As Secretary of State Antony Blinken [said](#) on July 1, "there's strong recognition that the two theaters...are linked." Japanese Prime Minister Kishida Fumio has been a main proponent of the linkage theory, [contending](#) that "Ukraine today may be the East Asia of tomorrow."

This isn't altogether inaccurate. Russian President Vladimir Putin's visit to North Korea in June, his first in nearly a quarter-century, has security implications for both Europe and East Asia. Putin and Kim Jong Un's new [comprehensive strategic partnership accord](#), which aims to improve bilateral relations, enhance trade ties, and provide mutual assistance should either country suffers an act of aggression, could exacerbate ongoing security challenges in Ukraine and the Korean Peninsula. North Korea's supply of munitions to Russia and Russia's rumored assistance to North Korea in satellite technology is a lose-lose proposition for countries from Germany, Poland, and Ukraine to Japan and South Korea.

The United States and its allies in Europe and Asia have tried to mitigate these threats by pooling resources and strengthening communication on issues of shared concern. Cooperation tends to revolve around bilateral and mini-lateral formulations. The United Kingdom and Japan finalized a [Reciprocal Access Agreement in 2023](#) establishing procedures for the UK military and Japanese Self-Defense Forces to visit one another's countries for joint exercises and training. Japan pursues a similar agreement with France. Germany and France have sent their naval and air forces to the Indo-Pacific, both as a show of resolve to China and because European states have a vested interest in preserving freedom of navigation. In 2023, Berlin deployed its first warship to the South China Sea in nearly two decades. The United States, meanwhile, is regularizing trilateral naval drills with Japan and South Korea, and with Japan and the Philippines, to boost interoperability between their respective forces.

NATO has never been far from the conversation. While Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and South Korea all have long-standing relationships with the transatlantic alliance, they were often seen as more symbolic than substantive. They certainly weren't formed with a specific adversarial country in mind. No longer; NATO is now explicitly referencing China in summit communiqués. [In 2019](#), the alliance stated that "China's growing influence and international policies present both opportunities and challenges that we need to address together as an Alliance." The language is noticeably tougher in [NATO's 2022 Strategic Concept](#), highlighting China's confrontational rhetoric, "malicious hybrid and cyber operations," and exploitation of economic leverage over smaller states. There is now a general sense that NATO, crafted in the early days of the Cold War to defend Western Europe from the Soviet Union, should be re-purposed to counter China—or at least play a part in it. Former Supreme Allied Commander of Europe James Stavridis [has even suggested](#) bringing Japan, South Korea, and Australia into the alliance.

Costs and consequences

That NATO's competitors and adversaries are increasingly making common cause with each other is not a good enough reason to move NATO out-of-area. Granted, NATO has engaged in missions outside the European theater, from the occupation of Afghanistan to training the Iraqi army in Iraq and leading a bombing campaign in Libya. Yet transforming NATO into an Indo-Pacific security guarantor or institutionalizing its relationship with IP4 countries will create internal difficulties within the alliance and compound the security problems NATO and its Asian partners want to address.

First, the divisions within NATO. At present there is no consensus on expanding NATO's remit to include Asia, particularly with the explicit goal to contain Chinese power. NATO members have varying reasons for avoiding it. French President Emmanuel Macron's opposition centers on concerns that incorporating Asian security matters into NATO's official business would degrade the alliance's traditional focus on deterrence in Europe. France,

particularly under Macron, also doesn't want to burn bridges with China or do anything to increase the risk of a direct military confrontation with China, however implausible it may seem. These worries led Macron to veto the opening of a NATO liaison office in Tokyo last year. For Germany, the issue has less to do with promoting Indo-Pacific security per se and more about preserving Berlin's €250 billion (\$274 billion) [trade relationship](#) with China, Germany's largest trading partner for the last eight years. Hungary is strengthening relations with China, so any attempt to bring the alliance out-of-area will likely be stonewalled by Budapest out of self-interest.

Second, outside the United States and perhaps the United Kingdom, it's unclear whether NATO possesses the hard power, platforms, and capacity to markedly increase deterrence in Asia. Europe's defense industrial complex is stretched thin, with the bulk of production going to a land war on the continent that won't end in the short-term. France has obligations in the Pacific, but their overseas territories are thousands of miles from the First Island Chain and wouldn't be all that useful in a war-time contingency. The most Germany could offer is the occasional freedom-of-navigation exercise in the region's key choke points, symbolic operations difficult to sustain given Berlin's three consecutive decades of defense cuts.

Third, China, Russia, and North Korea won't sit by passively in the event of a more Asia-focused NATO. All three are likely to respond to maintain a favorable balance of power in the region. China has long been suspicious that NATO, at Washington's urging, will extend into East Asia to buttress US power, hem China in strategically, and undermine what Chinese leaders regard as their rightful place in international politics. In this scenario, China may want to activate its "no limits" partnership with Russia to make it a critical counterweight. Joint Russia-China military exercises will become larger and more frequent, and any campaign to create wedges between the two—small to begin with—will be lost. China could even reassess its current opposition to a formal trilateral grouping with Russia and North Korea, if only to demonstrate that policies have consequences. None of this would be welcomed

by Southeast Asian countries, which have repeatedly warned of the dangers of the region's further militarization.

Conclusion

Rather than elevate Asia on the NATO agenda, the United States, Canada, and its European allies should keep the North Atlantic military organization in the North Atlantic area of responsibility. The top US, Canadian, and European priorities in Asia, maintaining adequate balance of power with China and avoiding a war that would cause immense casualties and trillions of dollars in lost global revenue, can be accomplished without extra-territorial alliances heavily dependent on US military power. The most effective way to achieve this with the least amount of risk is for the United States and European states to build on bilateral relationships with individual East Asian countries like Japan, the Philippines, South Korea, Vietnam, and Indonesia, all which are modernizing their own militaries to defend their prerogatives against a militarily superior China. None of these powers need a foreign military bloc to explain to them why a stable balance of power in Asia is in their collective interest.

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