



**NATO MUST DO MORE TO DETER WAR
IN THE INDO-PACIFIC, AND IT IS
WITHIN ITS REACH**

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NATO's forthcoming Washington Summit will mark the Alliance's 75th year. The mood will hardly be celebratory. Two and a half years into Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the West's ability to stay the course is increasingly in doubt. Meanwhile, even if former United States President Donald Trump does not win in November, recent [polling](#) suggests many Americans share his views that Europeans need to bear the lion's share for their continent's defense given other pressures on the United States. Such pre-occupations, understandable as they are, shouldn't allow another critical challenge to slip down NATO's agenda in DC: Indo-Pacific security.

NATO took the unprecedented step of identifying China as a strategic challenge in 2022. While Beijing's so-called "[no limits](#) partnership" announced just weeks before Russia's invasion was a catalyst, so too was China's increasing belligerence over issues like the South China Sea and Taiwan. As Japan's Prime Minister [Kishida Fumio](#) put it, many feared "today's Ukraine may be tomorrow's East Asia."

As a result, NATO has been deepening its partnerships with the so-called "Indo-Pacific Four (IP4)": Australia,

Japan, New Zealand, and South Korea. So far, however, these linkages have been limited to political dialogue and new equipment partnerships. Not all in the Indo-Pacific have welcomed this new interest, with the Ukraine war and growing US-China tensions crystalizing [differences of opinion](#) in Southeast Asia, in particular, regarding how best to manage regional security.

Notwithstanding any misgivings over a NATO role in the region, the risk of a regional emergency or conflict between great powers continues to grow. Aggression in the South China Sea has ramped up markedly this year, risking a miscalculation that could rapidly escalate into an international crisis. Russia and North Korea's recent mutual [defense pact](#) could further destabilize the Korean Peninsula as well as creating yet more challenges for Ukraine.

Meanwhile, China's navy is already larger than America's and its air force on-course to [numerically overtake](#) the United States. China has also been honing tactics to [isolate Taiwan](#), while a growing arsenal of missiles and [nuclear weapons](#) provides Beijing with more options to deter any US intervention. As the world's factory, China already has the basis for a war economy on unsurpassed scale. By contrast, Western armories are depleted, and industrial bases not yet mobilized. At the same time, weakening economic growth, defaults in the real estate sector, rising youth [unemployment](#), and multinational [corporate flight](#) could all see President Xi's authority increasingly challenged. This could see him cornered into an act of aggression, given Beijing's strategy of coercion against Taiwan appears to be failing.

The implications of such crises coming on top of the war in Ukraine as well as escalating violence in the Middle East could prove catastrophic. If China were to become an equal or dominant security power in the Indo-Pacific, for example, that could force regional nations to realign their posture. Alternatively, America and China might be propelled into a devastating war costing the global economy to the tune of [\\$10 trillion](#). The Indo-Pacific and Europe would both be impacted by such developments, while any conflict could fundamentally weaken the United States' ability to contribute to European security.

It would therefore appear there is a shared European and Indo-Pacific interest in NATO doing more to help deter a conflict in East Asia. A more proactive approach by the

alliance could also secure future US interests in European security. Yet, just as Indo-Pacific centrality might be threatened by an increased NATO presence, Europe might also balk at additional commitments given the Russian threat. Leaving the problem to America and its regional allies, however, ignores two critical problems.

First, the Indo-Pacific lacks the type of collective defense enjoyed by NATO. Instead, bilateral “hub and spokes” treaties with the United States, overlaid with a plethora of sometimes-competing unilateral pacts, predominate. Former Supreme Allied Commander Europe Adm. James Stavridis [recently suggested](#) extending NATO membership to Indo-Pacific countries to overcome this challenge. This may not be a quick fix, however, given protracted debates over European enlargement. Nor would all in Indo-Pacific welcome such an offer given varying regional perspectives.

Second, when it comes to US-China tensions, the military balance of power is currently in Beijing’s favor due to proximity, mass, and technological edge. While equipment projects initiated by some NATO nations, often with Indo-Pacific partners, will close the gap, none will enter service before the 2027 deadline Xi has given the People’s Liberation Army to be ready for war.

NATO must therefore act quickly and boldly to help deter aggression, but in ways that neither overmatch the region nor deplete resources defending against Russia in the Euro-Atlantic. Rather than deploying forces on-masse, then, a new alliance strategy could instead be developed around four pillars:

- First, NATO could change its boundaries to incorporate US possessions in the Pacific, including the state of Hawaii and the territory of Guam. Currently excluded from the Article 5 collective defense guarantee, adding them could help deter aggressors from using missiles against US regional forces in an escalating crisis.
- Second, NATO could support Indo-Pacific partners in developing regional interoperability of a type that the alliance has enjoyed for decades, making them quicker to respond to any aggression. This would also help coordination between theatres in scenarios where opponents act together.

- Synchronizing the timing and substance of NATO exercises with those taking place in the Indo-Pacific would be another quick step. This would support the US practice of surging forces between theaters and enable allies to create multiple dilemmas for China, Russia and North Korea.
- The alliance could also, as a fourth measure, develop a range of contingency plans to respond to scenarios where Eurasian autocracies act aggressively. These might include, as one example, blocking the flow of global goods China would need to sustain what would likely be a long war. Many of these trade routes lie within easy reach of NATO but beyond that of the PLA and are tasks well-suited to the Alliance’s 300-plus patrol vessels, leaving high-end platforms to focus on Russia.

All of which NATO could do relatively quickly to help the US and its Indo-Pacific partners plug a temporal gap in deterrence. While recognizing these are paradigm-changing proposals, given the increasing risk and implications of a new crisis or conflict, now might be the moment for the Alliance and its Indo-Pacific partners to take this next step in their burgeoning relations.

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