

Expansion of NATO in Asia: Myth or Reality?

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Source: People's Daily Online

Introduction

The changing dynamics of the threats for the United States (US) and for Europe have extended the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) dimensions. Initially, in 1949, during the Cold War, this joint security alliance was formed to counter the Soviets and promote democracy and capitalism all over the world. But with the dissolution of the Soviet Union, NATO has been focusing on new security threats such as terrorism and the Russia-Ukraine war.² At the same time, with the growing threat of China against the US and the US's high stakes in the Asia Pacific, there are debates about the expansion of NATO in the Asian region. Especially, NATO's plan to set up a liaison office in Japan has created tensions for China about the 'Eastward expansion' of NATO.³ Japan, Australia, the Republic of Korea, New Zealand and like-minded allies can play a vital role in this expansion.⁴ US's growing relations with regional superpowers like India and smaller but

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² Nato, "NATO's Purpose," NATO, June 29, 2022, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_68144.htm.

³ Person, "China Urges 'high Vigilance' over NATO Expansion in Asia," Reuters, May 4, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/china-urges-high-vigilance-over-nato-expansion-asia-2023-05-04/>.

⁴ Nato, "NATO's Purpose," NATO

significant countries like the Philippines can result in these countries playing an important role in the expansion.

The Asia Pacific region

The idea of expanding NATO in Asia is not new, and the responses from the countries of these regions, especially the ones of the Asia Pacific region, vary according to their national interests. The talks on the creation of the first liaison office in Japan in 2022⁵ and the participation of the countries like- Japan, the Republic of Korea (ROK), Australia and New Zealand⁶ have opened new doors and talks of discussing on NATO's expansion in Asia. Besides these countries, the Philippines and India may also play significant roles in this process.

Japan: The Vanguard

The rise of China has been the main concern for East and South East Asian countries as they are looking for further assistance from their Western allies.⁷ Japan, in response, has increased its military expenditure to 2% of its GDP, double its previous military expenditure.⁸ The US and Europe are extending their hands through NATO to provide Japan with military and strategic alliances as major allies. The Japanese Foreign Minister, Yoshimasa Hayashi, has confirmed they are in talks with NATO to establish a liaison office in Japan. This is the first step for NATO to extend its influence in the Asia Pacific. Japan joined the NATO Cooperative Cyber Defense Centre of Excellence (CCDCOE) last year, facilitating bilateral relations.⁹ The Japanese government officials had asserted that the Russia-Ukraine war has made Japan realize that the country should work more closely with its Western allies to develop security strategies.¹⁰ Japan joined NATO'S

⁵ Jessie Yeung and Marc Stewart, "Exclusive: Japan Is in Talks to Open a NATO Office as Ukraine War Makes World Less Stable, Foreign Minister Says," CNN, May 10, 2023, <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/05/10/asia/japan-foreign-minister-hayashi-nato-intl-hnk/index.html>.

⁶ Nato, "NATO Leaders Meet with Key Partners to Address Global Challenges, Indo-Pacific Partners Participate in a NATO Summit for the First Time," NATO, June 29, 2022, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_197287.htm?selectedLocale=en.

⁷ Shaun Narine, "Nato Faces Balancing Act in Southeast Asia Where Colonialism Memories Linger," South China Morning Post, June 4, 2023, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/opinion/article/3222754/can-nato-manage-its-ambitions-southeast-asia-where-memories-colonialism-linger>.

⁸ Xiao Liang and Nan Tian, "The Proposed Hike in Japan's Military Expenditure," SIPRI, February 2, 2023, <https://www.sipri.org/commentary/topical-backgrounder/2023/proposed-hike-japans-military-expenditure#:~:text=On%202023%20December%202022%2C%20the,spending%20since%20at%20least%201952.>

⁹ Chen Zhuo, "China Military," ChinaMilitary, accessed July 8, 2023, http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/OPINIONS_209196/Opinions_209197/16224337.html.

¹⁰ Jessie Yeung and Marc Stewart, "Exclusive: Japan Is in Talks to Open a NATO Office as Ukraine War Makes World Less Stable, Foreign Minister Says," CNN

Madrid summit in June 2022 along with other Asian partners, where they were in talks about ways to counter China.¹¹



Source: China Military Online

Japan's enhanced cooperation with the US and Europe indicates that the country will play a major role in extending NATO's influence in the Asia Pacific. NATO may also open up liaison offices in other countries if it goes well with Japan to consolidate its regional dominance. China, the challenger of the current global world order, has been the target for the Western allies. For that, Japan, as a neighboring country to China will play a pivotal role while NATO focuses on its expansion in Asia. But the Chinese officials are looking into it as a process that will only increase the tensions in the region. They claimed that the increasing military budget of Japan, along with the extending cooperation with a military organization such as NATO, would lead this region to instability.¹²

South Korea: Enhanced Cooperations

As the dominance of China in the Asia Pacific region is continuously increasing, countries like Japan and South Korea are facing security challenges. Consequently, South Korea recently has officially declared its enhanced strategic cooperation with NATO along with its three other allies.¹³ South Korea, under the new conservative government, is enhancing its defense cooperation with

¹¹ Nato, "NATO Leaders Meet with Key Partners to Address Global Challenges, Indo-Pacific Partners Participate in a NATO Summit for the First Time," NATO, June 29, 2022, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_197287.htm.

¹² Chen Zhuo, "China Military," ChinaMilitary

¹³ Park Chan-kyong, "South Korea Sets Sights on New NATO Strategy to Tackle China Clout," South China Morning Post, June 16, 2023, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3224173/south-korea-sets-sights-boosting-nato-ties-new-strategy-tackle-growing-china-clout>.

the US.¹⁴ Besides traditional security, South Korea has emphasized cyber security. According to the National Intelligence Service (NIS), “the country is the first Asian country to join the NATO Cyber Defense group.” “The NIS was formally admitted into the NATO Cooperative Cyber Defense Center of Excellence (CCDCOE) based in Tallinn, Estonia, Yonhap News reported.”¹⁵ South Korea and three other countries joined the NATO summit in 2022, which has developed the trilateral relationship between the USA, Japan and South Korea. The agreements between Japan and ROK, including resuming military exercise and intelligence sharing has facilitated the two countries to contribute to the expansion of NATO combinedly.



Source: Wilson Center

Thus, NATO, along with South Korea and Japan, is developing strategies to counter the emerging threats in the Asia Pacific region, especially the threats from North Korea and China on South Korea the cyber-attacks. ROK has also agreed to establish a diplomatic mission to NATO.¹⁶ The visit of NATO’s Secretary General, Jens Stoltenberg to Japan and South Korea in 2022 has some long-lasting effects as NATO is enhancing cooperation with the US allies in the Asia Pacific region, and it has been ensured to the ROK that NATO will be assisting the country to counter challenges both from China and North Korea.¹⁷

¹⁴ Ei Sun Oh, “NATO Expansion into Asia Will Divert Focus Away from Regional Devt and Prosperity,” Global Times, February 12, 2023, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202302/1285279.shtml>.

¹⁵ Riyaz Ul Khaliq, “South Korea Becomes 1st Asian Nation to Join NATO’s Cyber Group,” Anadolu Ajansı, May 5, 2022, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/south-korea-becomes-1st-asian-nation-to-join-nato-s-cyber-group/2579838>.

¹⁶ Sue Mi Terry and Kayla Orta, “South Korea’s Important Achievement at the NATO Summit,” Wilson Center, June 30, 2022, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/south-koreas-important-achievement-nato-summit>.

¹⁷ Deutsche Welle, “NATO Chief Stoltenberg Visits South Korea to Boost Asia Ties – DW – 01/29/2023,” dw.com, January 29, 2023, <https://www.dw.com/en/nato-chief-stoltenberg-visits-south-korea-to-boost-asia-ties/a->

The development of a trilateral relationship has opened new doors for South Korea and initiatives have also been taken by the country to add new dimensions in assisting NATO to expand in Asia.

Philippines: Realigning with NATO

A small but strategically important country like the Philippines was always an area of interest for both China and the US. That is why Philippines was often in a dilemma to choose between the two and in different scenarios, the country has chosen both China and the US to attain its national interest.¹⁸ Although President Rodrigo Duterte chose the side of China in 2016, he has reconsidered it and chose to realign with the US. US, on the other hand, considers Philippines as a major non-NATO ally and ensured its assistance over the increasing tensions with China regarding the South China Sea. So, Philippines has come under the umbrella of the US and NATO.¹⁹



Source: NATO Association of Canada

But there are negative implications of it as Philippines faces severe challenges from China. Just like Russia did not tolerate the country getting surrounded with the US allies, China will not accept it too. So, the increasing challenges from China has become a major threat for Philippines.²⁰ Even

64548270#:~:text=NATO%20Secretary%2DGeneral%20Jens%20Stoltenberg%20landed%20in%20South%20Korea%20on,where%20Korean%20veterans%20are%20buried

¹⁸ Richard Javad Heydarian, *Asia's New Battlefield: The USA, China, and the Struggle for the Western Pacific* (Mandaluyong City, Philippines: Published and exclusively distributed by Anvil Publishing Inc., 2016).

¹⁹ Olivia Cretella et al., "NATO and the Philippines: The First Step towards a Strategic Partnership," NAOC, November 9, 2021, <https://natoassociation.ca/nato-and-the-philippines-the-first-step-towards-a-strategic-partnership/>.

²⁰ Atty. Josephus B. Jimenez, "The Philippines Can Be the next Ukraine ," Philstar.com, February 12, 2023, <https://www.philstar.com/the-freeman/opinion/2023/02/12/2244446/philippines-can-be-next-ukraine->.

after the major threats from China, Philippines, being a significant regional player in the Asia Pacific will play a central role in extending NATO in the Asia Pacific region.

India: A Blurry Move

India has been a major non-NATO ally of the US especially in the Asia Pacific. US has been pressing India since the very first decade of this century to join the three defense pacts like the other NATO members and enhance the defense ties.²¹

India's relations with the NATO is in noticeable terms. India's Ministry of External Affairs Spokesperson, Arindam Bagchi, in 2022, had stated that India and NATO are in cooperation with each other in different levels and this cooperation is not something new. The increase in trade cooperation, joint military exercises and the mutual interest of countering China have been in the center of their cooperation.²²



Source: Institute for Security and Development Policy

Although India is in significantly good relations with US and NATO, over the history, India has been following non-alignment and multi-alignment policies.²³ It has also been seen in the Russia-Ukraine war where India did not condemn Russia's actions and also buying crude oil from Russia.²⁴ Also in the Taiwan issue where India's allies of the Quad- US, Japan and Australia were

²¹ Vijai K Nair, "NATO's Expansion: Ramifications for India," *Indian Defence Review*, April 24, 2012, <http://www.indiandefencereview.com/news/natos-expansion-ramifications-for-india/3/>.

²² Long Xingchun, "India Cannot Afford Us Intent of Dividing and Ruling Asia," *Global Times*, August 13, 2022, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202208/1272885.shtml>.

²³ Maitreya Bhakal, "NATO+ Exposes US Impatience with India's Independent Policy and NATO's Malevolent Expansion Ambitions," *Global Times*, June 9, 2023, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202306/1292281.shtml>.

²⁴ Sukalp Sharma, "Oil Buys from Russia at Fresh High in May with 42% Share in India's Crude Import Pie," *The Indian Express*, June 1, 2023, <https://indianexpress.com/article/business/oil-buys-russia-may-share-india-crude-import-pie-8641243/>.

actively engaged against China, India did not feel necessary to get itself engaged in these issues.²⁵ So, it can be said that even after being a major ally of the US in the Asia Pacific, India does not blindly follow any of its allies, rather India analyzes its national interests from their own point of view and can take bold decisions.

In case of the NATO, the case is similar. Having a good connection with NATO for several years and being a major non-NATO ally of the US do not ensure India's role in expanding NATO in Asia. India may get itself engaged "in some concrete cooperation with US-led NATO"²⁶, but there is hardly any chance of India to join the NATO.

Some other countries

Among the other countries, Australia and New Zealand can play a major role. Australia, which shares close relationship with the US and also a member of the AUKUS, has joined the NATO summit in Madrid in 2022. The NATO-Australia partnership is guided by 'Australia-NATO Individually Tailored Partnership Program (ITPP)' which promotes joint military exercises, capability development, enhanced dialogues and consultations in various issue.²⁷ In case of New Zealand, currently it is more focused on the IP4 than the NATO Plus.²⁸ As NATO is focusing on its eastward expansion, Australia and New Zealand which are US's close allies can prove vital in the near future.

Conclusion

With NATO's focus on its eastward expansion and mark its influence in Asia, the process is in an initial stage. The idea of creating a liaison office in Japan, the presence of the 4 non-NATO allies in the NATO summit in Madrid- all these events are driving the expansion of NATO in Asia. But it is rather very early to ensure a successful expansion in Asia especially in the Asia Pacific. Also, there are challenges as doubts remain regarding how much the major powers like India would cooperate in this process. So, even if NATO is to expand in Asia, there are questions about its

²⁵ Long Xingchun, "India Cannot Afford Us Intent of Dividing and Ruling Asia," Global Times

²⁶ Long Xingchun, "India Cannot Afford Us Intent of Dividing and Ruling Asia," Global Times

²⁷ "Australian Embassy," Home, accessed July 10, 2023, <https://belgium.embassy.gov.au/bsls/relnato.html>.

²⁸ Geoffrey Miller, "New Zealand Gets Ready to Embrace Nato," – The Diplomat, July 7, 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/07/new-zealand-gets-ready-to-embrace-nato/>.

influence in this region with a different geopolitical nature in this region comparing to Europe and also, the allies' perceptions regarding this expansion.