

NATO's New Mission: Keep America in, Russia Down, and China Out

NATO has been taking its lessons from the Euro-Atlantic area to prepare for contingencies in the Indo-Pacific.

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Meeting of the North Atlantic Council at the level of Heads of State and Government, Indo-Pacific Partners and the European Union, in Washington, D.C., Jul 11, 2024

Credit: [NATO](#)

As NATO commemorated its 75th anniversary at the summit in Washington D.C., the organization found itself at a critical juncture: expanding

cooperation with the Indo-Pacific Four (IP4) countries, among them South Korea. NATO's strategic pivot to the Indo-Pacific has become crucial not only for maintaining global stability but also for addressing the interconnected challenges posed by actors like Russia and North Korea on the one hand and China on the other.

In the words of NATO's first Secretary General, Lord Hastings Lionel Ismay, the [alliance was created](#) to “keep the Soviet Union out, the Americans in, and the Germans down.”

Nowadays, particularly should Donald Trump be re-elected as the U.S. president, the mission has evolved: to keep the Americans (still) engaged, to hold Russia's aggressive actions in Europe down, and to prevent China's influence from expanding in the Indo-Pacific region. In other words, NATO has been taking its lessons from the Euro-Atlantic area to prepare for contingencies in the Indo-Pacific.

In fact, the Washington Summit Declaration in its Article 30 says as much: “The Indo-Pacific is important for NATO, given that developments in that region directly affect Euro-Atlantic security.” The declaration emphasized the need to discuss, together with the EU, “common security challenges and areas of cooperation.” For that, fostering like-minded alignments with partners in the Indo-Pacific, especially South Korea, is decisive.

NATO's Strategic Pivot to the Indo-Pacific

The 75th anniversary summit in Washington D.C. served as a pivotal moment for NATO to solidify

its commitments and strategies in the Indo-Pacific region. Echoing this, U.S. President Joe Biden in his post-summit press briefing emphasized the role of the Indo-Pacific for NATO several times and the Korean Peninsula no less than nine times.

Similarly, South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol, who attended his third NATO summit in a row, underscored the importance of this engagement. This continuity at high-level meetings reflects a growing recognition within NATO of the need to deepen partnerships in the Indo-Pacific, an area increasingly seen as central to global security.

European pundits often argue that the world's future will be shaped by events in Europe, such as the ongoing war in Ukraine, or the Middle East, where conflicts like the one in Gaza continue to simmer. However, the real battleground for global influence and stability may well be in the Indo-Pacific. The dynamics in the region, particularly involving China and but also the Korean Peninsula, have direct and significant implications for both regional and global security.

Concrete deliverables are essential for these high-level summits to translate into actionable policies and joint initiatives. As hinted at in the Washington Declaration, cybersecurity and hybrid threats are two areas where NATO and South Korea can make substantial progress. For instance, the establishment of joint cyber operations and intelligence sharing mechanisms would be a significant step forward. The importance of cyber cooperation, including the

potential for joint exercises and coordinated responses to cyber threats and disinformation campaigns, could bring NATO and South Korea into an even closer alignment.

Another practical area of cooperation lies in hybrid warfare strategies. There is ongoing work within NATO on countering China's hybrid threats. By leveraging South Korea's firsthand experience with North Korean cyber activities, NATO could enhance its own capabilities and resilience against such threats. This includes integrating South Korean experts into NATO's Centers of Excellence in Tallinn and Helsinki, which focus on hybrid threats and cybersecurity.

NATO's Institutional and Cultural Challenges

However, the path to deeper cooperation is not without challenges. There are institutional and cultural hesitations within NATO regarding a more pronounced role in the Indo-Pacific. Several European countries often exhibit caution, fearing that expanding NATO's mandate too far beyond its traditional Euro-Atlantic focus could overextend the alliance and complicate its core mission. These internal dynamics need careful navigation to build consensus and maintain the momentum for cooperation.

Moreover, the geopolitical landscape adds another layer of complexity. The different relationships between China and various NATO members, often driven by economic interests, create a divergence in threat perception and strategic priorities. While economic considerations influence national policies, there

is a unanimous recognition within classified NATO settings of the strategic challenges posed by China.

One of the more symbolic yet impactful steps NATO could take is to establish a regional office in Tokyo (or perhaps Seoul). French President Emmanuel Macron, who initially blocked the opening of a NATO office in Japan, should now seize the momentum before a new government with potentially anti-American sentiments takes power in Paris. Allowing the office to be opened would not only facilitate closer coordination and engagement with Indo-Pacific partners but also signal NATO's long-term commitment to the region – and cement France's leadership role within NATO.

South Korea already maintains a dedicated representative attached to NATO, albeit out of its embassy to Belgium rather than within NATO premises. Formalizing NATO's presence in the region with a dedicated NATO office in Tokyo (or Seoul) would enhance operational efficiency and strategic alignment. It would also provide a physical space for regular interactions, joint planning, and crisis management exercises, thereby institutionalizing the partnership.

The Broader Implications

Expanding NATO's cooperation with the IP4, especially South Korea, is not just about keeping China at bay. The repercussions of European security challenges, such as the war in Ukraine, extend to the Korean Peninsula, where North Korea's cooperation with Russia poses direct

threats. The newfound friendship between Kim Jong Un and Vladimir Putin illustrates the interconnected nature of these regional threats and the necessity for a coordinated response.

Europe has always been within the range of North Korean ballistic missiles, and the United States could have always invoked Article 5 of the NATO treaty if it had been attacked by North Korea. In the past, these were more or less theoretical options. Now, the situation with North Korea is more urgent due to its alleged supplies of munitions to Russia and potentially other support, including sending men to assist Russia in its war in Ukraine. This new reality underscores the critical need for closer cooperation between NATO and South Korea to address these evolving threats effectively.

As NATO concluded its 75th anniversary summit, the strategic importance of deepening ties with the IP4 and particularly with South Korea cannot be overstated. This cooperation is crucial for addressing the multifaceted threats posed by hybrid warfare, cybersecurity challenges, and geopolitical instability. NATO's like-minded alignments – between the alliance and its partners – are the cornerstone of maintaining a rules-based international order. By solidifying these partnerships, NATO can enhance its strategic reach and resilience, ensuring a stable and secure global environment.

The evolving NATO-South Korea relationship exemplifies this approach, demonstrating how such like-minded alignments can drive global

security and stability in the face of common threats.

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