

NATO's Interoperability In the Asia-Pacific Area


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NATO's New Relevance

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has revitalized the reason for the existence of NATO, generally considered by most of the international leaders as "obsolete" (Trump, 2017). Due to globalization, which greatly increases international economic, political and diplomatic relations, the armed conflict in Ukraine is also having repercussions on the Asia-Pacific area. Indeed, in recent months the West has watched with concern as relations between Russia and China have strengthened in the wake of the economic and financial sanctions war waged by the West to disrupt the Kremlin's economic and industrial foundation.

Last February, Presidents Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping solidified their mutually supportive relationship with the issuance of the Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China on the International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development. In the document, Russia reaffirms its support for the one China policy in reference to the Taiwan dispute. In return, China opposes the NATO enlargement policy by opposing both the inclusion of Eastern European countries and the increase of the North Atlantic Council's interests in Pacific Asia. Recently, the two countries have also strengthened partnerships with Asian allies, especially in the energy and weapons export sectors. In fact, "the sides intend to continue to work in the interest of a strengthened role of ASEAN as a key element of the regional architecture" (Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China on the International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development, 2022).

The 2022 Strategic Concept

As a result of this geopolitical shift, NATO had to reevaluate its strategic agenda in both Europe and Asia-Pacific. The 2022 Strategic Concept can be considered the main pillar of a new, more cohesive NATO strategy. The document contains a major difference compared to its counterpart signed in Lisbon in 2010. In fact, while ten years ago NATO wanted "[...] to see a true strategic partnership between NATO and Russia [...]" (Strategic Concept for the Defence and Security of the Members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 2010), the new Strategic Concept describes the Kremlin as the "most significant and direct threat to the security of allies and peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area" (NATO 2022 Strategic Concept, 2022). In addition, for the first time China appears as a systemic challenge: specifically, Beijing is now being mentioned alongside the imported terrorism from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) as one of the most critical challenges facing NATO. The North Atlantic Council claims that "the PRC's malicious hybrid and cyber operations and its confrontational rhetoric and disinformation" damage allies and affects the security of the Alliance (ibid.).

The militarization of disputed islands, nuclear proliferation, a potential invasion of Taiwan, an emerging India, and the use of cyber space and cognitive warfare increase the possibilities for tension, escalation, and direct conflicts. Accordingly, the North Atlantic Council declared the intention to “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 ensure the defence and security of allies” (ibid.). However, the Alliance also declared its intention to maintain a constructive relationship with China.

Asia-Pacific: An Area of Challenge for Global Security

Nowadays, the Asia-Pacific region is facing several complex security issues, which also have world-wide consequences due to countries' military, economic and energy interdependence. Above all, the increasing militarization of the area is one of the main concerns for the Alliance. It may have dramatic economic and geopolitical consequences in the near future, considering the amount of trade transiting through the South China Sea and the Indo-Pacific. Over the past twenty years, the Asian-Pacific governments have increased their defence budgets by one third. Maritime capabilities are also likely to continue to grow, especially in China, putting freedom of navigation in the region at risk.

Old and New Alliances Between NATO and Asian-Pacific Countries

The Alliance has a long history of partnerships with Asian countries to address emerging challenges, such as cyber and hybrid threats, emerging and disruptive technologies, and the security implications of climate change. Considering the latest developments, the leaders of Australia, Japan, the Republic of Korea and New Zealand, the so-called Asia-Pacific 4 (AP4), were invited to take part in the Summit for the Strategic Concept for the first time. These countries have been considered “partners across the globe for decades” (Lynch, 2022) by NATO.

Several NATO member states have also developed partnerships with countries in the Indo-Pacific through other mechanisms, such as the Five Eyes, the QUAD, and more recently the AUKUS partnerships. Thus, the Partners Pillar of the Strategic Compass includes the general strengthening of collaboration between NATO members and the UN, but also greater collaborations with regional partners such as ASEAN.

By increasing cooperation with Indo-Pacific countries, NATO also faces several challenges within the organization itself. The most discussed is certainly the unevenness of military deployment among member countries, especially between the US and several European members. Harmonization of action will require difficult decisions by governments and the challenge of differing institutional, bureaucratic, and cultural norms. In this regard, the EU Strategic Compass envisions for the EU the creation of a rapid deployment capability of up to 5,000 military personnel for different types of crises and 200 fully equipped CSDP mission experts. In addition, it foresees joint military exercises with NATO Members both on land and at sea.

NATO will also need to strengthen common security and defence policies, joint operations in the civilian and military spheres, and a more flexible decision-making process. Permanent multinational formations may be a suitable strategy, with national brigades as building-blocks, which systematically train and exercise together. The advantages are numerous. Doctrines and equipment can be gradually harmonized between the national brigades. In contrast, past experiences such as the creation of EU Battlegroups have shown that volunteer multinational formations are unsuccessful, as they don't create synergy among soldiers nor create a homogeneous military force (Biscop, 2022).

At a technical level, recent studies argue that the interoperability among NATO allied forces can be enhanced through the sharing of the same military and technological equipment, particularly with the purchase and sale of F35 fighter jets among allies. Indeed, F35 supplies would ensure the modernization of European forces.

Conclusion

The recognition of the importance of the Indo-Pacific certainly represents a paradigm shift for the traditional strategy of NATO. However, the region's interests still appear distant to European allies and therefore seem not to be among their first priorities, especially when compared to the current Ukrainian war on the continent.

Still, there are signs of the European countries' renewed willingness to cooperate within the Alliance. As such, there are revived discussions regarding the need for increased defence budgets and the participation in joint military exercises. The Pitch Black 2022 exercise, that took place between Canada, France, Germany, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and the United States is a first example of one of such exercises. Similarly, according to the Washington Treaty, the United States does not envision direct NATO engagement in the Asia-Pacific either.

The recent NATO Strategic Foresight Perspectives Report on the Indo-Pacific, prepared by NATO Allied Command Transformation (ACT) in Norfolk, confirms a partnership-focused approach to promote future missions in the Asian region, especially with the AP4 countries through the Individual Partnership and Cooperation Programme, but no direct military action in the near future.

In this era dominated by strategic competition and cross-countries security issues, NATO Allies may work closely with like-minded countries, even if geographically distant. The commitments signed at the Madrid Summit last June can be a great starting point for a more inclusive and constructive approach in addressing future hybrid challenges.

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