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NATO defence ministers meet their Indo-Pacific counterparts. Towards a global alliance?

In October 2024, the very first meeting of NATO and Indo-Pacific defence ministers took place. The event reflected the deepening practical cooperation between the partners from the two poles of Eurasia, which was intensified by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Despite the geographical distance between the two areas, their security systems are more interconnected than before, not least because of the threats posed by the emerging coalition of authoritarian states. This raises questions about the prospects for a global alliance.

A meeting of North Atlantic Alliance (NATO) defence ministers was held in Brussels on 17-18 October 2024. This meeting was distinctive in that it was the first occasion on which defence ministers from countries in the Indo-Pacific region were in attendance; Australia, Japan, the Republic of Korea (South Korea), and New Zealand – collectively referred to as the AP4. In accordance with tradition, a representative of the European Union was also in attendance at the meeting. Additionally, a meeting of participating ministers from the Global Coalition against Daesh/ISIS¹ format countries was convened during the summit. On the first day of the NATO Defence Ministers' Summit, a NATO-Ukraine Council session was also held, attended by Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenski and Defence Minister Rustem Umierov.

The impact of the war in Ukraine on the security situation in the Indo-Pacific region. The escalation of hostilities between Russia and Ukraine in February 2022 has resulted in the conflict acquiring an increasingly international dimension. The limited scale of the 2014-2022 conflict enabled Russia to conduct a hybrid campaign in the Donbas and maintain control of Crimea based solely on its own capabilities. However, the February 2022 aggression demonstrated the considerable constraints of the Russian Federation's military capabilities in waging a large-scale war against a state actor. This has compelled Russia to provide subsidies for itself in terms of both technology and manpower. Russia has been importing a number of different kinds of munitions and weapon systems or parts for such weapons from China, Iran, and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea). Furthermore, most recently it has also been reported to have been supplementing its military capabilities with soldiers from North Korea. The difficulty of waging war in Ukraine is also evidenced by the reallocation of the majority of Russia's military manufacturing capacity to the needs of its domestic armed forces. According to data from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, Russian-produced arms exports in 2023 declined by over 50% compared to the previous year. Furthermore, during the years preceding the war (2019-2022), these exports were already markedly lower than during the preceding period (2014-2018), during which Russia accounted for over 20% of global arms exports².

The war in Ukraine is accelerating the processes involved in the formation of cooperative relationships between authoritarian states. This is becoming increasingly significant, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region, where China and North Korea represent Russia's primary partners. This collaboration is evidenced not only by military assistance to Russia but also by increased Russian energy exports to China. In 2023, Russian oil exports to China increased by 24% compared to the previous year, making Russia the primary supplier of this resource to China. In turn, in 2025, Russia's intention is to utilise the full capacity of the Power of Siberia pipeline and increase gas

¹ The Global Coalition against Daesh/ISIS was established in 2014 by 12 countries and currently comprises 87 member states, in addition to six countries with observer status.

² P. D. Wezeman (et al.), Trends in international arms transfers, 2023, SIPRI Fact Sheet, March 2024, https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2024-03/fs_2403_at_2023.pdf.

shipments to China to 38 billion cubic metres per year. This is in addition to the alliance treaty with North Korea, which was signed in June 2024 by President Vladimir Putin and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un. On 14 October 2024, the Russian-Korean agreement was submitted to the Duma of the Russian Federation for ratification. In addition to mutual security guarantees in the event of an attack, the treaty also provides for cooperation in the field of 'peaceful nuclear energy' or space technology. Furthermore, North Korea is interested in acquiring the technical expertise required to enhance the capabilities of its arms industry, including the production of intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) or submarine-launched ICBMs.

As indicated above, the circumstances in question have a direct impact on the security environment in the Indo-Pacific region. China's growing assertiveness and North Korea's provocative actions present a threat to the stability of the so-called first and second chain of islands, where the United States remains the main guarantor of security – as it is for most NATO members. The war in Ukraine provides a clear illustration of the intricate complexities inherent within the global security structure, as well as the interconnectivity between the security situation in Europe and that of the Indo-Pacific region. In this context, it is important to highlight that the dilemma faced by the US administration prior to the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, namely whether to prioritize involvement in the Indo-Pacific region at the expense of Europe, is not a binary, all-or-nothing proposition³. It is evident that the two security regimes are closely related and, under the prevailing circumstances, it is not feasible to ensure the stability of one at the expense of the other. This naturally gives rise to the necessity for cooperation between the states of the two regions. This issue has been acknowledged by the AP4 states, which are also demonstrably supporting Ukraine in its war with Russia for the sake of its security.

Country	Financial assistance	Humanitarian assistance	Military assistance	Total	% GDP
<u>Australia</u>	0.00	0.11	0.73	0.84	0.06
<u>Japan</u>	7.93	1.02	0.06	9.01	0.20
<u>New Zealand</u>	0.00	0.03	0.02	0.05	0.03
<u>South Korea</u>	0.47	0.30	0.01	0.78	0.05
Estonia	0.01	0.06	0.57	0.64	1.85
Finland	0.15	0.14	2.19	2.48	0.90
France	0.80	0.60	3.18	4.58	0.17
The Netherlands	0.72	0.58	5.14	6.44	0.68
Germany	1.41	3.05	10.63	15.09	0.38
Poland	0.89	0.40	3.23	4.52	0.72
The Czech Republic	0.00	0.05	1.24	1.29	0.50

³ In the analytical and expert community, the US pivot to the Pacific was interpreted as an unequivocal declaration of US withdrawal from its role as guarantor of security in Europe.

United States	25.00	2.93	56.80	84.73	0.39
Taiwan	0.00	0.03	0.00	0.03	0.00
Turkey	0.00	0.00	0.07	0.07	0.01
United Kingdom	3.41	0.85	9.42	13.68	0.47

The above table presents the volume of AP4 aid to Ukraine in billions of euros and as a percentage of the country's GDP for the period between 24 January 2022 and 31 August 2024. This is compared to the aid volumes and percentages for the other selected countries. The data presented here are the result of an original compilation by the author based on the Ukraine Support Tracker, which is maintained by the Kiel Institute for the World Economy (<https://www.ifw-kiel.de/topics/war-against-ukraine/ukraine-support-tracker/>). It should be noted that the data are to be regarded as indicative, as a portion of the data remains classified, and for some countries, there may be reasonable doubts about the methodology used to acquire the data.

AP4 cooperation with NATO to date. The Russian-Ukrainian conflict has served as the impetus for NATO's collaboration with the AP4 and since the full-scale invasion, AP4 leaders have attended successive NATO summits, namely those held in Madrid (2022), Vilnius (2023), and Washington (2024). It should be noted, however, that similar meetings at the level of foreign ministers have already been held since 2020, and that cooperation has also been pursued through meetings with the NATO Military Committee.

Furthermore, the significance of NATO's collaboration with the AP4 has been articulated in the Alliance's own documentation⁴. While the challenges posed by North Korea and China were already identified in summit declarations and communiqués from previous years⁵, the Indo-Pacific region was only explicitly identified as an area of interest for NATO in the 2022 Strategic Concept. In the same year, NATO and the AP4 also adopted the "Agenda for Tackling Shared Security Challenges". Each AP4 member country also signed "Individually Tailored Partnership Programmes" with NATO, which set forth, among other things, strategic objectives for cooperation.

Towards a Global Alliance? The October summit, which was attended by defence ministers from both NATO and the AP4 countries, has resulted in the strengthening of relations between the two parties to an even greater extent. Meetings of this nature are typically more technical in nature and serve to elaborate on the practical cooperation on which a political decision was taken at an earlier North Atlantic Council meeting. This indicates a clear intention on the part of the countries in question to enhance interoperability, integrate supply chains, and reinforce the manufacturing capacity and cooperation of their respective defence industries. The interdependence between Europe and the AP4 states in the second and third dimensions is exemplified by the involvement of Korean arms manufacturers in Europe ([IEŚ Policy Papers 7/2023](#)). A further dimension of cooperation is the joint support of Ukraine, which for partners from such distant areas requires, among other things, the coordination of logistical efforts. In this context, it should be noted that during the summit, Australia's Minister for Defence Industry and Capability Delivery, Pat Conroy, announced the transfer of 49 M1A1 Abrams tanks to Ukraine.

The internationalisation of security processes in Eurasia has given rise to the necessity for cooperation between partners from its two geographically peripheral regions. The levels of cooperation between NATO and the AP4

⁴ It is noteworthy that some of these countries have contributed to NATO-led operations in Afghanistan (International Security Assistance Force; Resolute Support Mission) and in the Gulf of Aden (Operation Ocean Shield).

⁵ Even prior to the annexation of Crimea, the North Korea issue was a topic of concern for NATO. However, it was only at the 2019 London Summit that China was identified as a potential challenge.

states are being expanded, and beyond the mere issuance of political declarations, tangible cooperation initiatives are being actualised. The meeting of defence ministers is a clear manifestation of this. It seems reasonable to posit that cooperation at the practical level will continue in the foreseeable future. This may encompass such areas as the sealing and coordination of sanctions regimes, the strengthening of interoperability, the promotion of arms industry cooperation, and the fostering of intelligence cooperation. Nevertheless, it remains unclear whether NATO and AP4 states will opt to elevate the nature of their cooperation to a classically understood alliance, including mutual security guarantees. At this juncture, there is minimal evidence to suggest this will occur, and the primary reference point for the relevant actors in their security policies will likely remain the US as an additional bonding element between the two regions.