**NATO pivots to Asia**

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NATO is embarking on a significant step to establish its presence in the Asia-Pacific region by planning to open a liaison office in Tokyo, marking its first office of this kind in Asia. The strategic move aims to facilitate regular consultations between NATO, Japan, and key regional partners like South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand, recognizing the emerging challenges posed by China in addition to NATO’s traditional focus on Russia. The proposal for the liaison office was subsequently shared among the alliance’s 31 member countries in mid-April, as revealed by an individual familiar with the proceedings. Both NATO and Japan also intend to sign an Individually Tailored Partnership Program (ITPP) ahead of the July 11 and 12 NATO summit in Vilnius, Lithuania. Japan, as well as South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand, is expected to attend the summit. The liaison office will facilitate increased cooperation between NATO and these four countries, dubbed the Asia-Pacific partners of NATO, or AP4. The meeting last year in Madrid was the first time the four nations had been invited to attend a NATO summit. As part of their collaboration, Japan and NATO will also work together to address “cyber threats, disruptive technologies, and disinformation activities.” In other words, the two will work on ensuring that the internet and social media are employed to spread imperialist propaganda while blocking workers and youth from accessing so-called “disinformation,” including socialist, anti-imperialist and anti-war viewpoints. The Danish ambassador to Japan, Peter Taksoe-Jensen, serves as the intermediary between Tokyo and NATO, and he emphasized that the establishment of the liaison office aimed to counter China’s growing economic influence and prevent it from emerging as a formidable competitor to Western powers. Taksoe-Jensen highlighted that during the NATO Madrid Summit in 2022, allied leaders concluded that Russia had transitioned from being a partner to a threat, and they also recognized that China’s ascent could significantly affect the security landscape across Europe and beyond. In response to this development, Beijing’s Foreign Ministry criticised the move of the new liaison office in Tokyo, saying, “NATO’s continual eastward expansion in the Asia-Pacific, interference in regional affairs, attempts to destroy regional peace and stability, and push for bloc confrontation calls for high vigilance from countries in the region.”

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Historically during the post-Cold-war era, NATO and China had a relatively limited but constructive relationship. While there were occasional crises, such as the 1999 bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade and NATO’s military intervention in Libya in 2011, which China viewed as exceeding the UN Security Council’s authorization, the focus was primarily on dialogue and coordination in non-combat military operations like anti-piracy efforts in the Gulf of Aden. The aim was to prevent hostility through mutual understanding. However, as tensions between China and the West escalated during the Trump presidency starting in 2017, the dialogue between China and NATO came to a halt. Despite NATO’s increasing focus on the Indo-Pacific region, China maintained a mostly indifferent attitude towards the alliance, as evident from the lack of Chinese analyses on NATO. However, since 2022, the nature of the relationship has significantly shifted. The focus now lies on the divergent issues and challenges with both prioritizing their respective security agendas rather than seeking mutual benefits through dialogue and coordination. The change in perspective can be attributed to various factors, but the significant one is the United States’ perception of China as a growing threat. The US has expressed its desire to pivot NATO’s focus towards the Asia-Pacific region, reflecting its concerns about China’s increasing influence and assertiveness.

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Beijing faces a challenge with the coordinated transatlantic response because it puts pressure on China from both the Indo-Pacific and Euro-Atlantic regions. The expansion of NATO’s activities beyond its original territory, including interventions, cyber warfare, and space operations, worries China. This expansion will make it harder for China to invest in Western economies and gain access to technology, which will affect its ability to compete with Western industries and control strategic assets. Moreover, NATO’s partnerships with key US allies in the Indo-Pacific increase the resistance against China’s military, economic, and industrial challenges. The notion of “shared values” put forth by NATO, its member nations, and Japan is primarily aimed at Russia and China. The United States, along with Tokyo and its allies, asserts that China poses a threat to the Indo-Pacific region, emphasizing the need to preserve its “free and open” nature. However, this narrative often serves as a means to criticize Beijing for not adhering to the post-World War II order that was established and dominated by the United States. While the U.S. carries out provocative operations near China, citing “freedom of navigation,” any response from Beijing is portrayed as evidence of Chinese “aggression.”

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In their pursuit of broader objectives, Washington, Tokyo, and NATO aim to go beyond the mere defence of “democratic values.” Their underlying motive is to redivide the Indo-Pacific region, designating China as their primary focus. However, this risky endeavour carries the potential of escalating into a global conflict, with the use of nuclear weapons hanging ominously overhead. NATO’s pivot to Asia is a significant indication of increased military and strategic involvement of the US-led West & has the potential to intensify existing rivalries and competition, thereby amplifying tensions and creating a volatile environment rife with geopolitical challenges and uncertainties.