

NATO-Europe-US Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific: Challenging Times Ahead

by Gabriele Abbondanza

As the Indo-Pacific gradually becomes the world's geopolitical and geoeconomic epicentre, states and regional organisations are progressively pivoting to it. Due to a combination of drivers – chiefly US pressure, economic opportunities, strategic interests and politico-normative priorities – European and Indo-Pacific actors have increased cooperation with Washington and NATO in the region.

However, the second Trump administration looks considerably less aligned with the conventional pillars of US foreign policy. In light of the unfolding fracture between the US and its European allies over Ukraine, what lies ahead for NATO-Europe-US cooperation in the Indo-Pacific?¹

¹ This op-ed draws on the author's contribution to a recent high-level roundtable organised by the NATO Defense College Foundation. See "A Roma esperti a confronto sul futuro ruolo della Nato nell'Indo-Pacifico", in *Agenzia Nova*, 4 March 2025, <https://www.agenzianova.com/news/?p=395219>.

The priorities of NATO's Indo-Pacific partners

The so-called Indo-Pacific Four (Australia, Japan, South Korea and New Zealand – IP4) are NATO's regional partners as well as formal US allies, each of them with specific priorities and concerns.

Australia is possibly the US's most unwavering ally in the Indo-Pacific. Canberra has second-tier yet noticeable military capabilities, a large military expenditure and moderate expeditionary experience.² The country has cooperated with NATO in the Middle East and the Indian Ocean, and is a NATO "Enhanced Opportunities Partner".³ Consequently, greater

² Elcano Royal Institute, *Elcano Global Presence Index 2023: Australia*, <https://www.globalpresence.realinstitutoelcano.org/en/countrySheetPage?countries=36&years=2023>.

³ NATO, *Relations with Partners in the Indo-Pacific Region*, 24 October 2024, https://www.nato.int/cps/el/natohq/topics_183254.htm.

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Australia-NATO cooperation in the Indo-Pacific is foreseeable, although this would require US approval and would be subject to President Trump's transactional approach.

Japan is another steadfast Indo-Pacific player, being the country in which the modern iteration of the "Indo-Pacific" as a strategic concept originated. Tokyo is acutely threat-aware – its exclusive economic zones border both China's and Russia's – and is entirely aligned with Washington. Despite the country's constitutional and budgetary limitations, its military capabilities are very significant, although their deployments are traditionally minimal. Japan has mostly supported NATO via financial means, yet the latest tailored partnership shows much scope for future cooperation. As with Australia, any major NATO-oriented development is subordinated to US approval.

South Korea is a more recent component of the Indo-Pacific equation, chiefly due to its vast security-trade divide vis-à-vis the US (a treaty ally with around 30,000 troops stationed in the country) and China (whose bilateral trade is worth over 300 billion dollars). Even so, the country is now more explicitly aligned with the US, and although its contribution to NATO activities is less prominent than Australia's, Seoul's position as a major defence player could stimulate stronger cooperation with the Alliance in the region. Once again, a continuing US commitment would be a prerequisite in this case too.

Lastly, New Zealand, arguably the "odd man out" among the IP4 due to its low threat perception, its focus on non-

traditional security, the nuclear-free policy in its waters, a consequently "milder" relationship with the US, and its lower material capabilities. Still, Wellington has recently performed passing exercises (PASSEXs),⁴ it has previously supported NATO in the Balkans, Afghanistan and the Indian Ocean, and currently focuses on technology and military capacity-building. Hence, more cooperation in these specific areas could be envisioned, given their "low-security" perimeter.

In short, the IP4 display varying degrees of Indo-Pacific cooperation with NATO. While there is a general convergence on greater involvement, stronger cooperation traditionally requires US consent, which is a less straightforward condition compared to the past.

Europe at a crossroads

Europe's interaction with the Indo-Pacific is gaining momentum, despite being relatively recent. The spillover effects of Indo-Pacific security issues have prompted a widespread recognition of the region's significance, including the "big four" (France, the UK, Germany and Italy) with their broad alignment to the US, large material capabilities (and blue-water navies) and expeditionary experience.⁵ This

⁴ They entail the passage (without military exercises) through international or territorial waters as granted by the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea.

⁵ Gabriele Abbondanza and Thomas Wilkins, "Europe in the Indo-Pacific: Economic, Security, and Normative Engagement", in *International Political Science Review*, Vol. 45, No. 5 (November 2024), p. 640-646, <https://doi.org/10.1177/01925121231202694>; Elcano

development holds much promise for Europe-NATO convergence in the region, also considering their substantial cooperation in the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean.

France spearheaded the European approach to the Indo-Pacific, on account of its status of “resident power” (with overseas territories, population and military bases in the region), through an effective combination of hard and soft power. The UK, the only other resident power, has systematically engaged with the region in more recent times, following a more traditional (US-led) balancing strategy. Germany and the Netherlands, two major trading nations, tend to interact with the Indo-Pacific in a more “neutral” way, with Germany trying to limit its excessive reliance on China. Italy represents a particular case, as its economic, normative and security engagement (including major deployments and naval diplomacy) in the region is both rooted and substantial (the country’s “Enlarged Mediterranean” sphere of interest overlaps with the western Indo-Pacific), although it does not have a formal regional strategy (yet).⁶

The EU, too, has openly recognised the necessity of an Indo-Pacific pivot and is pursuing it with its own policy tools.⁷ Lastly, other European countries

– virtually all NATO members – are gradually refocusing on this region.

However, the widening fracture with Europe’s greatest ally – the US – marks a major shift in transatlantic relations. While this may not be a permanent turn in US foreign policy, Washington’s instability is prompting Europe to do more, to do better and to do it rapidly.

On the one hand, the current US posture is already spurring a greater European role in its immediate neighbourhood, which undoubtedly remains the main priority area. On the other, given that Europe’s interests are now inextricably intertwined with the Indo-Pacific, a stronger European activism in this region is altogether possible, mainly due to economic, strategic and political interests, in addition to renewed US burden-sharing pressures. As more intense rivalry with China is unlikely due to well-known issues concerning political and material resources, greater cooperation with Europe’s many Indo-Pacific partners – including the NATO IP4⁸ – may well represent a realistic step forward towards further developing European countries’ role in the region.

To achieve this, Europe needs a more realistic (that is, higher) threat awareness, greater defence spending,

Royal Institute, *Elcano Global Presence Index 2023*, <https://www.globalpresence.realinstitutoelcano.org/en>.

⁶ Gabriele Abbondanza, “Italy’s Quiet Pivot to the Indo-Pacific: Towards an Italian Indo-Pacific Strategy”, in *International Political Science Review*, Vol. 45, No. 5 (November 2024), p. 669-679, <https://doi.org/10.1177/01925121231190093>.

⁷ Gorana Grgić, “Ambition, Meet Reality: The European Union’s Actorness in the Indo-Pacific”,

in *International Political Science Review*, Vol. 45, No. 5 (November 2024), p. 680-689, <https://doi.org/10.1177/01925121231191275>.

⁸ Giulio Pugliese, “How to Facilitate NATO-IP4 Defense Industrial Cooperation: The Case of Italy and Japan”, in Liselotte Odgaard (ed.), *Moving the NATO-IP4 Partnership from Dialogue to Cooperation Maritime Security and Next-Generation Technologies*, Washington, Hudson Institute, March 2025, p. 32-35, <https://www.hudson.org/node/49515>.

more integrated defence systems⁹ and, arguably, a European security-oriented minilateral which gathers a “coalition of the willing” aiming to protect Europe and its partners. This can take the form of a “European pillar” within NATO and/or a European defence union, among other options. Although these are remarkably ambitious goals, challenging times warrant more decisive actions.

Shockwaves from Washington, and how to navigate them

In the Euro-Atlantic area, Washington is the informal though undisputed leader within NATO; in the Indo-Pacific, it is at the helm of a ‘hub and spokes system’ of alliances and partnerships. This latticework of security architectures has guaranteed stability for US allies – and US primacy – for around 80 years.¹⁰

Today, this unprecedented collective security endeavour faces not only external challenges – chiefly Russian and Chinese revisionism – but also internal ones due to Trump’s destabilising policies. The latter are creating divisions among NATO and Indo-Pacific allies, preoccupations among Indo-Pacific partners (Taiwan

above all) and, conversely, greater confidence among systemic rivals.

While Washington’s sudden unreliability in supporting Ukraine cannot be fully compared to the Taiwan case – chiefly due to the US grand strategy’s emphasis on the Indo-Pacific – the Trump administration’s recent foreign policy demands higher cooperation between NATO’s members and global partners. Stronger support for maritime security, interoperability, reciprocal access agreements and cooperation on non-traditional security issues are necessary.

Nevertheless, this shouldn’t necessarily take place with NATO’s official aegis, given the Indo-Pacific’s traditional wariness of security-based initiatives, hard power politics and confrontational approaches more in general, which has led to many states adopting “hedging postures” over the years.

Amidst the volatile 2020s, two final implications stand out. First, the Indo-Pacific’s sheer importance can no longer be ignored. While other regions acknowledged it long ago, Europe is making up for the time lost, although it still lacks a unified approach.

Second, as the US adds to global uncertainties rather than addressing them, allies and partners must assume greater international roles while hoping that cooperation eventually resumes. This should prompt greater Europe-Indo-Pacific-NATO cooperation in light of growing economic, political, and security interdependence.

⁹ Gaia Ravazzolo and Alessandro Marrone, “EU Defence Industrial Initiatives: A Quantum Leap Is Needed”, in *IAI Commentaries*, No. 24|79 (December 2024), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/19309>.

¹⁰ Thomas Wilkins, “A Hub-and-Spokes ‘Plus’ Model of US Alliances in the Indo-Pacific: Towards a New ‘Networked’ Design”, in Elena Atanassova-Cornelis Yoichiro Sato and Tom Sauer (eds), *Alliances in Asia and Europe. The Evolving Indo-Pacific Strategic Context and Inter-Regional Alignments*, London, Routledge, 2023, p. 8-31.

Some recent developments – the Draghi and Letta reports for the EU, the European Commission’s response to them, NATO’s resilience amid this uncertainty – are promising, though only time will tell if they will produce the foreign policy shifts that are required to adapt to a more challenging 21st century.

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