

## COMMENT 258

# Prospects for NATO-Japan relations

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NATO's summit in Madrid in June 2022 determined a historical landmark regarding NATO's relations with Asia for several reasons. [For the first time](#), leaders of Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand (the [Indo-Pacific Four or IP4](#)) attended a NATO Summit. Additionally, '[NATO included China in its Strategic Concept](#)'. There was never any mentioning of Beijing in any earlier Strategic Concepts. [In May 2023](#), NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg mentioned that the organisation is considering the opening of a liaison office in Tokyo. Until now, the Embassy of Denmark in Tokyo served as a '[contact point](#)' for NATO members in the region. Japan and NATO actually started discussing the opening of a Tokyo office in [2007](#); however, and apparently, Stoltenberg statement needs to be seen in the context of his meeting with Japan's Prime Minister Fumio Kishida on 31 January, 2023. [Both sides](#) 'agreed to strengthen their partnership, including by stepping up their cooperation against cyberthreats.' [To do so](#), Kishida expressed interest in appointing a [new ambassador to NATO](#), separate from the ambassador to Belgium who had until then doubled in the role. The establishment of a permanent representative office for NATO affairs seemed to be on the table in the [Fiscal Year 2023](#). Yet despite further agreements of closer cooperation between NATO and Tokyo (most notably the announcement of the [Individually Tailored Partnership Program \(ITPP\)](#) with Japan), the potential NATO liaison office in Tokyo failed to materialise. It is reported that due to [French objections](#), apparently supported by [Germany](#), the notion of a Tokyo liaison office was removed from the joint communique accompanying the Vilnius summit in July 2023 – and

this during the [last round of talks](#). To set up a NATO office, the [unanimous support](#) from the North Atlantic Council - the transatlantic alliance's highest political decision-making body - is needed. Either Paris, Berlin (or any other NATO member) has 'the power to veto the move'. This surprising "last minute" resistance is nevertheless astonishing, since all NATO members seem fundamentally convinced of the importance of closer cooperation with Japan – and of the need for a greater engagement in the Indo-Pacific. According to a [report by Nikkei Asia](#), there was 'actually a consensus on the need to deepen engagement with Indo-Pacific partners [...]'. Even French President Emmanuel Macron agrees that the alliance should have partners with other regions '[with whom we \[NATO\] manage major security issues in the Indo-Pacific, Africa and also the Middle East](#)'. However, [differences emerged over the approach](#) towards the Indo-Pacific region. Moreover, the military alliance is already running [over a dozen liaison](#) offices or delegations around the world. One of the core arguments made by those (foremost Macron) opposing a Tokyo office is that '[NATO should keep its focus firmly on the North Atlantic region](#) ([highlighting article V and article VI](#) of the NATO statutes) – doing otherwise being held as a '[big mistake](#)' (Macron).

The removal of the expression 'NATO liaison office in Tokyo' from the "Vilnius communique" raises several issues. How far is NATO both willing and able to extend collaboration with countries in the Indo-Pacific? How is the evolving NATO engagement in the Indo-Pacific perceived, foremost by Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand? What is the rationale by France and other NATO-members to veto a liaison office in Tokyo? Is French resistance originating from President [Macron's personal views](#) or is it part of a broader, more deeply entrenched set of French foreign policy parameters? Does the fact that the expression 'NATO liaison office in Tokyo' was removed from the "Vilnius communique" mean the end of the idea? Here, it is interesting to note that Stoltenberg stressed that '[the issue of the liaison office is still on the table, it will be considered in the future](#)'. How far is the issue of the NATO liaison office in Tokyo questioning NATO's unity? NATO is eager 'to counter the deepening global strategic partnership between Russia and China' ('[no-limits](#)' partnership). However, some NATO members – especially those European – are interested in avoiding any provocation of China. The debate regarding how far is Beijing a threat or 'just' a challenge is an indication of such

cautiousness. Paris may simply be reluctant to support anything that fuels tensions between the alliance and Beijing. The opposition by the French diplomacy to the office in Tokyo echoes [China's criticism](#) ([‘Asia lies beyond the geographical scope of the North Atlantic’](#); Wang Wenbin, Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson). It may be that a correlation exists between French objections, Beijing's criticisms, and President Macron's latest visit to China. How far would the establishment of a NATO liaison office in Japan contribute to a phenomenon which Beijing describes as an ‘Asian-NATO’ or ‘anti-China coalition’? Since the opening of a NATO liaison office in Tokyo is on hold (at least for the moment), what could be the next step in the relationship between Japan and the alliance? Issues include how to coordinate further collaboration with the other IP4 countries. How significant is the [institutionalizing of a framework for cooperation](#) between NATO and the IP4 countries, and how can it be operationalized? Does the latest rapprochement between the administration of US President Joe Biden and Beijing contribute to changing opinions by some NATO members regarding opening an office in Japan? How do other regional entities, especially ASEAN, perceive an increasing engagement by NATO in the Indo-Pacific region - considering the emerging of new formations like the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) between Australia, India, Japan and the United States or the trilateral security pact (AUKUS) between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States? [According to Stoltenberg](#): ‘We [NATO] value the partnership with you [to the South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol] because security is not regional, security is global. What happens in the Indo-Pacific matters for Europe, and what happens in Europe matters for the Indo-Pacific.’ How far is the debate over the opening of a NATO-liaison office in Japan part of the global struggle of like-minded partners for the protection of the internationally-accepted, rule-based global order? Do Japan-NATO relations serve as a model for the collaboration with other IP4 countries (and beyond)? Could a successful institutionalization of a framework for collaboration (for example via a liaison office) incentive the ‘NATO-Plus’ format for cooperation? How far do US-China tensions over Taiwan impact the link between the Indo-Pacific and Euro-Atlantic security? And, last but not least, would a stronger European support for a NATO engagement in the Indo-Pacific strengthen the trans-Atlantic relations as well?

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