



# NATO's presence in the Indo Pacific

North Atlantic Council



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Literacy and Enlightenment



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## Introduction

The Indo Pacific region has been in recent days, after the Middle East and Ukraine, the most tense region in the world. This is mostly due to the surge of imperialism in China. China's expansion, especially in the South China Sea, has raised many questions on how to traverse the current political climate.

China's expansion on itself really is not considered a direct threat to the NATO alliance, but any conflict in the region would certainly mean U.S. intervention. Besides, the EU and NATO have many allies in the region such as Japan and the Republic of Korea. Instability and conflict in the region directly affects the entire world, which is something the alliance needs to prevent at all costs.

The complexities in the region and the possible danger a conflict possesses should not be taken lightly. When discussing the role of NATO in the region, delegates should focus on de-escalating the situation and assisting the allied states in the regions with combatting China's aggression and sustaining the Indo Pacific peace.

## Definition of Key Terms

### Indo Pacific

The Indo Pacific is a region spanning across the Indian and Pacific ocean. The exact region is unclear, but it goes from Japan to Somalia and is responsible for almost a majority of all world trade.

### Hybrid Warfare

Hybrid warfare is a form of warfare in the grey area performed by state and non-state actors. This type of warfare typically focuses on civilians by damaging critical infrastructure or spreading misinformation.

### Imperialism

Imperialism is the political ideology within a country or by its leadership to expand their territory. In the colonial eras this was mostly done overseas but in the current day this mostly lies in the form of influence.



## Artificial Island

Artificial islands are man-made islands predominantly around coast areas or shallow waters. Ships supply sand and rocks to the middle of the ocean thus creating after time new territory.

## Chips

Chips are miniscule metal objects which run all technological devices. Taiwan is the world biggest supplier of micro chips, even smaller than normal chips. These chips form the framework of our current form of warfare and daily lives.

## IP4

The IP4 or Indo Pacific 4 refers to New Zealand, the Republic of Korea, Japan and Australia. These four nations are NATO's biggest allies in the Indo Pacific.

## Maritime Borders

A nation's maritime borders refers to the territory in which a state has all rights over all resources within that area. This includes fish oil and other resources nations may find. This zone is oftentimes called the Economic Exclusive Zone.

# General Overview

## China's influence

For a better understanding of the situation in the Indo Pacific one would have to examine China's stance on the situation. China, as one of the P5 powers and therefore as the of the most powerful nations in the world, has a huge sphere of influence in the region. The different "conflicts" China fights can be divided into two parts. Firstly there is the Chinese expansion in the South China Sea. The expansion in the South China Sea has caused many uproars in affected nations such as Vietnam and the Philippines. The South China Sea on itself is a very fragile and unstable region. Many nations, including China, have borders in the water who are contradictory to each other.

When looking at Figure 1, it is noticeable that China's claim of nautical territory is outside of their land borders. China claims more than half of the South China Sea, but most of this territory is far off the Chinese coast. Why is it that China has decided to claim the territory as their own? All has to do with the islands located in the South China Sea. There are two kinds of islands here. Some occur naturally, but China has been creating artificial islands all across the body of water. According to their interpretation of international law, the territory they claim is within their sea borders, as the artificial islands are under their control. Secondly China claims many other islands within the South China Sea, which are contested by multiple nations. None of the competing nationals however have the power to stand up against military and economic powerhouse China.

Figure 1: Map of the South China Sea



China continues its aggression in this region by focusing on helpless civilians such as fishermen. Especially Philippines fishermen have been the target of Chinese aggression with multiple incidents recorded.

It is important to note that China isn't the only aggressor in the region. As seen on the chart many of the maritime borders are contested by multiple nations, with only Brunei's claim seeming reasonable.

## Taiwan

The other region in the Indo Pacific where tension is even higher, is around Taiwan and the East China Sea. The tension traces back many decades back, when the communists of Mao Zedong won the Chinese civil war against the nationalist. The nationalist fled to the island known at the time as Formosa. There Chiang Kaishek continued the Chinese Republic. Nowadays both "China's" refuse to recognise each other, even claiming all of China and Taiwan's islands as their own. With the United States unofficially protecting Taiwan and at the time the Soviet Union being on China's side, neither ever entertained an attack on each other's territory.

Nowadays tensions remain high. The USA still unofficially protects Taiwan, now having a fully fledged technological economy with almost a full monopoly on chips production. These chips are critical to almost all states, including their rival China. Any attack on Taiwan could very realistically wreck the world economy, leaving many states in potential utter chaos.

Recently China has continued to pursue their wish for a unified China by further escalating the situation around Taiwan. China continuously flies their airplanes over Taiwan's national airspace and sends vessels, both civilian and military, into their maritime borders. Besides that, president Xi Jin Ping has expressed that Taiwan is high on China's agenda.

Another target of China's aggression are two of the IP4 nations, namely the Republic of Korea (ROK) and Japan. The ROK's rivalry with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) is



the main reason for China's aggression towards the ROK. Japan is merely attacked due to its alignment with the USA. Of all named states, only Japan has responded to these actions effectively. When a Chinese aircraft entered the airways above Japan, warning shots were delivered. Not stopping there, Japan's president answered strongly, suggesting that if another attack occurs, more profound measures will be taken.

### **Military presence**

Multiple NATO members have a military presence in the region, each with different reasons. Firstly there is the United States of America. The USA has a military presence all over the world and does not exclude the Indo Pacific. The USA has a defence treaty with almost every major nation in the region, excluding China and India. Secondly there are France and Britain, who both have a military presence in the region in the form of colonised islands. The UK however also has very strong ties with New Zealand and Australia, further stabilising their foothold in the region.

With all these countries being militarily present, NATO's foothold is protected and thus their influence in the region can continue. In the case of any conflict NATO can also respond quickly here. It's important however to not overreact and undergo an act of aggression towards China and allies, as it would in a worst case scenario lead to war.

### **Potential result**

Nato's reason to worry about the region is mostly about the potential result a conflict could have. The USA is one of Ukraine's biggest suppliers and also has a major portion of their military force stationed in the European member states. If any conflict would break out in the Indo Pacific the USA would have to withdraw a major part of their forces in Europe and aid to Ukraine would most certainly be stagnated. In this realistic scenario the chance of Russian aggression expanding increases immensely. Russian progress in Ukraine could be one of the results, but another worse result could be a direct act of war against one of the alliance's members, such as the Baltic States.

So one of the reason the Indo Pacific is important for NATO and its allies is the potential burden the USA would receive.

The other reason is the economic part. A very significant portion of world trade passes through this region. The Malacca strait, the strait of Hormuz and the Bab el-Mandeb strait are major chokeholds and each of these chokeholds have the power to wreck the entire world economy. For all NATO members it's critical to ensure passage through these waterways to prevent a global economic collapse.



## Major Parties Involved

### United States of America

The USA has a military presence all over the world and does not exclude the Indo Pacific. The country has a defence treaty with almost every major nation in the region, excluding China and India. Although not officially, it protects Taiwan from the Republic of China, which is one of the reasons why there are tensions between the two states. The USA is one of the most influential countries in the modern world, in many sectors, hence its relevance to the issue.

### IP4

The IP4 are NATO's major partners in the Indo Pacific. Especially Japan and the ROK have a decent military and have been proper adversaries to China's expansion. Japan has had the only real response to China's infractions of their airspace. NATO needs these allies to fully influence the region to their liking

### China

From NATO's perspective, China is the main aggressor in the Indo Pacific. Combatting China's expansion whilst at the same time keeping friendly relations is a difficult task and the political waters in the region are hard to traverse due to China's influence.

### France and the United Kingdom

France and the UK are the two other nations present in the Indo Pacific. France in the form of their many overseas territories such as New Caledonia and the UK in the form of their Commonwealth of Nations. Because of their former colonialism France and the UK still play a major part in the Indo Pacific and should have a major say in dealings around this issue.

## Timeline of Events

April 4th 1949	NATO creation
October 1949	Mao Zedong's Communist party wins the Chinese civil war
25 June 1950 – 27 July 1953	The Korean civil war
August 17th 2009	Operation Ocean Shield starts
June 29-30 2022	The IP4 is first present at a NATO summit
August 26th 2024	China flies an airplane into Japan's sovereign airspace causing major controversy



## Previous attempts to solve the issue

### Joint military exercise

NATO members have already participated in joint military exercises with several IP4 members and have strong ties with them. These exercises helped strengthen the resolve of the IP4 members and ensured possible future compatibility between different armed forces.

### Partnership and relations

NATO has recently started to as a whole strengthen their ties with the IP4. In all of the past three NATO summits the heads of state of New Zealand, the ROK, Japan and Australia were present. Now it has been made clear that no Asian nations for now will join the alliance, NATO has sought closer relations with these members and some documents have been signed to increase cooperation.

### Maritime operations

Seeing as the Indo Pacific mostly consists of ocean and open waters, establishing a maritime presence able to influence the region has been one of NATO's priorities. NATO has before acted upon this wish during operation ocean shield. This operations included a wide variety of NATO members with the task of tackling the problem of Somali pirates

## Possible solutions

### Cooperation

NATO could enhance its cooperation with Indo-Pacific nations by formalizing partnerships with countries like Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand, as well as building closer ties with regional organizations such as ASEAN. This cooperation could focus on shared security concerns, including maritime security, counter-terrorism, cyber defence, and climate-related threats.

Establishing regular dialogue mechanisms, sharing best practices, and conducting joint training programs could deepen trust and interoperability. NATO could also assist in capacity-building efforts, helping regional partners modernize their defence capabilities and improve readiness for potential crises.

This approach would highlight NATO's commitment to global security while respecting the sovereignty and agency of Indo-Pacific nations. By positioning itself as a collaborative partner, NATO can promote a rules-based international order and counterbalance destabilizing influences without escalating tensions.

### Improving NATO-China Relations

To address rising tensions and prevent misunderstandings, NATO could seek to improve relations with China through sustained diplomatic engagement and dialogue.

While maintaining its core values and addressing concerns about China's assertive policies, NATO could promote areas of limited cooperation, such as disaster relief, counter-piracy, and



combating transnational crime. This approach would help manage competition and reduce the risk of unintended conflicts while signalling NATO's openness to constructive engagement.

By balancing deterrence with dialogue, NATO could position itself as a stabilizing force in the Indo-Pacific, encouraging China to participate in global security efforts without compromising the alliance's principles or its commitments to other regional partners.

### **Military assistance and exercise**

NATO could increase its visibility and credibility in the Indo-Pacific through joint military exercises and targeted assistance programs with regional allies. These exercises could focus on enhancing interoperability in areas such as maritime operations, disaster response, and hybrid warfare. For instance, conducting large-scale naval exercises in coordination with partners like Japan and Australia would demonstrate NATO's commitment to collective security and its capacity to operate effectively in the region.

In addition, NATO could provide technical assistance and advisory programs to help Indo-Pacific nations strengthen their defence infrastructure. These efforts could include sharing expertise on cyber defence, crisis management, and peacekeeping operations.

Such initiatives would serve as a tangible demonstration of NATO's support for its partners, deterring aggression and fostering stronger regional security networks. They would also reinforce NATO's strategic goal of projecting stability beyond its traditional Euro-Atlantic sphere.

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