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NATO 2030 and the out-of-area conundrum

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Over the recent years, the Indo-Pacific has graduated from being a geostrategic term reserved for a relatively niche community of analysts to an almost ubiquitous, albeit still fuzzy concept that in generous interpretation could capture as much as five continents. The fact that policymakers around the world are paying greater attention to the region is no doubt a reflection of the impact security and economic developments in this realm have on the rest of the world, and which are by and large a direct consequence, or a by-product of, China's growing power and assertiveness. Thus, a number of NATO Allies have been adjusting their approaches to the region, its key players, and potential Allies and partners.

This shift in strategic attention has coincided with a growing foreign policy consensus in the United States and allied states towards ending the “forever wars” in the Greater Middle East, and ceasing the so-called era of out-of-area (OOA) missions by NATO. The Alliance has been deemed to have strayed from its original mission of deterring and defending against Russian aggression in Eastern Europe, which became even more apparent following Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea and intervention in Ukraine in 2014.

Yet, as more NATO member states look towards responding to challenges emanating from the Indo-Pacific, the prospects of future OOA operations in this region are becoming likelier than at any point in the post-Cold War era. This in turn leads to a slew of questions around the conceptualisation and execution of potential OOA operations in the Indo-Pacific. At present, the institutional leadership is adamant: “(T)here is no way that NATO will move into the South China Sea”,¹ while some of the major and middle powers in the Alliance are far from foreclosing that option.

This *Policy Brief* first sketches out the strategic vision of those member states that have articulated Indo-Pacific strategies, after which it turns to the concept of OOA driven by new strategic imperatives. It concludes by proposing a framework of assessment for the prospects of coordination and cooperation among NATO Allies in the Indo-Pacific, and offers some preliminary thoughts on the near- to medium-run OOA activities.

Atlantic Allies in the Indo-Pacific

The first time the Indo-Pacific was given a strategic nod was in 2007 when the Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe used it in a speech to the Indian parliament.² However, the first strategic articulation of the concept in the Atlantic space was delivered by then US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson in a speech at the Center for Strategic and International Studies some ten years later.³ During the Trump administration the strategy that would become known as the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) would be characterised as having some novel elements beyond nomenclature, such as elevating the US-Japan-Australia-India Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (the so-called “Quad”), but remaining firmly on the course trodden by the previous two administrations. The Obama administration might have rebranded the US as a Pacific power, but it was in fact continuing the

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1 J. Stoltenberg, *NATO 2030 - Safeguarding peace in an unpredictable world*,

Keynote speech by NATO Secretary General at the Sciences Po Youth & Leaders Summit, 18 January 2021.

2 S. Abe, *Speech to the Indian Parliament*, New Delhi, 22 August 2007.

3 R. Tillerson, *Defining our relationship with India for the next century*, speech, Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, DC, 18 October 2017.

trajectory and building on the efforts of the Bush 43 administration.⁴

Following the publication of the Biden White House's *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance* in March 2021 and statements from senior members of the foreign

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policy and national security team, we can find plenty of continuity with the Trump administration's FOIP.⁵ The Biden administration finds the Indo-Pacific at the core of US "vital national interests".⁶ President Biden's first multilateral commitment was the Quad summit in March 2021 with the leaders of Japan, Australia, and India. The first international visits for

the Secretary of State and Secretary of Defense were to Asia – Japan, the Republic of Korea and India. The US response to China remains equally robust following the "now infamous" meeting in Anchorage, Alaska in March 2021.⁷ As it edges closer to the first six months in office, it is clear the Biden administration is trying to negotiate the best terms of "competitive coexistence" with China.⁸

On the other side of the Atlantic, France was the first mover among the European states when it comes to formulating its Indo-Pacific strategy. The French president Emmanuel Macron was unequivocal about branding France as an "Indo-Pacific power" in a speech delivered in Sydney in 2018. His call to establish a French, Australian and Indian "strategic axis" to ensure "balance" in the region, would soon after be expanded on in the French government's defense guidelines.⁹

The German government, on the other hand, was initially apprehensive about using the term "Indo-Pacific". The change came in September 2020, when the German Federal Foreign Office released a document entitled "Policy guidelines for the Indo-Pacific region Germany-Europe-Asia: shaping the 21st century to-

gether" in which it underscored the need to remain in friendly relations with the Indo-Pacific nations, and not allow for the region to be dominated by a single or two hegemons.¹⁰ The German approach to the region was presented as complementary to the EU's nascent strategy. On the other hand, France presented its efforts more as acting like a bridge from the EU to the region.

The government of the Netherlands soon followed suit when it released a policy document outlining its strategy for the Indo-Pacific. In late 2020, its Ministry of Foreign Affairs published the "Indo-Pacific: Guidelines for strengthening Dutch and EU cooperation with partners in Asia", where it called for the EU to not shy away from engaging in *realpolitik*.¹¹ Interestingly, the strategic document uses both Indo-Pacific and Asia-Pacific as geostrategic terms of reference, and sees potential for the Netherlands to step up its bilateral efforts in the region.

This EU troika was in no small part responsible for the fact that in April 2021 the Council of the European Union adopted conclusions which provide detailed guidelines to European institutions to elaborate a strategy on the Indo-Pacific by September 2021.¹² The document, entitled "EU strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific", signals EU's ambition to boost its role in the region and consolidate the existing bilateral engagement with the region that exists at the level of EU member states.

Out of the EU, the British government published a 111-page "Integrated Review of Security, Defense, Development and Foreign Policy" in March 2021 through which it seeks to establish a new, post-Brexit, future, and develop a more active global presence.¹³ The review dedicated a special section on the United Kingdom's much-advertised Indo-Pacific "tilt". Britain branded itself as "the European partner with the broadest and most integrated presence in the Indo-Pacific" while laying out very concrete action points on matters involving security, trade, diplomatic initiatives and development assistance.

Interestingly, the recent June 2021 NATO Summit communiqué does not refer to the Indo-Pacific at all¹⁴, but rather the Asia-Pacific partnerships, even though for the first time, it acknowledges China's ambitions, strategy, and behaviour present systemic challenges to alliance's security.¹⁵ On the other hand, the 2020 Re-

4 N. Silove, "The pivot before the pivot: US strategy to preserve the power balance in Asia", *International Security*, Vol.40, No.4, 2016, pp.45-88.

5 "Indo-Pacific strategy report: preparedness, partnerships, and promoting a networked region", Washington, DC, US Department of Defense, 1 June 2019,

6 J. R. Biden Jr, *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance*, Executive Office of the President, Washington DC, 2021.

7 Press note, *Secretary Antony J. Blinken, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, Director Yang and State Councilor Wang at the top of their meeting*, Department of State, 18 March 2021.

8 A. S. Erickson, "Competitive coexistence: an American concept for managing US-China relations", *The National Interest* 30, 2019.

9 *La France et la sécurité en Indo-Pacifique*, Ministère des Armées, Paris, 2018; *France's Defence Strategy in the Indo-Pacific*, Ministère des Armées, Paris, 2019.

10 German Federal Office, *Germany - Europe - Asia: shaping the 21st century together*, 1 September 2020.

11 Government of the Netherlands, *Indo-Pacific: guidelines for strengthening Dutch and EU cooperation with partners in Asia*, November 2020.

12 Council of the European Union, *Council Conclusions on an EU Strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific*, 16 April 2021 (7914/21).

13 House of Commons Library, *Integrated Review 2021*, 24 March 2021.

14 The decision not to use the term Indo-Pacific in the communiqué was a result of an individual member state's objection.

15 NATO, *Brussels Summit Communiqué issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Brussels*, 14 June 2021.

flection Group to the Secretary General made several specific references to the security developments in the Indo-Pacific region, as well as the recommendations for future partnerships.¹⁶

“Out-of-area” cooperation in the context of strategic shifts

The bulk of literature on OOA operations relates to the discussions of NATO going “global” – an idea that is as old as the Alliance itself. The beginning of the “OOA era” is usually taken to be the end of the Cold War. However, as soon as NATO became active, the question of OOA operations was placed on the agenda for both military and political planning. For instance, the French Indochina campaign in the 1950s and the US escalating involvement in Vietnam in the 1960s raised the question of whether the member states could ask for support from the Alliance – something that would soon be dismissed.

Pressing ahead into the post-Cold War era, it confronted the Alliance with some troublesome policy options. Under what circumstances would the Allies use force outside the Alliance area? To what degree would the Allies be able to cooperate when military force is required? How would political cooperation among these nations be best sustained? These are the questions that underpinned debates regarding interventions from Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo in the 1990s, Afghanistan and Iraq in 2000s, to Libya in 2010s.¹⁷

Yet, the transatlantic Allies find themselves in a distinctly different position now that the impetus for OOA cooperation is not motivated by the responsibility to protect, or the response to an acute threat (or the perception thereof), but rather a systemic challenge and shifting strategic priorities. In other words, rather than thinking about OOA cooperation as a discrete expeditionary engagement, the stated strategic objectives demand reconceptualising OOA policies and operations. More importantly, given the current signals from NATO’s institutional leadership, that rejects NATO’s “global presence”, but calls for a “global approach”, this type of cooperation would be executed by mobilising different types of bilateral, minilateral and multilateral platforms in which member states would take the lead, or at least, play a part.¹⁸

This, of course, presents the question of what exactly OOA strategic planning looks like in the context of transatlantic cooperation, and whether the transatlantic Allies are able to reach a consensus and converge

over goals and preferred methods of achieving them. In a redefined context of OOA, one could consider a framework for analysing the potential for transatlantic cooperation in the Indo-Pacific by focusing on four distinct factors. First, the definition of threat(s) and whether they are state-based, non-state based, or hybrid. Second, the statement of strategic goals – primarily, whether they are oriented towards increasing or maximising power, or maintaining the status quo. Third, the assessment of capabilities, where economic, military, and political power can be deemed as appropriate or insufficient in relation to the stated goals and in the ability to employ it. Fourth, the preferred means of action. Following such analysis, one could ascertain the potential areas of cooperation, as well as weigh in on the risks in cases where such cooperation is not possible, along with the bargains that will need to be made.

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OOA operations and prospects of transatlantic cooperation in the Indo-Pacific

So far, both the US and European states that have published Indo-Pacific strategies have emphasised the commitment to preserving the rules and norms governing the maritime space in the Indo-Pacific, and have acted accordingly, albeit in significantly different orders of magnitude. The United States still has the largest and most sophisticated armed forces, and its commitment to the region surpasses that of all the other NATO Allies. Yet alarms have been sounded over its preparedness for a great power competition in the Indo-Pacific.¹⁹

The European Four – France, the UK, Germany and the Netherlands – have as of late contributed to the increased traffic in the Indo-Pacific waters. The UK has added to its previous naval deployments, by recently sending a carrier strike group, led by the HMS Queen Elizabeth aircraft carrier to her maiden voyage to the Indo-Pacific with plans to further increase its presence. Joining the UK’s carrier strike group is the Dutch frigate HNLMS Evertsen. French ships have been integral to its Jeanne d’Arc mission, while it also uses surveillance frigates based in New Caledonia. Finally, Germany has also upped its naval diplomacy by announcing it would deploy its frigate Bayern to the region in summer of 2021. As the EU continues to harden its stance towards China, there is an even greater potential to up those efforts and coordinate with the United States.

16 NATO, *NATO 2030: united for a new era. Analysis and recommendations of the Reflection Group appointed by the NATO Secretary General*, Brussels, 25 November 2020.

17 J. E. Peters and H. Deshong, *Out of area or out of reach? European military support for operations in southwest Asia*, Santa Monica, CA, RAND Corporation, 1995.

18 J. Stoltenberg, *Remarks by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg on launching #NATO2030 – Strengthening the Alliance in an increasingly competitive world*, 8 June 2020.

19 A. Townshend, B. Thomas-Noone, and M. Steward. *Averting crisis: American strategy, military spending and collective defence in the Indo-Pacific*, United States Studies Centre at the University of Sydney, 2019.

Both sides of the Atlantic are equally concerned about protecting major energy and technological routes in the Indo-Pacific.

However, moving forward with this cooperation is going to require reconciling the fact that while the United States and major European powers might be

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diagnosing the same threats to their interests, their prescriptions to tackle those problems have often been far from similar. A fundamental incompatibility is emerging from their contrasting approaches to managing international security and the global economy. This asymmetry stems primarily from the different capabilities

the transatlantic Allies and partners possess and are willing to employ. Moreover, despite the toughening approach to China at the level of its institutions, a number of EU and NATO member states continue to advocate closer Sino-European ties. On top of this, if the US approach begins to look too much like 21st century containment, even more enthusiastic countries might grow more reluctant to get involved, for fear of being seen as blindly band-wagoning.

Most importantly, the ability to pool resources is contingent on the availability of the said resources. A major source of tension in the alliance stems from a divergence in policy preferences. European states have traditionally been reluctant to prioritise ‘guns over butter’ even if they have been consistently increasing their military expenditures over the past decade. Therefore, cooperation on specific security matters such as freedom of navigation patrols and capacity building in the Indo-Pacific will not only depend on the political will, but also on the availability of European resources. It will also most likely be based on bilateral or smaller multilateral agreements, with the likes of France and the United Kingdom working closely with the United States.

Most potential for broad-based transatlantic cooperation remains outside of hard security matters, and hence out of the traditional understanding of OOA activities. Namely, in functional areas such as the development of regional infrastructure, where there is no shortage of ambition and pledges with some ear-

ly commitments via the EU’s Connectivity Strategy, US-facilitated Blue Dot Network, and the most recent G7 launch of the “Build Back Better World” initiative. Moreover, all the mentioned allied states have referred to building cyber security resilience in the region and protecting critical technology. Furthermore, as the link between economic security and national security becomes all the more apparent, the strategic documents call for propping up supply chains.

Lastly, all of the policy documents call for a stepped-up involvement in diplomatic efforts on a whole range of regional and global efforts – from illegal fishing and piracy, organized crime, to arms control and climate change. Such action could be mutually beneficial as it would allow transatlantic Allies to help shape the agenda and provide greater legitimacy for particular policies, while at the same time it would help address major issues and challenges in the Indo-Pacific.

Uncertain OOA prospects

At the moment, NATO’s increasing attention to the Indo-Pacific is not seen through the prism of potential future OOA activities. Even the Alliance members that have articulated their Indo-Pacific strategies do not approach the region through that lens. Granted, for those for whom the region is inextricably linked to national interest given their geography or territorial possessions, this is hardly outside of their area of strategic interest. Those who recognise their security and economic interests warrant increasing engagement and commitments to the region play up the fact they are primarily partners to the states in the region who want to prevent hegemony. Overall, there is no doubt there are plenty of common denominators across the proclaimed goals in the strategic policy documents published by the United States, United Kingdom, France, Germany and the Netherlands. In that vein, there is plenty of space for pooling resources and coordinating efforts.

However, the question that remains unanswered is whether and to what extent NATO Allies will be able to do it under the NATO umbrella. The forthcoming new Strategic Concept will no doubt shed light on how NATO will go about addressing the seeming mismatch between having a more global approach without having a global presence. While the OOA discourse has been deemed out of vogue, the strategic shifts on part of the Alliance members in the direction of more involvement in the Indo-Pacific have a direct bearing on the Atlantic Alliance with important questions about the implications of such moves.



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