

Contemplating an *Asian NATO*: Obstacles and Challenges to Its Formation

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Abstract: The paper analyses the possibility of formation of an Asian counterpart to the NATO alliance, focusing on the obstacles to and challenges involved. In the first part of the paper, the author reflects on the cooperation of certain Indo-Pacific countries (especially Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand) with NATO, including the scope and progress of their engagement to date. Next, the paper provides a brief review of early 21st-century proposals for a 'global' NATO, which ultimately remained unrealized. The central section examines the concept of an *Asian NATO*, analyzing potential member countries and exploring the obstacles to the realization of such an alliance. The author identifies three major to the creation of an *Asian NATO*: cultural-political, geo-economic, and geographic/geostrategic. Each of these obstacles is analysed and interpreted individually, under the assumption that the USA would be willing to initiate the alliance's formation. These challenges primarily concern the potential Asian member countries themselves. The final section provides a summary of the key arguments and presents the concluding remarks.

Keywords: Asia, Indo-Pacific, Alliances, USA, China, Strategy.

Introduction

A common theme in academic publications, in the media, and the discourse of high-positioned officials, both in the West and other regions, is the claim that the People's Republic of China has undoubtedly been on the rise, exerting its growing influence globally. There have been dozens of books published on China in the English-speaking world containing in their respective titles the word 'rise'.

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That rise is characterized by its political, economic, and military aspects, indicating that China is becoming an increasingly powerful international actor. On this topic, Kachiga (2021, 13) observes that China is rising to the top of the world's hierarchy of wealth and power. The consequence is that being at the top means an improved status and influence—and with influence comes power.

As one country gains increasing influence and power, relations among great change (especially if competing countries do not progress at the same pace or even fall behind). This affects the balance of power, and transforms the global order. Back in the 1990s, U.S. strategic thinkers of the USA started considering an adequate approach to China's rise as a future/possible contender. While China was still far from its present powerful position, influential American authors like Zbigniew Brzezinski argued that, for historic and geopolitical reasons, China should consider America its natural ally. On the other hand, Brzezinski also noted that for America, China's regional power, when integrated into a broader framework of international cooperation, could be a vital geostrategic asset (Brzezinski 1998, 207). Yet, China managed to develop economically faster and more successfully than any Western analyst, including Brzezinski, could have predicted. More than a quarter of a century ago, Brzezinski stated that "even by the year 2020, it is quite unlikely even under the best of circumstances that China could become truly competitive in the key dimensions of global power" (Brzezinski 1998, 164).

Nevertheless, even before 2020, China was recognised in Western publications, as well as scholarly production, as one of the global poles of power. As noted in one study on 'new bipolarity' in international relations, China, by virtue of its current combined capabilities, has moved from great-power to superpower status (Tunsjø 2018, 179). Øystein Tunsjø dedicated his 2018 study to describing and explaining the birth of new bipolar order built by the USA and China. Given that the relations between Washington and Beijing are burdened with numerous misunderstandings and conflicts (the issue of Taiwan, commercial issues, high technology transfer, war in Ukraine), the benevolent rhetoric of Brzezinski has long since been obsolete, and China is being more and more treated by the USA (and by the entire 'Western community) as a direct challenge and a potential threat. During the 1990s, when Brzezinski's famous book entitled *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives* was a bestseller among political scientists, there was not a single mention of China in NATO's strategic concept. In other words, it was completely out of focus of the Western Alliance. More than two decades later, the Alliance's Strategic Concept reads:

"The People's Republic of China's (PRC) stated ambitions and coercive policies challenge our interests, security and values" [...] "The deepening strategic partnership between the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation

and their mutually reinforcing attempts to undercut the rules-based international order run counter to our values and interests“ [...] We will work together responsibly, as Allies, to address the systemic challenges posed by the PRC to Euro-Atlantic security and ensure NATO’s enduring ability to guarantee the defence and security of Allies“ (NATO 2022, 5).

In that same year, the US National Security Strategy claimed that:

“The PRC is the only competitor with both the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to do it“ [...] “In the competition with the PRC, as in other arenas, it is clear that the next ten years will be the decisive decade“ (White House 2022, 4–5).

One gets the impression that the stakes in the American (Western)-Chinese contest have been significantly raised. In U.S. academic, military and expert circles, China is interpreted as a new contender, after the USSR. Already a couple of years ago, certain prominent Western intellectuals announced the ‘new Cold War’, perceiving China as an even more significant challenge for the USA, even a bigger and more dangerous one than the USSR ever was (Ferguson 2019). With that in mind, Walters (2023) poses a question whether it is time for the U.S. and Asian countries to form an organization like NATO.

This paper explores which countries would be the most likely members of a hypothetical *Asian NATO*, as well as the major obstacles and challenges to its formation, assuming U.S. leadership accepts the idea and that there is sufficient political will to pursue its creation. In that sense, the research focuses on the circumstances, conditions and external obstacles (beyond the U.S.) to establishing an *Asian NATO*.

Literature review

This topic is largely unexplored in academic literature, with few scholarly articles and studies addressing the possibility of creation of an Asian NATO, its perspectives and challenges/obstacles. Generally speaking, views concerning the possibility of an Asian NATO can be labeled as either ‘optimistic’ or ‘pessimistic’, with the latter being more prevalent.

Hemmer and Katzenstein (2002) argued why the USA, upon the end of the WWII, had failed to form a political-military defensive alliance in the Far East analogous to the NATO in Europe. Although their article addresses a different topic,

their analysis of U.S. policy and interests highlight structural factors that hindered the creation of an Asian NATO at the start of the Cold War—factors that continue, to some extent, to obstruct its formation today. He and Feng (2012) address a similar topic from a different perspective, employing the prospect-threat alliance model to analyze threats and risk-taking behavior in alliances. While their research is not directly related in terms of content, it is conceptually valuable for understanding the cautious stance of some Indo-Pacific countries toward the creation of an Asian NATO and their hypothetical participation in it.

When it comes to recent research that consider the perspectives of an Asian NATO, they are not only few, but are also very restrained and sceptical of the idea. Ahmad (2021) observes that “simply put, Asia is not ripe for a NATO style containment block against China.” She offers a couple of reasons – there is no support of the ASEAN members (but this support is crucial, given their strategic position); deficit of solidarity among diverse regional partners; opposition of China to such alliance (Ahmad 2021).

Similar scepticism and pessimism is expressed by Pajon (2024), who, in a reaction to the statement by Japanese Prime Minister, says that for the time being, the idea of an Asian NATO seems unrealistic. Like Ahmad, Pajon provides similar arguments, out of which the first and foremost is – “the diversity of actors and geographical elongations in Asia indeed make it difficult to establish a common perception of threats” (Pajon 2024). This ‘obstructive’ factor for the creation of an organisation analogous to the NATO is recognised in this article as well, and it is duly explicated.

Contrastingly, moderate optimism in view of the possibility for the creation of an Asian NATO was expressed by Green (2023), claiming that “the U.S. and partner governments may not have the intent of pursuing an Asian NATO today, but the unfolding geopolitics of the region makes that option more plausible than it has been for seven decades.”

Other authors quoted in this article (Fiddler 2024; Walters 2023) who expressed their views on the topic, provided a string of convincing evidence with regard to the strength and number of factors making it difficult to form an Asian NATO, and for that reason they can be considered ‘pessimists’. Walters claimed that there were political differences in the stances of certain candidate countries that make it impossible to assume a joint defensive position and that these very countries would not like to engage in a conflict with Beijing. Fiddler referred to the insufficient interest of potential member countries, along with the fact that they were dependent on trade deals with China in the economic sense. Despite the scarcity of scholarly articles on the topic, one should expect an increased interest in it in

the near future both in terms of their quantity and quality, bearing in mind the fact that this is a challenging topic allowing for putting numerous hypotheses from the fields of international relations studies and of security studies to a test.

Theoretical framework

The aforementioned issues are going to be researched into using the sort of dialectical method – by contrasting ‘the thesis’ and ‘the antithesis’, where the former is embodied in the neo-realistic school in the field of international relations studies (Waltz and Walt) and the latter in the ideas of the neo-liberalism school (Nye and Koehane), as well as the already mentioned He and Feng (2012) championing their prospect-threat alliance model and the theses of geopolitics on the significance of geography in political affairs. By opposing the arguments from the said two perspectives, one can draw a conclusion that, for the time being, the respective politics and strategy of potential member countries of an Asian NATO is more guided by the reasons and considerations of the latter corpus.

So, we can start with ‘the thesis’. The introduction section already describes the rise of China and the perception of that rise in the American (international) political science, seen from the perspective of U.S. and international organisations (NATO), as well as prominent individuals-statespersons (Japanese Prime Minister). The U.S. – China relations, along with other American allies from the Indo-Pacific region are becoming growingly tense. In neo-realistic terms, there is a typical understanding that international politics is the realm of power, of struggle, and of accommodation (Waltz 1979, 113). According to the same author, countries have always competed for wealth and security, and the competition has often led to conflict (Waltz 2000, 33).

It is an undeniable fact that, over the past decades, the economic, technological, and military power of the PRC has grown to such proportions that it exceeds the overall powers (in respective domains) of potential member countries of an Asian NATO. Given that the same author claims that the international system induces balancing, rather than band-wagoning behaviour (Waltz 1979, 126), one would expect, from the position of neo-realism, for potential member countries of an Asian NATO to develop close ties between them, even in the form of a multilateral military alliance. Nevertheless, is the Chinese accumulated power a good enough reason for the creation of such an alliance? There are concepts in international relations studies (neo-realistic) which pinpoint urges for balancing in other drivers.

For example, Stephen Walt argues that “states tend to balance against threats and not necessarily against power” (Paul 2004, 8). According to him, rather than allying in response to power alone, it is more accurate to say that states will ally with or against the most threatening power” (Walt 1985, 8–9). Several years later, he expressed a similar thought in slightly different terms, noting that in anarchy, states form alliances to protect themselves. Their conduct is shaped by the threats they perceive, with the power of others being just one element in their calculations, albeit an important one (Walt 1987, x).

One might argue that, since the end of the Cold War, countries worldwide, including those in the Indo-Pacific region, have recognized China’s rising power, but have not significantly ascribed to it any Chinese geopolitical aspiration or threat to its neighbours. Yet, a very straightforward and partly alarming (previously mentioned) statement by Japanese Prime Minister is a testimony that the Chinese politics is being taken as increasingly threatening in that region. According to Walt (1987, 263), balancing was far more common than bandwagoning, and bandwagoning was almost always confined to especially weak and isolated states.

The aforementioned features basic principles of ‘the thesis’ (neo-realistic view/paradigm), which suggests that potential member countries of an Asian NATO (far from being weak or isolated) should already be moving towards creating a solid counterbalance to China, supported, naturally, by the USA. However, developments in practical politics do not fully confirm this assumption.

The article offers counter-arguments as well – the contents of ‘the antithesis’. First and foremost, the factor of geopolitics/geography is highlighted – great distances between potential members of the alliance, as well as between them and the very PRC itself, and their mostly islandic character (Japan, Philippines, Australia, New Zealand) not only make it difficult for their respective armed forces to act in synergy, but they also affect the perception of Chinese threat (for some of these countries, this threat is direct and realistic, for some not to that extent – for instance, New Zealand). This would be the geopolitical (geographical) element in the contents of ‘the antithesis’. In addition, the author points not only to the spatial but to the mentality/cultural distance between certain countries – potential member countries of an Asian NATO.

Another element in ‘the antithesis’ context is mentioned by Paul (2004, 9): “Liberals also suggest that states that are economically interdependent are unlikely to engage in disruptive military balancing *vis-à-vis* one another”. One of the versions of the liberal understanding of international relations is the theory of interdependence formulated by Nye and Keohane in the 1970s. In their effort to sum up the theory by the end of the 1990s, they claim that the notion of complex

interdependence implies: “a world in which security and force matter less and countries are connected by multiple social and political relationships” (Keohane and Nye Jr 1998, 83).

In more concrete terms, when found in a situation of complex interdependence: “no longer must states adjust every major foreign policy action to the balance of military power and the nature of military alignments. On the other hand, the emergence of multiple channels of contact between countries, on multiple and nonhierarchic issues, increases the opportunities for influence. Points of conflict as well as points of cooperation increase. The total foreign policy situation becomes more complex. As a result, the bargaining choices for states become richer” (Keohane and Nye 2012, 97).

In other words, interdependence provides countries with a context which is far more benevolent than what used to be the situation in the past and which offers far more opportunities for the evasion of strategic competition (creation of opposing military blocs included), of dangerous tensions, and of armed conflicts.

This article proves the (economic) interdependence between China and potential Asian NATO member countries to be much deeper and more comprehensive than it was the case between the USSR and European countries and the USA during the Cold War. The orientation of the aforementioned countries towards the trade with China is so strong that they are highly sensitive, for commercial reasons, over the possibility of making any steps that might be taken as hostile by Beijing, including the creation of a NATO-like political-military alliance.

The third element of ‘the antithesis’ is the argument presented by He and Feng in their previously cited paper, which complements the second element—interdependence. Choosing as their methodological basis the behavioural theory of decision-making under conditions of risk, introduced by Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky (1979) through laboratory experiments, He and Feng (2012, 233) highlight the conclusion of this theory stating that if people are in an advantageous situation (a domain of gains), they are more likely to behave cautiously (risk-aversely) in order to protect their gains and avoid losses. However, when people are in a disadvantageous situation (a domain of losses), they are more likely to choose risky behavior that may either reverse or worsen their losses.

According to He and Feng, similar reasoning (calculation) can be applied to countries. In the case of a hypothetical Asian NATO, the article argues that the respective public opinion of its potential member countries is very much afraid of their countries being dragged into a conflict with China over Taiwan if the USA decides to deploy armed forces to defend the island against an invasion from the Chinese mainland. Considering the fact that, due to the diversified trade with China

over the past decades, hypothetical Asian NATO member countries are in an advantageous situation (a domain of gains), it is clear that any military involvement in a conflict over Taiwan would be extremely counter-productive for them in economic, social, and security terms. Related to that, He and Feng (2012, 234) offer instructive observations, noting that while external balancing through alliances can help states gain security, they are also exposed to significant risks. The principal loss is the likely loss of freedom of action, which can take various forms, such as political constraints, military obligations, and even military entrapment. Therefore, an alliance is a double-edged sword for a state in the international system.

Concerning an Asian NATO, it is obvious that a potential military involvement with regard to Taiwan would represent the aforementioned “military entrapment”.

In conclusion, the opposition (interplay) of the elements of ‘the thesis’ (neo-realistic ideas) and ‘the antithesis’ (geopolitics/geography, theory of complex interdependence, and prospect-threat alliance model) represents a specific theoretical framework of this article, which reveals how a seemingly single solution (from the aspect of neo-realism) – the creation of an Asian NATO – to ensure the security of certain Indo-Pacific region countries becomes problematised using a series of counter-arguments on the part of ‘the antithesis’.

The context of the unrealised project

The Indo-Pacific region is the primary arena of the U.S.-China rivalry, with its sub-regions serving as a longstanding battleground for the two political blocs. After World War II, northeast and southeast Asia became focal points of U.S. foreign and security policy, driven by the beginning of the Cold War and the perceived Soviet threat. In Europe, the USA initiated the creation of NATO in 1949, a firm military alliance directed towards the USSR, the foundation of this alliance being Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty, which reads at the beginning:

“The Parties agree that an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all” [...] (NATO 2023).

What is implied by this, as well as by other articles, is that the principle of collective defence is the main axis of the NATO’s founding treaty. It remains a unique and enduring principle that binds its members together, committing them to protect each other. Over the course of time, the NATO would expand, deepen internal integration, and turn into the main instrument of the American presence in (and control over) Europe. Although the USA had equally valuable (vital) interests

in the region of Pacific, north- and south-east Asia, Australia, and Oceania, it did not establish the regional replica(s) of NATO to tie up various anti-Communist regimes and countries into a unique military-political alliance. Instead, the USA opted for entering into a series of bilateral defensive treaties with those countries Washington had estimated they have an unquestionable geostrategic value.

In September 1951, the USA arrived at the ANZUS treaty with the countries of Australia and New Zealand (Australia, New Zealand and United States Treaty), which came into existence the following year. Also in September 1951, the Security Treaty between Japan and the USA was signed in San Francisco. A month earlier, the USA signed the Mutual Defence Treaty with the Philippines. Upon the establishment of truce in the Korean war, in October 1953, the USA and South Korea also signed the Mutual Defence Treaty. Apart from the ANZUS pact, the only multi-lateral mechanism in the region of Indo-Pacific for maintaining security was the SEATO (Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation) established in September 1954. The Treaty attracted, other than the USA, the countries of Great Britain, France, Australia, New Zealand, Pakistan, the Philippines, and Thailand. Much too heterogeneous and loosely structured, the Treaty was abolished in 1977 (Budimir, Vuković 2016, 88-89).

Hemmer and Katzenstein (2002, 579) noted that, in the years following the Second World War (WWII), the U.S. policymakers contemplated the possibility of establishing an Asian NATO. Nonetheless, the idea was abandoned, despite the contemplations. Hemmer and Katzenstein have elaborated on the issue and provided an abundance of arguments and information. According to them, multilateralism is a particularly demanding form of international cooperation and requires a strong sense of collective identity. This sense of collective identity was lacking in the region in the period designated. On the contrary, some Asian countries refused an idea of joining a regional treaty should Japan be its member, both out of fear of Japan gaining in power and out of memory of its aggression. Therefore, there was neither mutual trust nor any sense of connection of political destinies among the very candidates for the 'Pacific NATO'. Not that the USA itself maintained an equal relationship towards Europe and Asia. In the case of Europe, American officials themselves pointed to the religion and democratic values as a foundation of the North Atlantic community (with European origins of many Americans also perhaps playing some role). The mentioned authors (2002, 588) state that the identification of the USA with Europe "had an undeniable racial component." On the other hand, in the case of Asia, these affinities and trust were absent. Religion and democratic values were shared only in a few instances, and race was a powerful force separating the United States from Asia. This dynamic influenced the U.S. preference for multilateral or bilateral security arrangements.

Although the formation of an Pacific or Asian NATO would have been justified from the perspective of military strategy, operational skill, and logistics, as well as politics, a decision on the actual establishment of the Treaty was never made. John Foster Dulles explained that “in the absence of identification, there could be no Asian equivalent of NATO” (Hemmer, Katzenstein 2002, 597). The reliance of the USA on a network of bilateral security treaties will remain the foundation stone of the American military-political strategy throughout the entire Cold War. The said SEATO never approached the role the NATO assumes. It is interesting, though, that not even Asian countries that had defense treaties signed with the USA never expressed any deeper mutual interest in establishing cooperation among themselves at a military or security level. Instead, each country chose to focus on its particular issues, relying solely on the USA.

Upon the end of the Cold War and the onset of the era marked with American hegemony, there was no discussion about possible grouping of American Pacific allies into a formalised military-political alliance. The situation changed in the aftermath of the 2001 terrorist attacks, and the subsequent American military intervention in Afghanistan, when a number of Asian-Pacific countries provided support to the efforts made by Americans in the fight against Talibans and in supporting the new authorities in Kabul. Australia and New Zealand sent their troops into Afghanistan, whereas Japan organised financial aid for a great deal of infrastructure projects in the country. South Korea had its troops and a civilian mission stationed in Afghanistan, and it provided financial aid for a variety of projects across the country as well (Vuković 2017, 26). Given that the NATO would gradually take over the burden of the mission in Afghanistan on itself, the Alliance, upon the initiative of the USA, decided to deepen the cooperation with the four countries in question in various areas. With regard to the official vocabulary of the NATO, they became ‘partners across the globe’ or, simply put, ‘global partners’.

In early 2000s, a discussion was started about the potential expansion of NATO beyond Europe. In a text entitled ‘Global NATO’ of 2006, Ivo Daalder and James Goldgeier advocate that it should be made possible for any democratic country capable of and willing to contribute to new NATO missions/responsibilities to become a member. Furthermore, John McCain, an American senator and a candidate on the presidential election advocated at that time for the creation of ‘Worldwide League of Democracies’ - in reality a form of the NATO expanded (Vuković 2017, 30).

In all these plans, Australia, Japan, New Zealand and South Korea existed as potential members, although neither country expressed any wish to formally join the Alliance. Their NATO membership remains unrealistic or unattainable over a series of reasons. One reason, without a doubt, is the strong opposition of certain

European countries. This raises the question of how viable it would be for the USA, without European partners, to initiate the creation of an Asian NATO while adhering to the same principles. What would be the basic principles of such an organization, and which countries could be included? What would be the major obstacles and challenges? These are the issues addressed in the paper.

Nonetheless, there have been plans and appeals for the creation of the Asian NATO and they are no secret. Thus, in 2023, a group of US politicians has proposed a bill to Congress that would establish a fact-finding panel towards the creation of an Indo-Pacific version of NATO that could act as a deterrent against growing aggression in the region by China and North Korea (Ryall 2023).

The following year, the request was subtly reformulated: the next administration should consider proposing a comprehensive Pacific Security Alliance, with Asian members fully sharing economic and personnel responsibilities. The envisioned Asian security organization would benefit from U.S. support through global aerial transport, intelligence, naval operations, and space-based reconnaissance (Cohen, Hill 2024).

Finally, in his essay published a few days before he will become the prime minister of Japan, Shigeru Ishiba (2024) proposed the creation of an Asian version of NATO.

Hypothetical members of an *Asian NATO*

When considering the creation of a hypothetical Asian (Pacific or Indo-Pacific) NATO, four countries naturally come to mind, apart from the USA: Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand. The Philippines is also considered a potential member, though with somewhat less likelihood. Why are these countries viewed as proper candidates for an Asian counterpart to NATO? Firstly, as previously mentioned, they are nations with which the USA has long-standing defense treaties, each having developed a bilateral military-political framework with the most powerful country in the hypothetical alliance.

The NATO began regular contact with Japan in the 1990s, with New Zealand in 2001, and with Australia and the South Korea in 2005. The NATO formalised its partnerships with Australia, Japan, the Republic of Korea, and New Zealand by signing Individual Partnership and Cooperation Programme documents with each of these countries between 2012 and 2014. Individually observed, when compared among each other, these countries do not have the same level of cooperation with the NATO, but they have no match in any other country in the Indo-Pacific region

as regards this issue. Australia is the 'most integrated into the NATO's military operational structure', Japan has had 'the longest relations with the NATO and is the most openly enthusiastic about its association with the alliance', relations between the Republic of Korea and the NATO 'have been relatively superficial until recently' but 'currently are in a dynamic state as a result of external and internal changes, including the war in Ukraine', whereas New Zealand has 'traditionally seen the direct practical benefits of the NATO partnership as limited for its regional security interests' (Expert Study Group 2024, 7).

Appreciating their contribution to NATO, the leadership of the Alliance invited representatives of these four countries to the Madrid summit of heads of state and government in June 2022. Given that one of the prominent issues both during the summit and in the then adopted NATO Strategic Concept was the 'Chinese challenge', their participation at this event, viewed from a geostrategic point of view, was fully justified and expected.

The long-lived and versatile cooperation of these four countries with the NATO is important, among other things, due to the fact that their political, security, and military structures could have, by means of that cooperation, gained quite enough knowledge about and experience of how an international multilateral military-political platform spearheaded by the USA functions, which represents a solid ground for possible formation of a military alliance analogous to that one. The representatives of these countries were presented with an opportunity to see, through bilateral treaties their countries established with the NATO, from the 'inside' how one such complex mechanism operates featuring consulting procedures elaborated, planning, locking agreements, lobbying, and even reaching compromise.

In addition, a potential fifth member of the Asian NATO could be the Philippines, which has maintained strong partnership with the USA for decades and which has unresolved territorial disputes with China in the South Chinese Sea. Considering its geographic position, the Philippines could prove an extremely precious member of the hypothetical alliance, since it is located roughly half-way between Japan and South Korea, on the one side, and between Australia and New Zealand, on the other hand. The issue that arises with the membership of the Philippines in a potential Asian NATO concerns somewhat poor experience as regards the functioning of contemporary multilateral security platforms and an almost exclusive interest in an alliance with the USA. Nevertheless, there have been significant improvements achieved in that field, some observers would even refer to them as revolutionary. The Philippines and Japan signed the Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA) on July 8, 2024, in Manila. The RAA allows the military forces of Japan and the Philippines to deploy troops on each other's soil. The agreement paves the way to deepen their defence partnership (military cooperation), including

joint exercises, training, and disaster response operations, and has emerged from shared concerns about the deteriorating security situation in the South China (Strangio 2024). This agreement was preceded by a trilateral meeting at the highest level in April 2024, gathering President Biden of the USA, President Marcos of the Philippines, and Prime Minister Fumio of Japan, which resulted in a joint statement issued expressing:

“serious concerns about the People’s Republic of China’s (PRC) dangerous and aggressive behavior in the South China Sea” (Joint Vision Statement 2024).

This event and the subsequent joint statement led certain commentators, such as Anna Rosario Malindog-Uy (2024) to ask whether US-Japan-Philippines alliance constitutes a precursor to creating an Asia-Pacific NATO. Leaving the question unanswered, the same author notes that the strengthening trilateral cooperation signifies a strategic shift toward a more assertive posture in international relations, echoing Cold War-era tactics. It also symbolizes a unified effort to strategically challenge, encircle, isolate, and diplomatically counter and contain China, underscoring the competitive geopolitical dynamics in the region amid escalating US-China rivalry in the Asia-Pacific (Malindog-Uy 2024).

It is interesting that the USA prefers this pattern of action in the fields of security and defence in the region of Indo-Pacific. Yuasa (2024) observes that U.S. diplomacy aims to develop strategic triangles to prevent China from infringing on other countries. The emerging Japan-U.S.-Philippines alliance serves as a triangle of deterrence against China, complementing the earlier Japan-U.S.-South Korea framework.

To these strategic triangles one might add one more from 2021 – the AUKUS – a military alliance between the US, Britain, and Australia. In terms of the candidates for an Asian NATO, the three trilateral platforms, that is, triangles, comprise, apart from the US, Japan, Australia, South Korea, and the Philippines, whereas they exclude New Zealand. At the same time, through the AUKUS, they include an actor outside the region designated, Great Britain. It is obvious that the region of Indo-Pacific is ‘covered’ by a dense network of bilateral and trilateral security platforms, and that an important leg of the road towards creating an Asian NATO has already been crossed. There is, however, no official and unambiguous pending political plan and project for the creation of such an alliance. Thus, an issue is raised as to possible challenges and obstacles on its way.

One should mention that analyses, comments, and studies dealing with possible members of an Asian NATO, along with the countries already highlighted, feature India, Thailand, Singapore, Indonesia, Vietnam, and others. When India is concerned, it is a country trying to elevate itself to the status of an independent

global pole of power, so the issue of its becoming a member of an organisation such as the NATO is not under consideration. Other countries on this list have no or little experience with reference to multilateral cooperation, they do not feel the influence of the 'Chinese challenge' on an equal scale, with Vietnam, for example, not being a democracy and being ideologically much closer to Beijing than to Washington.

Obstacles to the development of an *Asian NATO*

The NATO has been active for 75 years now, which points to its rather strong foundations laid by the US upon the finish of the Second World War. Therefore, the NATO serves the role of a platform for comparison in our analysis of challenges and obstacles in the way of the hypothetical creation of an organisation analogous to it in the region of Indo-Pacific. The first obstacle or downside is geography. The main front of the NATO during the Cold War stretched along the German-German border (East and West Germany). Hugh Faringdon (1989, 188) observes that Western Europe, "a small group of countries crowded together on a peninsula projecting from the Euro-Asian landmass", is greatly influenced by the knowledge of its proximity to Russia and distance from America. This proximity also brings fear, reinforced by Europeans' familiarity with the realities of total war. Relative density of European countries and small countries at the westernmost spike of gigantic Eurasia, the enemy's immediate presence on the land – the USSR and its satellites – and the state of sharing the joint border with them, in a nutshell, specific geopolitical circumstances, motivated (Western) Europeans to join the NATO and participate in the system of collective defence that means a sacrifice even when a particular is not immediately threatened. The fall of one member-state of the NATO under the Soviet occupation, due to the aforementioned density, would imply the collapse of the rest in near future. Green (2023) rightfully observes that bilateral security commitments appeared more logical given the region's geography. Unlike Europe, there was no contiguous group of countries facing the communist bloc. The United States' overwhelming naval and air power in a maritime theater contrasted sharply with Soviet land power dominance in Europe, allowing Washington the luxury of foregoing a collective security arrangement.

In the opposition of such geographic circumstances there are geographic and geopolitical fact of the Indo-Pacific. No hypothetical member-state of an Asian NATO shares a joint land border with China, which is perceived as the major threat ('new USSR'). Apart from South Korea, all other countries – Japan, the Philippines,

Australia, and New Zealand – are island countries, which makes them, compared to continental ones, more confident in terms of perspectives of their own defence and which weakens their urges and motivation for participating in a multilateral military-political alliance. Instead of density, there is dispersion – the distance, for instance, between the capitals of Australia and Japan is almost 8,000 km. The shortest distance is the one between South Korea and Japan, less than 200 km, but, as it is, these are two societies that nourish the culture of and historically rooted distrustfulness towards each other. Potential member-states of an Asian NATO are scattered into three mutually distant strategic-operational zones – north-east Asia (Japan and South Korea), southern Indo-Pacific (Australia and New Zealand), and the central link, the Philippines. In short, geography in this particular case presents a major disadvantage for the creation of a multilateral military alliance.

An obstacle in the form of geography is extremely demotivating in terms of joint participation of armed forces of potential member-states in a hypothetical conflict. During the Cold War, it was designed, in case of the Soviet invasion, to summon Canadian, British, French, Belgian, and Dutch troops, along with American and German ones, to organise resistance (Faringdon 1989). The sense of mutual destiny and general danger forced these countries to be ready to sacrifice one's own troops in the territory of another country. In case of an Asian NATO, given that such a feeling is nowhere to be found, not even in traces, it is almost inconceivable that the governments of potential member-states would agree to this form of sacrifice, that is, it is highly unlikely that the societies in question would approve of, for instance, Australian troops fighting on the soil of Japan (and *vice versa*). Nevertheless, the recent history keeps record of some precedents (in the Vietnam war, for instance, there were Australian and South Korean troops fighting on the side of Americans). In addition, there are grave differences between potential members as regards security issues, as well as the lack of cultural and historical closeness. Moreover, there is enormous repulsiveness in some cases. In 2020 (Kudo), in a representative research of public opinion in South Korea, as many as 71.6% of the Koreans surveyed said that they feel badly or relatively badly towards Japan.

With such attitudes prevailing in one society living in close proximity to another one (although there are entirely opposite examples – the perception of Japan in the Australian society and *vice versa*), a question is raised: how can anyone expect that an ally sentiment be developed between them, which implies the readiness for mutual sacrifice? Fiddler (2024) notes that each attempt to establish a Pacific NATO failed for unique reasons, though the underlying causes remained consistent. The Pacific partners were spread over vast distances and had varied histories, cultures, political institutions, and threats.

Another analysis by the Expert Study Group (2024, 7) claims that these countries are a relatively cohesive group, but their views and interests are far from uniform.

That is to say, another obstacle would refer to an instance of obvious and not easily manageable diversity of interests, needs, and perceptions of potential member-states for an Asian NATO. In short, the second obstacle would refer to inadequately strong mutual identification of possible Asian NATO countries – a sense of mutual political, cultural, or civilisational destiny, which was somehow rooted in European countries and was nurtured carefully for decades following the Second World War here, in the region of Indo-Pacific, is not sufficiently developed.

The third obstacle concerns the strong economic reliance of these states on China. Therefore, hypothetically speaking, an Asian NATO should act in the sense of restraining and diverting the armed forces and politics of China in the region of Indo-Pacific. Some authors claimed that an all too powerful China should automatically trigger a reaction of the neighbouring countries. In the opinion of a renowned expert Luttwak (2012, 257), the rapid growth of a country's economic capacity and military investment must provoke adversarial reactions, in line with the logic of strategy. However, things are far from being that simple. Ultimately, member-states of an Asian NATO would have to plead allegiance to entering a small- or big-scale conflict with the armed forces of China, should the circumstances command such an action. Nevertheless, such a conflict would inevitably lead to breaking up commercial ties of such countries with Beijing, which would leave heavy, practically disastrous consequences.

A second barrier to establishing an Indo-Pacific Treaty Organization is the deep economic integration Indo-Pacific partners have with China, now the largest trading partner for most potential members, including South Korea, Japan, Australia, and New Zealand. Beijing has also shown a consistent willingness to use economic coercion to influence its neighbors' policies (Fiddler 2024).

During the Cold War, member-states of the NATO did not feel that sort of limitation since the share of trade exchange with the USSR, compared with the overall foreign trade exchange, was meagre. For instance, in 1984, this figure was 4% or less for the countries of West Germany, France, Japan, the Netherlands, and Great Britain as regards their respective import/export. As for the export from the USA to the USSR, it was only 1.5% of the overall American export, whereas the import from the latter was much under 1% (Becker 1987). Given that the aforementioned Western countries could have easily economically survived without any trade arrangement with the USSR, they felt no strategic limitations in that respect, that is, they had much more freedom in their actions than is the case

with hypothetical member-states of an Asian NATO as regards their respective relations with China. The Chinese influence on the global economy is beyond comparison to that of the former USSR, and it serves to deter possible member-states of an Asian NATO from their grouping into a military-political alliance and from any multilateral (military) action at the expense of Beijing.

Green finds that, unlike NATO members' early Cold War relations with the Soviet Union—when the United States and its allies generally had no significant economic ties with the Soviets—China is now the top trading partner for Japan, South Korea, Australia, and most other U.S. allies in the region. Additionally, these countries aim to eventually restore a more productive relationship with Beijing despite current tensions, recognizing that a NATO-style alliance could likely hinder that possibility (Green 2023).

The non-existence of a joint land border with a possible hegemon – China and, consequently, a less developed sense of immediate threat, as well as highly useful and productive commercial ties with it, have an extremely negative influence on the possibility of forming an Asian NATO.

The Challenge of Taiwan

When the NATO was formed in 1949, the European political map, as was the case over the following decades, was comprised of clearly defined subjects of international law and politics, which formed either one or another military-political bloc, whether as neutral or non-aligned countries. The situation in the region of Indo-Pacific is somewhat different, given the existence of Taiwan, an island which *de facto* functions as an independent state, although not exercising the usual international law subjectivity, and to which PR China claims its rights, considering it to be part of its own territory. The USA committed itself, for various political and strategic reasons, through the statements of its highest officials, to providing military aid to Taiwan in case of an attack of PR China on the island. If an Asian NATO were formed upon the same governing principles as the existing one, including the famous Article 5, that would imply that any member-state is entitled to ask for military assistance of other member-states. Even though this assistance is predominantly referred to as that of the USA provided to other member-states when an Asian NATO is concerned, it is equally legitimate to assume the opposite situation, in which other member-states provide support for the USA or to each other. This raises a delicate issue: how would the potential member states of an Asian NATO respond, and in what capacity, in the event of an open military conflict between the USA and China over Taiwan?

Walters (2023) finds that no country in Asia has formal diplomatic relations with Taiwan. The island's closest security agreement is with the U.S., often referred to as "strategic ambiguity," meaning the U.S. has neither committed to nor denied its willingness to defend Taiwan if China were to invade. The question of whether an Asian military alliance would need to support the U.S. in defending Taiwan would be a primary concern for any potential members (Walters 2023).

In other words, the very possibility of the involvement of the USA into an active defence of Taiwan, as well as summoning the allies from a potential Asian NATO to join in that operation, functions as a means of deterrence in contemplations of creating a sort of multilateral military-political platform/alliance in the region of Indo-Pacific. Another issue to be considered is the state of public opinion in those respective countries over the possibility of potential involvement in a war over Taiwan. Fiddler notes that public opinion polls consistently show Indo-Pacific populations are against going to war with China over Taiwan. If China invaded Taiwan, 34% of South Koreans would support military assistance, 11% of Japanese would back their Self Defense Forces using force with the U.S., and 56% of Australians believe their country should remain neutral (Fiddler 2024). Based on this data, the author is confident that concerns about getting entangled in a war over Taiwan will prevent political leadership from pursuing a NATO-like structure (Fiddler 2024).

It is certain that if China were to subdue Taiwan militarily, all the countries analyzed would be deeply concerned. However, the question remains whether this uncertain scenario would be enough to compel them to pledge unconditional solidarity with the USA and potentially engage militarily, especially given their geographic distance from Taiwan (with the Philippines being the most concerned) and the risk to their profitable commercial ties with China.

Conclusion

When the circumstances and reasons for (non) creation of an Asian NATO are analysed, taking into account general geographical, as well as political-geographical and cultural-geographical factors proves to be a useful research procedure. At the turn of the century, a prominent geopolitical analyst famously stated that all politics is geopolitics and all strategy is geostrategy (Gray 1999, 163). These words seem to capture the essence of the debate on the (non)creation of an Asian NATO. If it is an undeniable fact that the world is entering a new Cold War (Ferguson 2019) and a period of new bipolarity (Tunsjø 2018), with China emerging as a global

contender to the USA, it is clear that the Indo-Pacific region holds increasing geostrategic importance for the USA, surpassing that of Europe over time. Yet, while Europe has NATO, the Asia-Pacific region lacks such an organization, and there are no strong indicators suggesting that one will emerge in the near future.

Over two decades ago, Hemmer and Katzenstein explained the reasons which, with regard to the internal affairs of the USA in the first place, prevented Washington from forming an Asian NATO. Many of the aforementioned reasons, at least when the US politics is concerned, remain valid. This paper explores the perspectives, as well as the obstacles/challenges of creating an Asian NATO under the assumption that the USA has already made a decision to engage in a process of its conception. To this end, the paper shows that geography is a major factor that prevents/interferes with the formation of an Asian NATO. There is too wide a distance between the potential member-states of such an alliance. This gap presents no obstacle to signing an agreement on mutual defense, but it is an obstacle to fulfilling the duties stipulated in the agreement in case of a war conflict. One might observe that a comparatively long distance of the USA from Europe or Asia does not prevent Washington from being actively present in the regions designated, from entering into bilateral or multilateral agreements, or from establishing military bases and keeping a large number of troops in them. It is a sound remark, but one should not forget that the USA, by definition, is a global (super)power and that such a status requires their omnipresence worldwide. In addition, the USA has, for the time being, the developed means at its disposal to project its power all over the world (aircraft carriers and accompanying fleets). The American public opinion has been shaped for decades to accept the fact that it is the duty of the USA to serve as the keeper of global order, even in the most remote regions of the world. All the aforementioned features is what Japan, South Korea, Australia, New Zealand or the Philippines lack.

Due to mutual long distances and unrelated or loosely related historical destinies of the countries designated, that is, the lack of mutual identification and of the sense of interconnectedness, there are cultural-geographical factors at play here that work against the creation of an Asian NATO. Between the two, in terms of military power, potentially strongest member-states of the proposed alliance – South Korea and Japan – there is still a climate of significant distrust dating back from the period of the WWII, and from a more distant past as well. Japan presented a most brutal occupying force on the islands of the Philippines, and it never reached that level of critical self-reflection on its own role in history, as was the case with Germany. Furthermore, there are differences with regard to focal points too. South Korea is primarily concentrated on the challenge of North Korea, which is an uncontrollable one without the assistance of China (Behrendt 2023). The

Philippines is engaged in a direct territorial dispute with China, whereas Japan is in a similar situation with the Russian Federation (South Kuril islands), which is becoming more and more strategically connected with Beijing. Australia and New Zealand, geographically speaking, have the least reasons for unrest as regards the aspirations and actions of Beijing in its immediate surrounding or on global scale. Hence, apart from cultural-geographical matrices and identities, there are various security interests of the designated countries as well.

Finally, the creation of an Asian NATO is hindered by a very powerful and comprehensive economic cooperation of the countries in question and China. Any instance of their alignment with any military-political bloc, with an imposed duty of organising collective defence, would cause tensions with Beijing, possible reduction in trade exchange between the two sides, and the decrease of Chinese investments. All this presents a strong case against forming an Asian NATO. Unlike the USSR, which promoted certain ideological agenda that implied both internal overturns and revolutions in Western countries or those that nurtured similar social values, PR China follows more classic geopolitical markers and its politics does not penetrate the internal structure of (non)Western democracies. For that reason, along with obvious benefits of doing trade with China, it is more difficult to mobilise public opinion in a certain country against Beijing when they have no open claims to their sovereignty and integrity. Bearing this in mind, mobilising respective public opinions of Japan, South Korea, Australia or the Philippines to support the USA in case of a war conflict with China over Taiwan or take an active part in it seems an unlikely prospect. Even if all potential challenges and dilemmas over an Asian NATO were removed, it would still be rather demanding to win the public opinion in any of the said countries to sanction the engagement of their respective troops in a highly risk military venture involving a country which is not a member-state of the alliance.

As it is highlighted in the section dedicated to the theoretical framework of this article, the reasons of *realpolitik* (in neo-realism), which favour the potential creation of an Asian NATO, are dominated by the arguments of geography/ geopolitics, of neo-liberal view of the world politics (theory of complex interdependence), as well as by the arguments of behavioural theory of decision-making under conditions of risk, which problematise such a process or make it difficult.

When taken together, it is obvious that all the aforementioned reasons present a significant obstacle to forming an Asian NATO. Currently, an even greater obstacle is the stance Washington has taken over the existing bilateral and trilateral security platforms, seeing them as satisfactory mechanisms for restraining PR China and realising key American interests in the region of Indo-Pacific. If, one day, Washington decides to initiate the process of formation of an Asian NATO, it will

be interesting to see what devices it is going to use to try to reduce or bypass the obstacles presented.

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Željko BUDIMIR

**RAZMATRANJE AZIJSKOG NATO-A:
PREPREKE I IZAZOVI U NJEGOVOM USPOSTAVLJANJU**

Apstrakt: U radu se analizira mogućnost stvaranja azijskog pandana NATO-u, odnosno, prepreka i izazova u tom procesu. U prvom delu rada, autor se osvrće na saradnju pojedinih indo-pacifičkih zemalja (posebno Japana, Južne Koreje, Australije i Novog Zelanda) sa Severnoatlantskom alijansom, uz osvrt na sadržaje i dostignuti nivo tih odnosa. Potom se pruža kratak osvrt na ideje i koncepte stvaranja „globalnog NATO-a” sa početka 2000-ih godina, koji nisu realizovani. U središnjem delu rada, autor opisuje i objašnjava ideju stvaranja azijskog NATO-a, analizira i iznosi pretpostavke o tome koje bi zemlje mogle da budu u njegovom sastavu, i zatim, izlaže osnovne prepreke koje stoje na putu realizacije te ideje. Prema autorovom mišljenju, te prepreke su kulturološko-političke, geoekonomske, i geografsko/geostrateške prirode. Svaka od ovih prepreka se zasebno analizira i tumači, polazeći od pretpostavke da bi SAD bile voljne da pokrenu stvaranje tog saveza. Prepreke se sagledavaju na nivou potencijalnih azijskih članica. Na samom kraju rada, autor sažima sve prezentovane argumente i iznosi zaključke.

Ključne reči: Azija, Indo-Pacifik, savezništva, SAD, Kina, strategija.