

# NATO and Asia

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## INTRODUCTION

During the period of the Cold War, Asia has been for NATO member countries at best an afterthought in its policies or actions. The main purpose of the alliance from 1949 to 1989/90 was to defend the territory of its member states by counterbalancing the conventional superiority of the Soviet Union and its allies. During this period there has been no relationship whatsoever among the alliance and Asian countries. Of course the United States has had very close relations with some Asian countries in the political, economic, and even in the defence realm but it never tried to hook NATO upon this relations.

In recent years, however, NATO has gradually increased its institutional ties to some Asian and some Pacific countries, most notably to Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand. Further to this, it maintains also ties (albeit loose ones) to China. The Asia-Pacific is about to become an important part of NATO's ongoing effort to create a global network. This article tries to answer three intertwined questions. First, what are the factors that drive NATO's increasing engagement with Asian-Pacific countries? Second, how are the relations between NATO and Asian-Pacific countries? Third, what could be a foreseeable future for NATO's relations with Asian-Pacific countries?

## WHY IS NATO INTERESTED IN THE ASIA-PACIFIC?

When the end of the Cold War came about, NATO member states were faced with three strategic choices. The first was simply to dissolve since NATO had accomplished its principal mission—to deter the Soviet Union in its expansionistic drive. The second option would have been to maintain NATO as an alliance

designed to defend the territories of its member states from an armed attack, so keeping the organisation as a shell without any meaningful objectives or missions. The third option, which NATO obviously chose, was to adapt to the changing strategic environment and to take on new roles and responsibilities.

Relatively soon after the collapse of the Soviet empire, it became apparent that the world would not turn into a better, more peaceful place. The Iraqi aggression against Kuwait, the outbreak of ethnic conflicts in former Yugoslavia, the increase in the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction—just to mention a few developments—made NATO decide that the maintenance of a robust military alliance of nations who share also common values and norms seeking to protect their security while at the same time exporting stability outside its borders was in the self-interest of its member states. A crucial aspect at that time (beginning of the 90s) was that NATO decided to get engaged outside its territory with the nations of the former Warsaw Pact and the republics of the former Soviet Union. At the minimum level, NATO sought to establish some kind of formal relationship to encourage regional stability and thus help these countries in their transition from authoritarian to democratic political systems. The central tool to assist these nations in their democratic transition has been and still is the Partnership for Peace (PfP), which encapsulates a number of political and military activities between NATO and participating nations. In addition, NATO established dialogue and cooperation frameworks with various Muslim countries, such as the Mediterranean Dialogue (MD) with countries from the Middle East and North Africa and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI) with countries from the Arabian Gulf.

Besides this decision to get engaged with former adversary countries, NATO had to expand its geographical reach in military and political terms. The war in the former Yugoslavia—accompanied by massive migratory flows into the territories of NATO member countries—forced NATO to intervene militarily in Bosnia to save the Muslim majority population from ethnic cleansing. This marked the beginning of a new era for NATO. While alliance member states trained and planned for more than 40 years for a hypothetical situation—which luckily never materialised—the intervention into Bosnia catapulted NATO into the “real” world. In 1999, NATO had to intervene once again to come to the rescue of

Muslims in Kosovo.

So, by the end of the millennium, NATO had already transformed, slowly but steadily, from an alliance of collective defence to a hybrid institution, which had to pursue several goals such as collective defence of its member territories, political and military dialogue with interested states, and out-of-area operations to stabilise its immediate environment.

During the Cold War, NATO had no systematic links with Asia. Whatever modest connections that did exist were largely an indirect result of NATO's Cold War security requirements. Simply by virtue of the fact that the Soviet Union was the focus of NATO security concerns, military planning inevitably had to take into account all areas of the Soviet Union, including Central Asia.

Early post-Cold War NATO-Asia interaction was both limited and cautious. In 1992, NATO decided to seek an informal connection with Japan. However, both sides had been very keen at that time to limit its exchange to a low-level political dialogue. NATO did not want to give the impression of becoming engaged in Asian security issues.

The situation, of course, has been slightly different with regard to Central Asia. These countries were early participants in NATO's North Atlantic Cooperation Council, which later on evolved into the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council, beginning in 1992. In addition, as early as 1992, NATO organised what was termed the Group of Defence Ministers. This Group was composed of the ministers of all sixteen NATO allies and the former Warsaw Pact and former Soviet republics, as well as Russia. The Group, among other things, provided an opportunity for dialogue between NATO and the Central Asian nations.

With regard to Asia, NATO's interest remained finite. The situation, however, changed dramatically after 9/11. The lessons NATO member countries had to learn with regard to the attacks have been:

- a. Threats and risks to the security of NATO member states are deterritorialised nowadays, meaning that they can emanate from everywhere and that NATO has to be prepared to counter them at their places of origin.
- b. In order to fight these threats and risks, NATO needs to evolve into a globalised alliance.
- c. That NATO—in order to protect the security of its members—needs networks on a global scale, including

countries and international organisations.

NATO's relationship with Asian nations has increased significantly in large measure due to the ongoing work of NATO in Afghanistan. Whether these relationships would have emerged anyway is open to debate, but there is no doubt that concerns about Afghanistan and the security threat it could represent were important motivating factors for the growing connections. Australia, for example, has approximately 1,000 troops deployed with NATO in Afghanistan. There is an Australian contribution to a Provincial Reconstruction Team in Uruzgan Province, and a Special Operations Task Group deployed under an Australian commander in the same province that operates in direct support of ISAF. New Zealand has provided around 160 troops in Afghanistan. Japan's relationship with NATO is also primarily focused on Afghanistan, where Tokyo has supported peace and security-oriented operations. For example, Japan has conducted refuelling missions for US forces in Afghanistan and has financially supported a Law and Order Trust Fund to strengthen police activities. Japan has also committed funds in support of basic human needs projects in conjunction with NATO, and Japan may consider providing additional support for allied efforts in Afghanistan.

The participation of partners in NATO-led peace support operations is guided by the Political-Military Framework, which has been developed for NATO-led Partnership for Peace operations. The involvement of contributing states in planning and force generation processes took place through the International Coordination Centre at Supreme Allied Headquarters Europe (SHAPE). Besides this, every Asia-Pacific nation that helps NATO in its operations has a liaison officer within the two Strategic Commands.

Typically, forces of NATO's partners are involved in the decision making process through their association to the work of committees, and the posting of liaison officers in the operational headquarters or to SHAPE. They often operate under the direct command of the operational commander through multinational divisional headquarters.

As far as its relation to Asian countries is concerned, NATO had to think about expanding these relations and putting them on a more formalised but also substantiated level, simply because of the fact that countries like Japan and Australia were ready to help NATO in fighting terrorism and insurgency in Afghanistan.

The question inevitably arose at NATO as to whether a deeper relationship between NATO and Asian-Pacific countries should be developed. For this to happen, NATO had to consider what kind of relationship to establish, and whether to differentiate among the countries in terms of the nature or extent of the relationship.

The debate in Brussels and allied member states has focused at the beginning primarily on what NATO members might get out of such developments. In addition, from the alliance's perspective, there have been two issues that have been paramount. One has been the alliance's interest in sharing the burdens represented by such missions by attracting non-NATO, non-European countries willing and able to contribute military forces. Attracting such forces is increasingly critical as NATO members find themselves stretched to meet the demands of these new missions.

One of the outcomes with regard to these considerations was the creation of the so-called contact countries group at NATO's 2006 Summit in Riga. According to the final communiqué of this summit, NATO stated its willingness to

increase the operational relevance of relations with non-NATO countries, including interested Contact Countries; and in particular to strengthen NATO's ability to work with those current and potential contributors to NATO operations and mission, who share our interests and values.

As a result of the Riga summit, annual work programmes have been developed with interested partner countries. Activities range from joint exercises and joint operations, through to language training and advice, and information exchange.

Individual Contact Countries choose in which areas they wish to be engaged with NATO, and the extent of this cooperation. Any inclusion of Contact Countries in alliance activities requires approval of the North Atlantic Council, NATO's principal decision making body, except in certain cases. Cooperation with Contact Countries should be mutually beneficial and reciprocal.

Most significantly, NATO has established a military-to-military relationship with Pakistan. Several years ago, a Tripartite Commission, including representatives from NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), Afghanistan and Pakistan, was established to provide a joint forum on military and security issues. Representatives of the commission meet regularly to discuss security matters in the four main areas of cooperation:

intelligence sharing, border security, countering improvised explosive devices and initiatives related to information operations. Recently, NATO has taken the decision to enhance its interaction with Pakistan to ensure that Islamabad is aware of its concerns and interests regarding developments in Pakistan that may have an impact on NATO's efforts in Afghanistan.

India, of course, is also located close to Afghanistan and has its own interests in that nation and the region. For the time being, there is no formal interaction between NATO and India. Nevertheless, informal discussion within NATO circles regarding the possibility of establishing such formal contacts with India are taking place. And even in India there is a growing interest in establishing such kind of formal ties since the Indians and NATO share the same goal: to prevent Afghanistan from being taken over by the Taliban one more time.

South Korea's relationship with NATO is still in an embryonic stage. Seoul withdrew its small contingent of troops from Afghanistan in 2007 after a hostage crisis, and it never fully joined ISAF. The government in Seoul prefers to limit its contribution by providing medical and engineering support to separate US forces in Afghanistan. However, since relations with NATO are based on joint ownership, the door remains open at NATO for an enhanced relationship with South Korea.

Finally, Singapore and NATO recently established an official relationship that was announced at the NATO 2008 Summit in Bucharest. Singapore has deployed a very small contingent in Afghanistan, and its representatives do not regularly attend NATO meetings. However, there exists potential for training and exercises in the future since Singaporean authorities have occasionally expressed such possibilities.

Last but not least there is a political dialogue between NATO and the People's Republic of China, which originated upon Chinese request dated back in 1999.

To sum up: NATO nowadays, as has been shown in this chapter, maintains an intensive network of relations in the Asian-Pacific area, ranging from political dialogue to intensive political-to-political and military-to-military cooperation. But for the time being this network mainly serves NATO's purpose to win its war in Afghanistan. Every relationship NATO has in the area is geared towards this purpose. Not to be misunderstood—the goal

of stabilising Afghanistan is a shared one between NATO and its partners in Asia-Pacific; however, the structure of the relations is asymmetric.

## NATO AND ASIA: THE WAY AHEAD

Although NATO has established over the past few years structured relationships with several Asian and Pacific nations, and five Asia-Pacific countries have joined NATO's Tailored Cooperation Program—Australia, New Zealand, Japan, South Korea and Singapore—the relations are far from being easy. In particular, those countries that provide troops and other support for NATO-led operations have raised their concerns that they have the least access to NATO's decision making, even in comparison to some of the Central Asian PfP countries. NATO has reacted to this kind of criticism at its Bucharest Summit in 2008 by introducing a stronger political dialogue, which foresees meetings of the North Atlantic Council with ministers of the countries concerned, high level talks, and meetings with ambassadors. This decision has been welcomed but nevertheless falls short of a desired closer involvement in NATO's decision making structure.

In the long run this might lead to a major problem for the alliance, since governments in the Asia-Pacific who are contributing to NATO operations are becoming increasingly under pressure from their domestic audience; for example, questioning the fact that Australian soldiers are fighting under a NATO command without Australia having the possibility to raise its voice regarding the planning and the execution of such operations at the highest level.

A possibility NATO might look at is the opening of its decision making bodies to those countries substantially involved in NATO-led military operations. By creating special high level arenas where these countries could meet with NATO countries before NATO takes decisions would give them the possibility to get some kind of voice opportunities over NATO decisions without having a formal veto right. One framework could be North Atlantic Council+ Sessions, where the NAC meets with representatives of the respective countries before it goes into session to take decisions concerning the continuation of its military operations.

As is clear from the above overview, the NATO-Asia relationship is nascent but evolving. NATO has to make sure that

Asian-Pacific countries do not get the impression that they are only needed for carrying the NATO torch in Afghanistan. On the one hand, this requires more involvement on a high level, but at the same time a long-term vision (a “beyond Afghanistan” vision) for this relationship is required. What ties Asian-Pacific countries and NATO together for the time being is a common interest to fight common threats and risks. While Afghanistan has clearly been the key impetus, both NATO and various Asian nations ought to have an interest in developing a sustainable long term connection. The last section of this article tries to briefly sketch such kind of long term vision.

The future relationship between Asian-Pacific countries and NATO may be impacted by several determinants. For example, a growing awareness of NATO may result in a closer examination of its potential relevance as a model for Asian regional security structures. Obviously, there are significant historical and geographical differences between Europe and Asia, but there are some attributes of NATO that may be relevant. In particular, the more aggressive China will turn into in the future, the more an Asian-Pacific NATO might be needed in order to counterbalance a potential future Chinese threat to the sovereignty of Asian-Pacific countries.

But also the regional environment might call for the creation of a NATO-like entity. The on-going challenges that weak states face, as well as the kind of security problems (i.e. maritime piracy) that continue to beset the broader Asia-Pacific as well as the uncertain future of China might call for a more integrated response within the framework of a security alliance. While still more possible than probable, the optimal approach, one that can project not only a credible military force but also coordinate responses to specific political and non-traditional challenges, involves transforming the existing bilateral alliances in the Asia-Pacific into a multilateral cooperative security organisation similar to NATO.

It is important for NATO to convey to those countries in the Asia-Pacific who are still reluctant to work together with NATO or who perceive the alliance as an instrument of great powers, the message that NATO today is much more than just a military alliance; that, in fact, NATO in the 21st century has multiple identities, ranging from a military alliance to a security forum.

## CONCLUSION

In recent years at NATO, there has been a growing acceptance of the proposition that the most important security threats are no longer geographically defined. As a result, NATO has developed a global network, and many cooperative political or military programmes and projects are underway to assess, prepare for or address current or potential threats to NATO's security from anywhere in the world.

NATO has become, among other things, a global security forum. At NATO, or under NATO sponsorship, nations from various regions, including Asia, convene to discuss security threats and challenges at regional meetings and also at major NATO gatherings, and ministerial meetings. NATO has also become a global security coordinator—the hub of a global network. Asian nations, among others, are working with NATO to develop military capabilities that can be deployed collectively should the political decision be made to do so.

It appears very likely, given NATO's global interests, that NATO and Asian nations will develop increasingly close relations. Therefore, NATO needs to focus even more on understanding this complex region and opening more up for Asia-Pacific countries who are interested in deepening their political and military ties with the alliance. At the same time, Asian nations also should take every opportunity to gain an enhanced understanding of NATO. Asian policy makers and policy organisations should visit NATO and initiate NATO-Asia meetings and conferences. Similar to initiatives undertaken by the EU, think tanks from NATO as well as from Asia-Pacific countries might set up track two initiatives in order to discuss all issues related to an Asia-Pacific-NATO rapprochement.

In this way, over time, NATO and Asia can establish closer relationships. NATO and interested Asian nations can develop increased security cooperation and prepare not only for military operations when necessary, but also for civil-military missions that address the challenges of failed states and failed territories within nations.

At the same time Asia-Pacific countries should intensify their dialogue on whether a kind of Asian-Pacific NATO is needed in order to tackle commonly perceived threats and risks in a more coherent and efficient manner.

In any event, it can be said that the NATO-Asia relationship will be a growing factor in international politics in the years ahead.

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