

NAVAL WAR COLLEGE  
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**NATO Strategic Relationships: A Balancing Strategy for NATO to Engage Security Challenges**

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

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## **NATO Strategic Relationships: A Balancing Strategy for NATO to Engage Security Challenges**

The resurgence of Russia as a player on the international stage, the ongoing rise of China as a global power, and the continued presence (and expansion) of Violent Extremist Organizations (VEOs) requires the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to open their aperture for alternative security measures to maintain the peace and prosperity that North America and Europe have largely shared since the end of World War Two. In order to counter the potential threats or challenges of both great power competitors (Russia and China) and VEOs on NATO's geographical periphery, NATO should expend considerable effort to develop or expand strategic relationships with regional organizations such as the European Union (EU), African Union (AU), and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), as well as strong nation-state actors such as India, Japan, and Australia.

Russia and China constitute a dire threat to the West, but NATO is not without distinct advantages over these potential adversaries. Its primary advantage lies in Article 5 of the Washington Treaty which declares that an attack on one nation is an attack on all. However, NATO must lean on the existing world order, global institutions, and similar systems of government, to expand its strategic relationships across three geographical tiers (near abroad [Middle East and Africa], the Indian Ocean, and Western Pacific). These relationships may force Russia and China into a strategic reset that consumes their resources. Additionally, increased NATO engagement in these geographic tiers could bring more nations together into global counter-VEO coalitions in order to address the non-state actor challenge.

The West's victory in the Cold War with the Soviet Union was an opportunity to bring the Russian Federation into a closer relationship with NATO; alongside many of the former Warsaw Pact and Soviet states that joined NATO as formal members. However, due to differing directions on policy decisions, this desired rapprochement never materialized. Concurrently, China began to incorporate state-run Capitalist policies into their Communist political system and saw a meteoric rise in wealth and power.

The strategic objectives of each of these powers in the international arena remains to be seen, but the former Supreme Allied Commander of Europe, ADM(ret) James Stavridis, believes that Russia and China are moving closer in order to establish firm control of Eurasia.<sup>1</sup> Stavridis writes in Bloomberg that as the West observes Russia and China increasing cooperation, the West must recognize that together these two countries constitute a true global threat.<sup>2</sup> Stavridis additionally argues in favor of Halford MacKinder's "Heartland Theory" concerning Eurasia and the world dominance the state controlling this region would be able to exert.<sup>3</sup> The potential partnership, or eventual Alliance, of Russia and China should be seen by NATO leadership as a direct threat to the liberal world order and international peace and prosperity.

Russia constitutes the closest and most lethal threat to NATO's survival and has demonstrated its intent to cause considerable disruption within the Alliance through subversive actions that don't meet the Article 5 threshold, such as cyber attacks. Furthermore, their aggressive military posturing (i.e. Intermediate Range Nuclear Missile testing and harassment of NATO warships in international waters) foments additional instability. NATO has recognized Russia's aggressive actions as a direct threat intended to degrade and undermine Euro-Atlantic security at both the Brussels (2018) and London (2019) North Atlantic Council Heads of State and Government summits.<sup>4</sup>

Due to the distinct nature of this threat, retired Rear Admiral Lars Saunes (former Head of the Norwegian Navy) stated in an interview that NATO is expanding security circles around its territory

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<sup>1</sup> Stavridis, James, "China and Russia Want to Control the 'World Island,'" *Bloomberg.com*, 10 June 2019, accessed 14 January 2020, <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2019-06-10/china-and-russia-want-to-control-the-world-island>.

<sup>2</sup> Stavridis, 2019.

<sup>3</sup> Stavridis, 2019.

<sup>4</sup> North Atlantic Treaty Organization, "Brussels Summit Declaration," Issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Brussels 11-12 July 2018, 11 July 2018, accessed 15 January 2020, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_156624.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_156624.htm).

North Atlantic Treaty Organization, "London Summit Declaration," Issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in London 3-4 December 2019, 04 December 2019, accessed 15 January 2020, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_171584.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_171584.htm).

specifically to deter Russian aggression.<sup>5</sup> Given that the NATO North Atlantic Council and nation-state leaders within the organization have reached the consensus that Russia represents a dire threat to the Alliance, NATO must be willing to explore other options to counter this aggression. The activities that Admiral Saunes mentioned may have prevented further Russian adventurism in NATO territory (such as the Baltic states), but it has not stopped them from creating havoc on NATO's periphery (i.e. Ukraine - Crimea and Donbas region). The development of strategic relationships with other countries/organizations that view Russia as a potential adversary can limit Russia's aggressive nature toward NATO, as well as potentially address challenges from emerging global powers.

The continued rise of China as both an economic and military power is a challenge to NATO as China grows in strength and asserts its objectives (which are often misaligned with those of NATO nations) globally; primarily through their "Belt, Road Initiative (BRI)." Although attempting to use non-provocative language, NATO addressed China's growing power and influence as both a challenge and opportunity at the London Summit.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, the Alliance recognized the need to maintain strict controls on communication technology, especially 5G networks<sup>7</sup>, which are being developed and pushed by China and their state-supported company Huawei.

Speaking as an authority from a nation that sees China as threat, retired Admiral Tomohisa Takei (former Head of the Japanese Maritime Self Defense Force) has observed Chinese practices for his entire career and believes that NATO (and the EU's) vulnerability to China lies in the weaker economies of the Eastern European nations.<sup>8</sup> As demonstrated by NATO and Western Pacific leadership, NATO must view China not as an immediate, dangerous threat, but as a long term strategic competitor. The Chinese objectives for Europe and North America are not likely to be military confrontation, but the creation of an

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<sup>5</sup> Lars Saunes (former Head of Norwegian Navy), interview with the author, 06 January 2020.

<sup>6</sup> London, 2019.

<sup>7</sup> London, 2019.

<sup>8</sup> Tomohisa Takei (former Head of Japanese Maritime Self Defense Force), interview with the author, 08 January 2020.

environment that weakens the countries on those continents (both internally and as an Alliance) in order to promote a new world order congruent to China's political and economic system. Should they be successful in this endeavor, they will certainly become a regional, if not global, hegemon with the ability to directly influence nations within NATO. This potential outcome should drive NATO to partner more closely with countries/organizations that recognize the threat posed by China and compete with other, more immediate, threats to NATO's security infrastructure.

VEOs have increased their attacks in NATO nations (especially Europe) throughout the past decade and when combined with the challenge of immigration from North Africa and the Middle East (MENA), they are generally recognized as the primary threat to Europe by each national population. NATO dedicated significant energy to combating VEOs over the past decade, which was manifested in the Brussels declaration as a "direct threat to the security of our populations, and to international stability and prosperity more broadly."<sup>9</sup> NATO also sees a relationship between VEOs and ungoverned spaces in Africa, as well as some elements of immigration (although this phenomenon can be viewed as a completely separate challenge). This resulted in the "Package on the South - a range of political and practical cooperation initiatives towards a more strategic, focused, and coherent approach to the Middle East and North Africa" at the Brussels summit.<sup>10</sup>

National leaders, such as Admiral(ret) Nirmal Verma (former Head of the Indian Navy) believe that addressing the challenge requires large, cooperative coalitions of countries and organizations plagued by terrorism to combat it.<sup>11</sup> Terrorism is unlikely to dissipate as an activity for non-state actors to challenge NATO's superior military and economic position, especially with the continued upheaval in the MENA region. However, combating VEOs can be harnessed as a distinct opportunity and serve as the foundation for NATO to further build upon strategic relationships. These relationships will not only allow

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<sup>9</sup> Brussels, 2018.

<sup>10</sup> Brussels, 2018.

<sup>11</sup> Nirmal Verma (former Head of Indian Navy), interview with the author, 8 January 2020.

NATO to engage and defeat VEOs, but also offer an avenue of deeper cooperation with other countries/organizations that recognize differing security challenges (as VEOs present a threat in some form to most nation-states, especially Western or democratic nations). This challenge, combined with the existing Great Power Competition with Russia and China, should force NATO to consider expending more resources to develop new and enhanced strategic relationships.

The NATO Alliance views their relationships (or partnerships) with external countries or organizations as vital to the Alliance's strategic security infrastructure. The primary relationship the Alliance needs to maintain and continuously strengthen is with the European Union (EU), which allows NATO to partner with a geographic tier one organization with several similar members to extend their security apparatus across the entire DIME (Diplomacy, Information, Military, and Economic) model. Both the Brussels and London declarations recognized this vital requirement as an avenue for mutual benefit.<sup>12</sup> Presented more acutely than these broad declarations, the current Commander of NATO's Allied Joint Force Command Naples (JFCNP), Admiral James Foggo III, agreed with Admiral Takei that the NATO-EU relationship must become more strategic in countering the threat of Russia and the challenge of China across the DIME spectrum.<sup>13</sup> Foggo and Takei both believe that NATO and the EU national security interests overlap in both the near and long terms with NATO presenting the military strength to deter Russia and the EU engaging globally to limit China's rising influence.<sup>14</sup>

More to the point, Richard Heydarian (an Asia-based academic and columnist) argues for increased EU maritime presence in the Western Pacific to buttress against aggressive Chinese tactics through "joint military exercises and training or the transfer of technology."<sup>15</sup> A more aligned and stronger NATO-EU strategic relationship, with defined objectives and distinct mission sets would provide

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<sup>12</sup> Brussels, 2018. London, 2019.

<sup>13</sup> James Foggo (Commander, Allied Joint Force Command Naples, Commander U.S. Naval Forces Europe / Naval Forces Africa, interview with the author, 17 January 2020. Takei, 2020.

<sup>14</sup> Foggo, 2020. Takei, 2020.

<sup>15</sup> Heydarian, Richard, "EU Should Expand Maritime Activity in Southeast Asia as China Looms," *asia.nikkei.com*, 09 August 2019, accessed 08 January 2020, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Opinion/EU-should-expand-maritime-activity-in-Southeast-Asia-as-China-looms>.

for a more lasting and whole security structure in Europe and North America. While NATO continues to focus on military missions and exercises aimed to deter Russia, the EU can provide specific diplomatic and economic agreements to vulnerable nations (both within and outside of Europe) to allow for resistance to Chinese BRI programs. Potential offers the EU could extend include low interest loans to key strategic developing nations that have signed or are considering Chinese BRI projects. Additionally, although NATO should remain the primary military partner to the AU, the EU can partner on several other initiatives aimed at stemming the flow of migrants from Africa while providing greater stability to ungoverned regions on the continent.

Moving geographically to the south, but still within the tier one periphery, NATO must cultivate a strategic relationship with the AU, which not only will support their Mediterranean Dialogue partnership group (primarily consisting of MENA nations), but also support the Alliance's 360 degree strategic approach by helping the AU identify early, and immediately address, security challenges on the continent. Admiral Foggo has been working diligently for over two years in his role as the JFCNP Commander to cultivate this relationship, which included a trip to the AU headquarters in April 2019. His efforts likely inspired portions of the Package on the South that include activities in NATO's Hub for the South, which is under his command at JFCNP.<sup>16</sup> "NATO needs the AU as a strategic partner not only to protect NATO's southern flank from VEOs operating in North Africa, but also to control the immigration flow and combat nefarious Chinese activity on the continent such as illegal fishing" said Foggo in an interview.<sup>17</sup> Admiral Verma agreed that NATO will always find willing partners to combat VEOs; at the same time, if NATO were to provide more support to UN Peacekeeping Missions, the Alliance may be able to both cultivate a closer relationship with the AU while exporting peace to the ungoverned spaces that breed instability and violence on NATO's periphery.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Brussels, 2018.

<sup>17</sup> Foggo, 2020.

<sup>18</sup> Verma, 2020.



The key takeaway for an AU strategic relationship is that it allows NATO to open their aperture for addressing threats from the south in the near term and to compete with China in the long term. Supporting AU initiatives such as Early Warning will not only help African nations maintain stability and increase development, but also manage potential threats to Europe from their source and extend the “battlespace” away from NATO territory. Additionally, the more willing NATO is to expend energy and resources to help the AU, the more likely the AU will find common cause with NATO nations to resist Chinese predatory economic maneuvers. If successful in its development, a NATO-AU strategic relationship would allow NATO to continue to project its strategic depth into the Indian Ocean.

Extending into the geographic tier two Indian Ocean community, NATO must increase its focus on developing stronger ties with India. Although still identified as a developing country, India has emerged as the regional power in the Indian Ocean with a population that will soon be the world’s largest and an economy full of potential. Renowned foreign affairs author Robert Kaplan, in his book *Monsoon*, identifies the Indian Ocean as the strategic center of the world in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>19</sup> Control of this region, and the increasing amount of sea-going trade that will transit it, is a key element to power as the world maintains its current maritime-centric trajectory<sup>20</sup>, which should serve as a motivator for NATO engagement in the region.

Admiral Verma emphasized that India was unlikely to enter into a strategic relationship that is directed against a third country.<sup>21</sup> On the other hand, tackling VEOs and other current challenges in the cyber and space domains have immense scope for strategic cooperation.<sup>22</sup> Increased information sharing and military-to-military (mil-to-mil) engagement would help build trust and interoperability, as well as

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<sup>19</sup> Kaplan, Robert. 2010. *Monsoon: The Indian Ocean and the Future of American Power*. New York: Random House. xi.

<sup>20</sup> Kaplan 2010, 7.

<sup>21</sup> Verma, 2020.

<sup>22</sup> Verma, 2020.

promote NATO as a reliable partner for peace and prosperity. Finally, a strong relationship with India would allow for the further migration of NATO's security apparatus to move into the Western Pacific.

Transiting through the Indo-Pacific region into the geographic tier three, NATO should further their defense cooperation with Japan. As the power of China continues to rise, NATO must be able to buttress China's ability to project this power into the European theater and a stronger relationship with China's primary Pacific adversary of Japan will ensure China moves slower into tier one and two of NATO's periphery. Additionally, a deeper partnership with Japan, which has several territorial disputes with Russia, would serve as a vehicle to deflect some Russia attention from the European theater. Admiral Takei remained reserved concerning this type of relationship, which would be dependent upon multiple conflicting areas of national interest, but he did concur that additional NATO presence in the South China Sea to enforce the international rule of law would be welcomed by the Government of Japan.<sup>23</sup> Admiral Foggo also thinks that stronger ties with Japan, especially in the maritime domain, would give Russia and China reason for a strategic pause in the execution of their strategies given the consistent U.S. positions in the North Atlantic, Mediterranean Sea, and Western Pacific.<sup>24</sup>

Ultimately, the development of a stronger strategic relationship between NATO and Japan comes down to risk calculation for both parties. The immediate risk is that Russia and China would view the relationship as a threat and move closer for mutual support and possible protection, a potential outcome that was stressed by both Admirals Takei and Verma.<sup>25</sup> However, the prospective reward of heavier NATO engagement with Japan could mean a Russia less prone to adventurism in Europe and a China more apt to concentrate on the Western Pacific rather than continue to expand its influence through BRI and other measures. Of course, this relationship would require NATO to support other nations in the

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<sup>23</sup> Takei, 2020.

<sup>24</sup> Foggo, 2020.

<sup>25</sup> Takei, 2020. Verma, 2020.

Western Pacific in a similar fashion so as to not focus all of Russia and China's Pacific attention on Japan.

Another potential organization that would likely support NATO presence in the Pacific is the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Arguably, the South China Sea (SCS) has become the world's most volatile hotspot with competing claims between China and the Southeast Asian nations, with the United States and other western nations attempting to enforce international law and Freedom of Navigation (FoN) in the region. Admiral Takei's view is that Southeast Asia's prosperity depends on a free and open SCS and he also sees the region as requiring a military strategy unique to NATO (whereas the Indian Ocean and Pacific Islands should be approached economically by the EU).<sup>26</sup> Admiral Foggo agrees with this notion to an extent if utilizing only minimal resources, but cautioned that NATO's maritime focus should remain in the Alliance's near abroad to deter Russia.<sup>27</sup>

A potential compromise for NATO engagement in the region could be through the EU relationship as presented by Heydarian, who not only proposes maritime engagement with ASEAN nations, but also the signing of Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) that would allow their economies another avenue to operate outside of China.<sup>28</sup> Again, NATO must be careful not to overextend vital resources that would be needed in a Russian crisis, but look to become involved in existing missions that its member navies are already conducting, such as the Royal Navy's planned deployment of their new aircraft carrier, HMS QUEEN ELIZABETH, to the SCS. This type of low-level maritime involvement would signal NATO's desire to increase cooperation with ASEAN and nations in, and around, the region, without demonstrating an aggressive stance toward China.

Finally, the Pacific contains several other like-minded nations that would welcome NATO cooperation; namely Australia, New Zealand, and South Korea. These nations also have concerns with

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<sup>26</sup> Takei, 2020.

<sup>27</sup> Foggo, 2020.

<sup>28</sup> Heydarian, 2019.

rising Chinese power and although they will need to properly balance cooperation with NATO against their national engagement plans with China, a deeper partnership with NATO would provide them with a stronger platform for negotiation with China. Heydarian mentions the existing EU defense agreement with Australia, which NATO could leverage for increased cooperation.<sup>29</sup> It wouldn't be a stretch to see a similar agreement reached with New Zealand and several NATO nations are already contributing members to the United Nations force that remains in South Korea. Furthering these relationships through mil-to-mil exchanges, security cooperation conferences, or sending observers to participate in each other's exercises are low cost, low risk options to move closer to other nations attempting to balance China's rise in multiple different approaches.

Should NATO elect to pursue a robust agenda of deeper engagement with the countries and organizations listed throughout this paper, they should expect certain major outcomes, which represent the high risk, high reward nature of breaking with the current status quo. First, NATO must be ready for Russia to act belligerently as Russia will attempt to mark NATO development of strategic relationships throughout the near abroad and into the Indo-Pacific region as further threatening Russia with "encirclement," especially if NATO is able to broker a stronger partnership with India. China will also likely view these maneuvers as a type of containment, if not in a directly military sense, then certainly economically. Additionally, NATO must be willing to open their aperture to deeper engagement with Russia and China, as nations such as Japan and organizations such as ASEAN will want to maintain positive aspects of their relationships with Russia and China. As a result of this dynamic, NATO should also make concessions in the strategic relationship development process. Finally, the reaction of VEOs will likely be to increase destabilizing tactics and conduct attacks against countries/organizations that partner with the West; therefore, NATO must be willing to extend additional support to combat VEOs outside their immediate periphery.

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<sup>29</sup> Heydarian, 2019.

The development of NATO strategic relationships with countries and organizations in tiers one, two, and three, has the potential to lead to a more peaceful and prosperous world order, as it would provide the necessary leverage to curtail Russia aggression, limit China's predatory economic expansion, and place more pressure on VEOs.