



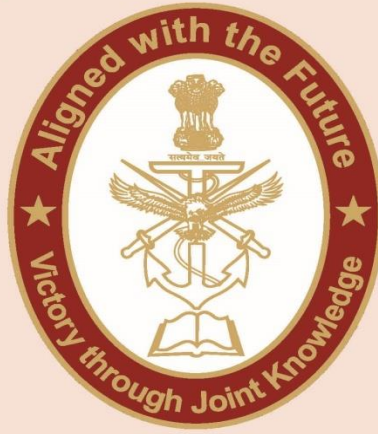
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INDIA'S STRATEGIC CONSIDERATIONS ON NATO'S DEEPENING COOPERATION IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

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Introduction

The Indo-Pacific region has become a focal point of global strategic competition, with various international actors vying for influence and stability. With the Russia-Ukraine war continuing into its third year, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) has taken steps to further its ties with some of its Indo-Pacific partners, Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand. The recent summit held in Washington D.C. on July 2024, was the third consecutive NATO summit that was attended by the countries, who are also referred to as the Indo-Pacific Four (IP-4).¹ This shift has significant implications for India, which occupies a central role in the Indo-Pacific.

The primary reason behind NATO's growing interest in the Indo-Pacific can be summarised by the opening remark of NATO's Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg during the Washington summit. He stated, "In this session, we will address our shared

security challenges, including Russia's war against Ukraine, China's support for Russia's war economy, and the growing alignment of authoritarian powers."² This has been a major concern for the West. The alliance's 2022 Strategic Concept explicitly acknowledged the significance of the Indo-Pacific and emphasised the need for increased cooperation with partners in the region.³

The allies of the U.S. have increasingly stated their opposition to Russia for its war on Ukraine, as well as its deepening partnership with China, which is aiding the expansion and reconstitution of the Russian military. There is also a strong pattern of strategic cooperation between China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea that can be seen across the region.⁴ Coupled with China being identified as a potential threat during the 2022 NATO summit, and as posing a systemic challenge to security, there was a reasonable apprehension that the situation in Europe today might extend to the Indo-Pacific tomorrow. In light of this, the Washington summit stressed the importance of NATO's Indo-Pacific partners and the key role they can play in enhancing the security of the region. Building strong defence industrial bases as well as protecting the strategic supply lines would be crucial to curbing the power of countries like Russia and China. Flagship projects focusing on cybersecurity, technology and countering disinformation were announced as part of these efforts.⁵

Efforts by NATO members in the Indo-Pacific

Even before the Russia-Ukraine War started, NATO's increasing interest in the region was witnessed when some of the member states became more involved in the Indo-Pacific region. For example, on 15 September 2021, a trilateral security partnership called the AUKUS project was announced between the U.S., the U.K. and Australia. As part of the deal, nuclear-powered submarines were provided to Australia, with the primary purpose of countering China's influence in the Indo-Pacific region.⁶ However,

as the primary focus of NATO is the transatlantic region, the engagements by member countries in defensive engagements in the Indo-Pacific have been limited and on an ad hoc basis.

India's Stance Towards NATO

S Jaishankar, India's Minister of External Affairs, made it clear that India does not intend to join the Western-led NATO. According to Jaishankar, the military alliance is inappropriate for India. NATO is an intergovernmental military alliance with 31 member states, mostly from North America and Europe. Its mission is to ensure its members' independence and security by collaborating on both the political and military fronts.⁷ This was in response to a suggestion from a Congressional Committee in the US to expand NATO Plus by including India. NATO Plus is a security agreement between NATO and five affiliated states (Australia, New Zealand, Japan, Israel, and South Korea) to strengthen global defence cooperation. The idea aimed to enable seamless intelligence exchange among these countries which would at the same time allow India to obtain superior military equipment without substantial delays. The US believes that India should join NATO to protect its borders from China and to strengthen global security in the face of Chinese aggressiveness in the Indo-Pacific.⁸

On the contrary, New Delhi believes that it can counter any Chinese aggression on its own without the need for external alliances. India underscores the economic challenges China is going through, especially in terms of exports and imports levels. Such statements definitely weaken the argument to join NATO to counter Chinese aggression. Traditionally, India has maintained a cordial but wary stance with regard to NATO. The reason for this cannot be attributed to a single cause but has to instead be broadly understood from historical, political, strategic and economic considerations. Historically, India's foreign policy has been characterised by non-alignment and

neutrality. Moreover, Indian leaders have always emphasised the preservation of India's strategic autonomy, which allows the country to make policy decisions based on its own national interests. Additionally, the regional dynamics between India and its neighbours, coupled with the geopolitical circumstances of the Indo-Pacific require greater flexibility and autonomy in its policy making. As such, India prefers like-minded partners instead of any fixed alliances, thereby maintaining its capacity to adjust to the ever-changing regional dynamics and respond accordingly while remaining neutral and keeping its best interest at the core.⁹ India's reluctance to join NATO was also influenced by strategic considerations. Firstly, India holds a key position in the region, and any decision it makes may have an impact on the geopolitical situation of the region. And secondly, India's close ties with Russia. NATO is primarily focused on countering Russian influence in the region. Whereas, India and Russia have always had a strategic partnership, especially in the domain of military cooperation. The two countries have also enjoyed diplomatic alignment and economic ties. Many of India's decisions on global issues have been influenced by its relationship with Russia. As such, a decision to join NATO would jeopardise this partnership, which would be detrimental to India.¹⁰

India must carefully evaluate the potential economic ramifications of aligning with NATO. As an emerging global economy, India is deeply reliant on trade and foreign investment, both of which could be impacted by the geopolitical dynamics associated with joining a military alliance. Such a decision may indirectly affect India's ability to maintain diverse economic partnerships, possibly leading to complications in its broader economic strategy.

India's Strategic Priorities in the Indo-Pacific

Initially, India had been reluctant to adopt the concept of Indo-Pacific, for three reasons. Firstly, it seemed like a strategy to limit the expanding influence of China, with

which India had been trying to balance its strategic relationship in the mid-2010s. Secondly, India wanted to preserve its strategic autonomy and avoid being perceived as aligning too closely with Western powers. Finally, India preferred to focus on its primary interests in the Indian Ocean, as opposed to early adopters of the Indo-Pacific concept such as the US, Japan and Australia, who focused on the Pacific Ocean.¹¹

However, India has realised its multifaceted interests in the Indo-Pacific. The concept aligned with India's historical interests and strategic aspirations, particularly in promoting a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" that upholds international law and maritime security. As a major maritime power with a vast coastline, ensuring the security of its sea lanes and maintaining a balance of power in the region is paramount for India. The Indian Ocean is crucial for global trade, with a significant portion of international maritime traffic passing through its waters. India's "Act East Policy" underscores its commitment to strengthening ties with Southeast Asian countries and enhancing its strategic footprint in the region.¹² With NATO's increased influence in the Indo-Pacific and engagements with countries in the region, it is impossible for India to ignore the strategic implications it has for India's own policy considerations. This move presents both an opportunity and a challenge for India.

Challenges

- **Geopolitical Implications:** While NATO offers a positive counter to China, India has to consider the implications of this partnership on the overall geopolitical landscape of the region. Historically, South Asia has had a very delicate balance of power. As India holds a key position in the region, an excessive alignment with NATO could have significant implications for the regional dynamics, and alter it in a way that may end up being detrimental to India's own interests. For example, it might escalate regional tension, especially with Pakistan, which could see the partnership as a threat to its security interests.¹³

- **Regional Reactions:** As NATO is primarily a North-Atlantic alliance, many of the NATO allies themselves as well as countries in the Indo-Pacific would prefer for it to have a lesser say in the region and limit itself to its original theatre. For example, there was a proposal to establish a NATO liaison office in Tokyo, Japan, which was blocked by France in 2023.¹⁴ Hence, India must be cautious to ensure that its support for NATO's initiatives does not lead to unintended diplomatic fallout or exacerbate regional tensions.
- **Strategic Autonomy:** The need to maintain strategic autonomy has been a governing factor in India's policy-making process. The policy of non-alignment, which is the cornerstone of India's foreign policy, reflects the nation's desire to remain independent in its decision-making. Becoming a part of an alliance like NATO limits such independence by imposing the alliance's decisions and political orientations on the member country. This could have potential ramifications on India's ability to make decisions suiting its best interests.¹⁵ Therefore, India needs to ensure that any cooperation with NATO does not compromise its ability to independently navigate complex regional dynamics and pursue its own security interests.

Opportunities for India

- **Enhanced Regional Security:** Collaboration with NATO could provide a framework for, *inter alia*, joint exercises, capacity building, peacekeeping efforts, intelligence sharing, cybersecurity and strategic dialogues, thereby further enhancing regional security. For example, India and NATO carried out coordinated counter-piracy efforts in the Gulf of Aden during 2009-2011. Again, in May 2011, a joint operation by the Indian Navy and NATO patrolling vessels thwarted a pirate attack in the Arabian Sea. Then in 2013, 14 Indian sailors were rescued by NATO vessels in the Gulf of Aden.¹⁶

- **Enhanced Partnerships:** Due to its strong and flexible foreign policy, India has been able to establish good relationships with multiple countries. This has resulted in India being able to work out bilateral and multilateral treaties, such as the existing infrastructure collaborations between India and Japan; maritime security and infrastructure development treaties with European countries, both bilaterally and through the European Union; renewed partnerships with Africa, etc. India can take advantage of NATO to further enhance its partnership with key players in the region and bolster its diplomatic and strategic leverage by facilitating more such trilateral and multilateral engagements.¹⁷
- **Counter to China:** Although its ties with China formed a factor in India's initial reluctance to join NATO or adopt the concept of Indo-Pacific, the relationship between the two countries has always been marked with both cooperation and tension. Despite their alignment and cooperation in international forums such as the BRICS, Shanghai Cooperation Organization or climate conventions, tension between the two nations has been on the rise. China has frequently blocked India's attempts at expanding its global influence. China's assertive actions in South Asia and the Indian Ocean, including its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and military buildup, catalysed India's adoption of the Indo-Pacific framework.¹⁸

In light of this, the addition of China to NATO's list of potential threats offers further scope for dialogue between the alliance and India. NATO offers a counter to the growing power of China in the Indo-Pacific. As India has a significant strategic interest in the region, NATO's presence could be a boon in terms of offsetting China's expanding footprints in the region.

Considerations for Navigating India-NATO Relations

- **Strengthening QUAD Cooperation:** The QUAD is a minilateral forum aimed at ensuring the security and stability of the Indo-Pacific. India, being a key player in the forum, should strive to further strengthen the cooperation between the QUAD members via joint exercises, coordinated policies and intelligence sharing, so that the region remains free and open. While NATO's involvement could complement the QUAD's objectives, India should circumvent overlapping or conflicting agendas.
- **Alignment of India's Strategic Interests with NATO's Strategic Concept 2022:** Most of India's strategic interests and priorities align with several points mentioned in NATO's Strategic Concept 2022. For example, point 14 emphasises freedom of navigation which resonates with New Delhi's focus on securing free and open sea lanes of communications (SLOCs).¹⁹ Points 15 and 17 address the threats posed due to advancements in technology. These are certain areas where India seeks to enhance its digital and cybersecurity capabilities. Point 19 highlights the risks related to climate change which is also a very relevant issue for India's national security agenda. Although several questions have been raised regarding NATO's presence in the region that shouldn't be a great concern or outright rejection from India's perspective. As long as the military alliance doesn't form a Cold War style, New Delhi can definitely find common grounds for collaboration.
- **Potential Collaboration Between India and NATO's Science for Peace and Security (SPS) Programme:** The Science for Peace and Security (SPS) Programme of NATO encourages discourse and practical cooperation among NATO member states and partner countries through scientific research, technological innovation, and knowledge exchange.²⁰ NATO has cooperated

with the Indo-Pacific countries like Japan and South Korea in terms of emerging and disruptive technology. Given India's growing focus on advancing its capabilities in technology, collaboration with programs like SPS of NATO could significantly enhance New Delhi's efforts in this area.

- **India's Counterterrorism Efforts Aligned with NATO's Enhanced Readiness Against Transnational Terrorism:** The 2024 NATO Summit in Washington reinforced the NATO 2022 Strategic Concept which highlighted terrorism as a significant threat.²¹ Under this, the counterterrorism guidelines have been updated to address the contemporary threats. This mirrors New Delhi's fight against terrorism in its neighbourhood. A global consensus to combat such threats is salient. Thus NATO's efforts to initiate enhanced readiness to counter such challenges reflect the global understanding of the transnational nature of terrorism, which aligns with the proactive counterterrorism stance of India.
- **Strategic Synergies Between India's Space Program and NATO's Focus on Space as a Critical Frontier:** The 2024 NATO Summit's emphasis on space as a critical frontier, through initiatives like the 'NATO Space Symposium' and integration of space capabilities into multi-domain operations. This aligns with India's growing focus on space as a strategic asset.²² India, with its expanding space program and defence capabilities, could find strategic synergies by collaborating with NATO on space domain awareness and leveraging innovations in the rapidly evolving global space sector.
- **Bilateral and Multilateral Treaties:** India maintains stable and cordial relationships with multiple countries. It should leverage that to enter into more bilateral as well as multilateral treaties with countries across the Indo-Pacific, as well as those beyond. Such treaties could target technology exchanges, trade,

economic benefits, etc. that would help India to walk further on the road to development.

Conclusion

NATO's deepening engagements in the Indo-Pacific present both challenges and opportunities for India. While an enhancement in regional security, cooperation and partnerships with key players in the region align with India's strategic interests, the potential for regional tension and the need to preserve India's strategic autonomy poses significant challenges. India needs to maintain a delicate balance between its alliance with NATO and achieving its strategic goals while preserving its broader diplomatic and security objectives. As the Indo-Pacific continues to evolve as a critical geopolitical arena, India's role will be pivotal in shaping the region's future stability and balance of power.

DISCLAIMER

The paper is author's individual scholastic articulation and does not necessarily reflect the views of CENJOWS. The author certifies that the article is original in content, unpublished and it has not been submitted for publication/ web upload elsewhere and that the facts and figures quoted are duly referenced, as needed and are believed to be correct.

Endnotes

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