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***Session IV: The Future of NATO: Cooperation and its Limits***

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# NATO and the Asian powers: Cooperation and its Limits

## Introduction

Presenting an integrated view of NATO-Asia relations can be a deceptive exercise. The patchwork of initiatives established between NATO and countries in the region has never been framed by any overarching Asia-specific rationale. Insofar as there is a strategic imperative driving outreach in the region, it has been the effort to draw “global partners” into closer cooperation with existing alliance operations – primarily in Afghanistan – rather than any broader process of identifying shared security concerns either with the major Asian powers or even with traditional partners in the region.

In Asia itself, interest in NATO has waxed and waned. The partnership with the greatest potential – that with Tokyo – has been hampered by Japan’s recent political turbulence, and the high-level impetus provided by former prime ministers Shinzo Abe and Taro Aso has yet to be re-established under the new Democratic Party of Japan government. Beijing’s attention levels have closely corresponded to its degree of anxiety about alliance military presence in China’s periphery and the state of NATO’s relationships with its regional rivals. New Delhi has been consistently skeptical about the virtues of closer engagement. While cooperation with Australia, New Zealand and South Korea has a more consistently positive dynamic, the net result is nevertheless a notably underdeveloped framework of ties between the transatlantic alliance and the most significant emerging global security actors.

In theory, NATO’s new strategic concept should provide an opportunity to redress this. While there are likely to be few elements in the concept directly concerned with the Asian region as such, it will at least provide the platform for a conversation about shared security threats that lifts sights beyond the all-consuming subject of Afghanistan. Whether it be energy security, maritime security, terrorism, non-proliferation, or the future of the greater Middle East, it is clear that all sides have goals in common and various capabilities that could be deployed in a more complementary fashion. Likely moves to consolidate the confusing array of partnership categories will also help. And this will also be assisted by the new NATO Secretary General’s initiative to develop dialogues of a more political nature with major Asian powers such as China and India, neither of whom is yet interested in the sort of operational cooperation that governs talks with other partners.

There are, however, significant obstacles to overcome. NATO's experience in Afghanistan, which was once a driving force for its relationships in Asia, is now arguably an inhibiting one. Skepticism about the institution has grown both in the region and in the United States, while the appetite within NATO for continued presence in South-West Asia, or for future operations of a similar nature, has diminished. But even if there is a resurgence of the vision of NATO as a globally-networked alliance willing to conduct out-of-area operations, a basic question still needs answered – given the challenging legacy to overcome with the two largest powers in the region, should NATO really be the institution of choice when looking to develop security partnerships in Asia?

### Mapping NATO's relationships in the region

NATO's relationships in Asia do not fall under a single unified umbrella. They can be segmented into several different parts: the relationships with states currently framed as "Contact Countries" or "other partners across the globe", Japan, the Republic of Korea, New Zealand, and Australia, which reflect the highest level of crossover with the strategic agenda and values of the alliance. The Central Asian relationships, which still fall under the ambit of the Partnership for Peace and have taken on renewed importance for NATO supply routes. The relationships with Afghanistan and Pakistan, which have involved high-level exchanges very specifically tailored to ISAF operations, and continue to consume the bulk of the alliance's political attention. And the other relations in the region, most significantly with India and China, which have been for the most part characterized by ad hoc exchanges on a more modest scale.

While many of these relationships have been treated extensively elsewhere, NATO's ties with the two largest states have received less attention.

### The view from Beijing and New Delhi

NATO has expanded its contacts with both India and China in recent years, with officials up to Deputy Secretary General level (in China's case) taking part in periodic dialogues, and Anders Fogh Rasmussen, NATO Secretary General, extolling the potential for closer ties. Yet there is a substantial legacy of mistrust

to overcome in both countries.

China's perspective on NATO has oscillated between hostility and indifference, and the peaks of Chinese interest have essentially been peaks of concern rather than of any enthusiasm for cooperation. These have included the bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, the establishment of a NATO presence in neighboring Afghanistan, the "color revolutions" in the Caucasus and Central Asia (attributed in China to Western democracy promotion efforts that were seen to be linked to the NATO enlargement agenda), and senior-level political efforts from Tokyo to expand its own relationship with the alliance.

Anxieties about Japan, NATO's regional presence, and the color revolutions may have somewhat receded, but traditional unease has not gone away. Beijing still sees NATO as a Cold War institution that has never truly shifted its essentially anti-Russian orientation or – as a values-based alliance – its potentially broader containment risk to China itself. When threat assessments in Beijing have dipped, China has simply paid the alliance less attention. On specific issues of potential security cooperation, the Chinese have flagged the NATO-led nature of operations as an obstacle. Discussions with China vis-à-vis Afghanistan, for instance, have been characterized by Chinese suspicion towards NATO's role and unwillingness to see a success for the alliance, which it fears may translate into a more substantial and permanent role in the region. Moreover, while diplomats and party officials are able to take part in these mid-level political dialogues, Chinese military officers remain barred from contact with NATO officials.

While China's difficulties with NATO are perhaps unsurprising, India's are no less deep-rooted. Delhi's close, long-standing relationship with Moscow, its Cold War companion, means that it shares little of the alliance's threat perception regarding Russia. The legacy of Moscow's own concerns can still be felt among members of the Indian strategic community, who at best see NATO as an anachronistic institution. India's desire to maintain a level of strategic autonomy diminishes its willingness to be more closely bound in to traditional alliances. And even among those who are keenest to upgrade security cooperation with the United States, the European nature of NATO as an institution appeals less than direct bilateral ties with Washington. More recently and more damningly, NATO's seeming failure in Afghanistan has raised questions about the basic effectiveness of the alliance in Indian eyes – not least its willingness to sustain a commitment to addressing extremism in South-West Asia, which is central to Indian security concerns.

## The Afghan experience

In this respect, India is not alone: Delhi's reaction to the ISAF mission is replicated elsewhere in the region. But perhaps even more important has been the impact of the war on views within the alliance itself. The war in Afghanistan had previously acted as a driver for NATO's relationships in the region. It gave additional impetus to questions over whether NATO should be transformed into a global alliance (or security network); what non-Atlantic partners might gain and expect from a closer relationship with NATO; and the general context of operations in South-West Asia. Now, the winding down of the war is producing the opposite dynamic.

The Europeans are not emerging from their Afghan experience with an emboldened, more globally oriented mindset. Despite the short-term surge in U.S. troop numbers, military presence in the region is on a downward trajectory. The appetite within the alliance for operations of this nature has been reduced. And the balance in debates regarding a global NATO has been tipped back in favor of focusing on core activities such as territorial defense and functional threats.

The U.S. reaction has been equally sharp. Atlanticists had cultivated a vision of the Atlantic alliance at the core of a global security network, consistently expanding its influence and strength through enlargement and an upgraded set of partnerships. But the Georgian War and political dynamics in Ukraine have hit the enlargement agenda hard. And disappointment in Washington over the practical difficulties of working through NATO in Afghanistan – and with European partners more generally – has raised questions about whether NATO is really the right institution to perform global military tasks or act as a conduit for developing global security relationships.

## A Future for NATO and Asia

The difficulties ensuing from the Afghan experience do not obviate the fact that over the long term, the need for a closer meshing of operational cooperation between the U.S. alliance partners in East Asia and the Atlantic alliance partners is only going to grow. Evidently there is also scope for coordination between all the European, North American, and Asian powers on a range of different security issues. But the fact that the two largest Asian states have such difficulties with

NATO itself as an institution poses problems of two distinct sorts.

First is the case of China. In the medium term, even if NATO were able to stage a successful reinvention, China's rise as a military actor is likely to become a central feature of the global, rather than just the regional, security landscape. NATO will ultimately need to resolve whether it is going to be part of the process of integrating China, part of the process of (at least implicitly) hedging against it, or whether it can continue to straddle the fence. What sort of China emerges in the coming years will partly determine that choice but equally important will be what sort of alliance NATO wants to become. Any attempt to sacrifice a values-based approach for the sake of closer cooperation with Beijing will face resistance both inside NATO and from other partners. Yet the alternatives – a semi-hostile relationship or an attempt to refuse to face the choice, both have risks for NATO's capacity to operate and relevance on the global stage.

New Delhi poses a different challenge: any values-based global security network without India would necessarily be compromised, yet NATO's ties there are if anything worse than those with Beijing. While the solution in this instance is at least obvious – an effort from the alliance to upgrade relations has little downside – in the absence of progress, the inevitable question will be whether NATO is really the right institution for the task. As things stand, a set of security relationships built largely through bilateral ties would certainly be easier if the inclusion of India is a central priority. And when it comes to multilateral institutions, while New Delhi is also deeply skeptical about the EU as a security partner, there is not the same level of hostility to overcome.

## Conclusion

Barring notable shifts in Chinese or Indian thinking, the result of the challenges facing NATO's relations with Asia's major emerging powers is likely to be that its efforts in the region will instead focus on deepening cooperation with U.S. alliance partners. Particularly if cooperation with Japan develops a fresh momentum, this is still an important and potentially ambitious agenda in its own right, as well as one that will impact on how China and India view the alliance. Moreover, many within NATO believe that a period of retrenchment and consolidation is necessary before a global agenda for the institution can really re-emerge.

The risks for NATO are clear nonetheless: the inevitable consequence of taking a holiday from the new geopolitics would be that the task of coordinating security

relationships between Europe, the United States, and the Asian powers ends up being conducted through other mechanisms instead. In the short-term, this is hardly going to result in the sort of existential crisis faced by the institution in the aftermath of the Cold War, when it was claimed that NATO had to go “out of area or out of business”. But if NATO is able to sustain neither global military commitments nor relationships with the coming century’s most important new global security actors, its future role could be a substantially diminished one.