



## NEW HORIZON

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLAND'S SECURITY  
OF NATO'S APPROACH TO THE INDO-PACIFIC

Robert Pszczel

Co-operation: Jakub Jakóbowski, Michał Bogusz

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## INTRODUCTION

The Indo-Pacific region (for the sake of simplicity defined here to encompass the area between the western coastline of the Indian Ocean and the easternmost extreme of the Pacific Ocean) appears to be gaining political, economic, and military significance each year. The impact of developments in the Indo-Pacific on the interests of other regions and countries are both potentially beneficial, creating new opportunities for growth and cooperation, and also potentially detrimental, posing threats to security and global order; and they cannot be ignored. This forces not only the countries within the region but also those further afield to pay greater attention to it and this is already happening. This also applies to the international organisations of which Poland is a member, primarily the European Union (EU) and NATO.

The subject of this analysis is the evolution of NATO's approach to the Indo-Pacific region and its implications for Poland's security policy. This paper does not advocate for the immediate development of a comprehensive strategy for Poland. Its goal is not even to outline all the elements that Warsaw's policy towards the region might (or should) include in the context of NATO's priorities. Rather, the more modest yet significant and urgent task today seems to be to stimulate discussion. This is currently lacking. Given the scale and dramatic nature of the threats now facing Poland and the entire democratic community, we cannot afford to take a passive role or to be granted an exemption from thinking about the Indo-Pacific region and its connections with our part of the world, including in the security realm. These connections are stronger and more organic than might have seemed to be the case not long ago.

## MAIN POINTS

- NATO's operational area has been significantly restricted by the North Atlantic Treaty. Furthermore, the European member states of the Alliance have traditionally been reluctant to engage operationally in conflicts in geographically distant regions. The countries on the eastern flank are particularly concerned about marginalising the European theatre in favour of the Indo-Pacific. Some Western European countries (notably France) do not fully share the US policy towards China and therefore cautiously analyse the consequences of NATO's partnership with Indo-Pacific countries.
- NATO's history, especially post-1990, has shown that it can engage politically and, in exceptional situations, act beyond its mandated area if required by its members' common security interests. This has not undermined the treaty-based foundations of NATO's functioning. This was demonstrated by NATO's stabilisation missions in many parts of the world, as well as by flexible partnership formulas with various categories of non-member states. The latter expands NATO's range of political options.
- For a long period, interested Indo-Pacific countries based their relations with NATO on occasional support for its actions and selective participation in certain partnership programmes. The confrontational stance towards the countries of the region adopted by China, combined with Beijing's worrying assertiveness and the militarisation of its policy, convinced both NATO allies and their closest partners in the Indo-Pacific of the need to revise mutual relations and elevate them to a higher level. The initial aim was strategic signalling towards China.
- From 2020 onwards, the way of thinking about the key challenges converged, especially regarding China. This resulted in intensive (of a privileged nature, in comparison with other partners) dialogue and new forms of cooperation between NATO and four countries in the region – Australia, Japan, South Korea, and New Zealand (the so-called AP4) – with the role of the region being highlighted in NATO documents. The pace of opening up to the AP4 is increasing, even if not all expectations associated with the Washington summit have been met.
- Poland's hitherto very cautious approach to NATO cooperation with the Indo-Pacific region seems to be losing its justification. There are at least

six significant reasons why the importance of the region and the value of this partnership for Poland's security interests will grow.

- First, the Indo-Pacific is inevitably becoming the most influential region on the world's economic, political, military, and climate map. To enhance deterrence effectiveness and prevent Chinese dominance, strengthening relations with the natural partners of Western states in this crucial region is becoming imperative for the US and the West, and therefore also for Poland.
- Second, the United States' prioritisation of the Indo-Pacific forces the European allies to develop an appropriate policy that takes these realities into account. This requires a synergy of actions that would ensure the adequate means and capabilities to defend both the European and Asian theatres simultaneously, respecting existing NATO commitments. Despite the doubts of many European countries, this process is moving forwards, and the partnership with AP4 could become a key element of it.
- Third, the increasingly close cooperation between Russia and China is already part of the new strategic reality. The global nature of this cooperation – from economic and technological ties, mutual political support, through military exercises and information exchange, to diplomatic and disinformation offensives worldwide – demands a more collective response from the international democratic community. NATO and AP4 countries share a common interest in ensuring the effectiveness of deterrence policies against China and Russia, both in Europe and Asia. For Poland, the fact that a crisis or conflict in the Indo-Pacific involving China and the US could be perceived by Russia as an opportunity to undermine NATO's security guarantees in Europe is extremely important.
- Fourth, AP4 countries see the connections between the Indo-Pacific and European theatres. They recognise the negative consequences for themselves of a potential Russian victory in Ukraine and contribute significantly to the policy of supporting Ukraine by the coalition of democratic states. This policy is currently one of the pillars of Poland's security policy. Moreover, AP4 countries are indirectly involved in NATO's deterrence policy, including on NATO's eastern flank.
- Fifth, cooperation with AP4 partners is not only part of NATO's new course but also a significant element of the geopolitical transformation of the

European Union. Given the expanding EU mandate in the field of security policy, Poland will need to increase its activity in shaping this policy. One of the challenges is to prevent potential contradictions between the EU's and NATO's strategies towards the Indo-Pacific.

- Sixth, the special strategies towards the Indo-Pacific developed and announced in recent years by many of Poland's allies confirm a significant similarity in thinking and the long-term nature of security connections between Europe and this region. This aligns with the increasingly ambitious practice of military cooperation carried out bilaterally by some of the larger NATO countries (the United Kingdom, France, Germany).



# I. NATO AND ITS COOPERATION WITH PARTNERS OUTSIDE THE TREATY AREA

## 1. Definition of NATO's Treaty Area

Until 2020, the development of special relations between NATO and these four Indo-Pacific countries (Australia, Japan, the Republic of Korea, and New Zealand) proceeded naturally, based on the free choice of specific forms of cooperation and defining common interests without the need for a special NATO strategy. However, to better understand the context in which NATO has developed the current model of these relations, it is essential to analyse the doctrinal and political evolution that the Alliance has undergone in its thinking about areas and countries outside the transatlantic community.

Under the North Atlantic Treaty,<sup>1</sup> which established the North Atlantic Alliance, NATO's mandate (and therefore its area of operation) is strictly defined in Article 6 of the Treaty. This essentially limits the scope of collective defence commitments (Article 5) to the territories of member states in Europe, North America, and Turkey, as well as (regarding the forces, vessels, or aircraft of member states) to the Mediterranean Sea and the North Atlantic area north of the Tropic of Cancer. Consequently, not only Africa, South America, and Antarctica but also much of the Indo-Pacific region remain outside NATO's mandate.

Neither the Korean War of 1950–1953 (in which NATO as an organisation was not directly involved) nor the Vietnam War (which the US had to conduct alone) changed this fact. It was a similar case with the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), established in 1955 (and dissolved in 1977), often described as the Asian NATO. Its members included the USA, the United Kingdom, France, Australia, New Zealand, and Pakistan, but besides these there were only two countries from the region: the Philippines and Thailand. It never created permanent military structures, and its purpose was more about legitimising Washington's anti-communist campaigns in Asia than fulfilling any alliance commitments.

In general, many European NATO members have always been cautious about global engagement beyond the territories of the member states. In the case of former colonial states like France or (to a lesser extent) the United Kingdom,

<sup>1</sup> [North Atlantic Treaty](#), NATO, Washington, 4 April 1949, nato.int.

having difficult experiences with the US stance towards their policies in the twilight of their colonial history (e.g. a lack of support from Washington for the Suez operation in 1956), this caution has deeper roots. Paris (though it is not alone in this) does not fully share Washington's policy towards China and does not want greater NATO involvement in the region.

In March 2023, French President Emmanuel Macron<sup>2</sup> articulated this view very bluntly, saying (after his visit to Beijing) that neither France nor Europe should get involved in the US-China confrontation over Taiwan. Although this statement was publicly criticised for a lack of solidarity with the US, there is no doubt that Macron publicly expressed what many Europeans think in private.<sup>3</sup>

For most European allies (especially those on the eastern flank), restraint stems primarily from fears of a potential American neglect of the European theatre. Given the global role of the United States (and the military commitments that bind Washington to various Indo-Pacific countries), the European allies' reluctance to become entangled in conflicts outside Europe, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region, remains resolute.

## 2. Doctrine vs practice

Despite the described formal-legal and political limitations, NATO has evolved its approach to territories outside the Washington Treaty after the end of the Cold War. In the 1990s, the debate focused on the possibility of an intervention in the Balkans. The slogan "out of area or out of business"<sup>4</sup> defined the dilemma facing decision-makers well: NATO was criticised for remaining passive and thus possibly becoming useless.

Bloody wars were fought on the territory of the disintegrating former Yugoslavia, a non-member state that was not an aggressor towards any of the allied states. Therefore, there was no question of potentially invoking Article 5. At the same time, the Balkans lie in the heart of Europe, and ethnic cleansing and murders were being committed in Bosnia, including in Sarajevo, where World

<sup>2</sup> P. Ricard, P. Smolar, B. Philip, 'Macron's Taiwan statements upset France's allies', *Le Monde*, 11 April 2023, [lemonde.fr/en](https://www.lemonde.fr/en).

<sup>3</sup> This was confirmed by public opinion polls in various EU countries in 2023. See B. Malley, 'Poll: Most Europeans support neutrality in US-China conflict', *Responsible Statecraft*, 8 June 2023, [responsiblestatecraft.org](https://www.responsiblestatecraft.org).

<sup>4</sup> W. Tuohy, 'Military: NATO After the Cold War: It's 'Out of Area or Out of Business'', *Los Angeles Times*, 13 August 1993, [latimes.com](https://www.latimes.com).

War I began. Symbolism played a significant role. In the capitals of NATO countries, with each week of bloody events, the conviction grew that the conflict had to be stopped, first by deploying stabilisation forces and later by an air operation in the case of Kosovo. And it was the European NATO countries that finally pressured the USA to ensure that NATO did not remain idle in the face of the threat of genocide in Europe. The condition for action outside NATO's territory was a UN mandate or the conviction of solid legal grounds for the actions taken.

Another military mission, this time in Afghanistan, was directly linked to the invocation of Article 5 when the United States fell victim to unprecedented terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. Evidence clearly indicated that the attacks were planned and rehearsed on Afghan territory. Hence the strong support of the allies for an American intervention in a distant part of the globe.

As in the case of actions in the Balkans, NATO's operation in Libya in 2011 resulted from fulfilling obligations imposed on the international community by, among others, a UN Security Council resolution, rather than from a previously agreed policy of deliberately going beyond NATO's area. The immediate stimulus was provided by requests from France and the United Kingdom for NATO support when these two countries initially tried to intervene alone in the face of the Muammar Gaddafi regime's aggressive policies. NATO's ongoing (in various forms since 2004) mission in Iraq has yet another format (purely focused on training, at the request of the Baghdad government).

NATO's flexibility and ability to shape its policies concerning countries across the globe do not imply the political or practical readiness for operational activities in distant regions, including the Indo-Pacific. Nevertheless, the above-described experiences of these and other (e.g. anti-piracy) NATO missions and operations show that adapting to current and new security challenges is in the Alliance's DNA. It has repeatedly proven capable of functioning actively in different parts of the world without violating the limitations of the North Atlantic Treaty. This is a significant added value, considering how difficult it is to predict the development of events in different, although strategically connected, regions. What seems unlikely (or even impossible) today can quickly become a fact that individual member states' government will have to respond to. This provides an additional argument for actively building up NATO's partnership with the AP4 countries - not to generate new operational commitments but to increase the range of political options for NATO.

### 3. NATO's flexible partnerships

Since 1990, NATO has been consistently developing partnerships and relations in various forms and configurations with other organisations (currently mainly the European Union, the United Nations, and the OSCE) and with non-NATO countries. Initially, the focus was on former Warsaw Pact states and other OSCE members (e.g. the North Atlantic Cooperation Council, the Partnership for Peace, the NATO-Russia Council), then the Mediterranean countries (the so-called Mediterranean Dialogue), the Middle East (the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative), and finally countries in various regions around the globe (the so-called partners across the globe). The goal of all partnership formats is to shape a cooperative model of international security. This is one of NATO's three main strategic tasks, alongside collective defence, and crisis prevention and crisis management. In practice, developing partnership relations with other countries also helps to enhance the effectiveness of many NATO missions and operations through the direct (or indirect) involvement of partners.

The flexibility and ability to adapt partnership tools to NATO's needs while aligning them with the expectations of partners is a good NATO tradition. For example, Poland, on its way to membership in the 1990s, was able to use the Partnership for Peace programme available to all participants but used it for its own integration aspirations.

### 4. Relations between the Indo-Pacific countries and NATO

Some democratic countries in the Indo-Pacific region have interacted with NATO for many years. For example, these countries helped in the stabilisation process in the Balkans (Japan,<sup>5</sup> New Zealand<sup>6</sup>), participated in a military operation (Australia,<sup>7</sup> New Zealand) or in a civilian mission (South Korea in Parwan in Afghanistan<sup>8</sup>), supported efforts at sea against piracy and terrorism (Australia, South Korea,<sup>9</sup> New Zealand), and the training mission in Iraq, actively cooperated with NATO within the coalition against Islamic State, and generously funded NATO programmes and funds (e.g. Japan's very significant

<sup>5</sup> 'Relations with Japan', NATO, nato.int.

<sup>6</sup> 'Relations with New Zealand', NATO, nato.int.

<sup>7</sup> 'Relations with Australia', NATO, nato.int.

<sup>8</sup> South Korea made a significant contribution to the Afghanistan support fund (over US\$300 million), provided nearly 500 experts in health policy and education in Parwan province, and was also active in cooperation with NATO in the fight against piracy. See 'Relations with the Republic of Korea', NATO, nato.int.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

financial contribution to supporting Afghan national forces, clearing unexploded ordnance, and others). It can be said that specific cooperation between these countries and NATO was extensive, although it was conducted without formal frameworks structuring relations with the region itself.

At the foundation of these relations were the shared values and goals of the international community (the primacy of international law, striving to maintain order and security), and to a large extent, the close relations that many partners in the region have with major allies, especially the USA and the United Kingdom. Political dialogue was conducted quite regularly, usually at the working level.

After 2010, the most active countries in the region decided to take up NATO's offer and agree on the so-called Individual Partnership and Cooperation Programmes (IPCP): South Korea and New Zealand in 2012, Australia in 2013 and Japan in 2014. Japan Joint Political Declaration<sup>10</sup> well illustrated the new circumstances that contributed to formalising bilateral cooperation. It mentions the community of values and strategic interests, the good experience of practical cooperation in Afghanistan, and a further opening up of NATO to relations with partner countries.

Individual IPCPs with Indo-Pacific countries were based on the selection of the areas of cooperation available (for all partners), and aligning with the specific interests of individual countries. The range of topics included issues such as interoperability, maritime operations, cyber security, scientific cooperation, cooperation in combating the aftermath of natural and industrial disasters, and exchanging analyses on arms control and non-proliferation (a particularly important topic for the Republic of Korea in the context of North Korea's nuclear programme). As the name suggests, the format of relations remained individual, and NATO documents did not make reference to the Indo-Pacific region as such.

<sup>10</sup> Joint Political Declaration between Japan and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, 13 April 2013, NATO, nato.int.

## II. THE CHALLENGE OF CHINA

### 1. Evolution of NATO's approach to China

For many years, NATO publicly avoided addressing the growing power of China on the international stage. It could be argued that, similar to Russia in the years 1990–2014, the allies tried to somewhat gloss over reality, seeing China primarily as a trade partner and hoping that Beijing would eventually become a constructive participant in international relations, including in the security domain. This philosophy underpinned Washington's strategy, which strongly advocated for China's inclusion in the World Trade Organization. In the US, alarm bells related to Beijing's increasingly confrontational policy (both regionally and globally) only began to sound from the beginning of this century. For the European allies, this happened even later.

For the United States, China's growing economic power and political activity in the Indo-Pacific gained additional security significance when Beijing began a vigorous process of expanding its military capabilities and then showed a willingness to use its economic and military leverage to intimidate America's partners in the region. Therefore, already under President Bill Clinton's administration, Washington openly declared the need to focus more attention on Asia (the New Pacific Community Initiative<sup>11</sup>). This course was continued by the administrations of George W. Bush and Barack Obama as part of the Asia and Pacific strategy and the American "pivot" to the Pacific, while during Donald Trump's presidency, there was a significant escalation of criticism of China's policies and, in effect, the beginning of a lasting multi-dimensional rivalry.

It seems that Beijing, accustomed to the leniency of European allies, made a strategic mistake by undertaking a series of actions over the past decade that left Europeans with no choice but to change their approach. On the list of China's provocative actions are: the arrogant stance during the pandemic, attempts to intimidate allies (the case of Lithuania<sup>12</sup>), threats towards Taiwan, aggressive claims on the maritime territories of other countries (especially in the South China Sea), industrial espionage, acquiring critical infrastructure in NATO member states while failing to fulfil promises of fully opening its market. Another turning point was Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2022,

<sup>11</sup> '14. East Asia and the Pacific', U.S. Department of State Archive, 2001–2009, state.gov.

<sup>12</sup> For more details, see J. Hyndle-Hussein, J. Jakóbowski, 'A new phase of China's pressure on Lithuania: weaponisation of European value chains', OSW, 22 December 2021, osw.waw.pl.

to which Beijing provided substantial diplomatic, propaganda, and economic support for Moscow. This led to a situation where China's reputation suffered greatly – it began to be widely viewed in Europe as a challenge to the entire global order.<sup>13</sup>

Even the European Union, traditionally favouring a cooperative approach to partners, had to take these facts into account and supplemented its political vocabulary by referring to China as an “economic competitor, systemic rival”, not just a partner. If one adds to this the strong pressure on other allies from the Trump administration to more clearly define NATO's approach to China, a change in NATO's stance seemed inevitable.

Until recently, it was difficult to find any mention of China's significance in the context of the NATO's security interests in official NATO texts. Only at the London summit in December 2019 did NATO leaders publicly acknowledge for the first time that “China's growing influence and international policies present opportunities and challenges that we need to address together as an Alliance”.<sup>14</sup> This brief sentence opened the political door to a more concrete assessment of China's significance for NATO's security.

Moreover, the London summit gave the Secretary General the green light to develop proposals to strengthen NATO's political dimension. This was partly in response to criticism of NATO from President Macron, who in an interview with *The Economist* spoke about its political brain death.<sup>15</sup> This resulted in the establishment of a group of independent experts. The group's report (NATO 2030) unequivocally described the threats and challenges which China's current policies present for NATO. It depicted China as an authoritarian state that does not share the values of the allies, violates the rules-based international order along with Russia, and poses political, technological, and military challenges to the West. Importantly, the report generally called for NATO to adopt a more global approach due to the global nature of these threats.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>13</sup> P. Le Corre, ‘The “Rebirth” of Europe-Taiwan Relations: Explaining Europe's New Balance Between Beijing and Taipei’, Asia Society Policy Institute, 10 January 2024, [asiasociety.org](https://www.asiasociety.org).

<sup>14</sup> London Declaration, NATO, 4 December 2019, [nato.int](https://www.nato.int).

<sup>15</sup> ‘Emmanuel Macron warns Europe: NATO is becoming brain-dead’, *The Economist*, 7 November 2019, [economist.com](https://www.economist.com).

<sup>16</sup> The former Polish Foreign Minister Anna Fotyga a member of this group. See ‘NATO 2030. Factsheet’, NATO, June 2021, [nato.int](https://www.nato.int).

The theses in the independent report were largely codified in NATO's Strategic Concept<sup>17</sup> agreed in 2022. It clearly shifted the focus of the assessment of Beijing's policies towards the threats rather than the opportunities. The Strategic Concept approved at the Madrid summit openly accuses China of using political, economic, and military tools to project power globally and of not revealing its strategies and intentions. Combined with hybrid actions (e.g. disinformation and cyberattacks that affect the security of the allies), aspirations for dominance, using economic and technological leverage to create dependencies, and Beijing's strategic partnership with Moscow aimed at undermining the international order, China's stance is unequivocally described as threatening NATO's security.

Since then, critical appraisal of China's policies has strengthened further.<sup>18</sup> With Russia's aggression against Ukraine, the strategic cooperation between Beijing and Moscow – political, economic (particularly helpful for Russia in circumventing Western sanctions), and indirectly military (joint exercises, providing dual-use components for Russia's arms industry, etc.) – has been recognised as directly harming NATO's security interests. The latest Annual Report for 2023 presented by the Secretary General in March 2024,<sup>19</sup> contained a strong statement that NATO and China are not partners, and the allies' expectations from Beijing include a clear condemnation of Russian aggression and ending support for the Kremlin's narratives, which are effectively disinformation. Existing forms of consultation between NATO and Chinese representatives (at the political and military levels) are maintained (e.g. on arms control issues), but they do not lead to any cooperation (there were once hopes related to mutual support in maritime anti-terrorist and anti-piracy operations). Today's contacts rather serve to persuade Beijing to rein in Moscow, e.g. to restrain the dangerous Russian rhetoric regarding the potential use of nuclear weapons.

The allies still exercise restraint in publicly criticising China, ensuring that it is not simply a copy of assessments reserved for Moscow. Many capitals not only want to avoid fundamental criticism of China to avoid fuelling the existing Chinese fears of NATO and the Western world but also strive to highlight

<sup>17</sup> NATO 2022 Strategic Concept, NATO, 29 June 2022, par. 13–14, nato.int.

<sup>18</sup> See e.g., *The speech by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg at the Heritage Foundation*, NATO, Washington, 31 January 2024, nato.int.

<sup>19</sup> *The Secretary General's Annual Report 2023*, NATO, 14 March 2024, nato.int.



differences in the approach to Beijing between the USA and the European Union member states. Nonetheless, the change is fundamental.

## 2. China's stance towards NATO

Beijing's policy towards NATO, as well as its propaganda narratives, have evolved over the past decades. The current stance can be considered unequivocally hostile. Several significant processes have led to this: China-US relations entering into a period of strategic confrontation, the evolution of NATO itself and its approach to the Indo-Pacific, and the strategic synergy with Russia aimed at US-led alliance networks. From Beijing's perspective, the conflict of interests with NATO is structural, and it does not seem likely that Chinese leaders will change this approach in the foreseeable future without abandoning their global ambitions.

In declarative opinions voiced on NATO, Chinese leaders must reconcile two aspects: ideology and the pragmatics of foreign policy. From an ideological standpoint, NATO's assessment has been clearly negative since the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949. In practical politics over the past 75 years, the attitude of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership towards NATO has gone through a full cycle: from hostility to partnership and back to hostility.<sup>20</sup> This cycle is primarily a result of changing relations between Beijing and Washington and, to a lesser extent, with Moscow. Nevertheless, one constant element of the CCP's assessment of NATO is the conviction that, like any other organisation of Western states, NATO serves as a tool of US dominance over its allies and will pursue Washington's interests, even against those of other members.

China's assessment of NATO primarily changes depending on the state of its relations with the US: when relations are close, it remains neutral, if not friendly; when they deteriorate, criticism of NATO increases. During the Cold War, until the Sino-Soviet split in the 1960s, NATO was the enemy of the "camp of socialism and peace". After the Sino-American rapprochement during the Nixon era, propaganda even spoke of a "common front" with NATO.<sup>21</sup> After the Cold War and the collapse of the USSR, NATO was generally ignored at the

<sup>20</sup> See P. Shetler-Jones, "Sewage of the Cold War": China's Expanding Narratives on NATO', The United States Institute of Peace, November 2023, [usip.org](https://www.usip.org).

<sup>21</sup> See 'Chairman Mao Zedong's Theory on the Division of the Three World and the Strategy of Forming an Alliance Against an Opponent', MFA of the PRC, [fmprc.gov.cn](http://fmprc.gov.cn); R.A. Scalpino, 'China and the Balance of Power', Foreign Affairs, 1 January 1974, [foreignaffairs.com](https://www.foreignaffairs.com).

political level. Even after the bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade in May 1999 during NATO's intervention in Kosovo, CCP propaganda focused on attacking the United States, not the Alliance itself.<sup>22</sup>

The entry of Sino-American relations into a phase of intense rivalry in the second decade of the 21st century led to an escalation in rhetoric towards NATO and its increased presence as an antagonist in China's international messaging. The first-ever participation of the heads of state and government of NATO partners from the Indo-Pacific at the 2022 Madrid summit and the adoption of a new NATO Strategic Concept referring to this region alarmed Beijing. This resulted in doubling down on its propaganda attacks against NATO, including regarding its potential expansion into the Indo-Pacific or using its experience to build an "Asian NATO".<sup>23</sup> Party propaganda portrays NATO's partnership programmes with East Asian and Pacific countries as unlawful interference in the region and "bringing a Cold War mentality".<sup>24</sup> The idea of establishing a NATO liaison office in Tokyo has become a particularly strong target of attacks. NATO is still seen and presented as a tool of US control over Europe,<sup>25</sup> instrumentally used against China.<sup>26</sup>

Beijing's stance towards NATO is also a function of its relations with Moscow, within the framework of mutual "favour exchange" in the European and Indo-Pacific theatres. Although the de facto Sino-Russian alliance's pivotal moment can be placed in the years 2013–2014,<sup>27</sup> for a long time China limited its criticism of NATO. A real change occurred after the video conference between Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping in December 2021, during Russia's preparations for the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Since then, Chinese state media, which had previously briefly reported on the growing tension around Ukraine, suddenly began to intensify the propagation of the Russian narrative about NATO's role in Europe. This can be boiled down to two theses, which are still repeated by the CCP both in internal and in international messaging directed at the Global South: NATO is an outdated organisation and a relic

<sup>22</sup> After the tensions in China subsided, Chinese experts noted NATO's role in the incident, but primarily as a tool of Washington. See Kong Hanbing, 纪末的悲剧——北约轰炸南联盟; *idem*, 北约介入科索沃战争, Aisixiang, 20 February 2023, aisixiang.com.

<sup>23</sup> See 北大西洋公约组织, MFA of the PRC, mfa.gov.cn.

<sup>24</sup> See Xu Ruojie, 北约图谋“东进” 推高亚太安全风险, Xinhua, 20 July 2023, news.cn; Zhong Feiteng, 北约「亚太化」面临三个挑战, China Times, 7 February 2023, chinatimes.com.

<sup>25</sup> Zhao Junjie, 拜登访欧意在强化对北约的控制力, China Internet Information Center, 4 July 2023, china.com.cn.

<sup>26</sup> Sun Ru, 中美全球博弈下的北约亚太化, CICIR, 29 July 2022, cicir.ac.cn.

<sup>27</sup> See M. Bogusz, J. Jakóbcowski, W. Rodkiewicz, *The Beijing-Moscow axis. The foundations of an asymmetric alliance*, OSW, Warsaw 2021, osw.waw.pl.

of the Cold War, and a militaristic organisation that undermines peace and stability in Europe.<sup>28</sup> In return, the Chinese side expects Russia to increase its criticism of the political consolidation of US allies in the Indo-Pacific, such as QUAD and AUKUS, as well as on the issue of Taiwan – as expressed in the Sino-Russian declaration of 4 February 2022.

Apart from the propaganda narrative, China perceives NATO as a threat in three dimensions. First, it is seen as one of the key mechanisms enabling the consolidation and effective political cooperation of Western countries on a global scale, including the coordination of countering China's growing influence. Beijing also assumes that in the event of a Sino-American conflict, NATO members who also belong to the EU would support economic sanctions against China.

Second, the existence of NATO poses a significant obstacle to Russia's influence on European countries. In conditions of a deepening strategic rivalry, Beijing wants to use its *de facto* alliance with Moscow to neutralise Europe as a potential ally of Washington. The primary tool would be military pressure from Russia, but a strong NATO complicates or eliminates Russian blackmail.

Third, NATO's (already concluded) operation in Afghanistan is perceived by Beijing as evidence that NATO can be active not only in the European security dimension but also potentially assist the US in the Pacific – both indirectly and directly. This means that in the event of a conflict in the Indo-Pacific region, NATO countries could support the US and its Asian allies not only politically and materially (by supplying weapons and ammunition) but also to some extent militarily.

<sup>28</sup> See 北大西洋公约组织, *op. cit.*

### III. STRENGTHENING NATO'S COOPERATION WITH THE AP4 COUNTRIES

#### 1. The birth and development of the AP4 format

All the aforementioned factors significantly influenced the change in the approach of NATO's key partners from the Indo-Pacific region. The AP4 countries are highly vulnerable to the consequences of China's aggressive actions. All four nations have defence agreements with the US (even though in New Zealand's case it is not implemented in practice, and America's defence commitments to Japan are unilateral). A potential military conflict over Taiwan would be of existential importance for their security. These countries also understand well how closely China is observing Russia's aggression in Ukraine and that it is drawing lessons for its policies.

Importantly, the AP4 governments also recognise Beijing's strategic interest in entangling the US and other allies in aiding Ukraine and in the West's conflict with Russia. The confrontational course of Beijing's policies in the region, supported by a significant increase in Chinese defence spending, has forced the AP4 countries to make new investments in their armed forces<sup>29</sup> and increase the number of military exercises, develop new formulas for international and regional cooperation (e.g. AUKUS, the Japan-South Korea-USA triangle), and elevate their relations with NATO. For the AP4, the mere initiation of privileged dialogue with NATO has intrinsic value (this is also true for NATO), as a strategic signal to Beijing.

Since 2020, it has become customary to invite AP4 representatives to key NATO meetings. These initially included foreign ministers' meetings; since 2022, they have also included meetings of military chiefs of staff and at the level of the heads of state and government. The participation of AP4 leaders at NATO summits in Madrid (2022) and Vilnius (2023) received significant publicity. Compared to other partners, following the accession of Sweden and Finland to the Alliance, only Ukraine can currently count on a similar status to the AP4 as a routine participant in NATO meetings (after the establishment of the NATO-Ukraine Council in Vilnius, this practice became the norm). Furthermore, the practice of political consultations with the AP4 has been extended to other

<sup>29</sup> See e.g., N. Fildes, 'Australia increases defence spending by \$32bn in response to China build-up', Financial Times, 17 April 2024, ft.com.

levels, including meetings of the North Atlantic Council at the Permanent Representatives level.

## 2. Key documents and forms of cooperation

In 2022, key documents regulating the Alliance's relations with the AP4 countries were adopted. The first is the Agenda for Tackling Shared Security Challenges, agreed upon (although not published) by NATO and the AP4 in April that year. According to official announcements, the plan aims to "deepen cooperation in areas such as cyber defence, technology, and hybrid threats".<sup>30</sup>

The second document is NATO's new Strategic Concept, approved at the Madrid summit in June 2022. Paragraph 45 of the Concept uses the term Indo-Pacific for the first time (although it is not precisely defined anywhere), explaining the context and objectives of developing relations with partners in the region: "The Indo-Pacific is important for NATO, given that developments in that region can directly affect Euro-Atlantic security. We will strengthen dialogue and cooperation with new and existing partners in the Indo-Pacific to tackle cross-regional challenges and shared security interests".<sup>31</sup>

This brief passage currently forms the main basis for NATO's agreed approach to the region. It unequivocally confirms that it is important for NATO's security. Deliberately – mainly at the request of the partners – it does not mention China (as is the case in other documents agreed with the AP4). It refers to Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand, but leaves the door open for the inclusion of new countries. The content of the cooperation is defined very broadly, allowing it to be jointly determined with the partners.

Thanks to the convergence of views on the need for new forms of relations, the AP4 countries and NATO have relatively quickly moved onto a more ambitious stage of cooperation. Already on the margins of the Vilnius summit, four-year cooperation programmes for 2023–2026 were agreed upon with Japan, South Korea, and Australia (with New Zealand being an exception). Under the new label of the Individually Tailored Partnership Programme (ITPP), there is a lot of new content, although the lack of full-text publication complicates a detailed analysis. However, the abbreviated version of the Japanese ITPP

<sup>30</sup> 'Relations with partners in the Indo-Pacific region', NATO, 17 August 2023, nato.int.

<sup>31</sup> NATO 2022 Strategic Concept, par. 45, *op. cit.*

available on NATO's website,<sup>32</sup> the extensive summary of the South Korean ITPP published by the Office of the President of the Republic of Korea,<sup>33</sup> and a brief overview of the Australian ITPP on the Australian Embassy's website in Belgium<sup>34</sup> are useful reference texts.

Comparing these modest source materials allows one to capture significant similarities between the individual ITPPs and some differences. The higher level of ambition for the planned activities is noteworthy. The scope of cooperation topics is extensive, covering areas such as cyber defence, maritime security, strategic communication, disarmament and arms control issues, the security implications of climate change, disaster relief, breakthrough technologies, space security, as well as the development of defence capabilities, standardisation, military and civilian exercises and interoperability.

The Japanese programme is the most comprehensive one, more openly referring to the international and national context of cooperation – connecting “like-minded” countries. It refers to the destructive consequences of Russia's war against Ukraine and promises further contributions from Japan's budget to NATO Trust Funds. The Korean programme outlines tasks for various institutions in South Korea, suggesting Seoul's serious intentions regarding ITPP implementation. The Australian version places the greatest emphasis on operational matters, such as logistics, information exchange, and exercises. This reflects the fact that this country has made the largest contribution among the Indo-Pacific partners to various NATO operations and has extensive experience in advanced military cooperation with various NATO members (including participation in classified information exchange within the Five Eyes community and the purchase of military equipment from the USA and Europe). Australia is also particularly sensitive to the threat of Chinese political and industrial penetration.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>32</sup> [Individually Tailored Partnership Programme between NATO and Japan for 2023–2026](#), NATO, 12 July 2023, nato.int.

<sup>33</sup> Analysis based on Hae-Won Jun, ‘[NATO and its Indo-Pacific Partners Choose Practice over Rhetoric in 2023](#)’, RUSI, 5 December 2023, rusi.org.

<sup>34</sup> ‘[Relations with NATO](#)’, Australian Embassy. Belgium, Luxembourg and Mission to the European Union and NATO, belgium.embassy.gov.au.

<sup>35</sup> *The Economist* in the issue of 16 March 2024, p. 46, quotes the head of Australian intelligence, Mike Burgess, who during the first public meeting of the “Five Eyes” (intelligence community of the USA, Canada, UK, Australia, New Zealand) in 2023 accused the Chinese authorities of conducting “the most persistent and sophisticated operation of intellectual property theft and expert knowledge in history”.

The AP4 countries are interested in closer cooperation with NATO. They actively participate in the numerous available cooperation formats (such as exercises), delegate representatives to NATO institutions (e.g. the NATO Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence in Tallinn, NATO Science and Technology Organization, NATO Defense College in Rome, etc.), engage in the Partnership Interoperability Initiative, participate in resilience workshops, and take part in research projects within the Science for Peace and Security programme, among others.

The ITPP, therefore, creates new opportunities for cooperation with specialised NATO bodies and committees, provided the allies are ready for this level of openness. There is great potential in exchanging lessons, analyses, and experiences regarding the security situation in the Indo-Pacific (and beyond), which both sides seem interested in. Any form of cooperation directly or indirectly related to defence industries also appears to be a promising avenue, given the enormous technological and industrial potential of the AP4 countries.

### **3. Strategic calculations of the AP4**

The AP4 countries are gradually following the lead of NATO's eastern flank states and increasingly expressing concern over the ever closer Beijing-Moscow alliance.<sup>36</sup> They exhibit a deep commitment to the rules-based international order, contested by Russia and China, and emphasise the anti-democratic nature of this relationship. They also fear the price Russia is willing to pay for China's support on the Ukraine issue. The Russian military presence in the Indo-Pacific, especially when coordinated with Beijing through joint exercises or provocative bomber flights, forces the AP4 countries to further disperse their deterrence resources. This is particularly relevant for Japan,<sup>37</sup> which has an unresolved territorial dispute with Russia over the Kuril Islands, and whose small, sparsely populated islets are highly vulnerable to potential Russian penetration in the region. South Korea, on the other hand, is sensitive to the possibility of Moscow providing financial and technological support to the North Korean regime in exchange for ammunition supplies. Australia is also concerned about Sino-Russian cooperation related to disinformation operations and cyberattacks in the Indo-Pacific, including in Pacific island states.

<sup>36</sup> Even some Chinese experts seem to notice the harm the Russian war inflicts on China's interests, but these opinions are either isolated or might serve disinformation purposes. See ['Chiny alarmują: mają problem z Rosją. „Większe szkody niż przewidywałem”](#), Onet, 15 January 2024, onet.pl.

<sup>37</sup> See [The Japanese Prime Minister's speech to the US Congress](#), Nikkei Asia, 12 April 2024, nikkei.com.



Strategically, the AP4 understand that the prolonged Russian war against Ukraine benefits China – it weakens NATO countries’ resources, especially those of the USA, and diverts their attention towards Russia, while China benefits economically and politically from the war by making Russia even more dependent on it. In general, the AP4 countries increasingly believe in the close relationship between the two operational theatres.<sup>38</sup> According to the assessment of one expert, both NATO and the AP4 countries see the partnership not so much as an instrument for mutual security assurance but as an added value to their own defence and deterrence.<sup>39</sup>

Therefore, without expecting significant operational engagement in Indo-Pacific security, the AP4 countries are interested in strengthening the defence capabilities and resilience of the European allies. They offer knowledge and experience (e.g. on diversifying supply chains of critical goods, screening Chinese investments in sensitive areas of the economy), modern technologies (e.g. Australia and New Zealand in military satellite fields), and efficient production capabilities. Poland has already benefited from these, signing contracts for the rapid delivery of tanks, self-propelled howitzers, rocket launchers, and aircraft from South Korea – with delivery times currently unattainable for European or even American firms. The scale and cost of these contracts alone mean that for Poland, the security of the region (especially the Korean Peninsula) has gained strategic importance. It is also worth examining the potential benefits of the interchangeability of defence resources between the two regions: for example, there are reserves of equipment and ammunition in the AP4 countries (such as precision-guided munitions) that are currently more needed in Europe – and vice versa.

<sup>38</sup> R.P. Pardo, ‘Brothers in Arms? The South Korea-NATO Relationship’, CSDS Policy Brief, 15 April 2024, [csds.vub.be](https://csds.vub.be).

<sup>39</sup> G. Grgić, ‘Redefining NATO’s Indo-Pacific partnerships: cooperative security meets collective defence and deterrence’, *Asian Security*, vol. 20, issue 1, 12 April 2024, after: [tandfonline.com](https://tandfonline.com).



## IV. A NEW PHASE OF PARTNERSHIP

### 1. Washington Summit

The NATO Jubilee Summit in Washington (9–11 July 2024) was an opportunity not only to celebrate the 75th anniversary of the Alliance but primarily to discuss the urgent priorities facing the organisation today. The most critical tasks, which took up most of the time at the meeting, were support for Ukraine and strengthening NATO's own defence capabilities. These issues were discussed in two separate sessions – one involving only member states and another within the NATO-Ukraine Council. The importance which NATO attaches to its partnership with the Indo-Pacific Four was highlighted by a third session attended by the leaders of the AP4 (Australia was represented by its Deputy Prime Minister) and the heads of the European institutions.

The summit declaration was expansive on this region. First, the allies strongly criticised China, identifying it as the main enabler of Russia in its war against Ukraine, pointing out the transfer of components and raw materials used by the aggressor's defence industry. NATO warned Beijing that supporting the war in Europe would damage China's interests and reputation. Other aggressive Chinese actions were also highlighted, including cyber and disinformation activities, as well as the intensive expansion of its nuclear arsenal. The allies called on Beijing to engage in strategic talks on transparency and confidence-building.<sup>40</sup>

Second, North Korea's policy of violating non-proliferation regimes and aiding Russia through ammunition and ballistic missile supplies was severely criticised.<sup>41</sup>

Relations with the AP4 were discussed in a separate paragraph, reiterating the narrative from previous documents on the importance of the Indo-Pacific for European security. The text mentions strengthening dialogue and cooperation with partners in the region, including through “flagship projects concerning support for Ukraine, cyber defence, combating disinformation, and technology”.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>40</sup> [Washington Summit Declaration](#), par. 26–27, NATO, 10 July 2024, nato.int.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, par. 25.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, par. 30.

Contrary to earlier expectations, no joint communiqué was agreed for the NATO-AP4 meeting. Differences of opinion among the allies were to blame for this, particularly the existing reluctance of some countries to further strengthen NATO's partnership with the Indo-Pacific nations.<sup>43</sup> The Biden administration was so focused on ensuring the event proceeded harmoniously that it was not prepared to invest its political capital in this matter.

The summit did not thus produce impulses to develop new formulas and new content for the partnership. However, this does not mean that these will not emerge in the coming months, possibly next year. The outgoing Secretary General is said to have discussed this with Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida for example.<sup>44</sup>

## 2. New ideas

Despite the fact that the summit will not be remembered for a breakthrough in NATO-AP4 relations, the logic of cooperation remains strong. The areas of flagship projects mentioned in the declaration should be filled with content. There are also various ideas in this regard.

For example, it can be assumed that a joint project to support Kyiv will emerge, especially as the Alliance as an organisation decided in Washington to take responsibility for coordinating military aid for Ukraine. In this context, a cooperation project between NATO and the AP4 (e.g. in terms of ammunition or some category of military equipment deliveries or their financing) would have relatively strong foundations, considering the significant involvement of the AP4 in Ukrainian matters today (more on this in subsection V.6). For example, Japan has declared a \$60 million contribution to the Trust Fund under the NATO-Ukraine Council. South Korea has promised a similar amount, and Australia has agreed to delegate one of its AWACS aircraft to monitor the airspace of the eastern flank, etc.

A field that seems to interest all parties is cooperation in cyber defence and critical infrastructure protection. Joint expert simulations in this area or special projects offering opportunities to exchange best practices and possibly

<sup>43</sup> There are also plenty of expert opinions suggesting that NATO should stay away from Asia. See M. Droin, K.A. Grieco, H. Jacob, 'Why NATO Should Stay Out of Asia', Foreign Affairs, 8 July 2024, [foreignaffairs.com](https://www.foreignaffairs.com).

<sup>44</sup> This was reported by a Japanese press agency – see 'NATO chief says expansion of joint drills eyed with Japan', Kyodo News, 13 July 2024, [english.kyodonews.net](https://english.kyodonews.net).

technological cooperation could be an interesting idea for cooperation.<sup>45</sup> There is also great potential in the broad area of resilience – the AP4 countries have more experience, for example, in diversifying supply chains for raw materials and critical components, which is knowledge that they could share with the allies (this could potentially be a joint project with the European Union).

Another important topic for cooperation could be more intensive and wide-ranging exchanges of classified information, including in the operational dimension. Through participation in NATO-led exercises and operations, most AP4 countries already have some understanding of NATO's functioning in its area of responsibility. But there is an appetite for much more. One of the obstacles to agreeing on a more ambitious programme is the lack of necessary agreements on the security of information exchange. Without these, it is hard to imagine war games or sharing potentially valuable information and analyses regarding China's policies and actions (another issue of interest to all parties).

It might be worth considering a solution similar to the NATO Strategic Direction-South Hub,<sup>46</sup> based at the Naples command, which focuses on analysing situations in Africa and the Middle East. An analogous structure (a logical location would be the Joint Forces Command in Norfolk), where experts from NATO and the AP4 work together, could serve for (formal and informal) information and expertise exchange with the AP4 and (possibly in the future) with other Indo-Pacific partners.

An attractive topic for potential cooperation projects is also the fight against disinformation, especially since Beijing has followed Moscow's lead, copying its most aggressive forms and using malign influence operations. NATO itself has significant problems countering Chinese propaganda, particularly on the global stage – there is a lack of experts with the necessary language skills and knowledge about China. It is also difficult to overcome Chinese internet censorship and help from the AP4 would be invaluable in this field. More intensive public diplomacy in the region would also be useful, but here the limitations arise from the doctrinal reservations described above. This was shown by last year's debate on the opening of a modest NATO Information Office in Tokyo, when a French veto blocked the initiative and is yet to be overcome.

<sup>45</sup> The potential for cooperation in modern technologies is more than significant. See D. Fiott, 'Military-technological cooperation across the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific', War on the Rocks, 19 January 2024, warontherocks.com.

<sup>46</sup> NATO Strategic Direction-South Hub (NSD-S HUB), thesouthernhub.org.

## V. POLAND'S SECURITY AND THE INDO-PACIFIC REGION

So far, Poland's approach has been characterized by considerable caution, leading to relatively passive participation in discussions on Indo-Pacific topics within NATO. The main elements of Poland's position have been a strong focus on AP4 support for Ukraine and, on the other hand, concerns about NATO (and especially the US) paying decreasing attention to collective defence in Europe and the security of the eastern flank.<sup>47</sup>

### 1. The Indo-Pacific as a region of global importance

The Indo-Pacific already generates over 50% of the world's GDP and is home to more than half of the global population. The region includes China, an increasingly powerful nation, and hosts key maritime trade routes and nine of the world's largest ports. It produces the most essential products for the entire globe, such as semiconductors, ships, solar panels, and electric vehicles. Much suggests that it is likely to become the wealthiest and most developed area in the world within our generation.

The Indo-Pacific is also an area of intense military build-up, where the probability of a large-scale international conflict is significant (e.g. Taiwan, North Korea<sup>48</sup>) – and some conflicts are already resulting in casualties.<sup>49</sup> The region is characterised by a high level of natural threats, as it is home to 75% of the world's volcanoes and 90% of earthquakes occur in the Pacific basin.<sup>50</sup>

With China gaining allies across different continents and proposing various diplomatic initiatives to increase its role in shaping the international order (between 2021 and 2023, Beijing annually proposed new Global Initiatives: for Development, Security, and Civilisation), it is impossible to ignore the emergence of defeatist views on the Western side. For some experts, China's political clout appears so overwhelming that they are ready to concede that the transatlantic community is already in a losing position. Consequently, they propose

<sup>47</sup> As rightly noted by A. Bachulska, it is necessary to do away with “wishful thinking” towards the region, especially towards China. See *eadem*, ‘Wychodząc poza business as usual: polska strategia wobec Chin’ [in:] *Powrót do Europy. Rekomendacje dla polskiej polityki w UE*, Fundacja im. Stefana Batorego, Warszawa 2024, pp. 81-87, [batory.org.pl](http://batory.org.pl).

<sup>48</sup> See ‘North Korea Crisis’, Center for Preventive Action, 9 February 2024, [cfr.org](http://cfr.org).

<sup>49</sup> A. Brar, ‘Two Dead, Four Injured in South China Sea Boat Collision’, *Newsweek*, 1 February 2024, [newsweek.com](http://newsweek.com).

<sup>50</sup> For interesting statistics and in-depth analysis of the Indo-Pacific region, see the special publication of NATO's Allied Command Transformation: *Regional Perspectives Report on the Indo-Pacific, Allied Command Transformation*, May 2022, [nato.int](http://nato.int).

somewhat absurd ideas, such as the European Union joining the BRICS format to avoid being sidelined in a world supposedly dominated by China.<sup>51</sup>

Therefore, it is crucial – in the context of relations between all the allies (including Poland) and the AP4 countries – to recognise that, although China represents the greatest challenge to the regional order and the entire global system, and its position in the Indo-Pacific is prominent, it is not yet a hegemon even in this region. Other countries, including the AP4, have a say on whether China will achieve this dominance.<sup>52</sup> This argument alone is convincing when considering the benefits of closer cooperation with these partners, especially if we add the policies of other regional countries, such as India, the Philippines, Indonesia and Vietnam. Passively accepting the future Pax Sinica as inevitable is neither an analytical assumption nor a political recommendation worth considering.

The political dynamics in the Indo-Pacific, a region of global importance, are thus dictated by China's attempt to achieve regional dominance, countered by a US-led coalition of selected regional countries, with the AP4 group at its core. The strategic stakes of this conflict for Poland are high. It affects not only the stability of the global and European economies but also potentially the future position of Poland's most important security ally – the USA. Furthermore, it engages China – currently the closest political partner of Russia.

## **2. The Indo-Pacific as a priority for the US**

The priority assigned to the Indo-Pacific by the United States is confirmed in the 2022 US strategy for this region. The assessment included there is unambiguous: “no region will be of more consequence to the world and to everyday Americans than the Indo-Pacific”.<sup>53</sup> The region holds immense importance for the American economy, accounting for trade worth \$1.75 trillion and hosting nearly \$1 trillion in US foreign investments.

Even in times of political polarisation in the US, the current strategy of the Biden administration from 2022 is largely a continuation of the policies of

<sup>51</sup> T. Dams, J. Veldkamp, 'How China is pursuing a new world order among the geopolitical ruins', Clingendael, 27 February 2024, [clingendael.org](https://www.clingendael.org).

<sup>52</sup> A significant evolution in India's approach to assessing the state of security in the region is noteworthy. See C.R. Mohan, G. Mohan, T. Madan, 'The role of the US, Europe, and Indo-Pacific partners in India's China strategy', Brookings, 27 December 2023, [brookings.edu](https://www.brookings.edu).

<sup>53</sup> *Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States*, The White House, February 2022, [whitehouse.gov](https://www.whitehouse.gov), p. 18.

previous US administrations.<sup>54</sup> Since at least the George W. Bush administration, the United States has treated China and the entire region as a priority. The 2022 US National Security Strategy defines China as “the only competitor with both the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to do it”.<sup>55</sup> For instance, in the past five years, China has launched more large ships than the USA, Australia, Japan, and South Korea combined. This has a bearing on the National Defense Strategy, which identifies China as the “pacing challenge” for the Pentagon,<sup>56</sup> meaning a challenge the United States cannot ignore.

For Washington, security cooperation with region’s countries is based on a realistic assessment of shared threats, even though the initiatives it has undertaken to integrate alliance networks in the Indo-Pacific are seen by Beijing as an element of isolating and encircling China. This includes deepening bilateral alliances (with Japan, the Philippines, Australia) and multilateral security coordination forums like QUAD (the US, Japan, India, Australia). Additionally, AUKUS – the tech-military pact between the UK, Australia, and the US (potentially also Japan and Korea) – from Beijing’s perspective, engages an important European NATO member in the Indo-Pacific and serves as a dangerous link between two theatres of operations.

The US command responsible for the Indo-Pacific operationally covers over 50% of the globe’s territory. In the Indo-Pacific, the US has defence treaties with five countries (three AP4 countries – Australia, Japan, South Korea, plus the Philippines and Thailand), permanently stations hundreds of thousands of US troops there, and has so many military agreements and operational exercise programs with various countries that listing them would exceed the scope of this study. The scale and ambition level of some exercises (especially naval ones) significantly surpass those organized in the European region.<sup>57</sup> Generally, Washington views as its strategic goal a need to ensure that the Indo-Pacific remains “free and open” for trade and navigation, for international norms, and for the sovereign security options of individual countries. Achieving this

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> *National Security Strategy*, The White House, October 2022, p. 23, [whitehouse.gov](https://www.whitehouse.gov).

<sup>56</sup> Annual Report to Congress: *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China*, U.S. Department of Defense, 2023, [defense.gov](https://www.defense.gov).

<sup>57</sup> ‘Two U.S. Navy carriers join Japan destroyer on Multi-Large Deck Event in Philippine Sea’, Commander, U.S. 7th Fleet, 31 January 2024, [c7f.navy.mil](https://www.c7f.navy.mil).

requires the functioning of an “integrated deterrence” system, where effective alliances and partnership ties are crucial.<sup>58</sup>

This is reflected in budget expenditures. For the 2024 defence spending year, the administration allocated nearly \$15 billion for the Pacific Deterrence Initiative (i.e., defence investments in this region); by comparison, the European Deterrence Initiative was valued at less than \$4 billion.<sup>59</sup>

### **3. China’s strategy in the Indo-Pacific and European security**

The nature, timeframe, and outcomes of the Sino-American confrontation in the Indo-Pacific have fundamental implications for the future of the global order, with both direct and indirect consequences for security in Europe. The primary parameters of this conflict are the political ambitions and military potential of China, and the containment system established by the USA in conjunction with its alliance network in the Indo-Pacific. This dynamic determines specific flashpoints and potential escalation paths, which carry real implications for Europe, including creating opportunities for Russian aggression on the continent, stretching US resources between two theatres, and potentially disrupting trade with Asia, thus undermining Europe’s economic capacity for rearmament and sustaining potential wartime efforts. These effects will most significantly impact the countries most vulnerable to Russian aggression, namely the eastern flank of NATO, including Poland.

The critical period is projected to be 2027–2035, during which China is expected to possess its peak military capabilities necessary for a potential invasion of Taiwan, which would likely escalate into a broader regional conflict. NATO must also prepare for the negative security impact of Chinese “grey zone” activities, such as a blockade of Taiwan, tensions in the South China Sea and East China Sea, and an escalation on the Korean Peninsula, which may partly be beyond Beijing’s control.

<sup>58</sup> The importance of deterrence policy is illustrated by the fact that it is also implemented through high-level strategic signalling declarations. See [Quad Leaders’ Joint Statement](#) (statement by the heads of state of the Quad format – USA, Australia, India, Japan), The White House, 20 May 2023; [The Spirit of Camp David: Joint Statement of Japan, the Republic of Korea, and the United States](#), The White House, 18 August 2023, [whitehouse.gov](#).

<sup>59</sup> ‘Kongres przyjął coroczny plan wydatków obronnych. Indo-Pacyfik ważniejszy niż Europa’, Portal Obronny, 15 December 2023, [portalobronny.se.pl](#).



Beijing's foreign policy is driven by two primary factors: the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) regime survival and the concept of China's national interest, defined by a unique blend of nationalism and Marxism typical of liberation movements. The CCP portrays itself as the sole guarantor of maintaining China's political, economic and cultural independence in the face of perceived continuous pressure in all these areas from the West, primarily the US and its Asian allies.

For the CCP elite, achieving these goals first requires establishing a regional security sphere in East Asia necessary to neutralise the aforementioned threats. For Beijing, this means breaking up the US alliance system and economically binding the countries of the region to China. Taiwan, seen by Beijing as part of China, plays a crucial role here, with reunification being integral to achieving regional dominance and a key element of internal legitimacy. Concurrently, Beijing aims to establish a new system of political-economic dependencies in the region, with China as the centre and primary beneficiary. Achieving these goals would allow Beijing to expand its security ambitions globally. This is seen in the increased pressure on its neighbours in Asia and closer ties with Russia as China's most important partner in jointly challenging US hegemony.

It is expected that China will maintain and gradually intensify its "grey zone" activities against Taiwan, as well as in the East China Sea and South China Sea, without crossing the threshold into open armed conflict until the Chinese armed forces achieve sufficient operational capabilities by the late 2020s. However, increased tensions may necessitate reallocating some allied capabilities to the Indo-Pacific region, limiting deterrence capabilities in Europe, and potentially destabilising the regional and global economy.

The People's Liberation Army (PLA) has been undergoing intensive modernisation since the 1990s, enabled by China's rapid economic and technological development. PLA reforms accelerated significantly after Xi Jinping came to power and gained full control over the army through an anti-corruption campaign in the military (2013–2015). According to consistent assessments by the Taiwanese military and the Pentagon, after 2027 the PLA should have the real capabilities to conduct an amphibious operation in the Taiwan Strait and the resources to achieve air superiority in the region. Simultaneously, 2027 will likely mark the beginning of Xi Jinping's fourth term (he will be 74 years old then), which may increase his personal motivation for historical resolutions within the next five years.



## Flashpoints in the Indo-Pacific

**Taiwan** is a critical potential flashpoint in the region, which in the coming years may face both an armed invasion and grey zone activities such as blockades or internal coup attempts. Its strategic location, unique economic and technological role, and informal alliance with the USA mean Washington will be involved in any conflict over Taiwan, regardless of its nature.

**The Philippines** hold a significant position in the region due to its geographic location south of Taiwan and in the South China Sea basin, as well as its status as the oldest US treaty ally in Southeast Asia. Simultaneously, Manila is a victim of Beijing's extensive claims to the South China Sea, and any Sino-Philippine conflict would be likely to trigger a US intervention.

**The Korean Peninsula** remains a source of permanent tension due to the ongoing division of Korea, involving two defence alliances – Beijing and Pyongyang on one side, and Washington and Seoul on the other. The development of North Korea's nuclear program destabilises the relative balance of power on the peninsula.

**Japan**, allied with the USA, has a territorial dispute with China over the Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea, is an economic rival of Beijing, is involved in an unresolved territorial dispute with Russia over the Kuril Islands, and is a target of propaganda attacks and potentially nuclear strikes from North Korea due to the presence of US bases in Japan. Tokyo has justified concerns about facing a strengthening alliance of Beijing, Moscow, and Pyongyang.

**Australia** is viewed by Beijing as part of the US strategic depth in the Pacific. Its mineral resources, including rare earth elements, make Canberra an important ally in the event of a protracted conflict. Australia is also bound by a series of agreements with Pacific island nations, whose strategic locations make them objects of the Sino-American rivalry.

**Vietnam**, seeking to regain territories lost to China in 1974, 1979 and 1988, represents a potential danger if Chinese military efforts fail. However, Beijing likely believes that Hanoi will remain neutral in the initial stages of a regional conflict and, if the tide turns in China's favor, will continue to stay neutral.

The rearmament and modernisation programs adopted by some states of the region, led by Japan and Australia, as well as increased defense spending in the US, will over time reduce the relative advantage that Beijing is expected to gain by the end of this decade. Furthermore, the slowing Chinese economy will limit its ability to sustain the current growth rate of defence spending. This stakes out the boundaries of Beijing's window of opportunity, which will open after 2027 and are likely to close within the following decade.

The CCP's decision to undertake openly aggressive actions in the future will depend on various factors and calculations. The domestic situation will be decisive: the more challenging it becomes, the greater the temptation to solve domestic problems through armed conflict. Moreover, if Beijing perceives the international situation to be favorable, especially a leadership crisis or internal destabilisation in the US, it may be pushed to act. The most difficult factor to estimate is when the CCP elite will assess that their military potential – if the PLA ever achieves it – is beginning to wane and they thus cannot delay the decision to go to war any longer. This alone does not, however, determine that such a decision will be made.

#### **4. The Sino-Russian alliance and the prospect of dual escalation**

The possibility of any negative scenarios in the Indo-Pacific coming into play is highly likely to be exploited by Russia – opportunistically or in coordination with Beijing – to escalate tensions in Europe, increase nuclear blackmail, hybrid activities or even launch a direct military attack on NATO members. In the scenario of an open conflict between China and the USA, this may also include China providing direct military assistance for Russian aggression in Europe.

Russia and China share a deep bond based on two foundations: strategic and ideological. Both sides are in structural conflict with the United States and aim to dismantle regional security systems based on the American network of alliances; for Russia this is in Europe (NATO) and, for China, it is in the Indo-Pacific. Additionally, the elites in Beijing and Moscow share an ideological hostility towards democracy, perceived as an American effort to overthrow authoritarian regimes through so-called colour revolutions. The relationship between the two capitals is, however, underscored by mutual distrust and tensions resulting from the shift in the balance of power in favour of China, as well as disappointment with Russia's lack of effectiveness on the international stage.

Beijing views the ongoing war in Europe as a way to divert US resources away from the Indo-Pacific, it shares the Russian perspective on the causes of the war (“NATO expansion”), supports Moscow economically, and will strive to prop up Putin’s regime. However, it seeks not to cross the “red lines” set by the US and the EU regarding military support for Russia – it aims to keep its own conflict with the West in check until the potential resolutions post-2027. Beijing limits itself to providing the raw materials and critical components (e.g. processors) necessary for the Russian war effort, buys Russian raw materials, provides its own sanction-bypassing system (e.g. the Chinese financial institutions, supporting de-dollarisation), and backs Moscow’s contacts with the Global South. Beijing also openly supports Putin domestically as the guarantor of Russia’s stability, recognised as an irreplaceable partner in the confrontation with the US.

The Russian elite accepts that, in the name of revising the post-Soviet order, it must acknowledge China’s primacy, but it is not abandoning attempts to maintain maximum autonomy within the Sinocentric international system. Despite emerging tensions and disappointments, the Kremlin has no alternative but to extend cooperation with China. China is crucial for overcoming Russia’s partial political isolation on the international stage and surviving the economic pressure caused by Western sanctions. China alone has the economic resources, political influence, and military capabilities to challenge the US and Western countries, which Moscow views as an existential threat. The Kremlin believes that the intensification of the conflict between China and the US (and some other Western countries) will raise Russia’s attractiveness in Beijing’s eyes, given its significant military capabilities (including in the nuclear sphere) and natural resources, which partly offset the asymmetry in bilateral relations in favour of China.

Beijing will support the revision of the European security system, aiming to weaken the US and NATO (which is perceived as a US tool in mobilising Europe to contain China), dismantle transatlantic relations, and create a favourable precedent for challenging the American security system in the Indo-Pacific. Despite growing economic and diplomatic dependence, China approaches attempts to dictate its policy to Moscow with caution. Beijing seeks to play the role of arbiter in Russia’s actions in the post-Soviet space and its contacts with the Global South, strives to limit aggressive moves by Russia towards Central Asia, and currently opposes the use of nuclear weapons.

The strategic Sino-Russian bond has direct negative implications for Europe’s security – both now and in the scenario of a broader conflict, such as over

Taiwan. With bilateral trade reaching \$200 billion in 2023, China is becoming Russia's most important trading partner, crucial for rebuilding and expanding Russian capabilities. There could be a drastic change in the status quo regarding China's approach to European security if there is a conflict in the Pacific, such as over Taiwan. In such a scenario, Beijing, aiming to stretch American resources between the European and Indo-Pacific theatres, might resort to openly providing military support to Russia. Similarly, Moscow is likely to exploit conflicts of varying intensity in the Indo-Pacific to escalate its aggressive actions on the European stage. In the most pessimistic scenario – where the US is focused on the Pacific and potentially cut off from supplies from Asia – this could significantly increase the risk of hybrid or direct Russian aggression, carried out in coordination with China or opportunistically, against a member of NATO's northeastern flank.

## 5. The logic of connections between Europe and the Indo-Pacific

When experts compare the two theatres – the European and the Indo-Pacific – they must take into account that, despite the impressive size of the US defence budget (now nearing a trillion dollars, surpassing the combined budgets of both the US's allies and rivals), the real operational capabilities of the United States are not as dominant as they were during the Cold War or even towards the end of the last decade. For decades, there was an assumption that Washington would be able to simultaneously conduct two wars (one global against a major strategic rival and a smaller one in a specific region). These assumptions are no longer valid in the hypothetical scenario of a simultaneous conflict involving both China and Russia.

The European allies must heed the increasingly strong voices from the US (and this is not just Trump's rhetoric, which often sounds as if he were questioning the credibility of Washington's commitments), urging the European NATO states to make a greater defensive effort. Defence spending of at least 2% of GDP is the minimum expectation. In practice, Europe must help the US balance the potential gap within NATO in operational capabilities that would arise if the US had to engage in a conflict in the Indo-Pacific.<sup>60</sup> Therefore, even the most pro-European American experts suggest a new level of ambition for the European allies within NATO's defence planning.<sup>61</sup>

<sup>60</sup> A.A. Michta, 'Without European rearmament, NATO is setting itself up for failure', Politico, 22 April 2024, politico.eu.

<sup>61</sup> H. Binnendijk, D.S. Hamilton, A. Vershbow, 'How Europe can build its defense while maintaining US support', DefenceNews, 28.02.2024, defensenews.com.

Its foundation could consist of two elements. The first is to provide at least 50% of NATO's collective defence forces and capabilities in Europe (currently, the US must compensate for European weaknesses, ensuring not only so-called strategic capabilities like aerial refuelling, strategic transport, and reconnaissance but also most of the personnel themselves). In practice, this should mean more substantial assignment of specific resources and instruments in deficit military capabilities, especially in categories such as reconnaissance aircraft and tankers, air defence systems, and anti-submarine warfare systems. For example, it would be worth considering the establishment of a NATO/European equivalent of the US Civil Reserve Air Fleet (CRAF)<sup>62</sup> to free up CRAF capabilities for support in the Asian theatre. The second element is about developing their capabilities to handle smaller challenges in Europe's immediate neighbourhood – for instance, in North Africa or the Middle East. In the event of a conflict in the Indo-Pacific, the US will need fewer ground forces and associated arms and military equipment. However, air forces will undoubtedly be crucial, not to mention naval forces – hence the consequences for NATO's defence plans in Europe.

## **6. Support from the AP4 for European security**

The political support of the AP4 countries for Ukraine, including joining sanctions against Russia, is a significant diplomatic reinforcement of Poland's policy – as well as the AP4 countries making a clear investment in relations with Europe. These nations have long been closely monitoring and calling out China's actions, as effectively supporting Russia's military operations and disinformation efforts. The AP4's message, for example, at the UN forum, is a valuable counterbalance to Beijing's propaganda efforts to misrepresent NATO and the European Union's stance on the war in Ukraine.

It is highly significant that NATO's Indo-Pacific partners are already demonstrating how substantial the aid they can provide to partners in Europe is through tangible support for Ukraine and the eastern flank. All AP4 countries participate in the Ukraine Defence Contact Group, the so-called Ramstein group, which coordinates military assistance to Kyiv, and are the only entities

<sup>62</sup> The Pentagon maintains agreements with US civilian airlines, which are ready to provide their aircraft for transporting the personnel/equipment of the US Armed Forces in crisis situations. See: 'Civil Reserve Air Fleet', Air Mobility Command, January 2024, [amc.af.mil](https://www.af.mil/About-Us/Our-Partners/). European allies applied similar solutions until the early 1990s, but existing agreements were terminated. Currently, NATO has several projects that supplement national transport capabilities, but their scale remains limited. See: 'Strategic airlift', NATO, [nato.int](https://www.nato.int).

from the region represented in this structure, apart from Cambodia, Pakistan, and Taiwan.

Most of the arms and military equipment deliveries and ammunition provided to Ukraine by AP4 countries are not public (apart from Australia's contribution, since it has declared the provision of significant amounts of equipment, such as infantry fighting vehicles and artillery systems, etc.).<sup>63</sup> However, it seems that this is significant aid, which Ukraine has already shown its appreciation for.

New Zealand has not only sent military equipment to Ukraine but also provided its C-130 transport aircraft (along with personnel) to transport aid from other partners to Ukraine, while Australia joined in patrolling the airspace on NATO's eastern flank (E-7A Wedgetail).<sup>64</sup> New Zealand contributed to NATO's fund for Ukraine and has been actively involved in the programme to train Ukrainian soldiers on British territory.<sup>65</sup>

Japan<sup>66</sup> and South Korea<sup>67</sup> have pledged substantial funds to NATO's Trust Fund for Ukraine. Japan has significantly supported Kyiv diplomatically by inviting President Volodymyr Zelensky to the G7 summit in 2023. It also broke a taboo in its security policy by providing Ukraine with military vehicles, vests, and drones shortly after Russia's invasion in February 2022. It also supplied its missiles to the American Patriot systems to replenish American stockpiles used for Kyiv. Overall, Tokyo has declared over 12 billion dollars in financial aid for Ukraine in the last two years.<sup>68</sup> In addition to filling equipment gaps in Poland, there are indications that South Korea has also provided a significant amount of ammunition to Ukraine via the Czech Republic<sup>69</sup> – perhaps further motivated by reports of large deliveries of missiles and ammunition to Russia from North Korea.

The current forms of engagement by the AP4 countries in strengthening European security indicate that Europe's relations with its partners in the

<sup>63</sup> See: 'Deliveries of major categories of military equipment to Ukraine', OSW, [osw.waw.pl](https://osw.waw.pl).

<sup>64</sup> 'Russian invasion of Ukraine', New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, [mfat.govt.nz](https://mfat.govt.nz).

<sup>65</sup> D. Capie, 'New Zealand Draws Closer to NATO with a Wary Eye', United States Institute of Peace, 6 July 2023, [usip.org](https://www.usip.org).

<sup>66</sup> P. Polityuk, 'Japan minister, in Kyiv bomb shelter, pledges funds to fight drones', Reuters, 7 January 2024, [reuters.com](https://www.reuters.com).

<sup>67</sup> 'South Korea's Yoon promises \$150m aid after Zelenskyy talks', Al Jazeera, 15 July 2023, [aljazeera.com](https://www.aljazeera.com).

<sup>68</sup> Y. Nakano, 'Japan's Leadership Role on Ukraine', Center for Strategic & International Studies, 22 February 2024, [csis.org](https://www.csis.org).

<sup>69</sup> L. O'Carroll, D. Sabbagh, 'Czech Republic to deliver thousands of extra artillery shells to Ukraine', The Guardian, 19 March 2024, [theguardian.com](https://www.theguardian.com).

Indo-Pacific are not a zero-sum game, based solely on competing for American resources. Naturally, given the formidable threat posed by China and their limited potential, their military engagement in Europe will never be significant – as is the case with Europe’s engagement in the Indo-Pacific. A commitment to international law and values, a similar perception of threats from Russia and China, close cooperation with the US, and substantial financial, industrial, and technological resources make Indo-Pacific countries powerful diplomatic allies, who have demonstrated their intentions following Russia’s aggression against Ukraine in 2022.

## 7. The European Union and the Indo-Pacific

Around the same time that NATO was maturing in its conviction about the need to develop a special partnership with selected Indo-Pacific countries the European Union decided to institutionalise its relations towards Asia and the Pacific. In 2020, the EU became a strategic partner of the broadest cooperation platform in the region – ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations), and in 2021, it agreed on the Indo-Pacific Strategy.<sup>70</sup>

The motivations were obviously similar to those guiding NATO’s approach – the desire to cultivate relations with a key region, concern for a law-based international order, and creating favourable conditions for trade and investment exchange. Due to the EU’s broad mandate, this strategy has various dimensions (integrating prosperity, promoting green technologies, communication, social aspects, etc.), while security and defence issues constitute only one segment. Declaratively, however, this is not a marginal dimension, and the list of potential actions in this field is impressive.<sup>71</sup> For example, the EU is currently negotiating a security and defence partnership agreement with Japan.

One of the policy objectives in the strategy is to promote a stable security architecture in the region, including the security of maritime communication routes. Among other things, this is why the EU has declared its readiness to

<sup>70</sup> [EU-Indo Pacific Strategy](#), European Union External Action, 30 January 2024, [eas.europa.eu](https://eas.europa.eu); ‘Questions and Answers: EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific’, European Commission, 16 September 2021, [ec.europa.eu](https://ec.europa.eu).

<sup>71</sup> The importance of the region for the EU is illustrated by the appointment of a special EU envoy to the region (currently Richard Tibbels). Additionally, since 2022, the EU has organised special ministerial meetings with the countries of the region. In 2024, this was the responsibility of the Belgian presidency. The lack of many participants (from the region and the EU) at the level of foreign ministers (as well as not inviting the US Secretary of State to the last meeting) was heavily criticised, but it does not mean that the formula itself is insignificant and will not be continued.

organise training to improve the military capabilities of interested countries in the region, for an increased presence of EU ships in the form of joint exercises and port visits in the Indo-Pacific, as well as assistance in enhancing the capabilities of regional states to defend cyberspace, and for dialogue on counter-terrorism. The strategy text explicitly claims that it is in no way directed against China, with which the EU intends to continue constructive relations. One of the assets of the EU strategy is its holistic approach, integrating traditional cooperation instruments (e.g., trade or environmental protection) with a developing toolkit in the broad field of security.

The EU has also shown that it is already thinking geostrategically, leveraging economic incentives for security policy needs. A good example of this is the EU initiatives related to the European Economic Security Strategy (including monitoring Chinese investments in Europe for security threats and reducing resource dependencies), as well as assistance to countries like the Philippines in accessing satellite data (useful for both climate issues and monitoring Beijing's aggressive actions at sea). Supporting initiatives to ensure the freedom of navigation in the contested waters of the South China Sea is also one of the EU's priorities in the region.

Regardless of the French president's statements, it seems politically impossible to imagine a scenario where the US would be forced to engage significantly in a military conflict in the Indo-Pacific while Europeans maintained full neutrality. This does not, of course, mean (and Washington does not demand) any significant relocation of European military forces and resources to the region. These are, after all, seriously limited.<sup>72</sup>

Apart from peacetime military aid (training, etc.) for the countries of the region, the most valuable contribution that the EU could make in the event of a conflict in the Indo-Pacific involving the US would be its economic strength.<sup>73</sup> The prospect of decisive sanctions that the EU could impose on Beijing is a significant deterrent without the use of military instruments. However, its credibility is entirely dependent on the political unity of the member states, and the EU is currently far from achieving this.

<sup>72</sup> Convincing arguments are presented by T. Sweijs i P. van Hooft. See *idem*, 'Two-Theatre Tragedy: a Reluctant Europe Cannot Easily Escape a Sino-American War over Taiwan', War on the Rocks, 10 April 2024, warontherocks.com.

<sup>73</sup> T. Dams, 'Taiwan and a European doctrine of deterrence', Clingendael, 21 March 2024, clingendael.org.



The implementation of the EU's strategy for the Indo-Pacific is burdened by at least three problems. Firstly, for many member states, the economic benefits of cooperating with China still outweigh security interests (especially in the field of supply diversification).<sup>74</sup> Therefore, there are difficulties in reducing dependence on Beijing's influence – for example, in terms of ownership stakes in various elements of strategic infrastructure (ports, key industries and even Chinese applications installed in many products). Dependence on Chinese products or components poses an increasing threat to the security of defence production in NATO countries – the prime example is the problem of China's dominant position in the production of gunpowder (nitrocellulose).<sup>75</sup>

Secondly, many European governments still perceive Washington's pressure to limit the aforementioned dependencies on China as a form of US dominance rather than an element of transatlantic solidarity. Thirdly, a consequence of this problem is the low priority of EU cooperation with NATO on Indo-Pacific issues, imposed by France and some other member states.<sup>76</sup> This leads to a discrepancy between declared ambitions and reality, creating problems for the implementation of the strategy. Perhaps that is why the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, recently stated that the Indo-Pacific is not currently a priority for the EU, as its priorities are Ukraine and the Middle East, and the EU's military capabilities in the region are limited by the lack of significant naval forces among the member states.<sup>77</sup>

There is an impression that due to distrust of US intentions in the region or for political reasons (the idea of the EU's strategic autonomy), some EU countries are promoting unrealistic European ambitions at the expense of agreeing to a more significant NATO mandate in the region. There is no justified basis for such an approach, as NATO as an organisation (including American views) does not envisage any operational plans or political doctrine to justify its military presence in the Indo-Pacific.

Significant modifications to the EU's strategy towards the region should not be expected in the coming months, certainly not until there have been personnel

<sup>74</sup> L. Gibadło, P. Uznańska, 'De-risking can wait. Scholz's visit to China', OSW, 17 April 2024, [osw.waw.pl](https://osw.waw.pl).

<sup>75</sup> L. Kayali, 'China is a threat to Europe's gunpowder supply, defense boss warns', Politico, 18 April 2024, [politico.eu](https://www.politico.eu).

<sup>76</sup> Such views are well illustrated by the article of the French expert M. Droin, 'NATO's Future in the Indo-Pacific: Tilt or Jilt?', 9DashLine, 8 September 2023, [9dashline.com](https://9dashline.com).

<sup>77</sup> S. Lau, K. Verhelst, 'EU's courtship of Indo-Pacific gets cold shoulder from big powers', Politico, 2 February 2024, [politico.eu](https://www.politico.eu).

changes in the main EU institutions. Given the continuation of China's confrontational actions and the expected increase in regional tensions, expectations for a more active policy towards the region will likely rise in 2025, coinciding with Poland's presidency of the EU Council.

This will mean a considerable challenge for Poland in coordinating the EU's activities in the Indo-Pacific, and a clearer definition of Polish priorities and a deeper conviction of the importance of relations with the region must be the basis for success. The very fact of the EU presidency may partially force Warsaw to engage more in the implementation of difficult decisions, including making significant choices between immediate economic benefits and security policy interests. This primarily concerns economic relations with China, which may be severed in the event of a conflict in the Indo-Pacific or be used by Beijing for political purposes. The steps taken so far by Poland to counter the security threats posed by Chinese investments, its presence in critical infrastructure and, above all, the dependence on the import of key raw materials and components from China seem insufficient.<sup>78</sup> This also applies to the analysis of the potential involvement of Chinese components used in the production of sensitive goods, including in the defence industry.

## **8. Strategies of individual NATO countries towards the Indo-Pacific**

Apart from the United States,<sup>79</sup> in recent years several other NATO member states have decided to codify their policies towards the Indo-Pacific. These include France, Canada, Germany, the Netherlands and, on the eastern flank, the Czech Republic and Lithuania.

All the strategies share an appreciation for the growing importance of the region for economic relations, but also for the global order, including the threats arising from a potential conflict in the Indo-Pacific. They differ, however, in the scope and form of defining their own interests and capabilities. This explains why more references to NATO policy can be found in the documents of countries that modestly define their influence in the region.

The Canadian strategy, published in November 2022,<sup>80</sup> appears closest to Washington's position. Its strong component (or rather motivation) is the growing

<sup>78</sup> See Ł. Ambroziak et al., *Dekada bezpieczeństwa ekonomicznego. Od offshoringu do częściowego friendshoringu*, Polski Instytut Ekonomiczny, September 2022, [pie.net.pl](http://pie.net.pl).

<sup>79</sup> *Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States*, op. cit.

<sup>80</sup> *Canada's Indo-Pacific Strategy*, Government of Canada, November 2022, [international.gc.ca](http://international.gc.ca).

disappointment with China's policy, which has been challenging Canada's interests in the region and the security system as a whole for several years. Canada, with its 25,000 km of Pacific coastline, considers itself a regional country and declares its readiness to defend its interests. The 2022 document emphasises the importance of the effective coordination of actions within NATO.

France was one of the first European countries to attempt to publish a comprehensive strategy towards the Indo-Pacific (publication was preceded by a series of speeches by President Macron devoted to the region since 2018).<sup>81</sup> Like the USA and Canada, France presents itself as a country belonging to the Indo-Pacific. Security issues are a significant element of Paris's policy, primarily due to its overseas territories in the Indian and Pacific Oceans (inhabited by over 1.5 million French citizens). It is mainly due to the need to ensure the security of exclusive economic zones in the maritime area that France maintains a presence of about 8,000 soldiers in the region. The strategy text is filled with ambitious terms about France's geopolitical role as a *puissance d'équilibre* (balancing power – positioning itself as a state not involved in Sino-American rivalry) but does not shy away from a realistic assessment of the threat posed by China's aggressive policy. Nevertheless, critics have for some time accused Paris of a discrepancy between the strategy's high ambitions and the scant resources allocated for its implementation.<sup>82</sup>

In comparison, Germany's policy towards the region is much more cautious, and is reflected in the 2020 German strategy.<sup>83</sup> The primacy of trade interests and issues arising from climate change are dominant. Security issues are only briefly mentioned, although the 2023 implementation report<sup>84</sup> notes exercises with Australia. The point of reference for Germany's view of the region is evidently the European Union, with NATO's role practically absent. On the other hand, the practice of bilateral relations between Berlin and the AP4 countries (especially Japan, with which Germany holds regular intergovernmental consultations, including meetings with defence ministers)<sup>85</sup> seems to go beyond

<sup>81</sup> See *France's Indo-Pacific Strategy*, Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs, February 2022, [diplomatie.gouv.fr](https://diplomatie.gouv.fr).

<sup>82</sup> A. Bondaz, 'Reconceptualizing French foreign and security policy in the Indo-Pacific', *Fondation pour la recherche stratégique*, 24 July 2023, [frstrategie.org/en](https://frstrategie.org/en).

<sup>83</sup> *Policy guidelines for the Indo-Pacific. Germany – Europe – Asia. Shaping the 21st century together*, The Federal Government, August 2020, [auswaertiges-amt.de](https://auswaertiges-amt.de).

<sup>84</sup> 'Germany and the Indo-Pacific – three years of enhanced engagement in a key region in international politics', Federal Foreign Office, 22 September 2023, [auswaertiges-amt.de/en](https://auswaertiges-amt.de/en).

<sup>85</sup> This is confirmed by the text published on the German MOD's website. See 'Deutschland und Japan: Militärkooperation im Indo-Pazifik wird ausgebaut', Bundesministerium der Verteidigung, 19 March 2023, [bmvg.de](https://www.bmvg.de).

the narrow framework of the strategy itself.<sup>86</sup> This is a typical approach for some other European countries – displaying caution in publicly defining the military dimension, while increasing military cooperation in the region. The German example provides a good illustration of the dilemma resulting from the simultaneous desire to engage in the region (which increases alliance value for the US) and avoiding antagonising relations with China for economic reasons.

Similarly, the Dutch strategy presents a pro-European view of the region. A large amount of space is devoted to maritime transport security issues, undoubtedly conditioned by the country's trade interests.

The Czech strategy – due to a similar positioning, attachment to transatlantic ties and how both countries perceive the threats – is particularly interesting for Poland. The document adopted in October 2022<sup>87</sup> describes the Indo-Pacific as a region which is “closer than we think.” At the outset, the Czech strategy emphasises its alignment with the region's policy agreed in the European Union, NATO, and the OSCE, openly acknowledging their collective implementation as the most realistic option for the Czech Republic due to its limited resources. China – as seen in the EU strategy, and even somewhat more critically – is identified as a partner, but also an economic opponent and systemic rival. The document outlines three dimensions of Prague's interests – geopolitical, economic and that related to the world order. Security is only one of four policy priorities in the region – alongside partnership, prosperity, and sustainable development. The AP4 are directly defined as key partner states (as in NATO's policy), while the United States is seen as a key ally in addressing the challenges posed by China. The document emphasises that security policy cooperation with regional partners (mainly in the form of information and experience exchange) should focus on areas such as cyberspace protection and the response to threats in this domain, building resilience (including the security of key infrastructure elements), non-proliferation and arms control issues, energy and climate security, and counterterrorism. Interestingly, the Czech strategy mentions the potential for coordinating cooperation within the Visegrad Group but recognises bilateral relations as the priority form of activity.

<sup>86</sup> This is well illustrated by the fact that, in addition to conducting joint naval exercises, Germany and Japan recently signed an important agreement on military equipment exchange. See ‘[Japan and Germany sign military supply-sharing pact](#)’, The Japan Times, 29 January 2024, [japantimes.co.jp](#).

<sup>87</sup> [The Czech Republic's Strategy For Cooperation With The Indo-Pacific. Closer Than We Think](#), Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic, October 2022, [mzv.gov.cz](#).

Unlike other EU countries, the Czech Republic did not hesitate to openly present Taiwan as one of its partners in the region (Lithuanians also did this in a document adopted in 2023). The behaviour of Beijing itself bore significant influence on the Czech Republic articulating such a principled strategy towards China: public adulation of the openly pro-Chinese President Miloš Zeman (in power from 2013 to 2023) and numerous scandals caused by Chinese attempts at corruption.<sup>88</sup>

Lithuania announced its strategy in 2023, that is, after the start of Russian aggression against Ukraine.<sup>89</sup> One of the motivations was the desire to advertise itself to new economic partners in the Indo-Pacific region after imposing economic sanctions on Russia. Since Vilnius considers Russian neo-imperialism to be a direct threat to its sovereignty, the strategy text explicitly points out the negative impact on Lithuania's security of China's aid to Russia. There is no doubt that Lithuania has taken into account the main elements of US and Japanese policies in the Indo-Pacific, and these are directly mentioned in the document. A lot of space in the strategy is devoted to building international mechanisms to defend against economic pressure – clearly stemming from the shock caused by the Chinese economic retaliation against Vilnius after the opening of the Taiwan Representative Office in Vilnius in 2021<sup>90</sup> and the relatively weak support Lithuania received from the European Union in this situation. The document realistically describes Lithuania's modest capabilities to pursue an active policy towards the Indo-Pacific, but creatively focuses on elements such as scientific and academic cooperation, energy security, promotion of the port in Klaipėda, the role of the Lithuanian diaspora in Australia and New Zealand, and the joint fight against disinformation, and sharing experiences in social resilience in the face of external corruption (where Lithuania has something valuable to offer its partners).

<sup>88</sup> See K. Hille, J. Shotter, 'Czech University mired in Chinese influence scandal', Financial Times, 11 November 2019, ft.com.

<sup>89</sup> 'For a secure, resilient and prosperous future. Lithuania's Indo-Pacific strategy', Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Lithuania, July 2023, urm.lt.

<sup>90</sup> M. Reynolds, M.P. Goodman, 'China's Economic Coercion: Lessons from Lithuania', Center for Strategic & International Studies, 6 May 2022, csis.org.

## CONCLUSIONS

The dynamics and logic of NATO's (and in parallel the European Union's) relations with the Indo-Pacific countries described above, encourage a more active role for European countries in shaping these connections. This may particularly apply to Poland. It is a significant NATO member and a key actor on the eastern flank, for which the fundamental pillars of security policy are inextricably linked to ensuring NATO's real collective defence capabilities (and thus US engagement in Europe). Therefore, the potential benefits of developing partnerships with the AP4 countries should outweigh concerns about a shift in the Alliance's priorities. Especially since the failure to utilise these partnership opportunities (rather than develop them) could prove detrimental to Poland's interests.