

Asian NATO: A Possible Emergence in the Backyard of China and its Allies

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In June 2024, Japan, South Korea, and the US conducted trilateral military exercises named 'Freedom Edge/Freedom Shield/Keen Edge'.¹ In addition, Japan, Germany, Spain, and France – all members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) apart from Japan – announced another military drill that would be conducted from 19 to 25 July 2024. These drills, and the NATO countries' involvement in the Asia/Indo-Pacific region, sparked outrage from North Korea, China, and Russia, which led to a profound narrative of the formation of an 'Asian version of NATO'.² In response to the drills, North Korea, before and after the commencement of the Freedom Edge exercises, conducted various missile tests. However, the reaction of North Korea to the joint military exercises of Japan, Spain, France, and Germany that would be conducted in July 2024 is yet to be seen. This study analyses how NATO's anti-China approach unleashed through these exercises will provoke and ramp up the escalation with China and its allies and lead to an arms race and instability in the region. All these measures will also intensify the great power competition between China and the US. Thus, an insecure environment will likely prevail, which could lead to an unwanted situation.

Motive for Japan and NATO Members' Military Exercises

Japan has stressed that the drills with the NATO members – Spain, Germany, and France – are to contain an "assertive China" and to ensure a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific,"³ which is also part of Biden's Indo-Pacific Strategy 2022. After the end of the Freedom Edge drills, a joint statement was released to promote a peaceful and stable environment, and "to promote trilateral interoperability and protect freedom for peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific, including the Korean Peninsula."⁴ There are multiple mutually beneficial rationales for Japan and the NATO members' consecutive drills in the Indo-Pacific, which as follows:

- i. The US needs the support of China's opponents in the Indo-Pacific to serve the US interests, as stated in its Indo-Pacific Strategy 2022;

- ii. To contain China within the region;
- iii. North Korea's nuclear missile testing and threats;
- iv. North Korea's weapons supply to Russia (both Russia and North Korea deny such allegations);
- v. Mutual Defence Pact between Russia and North Korea;
- vi. Japan aims to restore its stature in the Indo-Pacific as a 'political power' and 'military power';⁵
 - I. Challenges related to the security and international order, for instance, the Russia-Ukraine war.

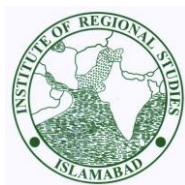
Stance of China and its Allies to the NATO's Involvement in the Region

According to Beijing commentator and military expert Wei Dongxu, the NATO forces' mobilisation in the Indo-Pacific creates instability. In a recent Shangri-La Dialogue after the meeting of the US Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin and China's Lt. General Jing Jianfeng, the Chinese counterpart argued for the 'Asia-Pacific version of NATO'. Jing said that the US role in the region is to ignite chaos and tension, which would "create division, provoke confrontation and undermine stability."⁶

Russia's Foreign Office said that the Russian Federation had informed Japan about its upcoming exercises in the Hokkaido Islands – controversial islands due to the unresolved territorial dispute between Russia and Japan – "that provocative military activity next to the Far Eastern borders of [their] country, conducted also in cooperation with extra-regional countries is categorically inadmissible."⁷ Furthermore, the ministry said that such activities pose a "potential threat" to the sovereignty and security of Russia.

North Korea, as a response, denounced the 'Freedom Edge' military drills, and stated that the participating states – South Korea, Japan, and the US – were instigating an "Asian version of NATO." Pyongyang's state-owned news agency, KCNA, stated that the emerging US-led block in the Indo-Pacific region will receive an overwhelming response and warned of "fatal consequences."⁸

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NATO's Anti-China Approach and Actions

For the first time, some of the most prominent and influential members of NATO can be observed indulging and behaving aggressively against China and its allies. In its London Declaration in 2019, NATO recognised that "China's growing influence and international policies present both opportunities and challenges that we need to address together as an Alliance."⁹ After analysing and observing the relevance of China and its allies being a threat to the Western-led international order, NATO initiated an approach to intermingle in the 'Indo-Pacific Region' through forming various alliances and conducting military drills.

Later in 2022, during the Madrid Summit, NATO presented the stance that "the deepening strategic partnership between the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation, and their mutually reinforcing attempts to undercut the rules-based international order run counter to our values and interests."¹⁰ In the same summit, leaders of the Indo-Pacific allies – New Zealand, Japan, Australia, and South Korea – were invited for the first time, which led to the formation of an alliance informally named Asia-Pacific Four (AP4).

In 2023, during the Camp David Summit, the US, South Korea, and Japan, for the first time, agreed upon trilateral exercises.¹¹ Afterwards, in the 2023 Vilnius Summit Communique, NATO reiterated the position that the partnership between China, Russia, and China's 'hybrid and cyber operations' and disinformation is a threat to the alliance and its allies.¹² In the same year, NATO also signed a strategic agreement with Japan, the Individually Tailored Partnership Programme (ITPP) from 2023 to 2026. The ITPP aims to enhance cooperation in "cyber defence, emerging and disruptive technologies, space, maritime security, and climate change,"¹³ and to tackle issues related to shared strategic and security interests.

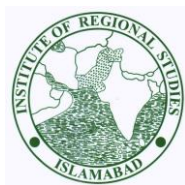
The exercises between South Korea, Japan, and the US in 2024 marked the execution of the first trilateral military exercise, 'Freedom Edge'. In response to it, North Korea test-fired two missiles with Multiple Independently Targetable Re-entry Vehicle (MIRV) technology, a day before the commencement of the drills on 26 June 2024. Shortly after, North Korea again test-fired two short-range ballistic missiles on 1 July 2024, and a tactical ballistic missile on 2 July 2024. After the end of the Freedom Edge drills, Japan planned to conduct military drills with Germany, Spain, and France, in the vicinity of the Russian Far-Eastern border on the Hokkaido islands. These drills

are part of the two-month-long tri-national 'Pacific Skies' drills, which would involve more than 30 military aircraft from the three European countries arriving in Japan.¹⁴

Analysis

NATO's direct involvement in the Indo-Pacific, along with its allies, can create instability in the region. The different alliances, military drills, and agreements, for instance, the Australia-United Kingdom-US (AUKUS), Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QSD/QUAD), Freedom Edge exercises, Germany, Spain, France, and Japan's drills – part of the Pacific Skies drills – and the ITPP partnership between Japan and NATO, are creating small circles of alliances which could lead to a greater alliance in the Indo-Pacific. As stated by Lt General Jing in the Shangri-La Dialogue 2024, "the true motive of the US is to converge small circles into a big circle, that is an Asian-Pacific version of NATO, to maintain the US-led hegemony."¹⁵ Therefore, the West and the US are keen for a permanent arrangement to be established from the thriving of the smallest regional groupings or the mini-laterals to form a multilateral grouping in the future. However, there is also trepidation about whether the mini-laterals would enhance or dismantle the already weak security cooperation within the Indo-Pacific.

The establishment of the 'Asian version of NATO' is aimed to encircle China to contain it in the Indo-Pacific region. However, it also threatens China's allies – Russia and North Korea – in the region. In response to the military drills, the so-called rogue state (North Korea) has also conducted missile tests. The action and reaction syndrome will jeopardise the security of each country in the region. This would also lead states to indulge more in the arms race and strategic partnerships and camps which would be dominated by the US, China, and Russia; for instance, North Korea and Russia have signed a mutual defence agreement which states that when "the two sides are put in a state of war by an armed invasion from an individual state or several states, the other side shall provide military and other assistance with all means in its possession without delay."¹⁶ South Korea and Japan have also hinted towards signing a security agreement, the 'Trilateral Security Cooperation Agreement', with the US against the threats from North Korea in 2024.¹⁷ These measures could lead to a new Cold War scenario, where there would be camps with new major powers leading them, along with the old ones and the arena for that would be the Indo-Pacific. The result would be the severance of the great



power competition and the exacerbation of the divisions over the key strategic and unresolved territorial disputes.

The military drills and the different partnerships like India-US-Australia-Japan, Australia-Japan-New Zealand-South Korea, Japan-South Korea, and the US and others will have a strategic impact on the region. The most beneficial actor among all of them could be the US. As the US is an offshore power in the Indo-Pacific, it pretends to be a stabilising factor. However, it promotes the so-called assertive posture of China in the Indo-Pacific. This may challenge the US and its allies' military might in the region as China is the emerging and resident power in the Indo-Pacific. For instance, China is modernising its nuclear arsenals, according to the SIPRI Report 2024.¹⁸ China is also modernising its conventional military forces, such as by acquiring a nuclear-powered aircraft carrier and the acquisition of indigenous stealth fighters.

The so-called offshore stabilising power, the US in the Indo-Pacific, has ramped up the provocation of China and its allies, which may result in a miscalculation or an inadvertent war.¹⁹ The US Department of Defence Report 2021 has argued about the annexation of Taiwan by China through the employment of air and naval blockades, the use of cyberspace, or other kinetic means.²⁰ The US has also defined a timeframe known as the Davidson Window, which states that China may invade Taiwan by 2030.²¹ The current involvement of the US and NATO members is building the capacity of the indigenous states of the Indo-Pacific to deter any Chinese aggression in the future. However, observing the Chinese counterapproach in the Indo-Pacific against the claim of China's invasion of Taiwan, this does not seem to be executed, as Jinping also stated that while the US is goading China, it would not take such a step.²²

Nonetheless, there are chances of an inadvertent war. For instance, there are consistent clashes between the

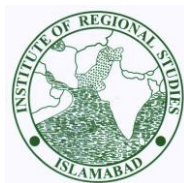
Philippines and China in the South China Sea, which may be limited to the Indo-Pacific region because there are nuclear weapon states, i.e., China and North Korea. Russia, an ally of China, also has a nuclear deterrent. Therefore, no state in the region would like to be indulged in a full-scale war; rather, the deterrent strategy would prevail. The US and some of the NATO members are focusing on information sharing and building a collective defence and military capability of their Indo-Pacific allies to deter and contain their enemies in the region. This ultimately aims to reinforce that any act of strategic ambition by either China, North Korea, or Russia would ignite a comprehensive regional, if not global, response.

Conclusion

The alignment of Japan, South Korea, and NATO countries like Germany, France, Spain, and the US is a result of Russia, North Korea, and China's alignment in the Indo-Pacific. As stated in the 'Indo-Pacific Strategy' of the US, the joint statements and communique of the recent joint military drills aim to counter China's rise and its emerging influence in the political, military, economic, and diplomatic realms in the Indo-Pacific and beyond. The US and NATO members are focused more on creating alliances in the Indo-Pacific, challenging China and its allies within the region. The formation of an 'Asian version of NATO' seems to be upcoming. However, the US Defence Minister Loyd Austin, rejected such claims. Finally, the military drills would enhance the interoperability of the US and its allies in the Indo-Pacific for any of China and its allies' aggressive posture in the region; however, it may lead to rifts in the Indo-Pacific countries, which is more catastrophic and dangerous. These exercises would also lead to the severance of the great power competition and an imbalance in the overall stability of the region.

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