

Looking to the Atlantic to Balance the Pacific: Expanding NATO
Partnerships to the South China Sea

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14. ABSTRACT A rising China presents a challenge that can only be met by creating a new international regime based on respect for international law in the South China Sea. To counter China's aggressive behavior, this regime must have a global perspective. Therefore, it is imperative for NATO to develop long-delayed, dedicated, formal partnerships with China's regional competitors in the South China Sea. Based on an assessment of military and informational capabilities, Indonesia and Vietnam are shown to be the two most critical partner states for this effort. This is illustrated by highlighting how both countries are economically dedicated, militarily relevant, and possess the internal stability to benefit from this partnership. Similarly, both states have unique information capabilities and the will to effectively counter Chinese strategic messaging regarding their illegal claims and activities in the region. Finally, counter-arguments that perceived NATO "expansion" into the Pacific will create a Russian reaction or support a negative post-colonialism narrative are shown to be unfounded.					
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INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

NATO partnerships enable cooperation through joint training and exercises, capability development, and political consultations which enhance security and stability, help prevent conflict, and defend the Alliance's core values.¹ NATO currently organizes its active Partnerships into four distinct categories, the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council, the Mediterranean Dialogue, the Istanbul Cooperative Initiative, and "Partners across the globe."² There is no dedicated partnership structure concerning the greater Pacific area, much less the South China Sea, where China seeks undisputed regional hegemony. It is clear that NATO should leverage partnerships with key states in the South China Sea to enforce international norms that the UN does not have the ability to influence.

The 2018 National Defense Strategy outlines how the current international order, which is built on a foundation of freedom, openness, and liberty, is being actively undermined by Russia and China. The strategy specifically highlights China as "a strategic competitor using predatory economics to intimidate its neighbors while militarizing features in the South China Sea" as it attempts to emerge as a regional hegemon.³ The United Nations (UN) should be the primary bulwark against such actions, as it is the primary international institution designed to maintain peace, security, and cooperation. Unfortunately, the UN has been relatively ineffective in curbing China's aggressive behavior in the South China Sea. A telling example is China's disregard for the UN Convention of the Law of the Sea, which was further exacerbated by

¹ "NATO's Partnerships Are Diverse, Valuable, and Flexible to the Circumstances at Hand," *Atlantic Council* (blog), July 2, 2019, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/nato-s-partnerships-are-diverse-valuable-and-flexible-to-the-circumstances-at-hand/>.

² NATO, "Partners," NATO, accessed October 5, 2019, <http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/51288.htm>.

³ Jim Mattis, "Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy" (Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, 2018), 1–2, <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>.

China's outright refusal to acknowledge the Permanent Court of Arbitration's 2016 ruling that China was infringing on the Philippine's sovereign economic exclusive zone.⁴

In light of China's growing economic and military power and its disregard for international law, the U.S. must rely on other institutions to maintain a favorable international order. Apart from the UN, the next most significant organization the U.S. belongs to is NATO. NATO's significance is underscored because all member states belong to a common *international regime*, which is a collection of shared principles, norms, rules and decision-making procedures.⁵ NATO's stated focus is on mutual defense and the security of the North Atlantic;⁶ however, recent history suggests NATO has interests well beyond this region. A number of these interests leverage formal NATO Partnerships with other states that have mutual interests with the alliance.

At this time, only five states in Indo-Pacific Command's area of operations have bilateral partnerships with NATO. They are Mongolia, Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand, none of which border the contested South China Sea. Therefore, NATO should formalize a dedicated partnership structure with nations in the South China Sea, specifically Indonesia and Vietnam. In effect, NATO would help create a new *international regime* of partners with a shared interest in curbing China's aggressive behavior, as "governments establish regimes to deal with problems that they regard as so closely linked that they should be dealt with together."⁷ A close examination of these potential partnerships through the lenses of the military and information instruments of power will illuminate potential opportunities, risks, and advantages to be gained for the U.S., NATO, and its potential regional partners.

⁴ "The South China Sea Arbitration (The Republic of the Philippines v. The People's Republic of China)" (2016), 2, <https://pca-cpa.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/6/2016/07/PH-CN-20160712-Press-Release-No-11-English.pdf>.

⁵ Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 59.

⁶ NATO, "The North Atlantic Treaty," NATO, accessed September 16, 2019, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_17120.htm.

⁷ Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics*, 61.

Military Opportunities for Economic Stability

China's goal is to establish regional hegemony at the expense of the interests of its neighbors. True hegemony is dependent on economic and military strength. Economically, a state must have control over raw materials and continued access to key markets.⁸ Militarily, it must have enough power to protect the political and economic environment it wants to lead.⁹ China's growing military modernization is putting it in a position where it may eventually achieve regional parity with the U.S. This parity, in-turn, will allow China the freedom to use military power to secure its economic claims in the South China Sea. The Chinese Navy's impressive growth and focus on gray zone maritime capabilities will give it a further advantage in its maritime border disputes with "Japan, the Philippines, Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Vietnam."¹⁰ NATO partnerships with Indonesia and Vietnam would provide an excellent opportunity to effectively counter-balance Chinese military expansion. These two states, in particular, have three characteristics that make them natural partners for NATO. These characteristics are: economic commitment, complementary military capabilities, and reliability.

Indonesia and Vietnam both play significant economic roles in the South China Sea as well as the global economy, especially with regard to China. Vietnam's competing oil exploration of the SCS puts them in direct competition with China, who is heavily dependent on importing oil and liquid natural gas from the Middle East. This competition led Chinese vessels to harass Vietnamese survey ships in 2011.¹¹ Indonesia borders the strategically important Strait of Malacca, through which 80 percent of global trade and over 80 percent of Chinese oil imports

⁸ Robert O Keohane, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005), 32.

⁹ Keohane, 39.

¹⁰ "China Military Power: Modernizing a Force to Fight and Win" (Washington, D.C.: Defense Intelligence Agency, November 2018), V, www.dia.mil/Military-Power-Publications.

¹¹ "China Military Power: Modernizing a Force to Fight and Win," 79.

transit.¹² Military control over the strait, either by China or other parties would have significant economic impacts across the world. Therefore, ensuring Indonesia has the capability to safeguard free navigation through this waterway is crucial. Fortunately, both Indonesia and Vietnam appeared economically committed to ensure they have the military strength to make valuable NATO partners.

Military alliances and partnerships prosper when all sides economically commit to increasing military strength. Apart from Singapore, Indonesia and Vietnam have shown the highest economic commitment to increase their military strength among Southeast Asian states. Indonesia's current defense budget of \$8.46 billion is expected to grow to \$12.14 billion by 2025 (see Appendix A) likewise Vietnam's defense budget is currently \$7.64 billion and expected to grow to \$12.1 billion by 2025 (see Appendix A).¹³ These figures compare very favorably to other potential regional partners: Philippines (\$4.8B), Malaysia (\$3.75B), Brunei (\$475M); even aspirational NATO accession, Ukraine, has a \$4.0 billion defense budget that is only expected to grow to \$5.7 billion by 2025 (see Appendix A).¹⁴ This commitment to defense indicates both Indonesia and Vietnam have the financial wherewithal to grow their military capability to support increased technologies that would be open to them as reliable NATO partners.

Indonesia's and Vietnam's commitment to defense spending also appears favorable when compared to recent NATO accessions¹⁵. Bulgaria (\$1.1B), Estonia (\$648M), Latvia (\$672M), Lithuania (\$1.2B), Romania (\$4.9B), Slovakia (\$2.1B), Slovenia (\$548M), and Croatia (\$762M) are expected to have a combined military expenditure of only \$15.5B (see Appendix A).¹⁶ This

¹² "How Much Trade Transits the South China Sea? | ChinaPower Project," accessed October 14, 2019, <https://chinapower.csis.org/much-trade-transits-south-china-sea/>.

¹³ "Jane's Worldwide Defence Budget by Force," accessed October 5, 2019, <https://janes-ihs-com.usnwc.idm.oclc.org/DefenceBudgets/Guided?view=chart&f=&pg=1&template=>.

¹⁴ "Data Shown in USD as Current by IHS Markit."

¹⁵ Not including Albania and Montenegro for which Janes did not have data.

¹⁶ "Data Shown in USD as Current by IHS Markit."

amount is barely above either Indonesia's or Vietnam's individual commitments. It is this lack of spending that has strained the relations between the U.S. and NATO, as only six current members are assessed to adequately spend at least 2% of their GDP on defense.¹⁷ Conversely, Vietnam currently spends 2.3 and while Indonesia sits at 0.7%¹⁸, previous data indicates that their budget is expected to significantly increase over the next 5 years. As we have recently seen with Saudi Arabia's vulnerability to Houthi insurgents, spending money on defense does not necessarily make a competent partner, however Indonesia and Vietnam are investing in capabilities that complement current NATO opportunities in the SCS.

The DoD Indo-Pacific strategy lists activities of a few individual NATO members in the SCS, and those activities can be summarized as piecemeal and non-persistent. The strategy lauds the UK, France, and Canada as critical partners "in maintaining a free and open Indo-Pacific."¹⁹ However, while each country's contribution is increasing; it is not clear that they are part of a larger NATO effort. Instead they appear to be bi-lateral operations that could be better coordinated. A dedicated NATO partnership plan would solve this issue by focusing on not only increasing regional capacity but by having regional partners provide high-demand, low-density complementary capabilities to support the Alliance.

From a maritime perspective, Indonesian and Vietnamese patrol craft, frigates, and corvettes are no match for a direct confrontation with the Chinese Navy. However, by partnering with more advanced NATO ships, they can combine to create an unpredictable and persistent

¹⁷ "A New Security Alliance Might Be Better than NATO Free-Riders | TheHill," accessed October 14, 2019, <https://thehill.com/opinion/national-security/395875-a-new-security-alliance-might-be-better-than-nato-free-riders>.

¹⁸ "Military Expenditure (% of GDP) | Data," accessed October 14, 2019, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/MS.MIL.XPND.GD.ZS>.

¹⁹ "DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE INDO PACIFIC STRATEGY REPORT: Preparedness, Partnerships, and Promoting a Networked Region," June 1, 2019, 42, <https://media.defense.gov/2019/Jul/01/2002152311/-1/-1/1/DEPARTMENT-OF-DEFENSE-INDO-PACIFIC-STRATEGY-REPORT-2019.PDF>.

presence in the SCS. This type of activity is adequate to combat Chinese gray zone activities, that attempt to normalize Chinese territorial claims over time.

Also, both countries possess a counter-mine capability that NATO forces could exercise and partner with. A 2015 study from China's Defense University highlighted the potential effectiveness of Chinese mine-laying operations.²⁰ Indonesia has nine minesweepers and Vietnam has two.²¹ There would be an excellent opportunity for NATO members, who tend to rely on minehunter ships, to partner with these two countries and practice operations with both types of complementary sea craft.

It is also worth noting that both countries possess aircraft that would allow for exchanges of tactics, techniques and procedures. Indonesia's possession of F-16 fighters and Apache helicopters would allow beneficial exchanges as five NATO countries operate the F-16. Also, Indonesia has continued to execute combined maritime and air patrols with regional partners.²² There would be significant gains for both sides to share ideas about maritime awareness and surveillance. Vietnam's acquisition of Scan Eagle ISR platforms, T-6 trainers, and former U.S. Coast Guard craft would provide a similar opportunity.²³ Moreover, Vietnam's inventory of 35 Su-30MK2 FLANKER aircraft²⁴ would provide opportunities for NATO pilots to interact with high-end aircraft that are also owned by China.

²⁰ "How Worried Should the U.S. Navy Be About Chinese Sea Mines? | The National Interest," accessed October 14, 2019, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/how-worried-should-us-navy-be-about-chinese-sea-mines-85596>.

²¹ "IHS Jane's," Jane's Sea Specifications Search and Analysis Tool, accessed October 14, 2019, <https://janes-ihs-com.usnwc.idm.oclc.org/Grid.aspx>.

²² "DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE INDO PACIFIC STRATEGY REPORT: Preparedness, Partnerships, and Promoting a Networked Region," 37.

²³ "DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE INDO PACIFIC STRATEGY REPORT: Preparedness, Partnerships, and Promoting a Networked Region," 37.

²⁴ "Janes Inventories - Air Platforms (Vietnam)," accessed October 14, 2019, [https://janes-ihs-com.usnwc.idm.oclc.org/Inventory/search?f=OPERATORCOUNTRY\(Vietnam\)%3Cand%3EETYPE\(Air%2Bplatforms\)&pg=1](https://janes-ihs-com.usnwc.idm.oclc.org/Inventory/search?f=OPERATORCOUNTRY(Vietnam)%3Cand%3EETYPE(Air%2Bplatforms)&pg=1).

Apart from leveraging complementary hardware, NATO partnership exchanges and exercises could help all involved better understand the region and their mutual competitor, China. It is clear that Indonesia and Vietnam both understand China differently than most NATO countries. Their history and proximity give them much greater insight into Chinese actions and thought processes. As experiences in both Iraq and Afghanistan have proven out, cultural knowledge is tightly knit to military success.²⁵ These shared experiences will also give the partners increased understanding and trust in each other's capabilities, which is critical when sharing advanced military tactics, operational concepts, and strategies.

Finally, when selecting potential military partners, reliability and stability are key decision drivers. NATO partner countries are given access to advanced training, tactics, techniques, procedures, and technology. Sharing these with unstable or unethical nations can have a significant negative impact. The CATO Institute's Arms Sales Risk Index ranks countries by analyzing three factors: corruption, stability, and behavior towards its citizens.²⁶ The goal of the program is to prevent arms transfers that may result in negative second-order effects. Previous examples of negative agreements include: arms sales to Iran before the 1979 revolution, weapons sold to Somalia during the Cold War which were later used against U.S. forces, and U.S. equipment provided to Iraq that were stolen by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria.²⁷ This in-depth approach is also an excellent tool to rank the reliability of potential NATO partners.

The scoring system runs from 1-100, with the higher number indicating a greater amount of risk. Indonesia's score of 50 and Vietnam's score of 47 place them squarely in the middle of

²⁵ Montgomery McFate, "The Military Utility of Understanding Adversary Culture," *Joint Forces Quarterly* 38 (July 2008): 42, <http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/polisci/faculty/chwe/austen/mcfate.pdf>.

²⁶ "The 2019 Arms Sales Risk Index | Cato Institute," accessed October 14, 2019, <https://www.cato.org/publications/policy-analysis/the-2019-arms-sales-risk-index#executive-summary>.

²⁷ "The 2019 Arms Sales Risk Index | Cato Institute."

the continuum.²⁸ It is encouraging that the risk assessment for both states have decreased from their 2017 scores. These numbers are encouraging when contrasted with other states. For example, NATO member Turkey has a higher risk score of 69, which is a 6-point risk increase over the previous year. Similarly, democracies India and Israel both have higher risk scores, 53, than Indonesia and Vietnam.

Even if Indonesia and Vietnam had significantly higher risk scores than they do, balancing China's military growth would still lead to a greater good. NATO missions in Iraq (91 risk score) and Afghanistan (84 risk score) support fragile and corrupt regimes in support of the greater end state of curbing international terrorism. Likewise, trade and support relationships with Saudi Arabia, with a risk score of 71, makes sense when put in the context of balancing Iranian plans of regional hegemony. The fact that NATO can partner with stable partners while countering a high-priority competitor, China, creates a positive narrative and creates greater international legitimacy. The following section will describe how military power and informational power must work in concert to be truly successful. "Prestige, rather than power, is the everyday currency of international relations...."²⁹

Information Opportunities to Strengthen Diplomacy

The U.S. National Security Strategy declares that adversaries are increasingly able to leverage information to degrade the values and fabric of free societies, while simultaneously protecting their own populace from outside information.³⁰ Similarly, a NATO 2018 information operations policy highlighted that the Alliance needs to address the speed and effectiveness of

²⁸ "The 2019 Arms Sales Risk Index | Cato Institute."

²⁹ Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics*, 31.

³⁰ Executive Office of the President, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (United States: White House Office, 2017), 34, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>.

their strategic communications in a more coherent fashion.³¹ It is imperative that the Alliance and its potential partners in the South China Sea area are prepared to combat China's influence campaigns in a unified and timely way. The U.S. Intelligence Community currently assesses that China is working to change the international discourse in the UN about human rights to focus more on economic standards and less on individual liberties.³² While China may be holding its own against the current U.S. narrative regarding China's predatory actions across the globe, a NATO-led message bolstered by partner support from Vietnam and Indonesia would pay significant dividends. This is especially true as both countries have shown the will to publicly denounce Chinese actions.

NATO's public narrative regarding Chinese aggression towards the legitimate territorial claims of other countries in the SCS was historically focused on a strategy of non-intervention, adherence to international laws and regional solutions. As recently as 2016, the NATO Military Committee Chairman, Peter Pavel, indicated the Alliance had no intent to intervene militarily.³³ However, he did state NATO was willing to work with regional countries on building their defensive capabilities, increasing their intelligence capabilities, and exchanging best practices regarding maritime security. More recently, this tone has become more confrontational. NATO has taken note of Chinese expansion in Africa and China's heavy investment in European critical infrastructure. In August 2019, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg stated that it is important for "NATO to address the rise of China...not least by working closely with our

³¹ "NATO Military Policy for Information Operations - Enclosure 1 Draft" (Brussels, Belgium: NATO, September 11, 2018), 2, https://shape.nato.int/resources/3/images/2018/upcoming%20events/MC%20Draft_Info%20Ops.pdf.

³² Daniel R. Coats, "Worldwide Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community," § Senate Select Committee on Intelligence (2019), 25–26.

³³ Tim Daiss, "South China Sea Disputes Off-Limits, Says NATO," *Forbes*, accessed August 28, 2019, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/timdaiss/2016/06/03/south-china-sea-disputes-off-limits-says-general/>.

partners in this region...”³⁴ He added, “This is not about moving NATO into the Pacific, but this is about responding to the fact that China is coming closer to us,”³⁵

Of course, actions speak louder than words, and past partnerships in the region have made an even larger statement. In 2013 NATO declared Japan to be a natural partner of NATO to help “ensure peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific and Euro-Atlantic regions.”³⁶ Similarly, NATO recently re-affirmed the roles Australia and New Zealand have as key partners of the alliance by signing a renewed partnership agreement.³⁷ Further formal partnerships with China’s South China Sea competitors, to include Indonesia and Vietnam would send an even stronger message to China and the international community. The more nations that stand united against Chinese actions, the more legitimate the voice.

Competitors of the U.S., including China, can quickly stigmatize unilateral U.S. actions as self-interested or against the international norms the U.S. helped create; such as during the 2003 invasion of Iraq. NATO messaging, backed by actions, have proven more difficult to contradict, especially due to the fact that a NATO action must be unanimously approved by all 29 members. For instance, NATO’s 1999 intervention against Serbia in Kosovo is an excellent example of when NATO’s action in the face of the UN’s crippling indecision was validated by the international community. Even though NATO did not have UN authorization to intervene, “there is a general consensus that NATO was morally justified in using force because of the developing humanitarian crisis on the ground. Waiting to obtain a further UN Security Council

³⁴ Joel Gehrke, “NATO Chief Says Alliance Must Prepare ‘to Address the Rise of China’,” *The Examiner*; *Washington, D.C.*, August 7, 2019, sec. Defense & National Security, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/2275032728/citation/6BC95CAACB9F4B2DPQ/1>.

³⁵ Gehrke.

³⁶ NATO, “Joint Press Statement Issued on the Occasion of the Meeting between the NATO Secretary General, H.E. Mr Jens Stoltenberg and H.E. Mr Shinzo Abe, Prime Minister of Japan,” NATO, accessed August 28, 2019, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_148029.htm.

³⁷ NATO, “NATO Secretary General Signs Partnership Plan, Welcomes Deepening Cooperation with Australia,” NATO, accessed August 28, 2019, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_168288.htm.

resolution would have allowed the humanitarian situation to worsen.”³⁸ Formalizing NATO partnerships with Indonesia and Vietnam would present an opportunity to add legitimacy to the Alliance’s South China Sea narrative for different reasons.

With regard to Indonesia, both NATO and Indonesia have the opportunity to highlight their shared ideologies. Indonesia is the second-largest democracy in the world and would provide an opportunity to echo NATO and US narratives regarding liberty that counter China’s expanding narrative that values a rising standard of living over individual freedom. NATO also has a strong record of supporting Muslims, first in Bosnia in the 1990s and then again in Afghanistan. Further partnership with Indonesia, which has a Muslim majority, would provide an excellent foil against Chinese abuses against the Muslim Uighurs in the Xinjiang region, which include discrimination and mass detentions.³⁹

NATO partnership with Vietnam would provide a strong narrative against China for different reasons. Vietnam is a communist state, as is China, but they have significant territorial disputes concerning both the Paracel and Spratly Islands.⁴⁰ NATO’s support of Vietnam’s legitimate claims would reinforce the message that NATO’s interest in the region was not-self-serving, but in the interest in sustaining international law, even if a communist nation is the benefactor. Vietnam would give NATO an opportunity to pro-actively undermine a potential Chinese counter-narrative focusing on a prior, short-lived regional military alliance in the region: SEATO, which was dominated by non-regional states with the primary goals of containing

³⁸ Helen Frowe, *The Ethics of War and Peace: An Introduction*, Second edition, (London: Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group, 2016), 89.

³⁹ “DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE INDO PACIFIC STRATEGY REPORT: Preparedness, Partnerships, and Promoting a Networked Region,” 7–8.

⁴⁰ “East Asia/Southeast Asia :: Vietnam — The World Factbook - Central Intelligence Agency,” accessed October 5, 2019, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/vm.html>.

communism⁴¹. Additionally, Vietnam's Communist Party has been at odds with China since 1979 as a result of the ill-fated Sino-Vietnamese war.⁴² The significant differences between the two parties could also be highlighted to show the world that Communism does not need to rely on absolute authoritarianism. Vietnam's openness to direct local elections in 2010 as well as opening up senior government positions to open elections stand in stark contrast to Xi's "presidency for life."⁴³

Clearly, NATO partnerships with Vietnam and Indonesia would be advantageous from a strategic communications perspective in countering Chinese SCS activity. Leveraging regional narratives to support internationally-brokered diplomatic solutions in the SCS is additionally a sound strategy. Vietnam has been more than willing to openly criticize Chinese incursions into their territorial waters in official and public fora, most recently on 3 October 2019 when Vietnam's Foreign Ministry demanded that "China must immediately stop serious violations and withdraw its survey ship... and escort vessels from Viet Nam's waters."⁴⁴ Indonesia's government and media between 2014-2016 were able to transform China's claims of fishing rights in the Natuna Islands into the state's and people's primary security concern.⁴⁵ These two successful examples of strategic messaging are shining beacons of commitment when compared to the Philippine's decision to not engage in a war of words after the 2016 UNCLOS ruling.

⁴¹ "Milestones: 1953–1960 - Office of the Historian," accessed October 3, 2019, <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1953-1960/seato>.

⁴² "The Communist Parties of China and Vietnam Do Not Get on - Banyan," accessed October 5, 2019, <https://www-economist-com.usnwc.idm.oclc.org/asia/2017/12/19/the-communist-parties-of-china-and-vietnam-do-not-get-on>.

⁴³ "The Communist Parties of China and Vietnam Do Not Get on - Banyan."

⁴⁴ "VGP News | China Must Stop Serious Violations, Withdraw Vessels from VN's Waters - China Must Stop Serious Violations, Withdraw Vessels from VN's Waters," accessed October 14, 2019, <http://news.chinhphu.vn/Home/China-must-stop-serious-violations-withdraw-vessels-from-VNs-waters/201910/37668.vgp>.

⁴⁵ Patrik Krithope Meyer, Achmad Nurmandi, and Agustiyara Agustiyara, "Indonesia's Swift Securitization of the Natuna Islands How Jakarta Countered China's Claims in the South China Sea," *Asian Journal of Political Science* 27, no. 1 (January 2, 2019): 70–87, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02185377.2019.1590724>.

Being able to echo an international ruling that states “China had violated the Philippines’ sovereign rights in its exclusive economic zone and... that Chinese law enforcement vessels had unlawfully created a serious risk of collision when they physically obstructed Philippine vessels”⁴⁶ are not opportunities Indonesia or Vietnam would likely pass up. Regardless of the significant military and information advantages a NATO partnership will bring to bear, there are a two potential counter-arguments that must be addressed.

COUNTER-ARGUMENTS

There are two potential arguments to not approach Indonesia and Vietnam as NATO partners. They are: the potential of antagonizing Russia and feeding a negative post-colonial era narrative. As we will see, both can be quickly mitigated, if properly managed.

The primary argument against NATO increasing its efforts into the South China Sea area is the perception that NATO only exists to act as a deterrent against Russia. It has been argued increased NATO activity in the Pacific would stretch the Alliance too thin or provoke a Russian response. Conversely, it is important to remember that Russia spent almost 20 years in the Partnership for Peace program with NATO and only withdrew its support five years ago. Russia’s perception of its own security has been historically tied to activity near its borders and a perception that it is being “surrounded” by NATO could force a Russian response. Western media has opined that NATO already “... has its hands full dealing with a resurgent Russia and Vladimir Putin’s military ambitions in Europe and elsewhere.”⁴⁷ It is not just western media that argues this line of thinking. Zhou Bo, an honorary fellow at a Chinese military academy wrote

⁴⁶ The South China Sea Arbitration (The Republic of the Philippines v. The People’s Republic of China), 2.

⁴⁷ Gehrke, “NATO Chief Says Alliance Must Prepare ‘to Address the Rise of China’.”

that a NATO decision to side with America against China could drive Russia and China into a “grand coalition.”⁴⁸

As for the argument that any NATO presence in the SCS would create a Chinese/Russian super alliance, it is unfounded. The U.S. Intelligence Community already assesses “China and Russia are more aligned than at any point since the mid-1950s, and the relationship is likely to strengthen in the coming year as some of their interests and threat perceptions converge, particularly regarding perceived US unilateralism and interventionism and Western promotion of democratic values and human rights.”⁴⁹ Recent press reports indicating China and Russia are beginning to deepen their technology collaboration also show that Russia still has deep-seeded reasons to distrust China, such as past intellectual property theft and distrust of China’s belt and road program.⁵⁰ Russia has also been supporting Chinese competitors, namely Vietnam. This year Russian and Vietnamese state-owned oil companies executed a joint oil production site in the SCS.⁵¹ Collectively, these events display that the potential of a flawless alliance is far from achievable as Russian goals will not be compatible with Chinese hegemonic plans.

Another potential counter-argument against NATO partnerships in the SCS is they could be perceived as interference from former colonial powers. Vietnam was a former French colony who fought bitter wars against both France and the U.S. Likewise, Indonesia fought a 4-year war against the Netherlands for its freedom following World War II. However, it appears the substantial amount of time that has passed between these events and the present, over 60 years in

⁴⁸ Zhou Bo, “NATO’s Challenge Is Not China. It’s How to Keep the Alliance Alive,” South China Morning Post, April 18, 2019, <https://www.scmp.com/comment/insight-opinion/article/3006680/natos-big-challenge-not-china-how-keep-transatlantic>.

⁴⁹ Coats, Worldwide Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community, 4.

⁵⁰ Samuel Bendett and Elsa Kania, “China, Russia Deepen Technological Ties,” Defense One, October 4, 2019, <https://www.defenseone.com/threats/2019/10/china-russia-are-turning-each-other-tech-help-west-limits-access/160364/>.

⁵¹ “Vietnam Cracks Open New Oil Field in South China Sea with Russia,” *Energy Monitor Worldwide*, 2019, <http://usnwc.summon.serialssolutions.com/>

the case of Indonesia and over 40 for Vietnam, has allowed all parties to move forward and achieve mutually-beneficial interactions.⁵² Finally, Indonesian and Dutch friendship continues to prosper. In 2014 both states signed a Defense Cooperation Agreement which authorized exchange visits and increased professional military education opportunities.⁵³

In the case of Indonesia, which suffers from regular “drought, earthquakes, flooding, landslides, tsunamis, and volcanic eruptions,” there have been ample opportunities for NATO members to support Indonesia.⁵⁴ In 2018 the U.S. provided Indonesia almost \$12 million to post-earthquake and tsunami recovery efforts. Additionally, the UK Royal Air Force was able to deploy shelter kits, water purifier and other gear to isolated survivors during the same event.⁵⁵

With regard to Vietnam, relations with NATO members are continually improving. In August 2019, the USAF Chief of Staff (CSAF) and the Commander of Pacific Air Forces visited their Vietnamese counterparts for the first time since the Vietnam War concluded. This move exhibited the strong growth of trust between the two nations, which saw diplomatic relations normalized in 1995 and Vietnam becoming the U.S.’s 16th largest trading partner and the U.S. becoming Vietnam’s 3rd largest partner.⁵⁶ In a similar vein, France and Vietnam have grown closer in a mutually-beneficial nature over the years. Most recently, in 2018, French and Vietnamese prime ministers oversaw the signing over \$10 billion of business agreements and numerous cooperation agreements covering, “energy, education, health, technology and the

⁵² Constance Johnson, “Indonesia; Netherlands: Defense Cooperation Agreement Signed | Global Legal Monitor,” web page, February 7, 2014, [//www.loc.gov/law/foreign-news/article/indonesia-netherlands-defense-cooperation-agreement-signed/](http://www.loc.gov/law/foreign-news/article/indonesia-netherlands-defense-cooperation-agreement-signed/).

⁵³ Johnson.

⁵⁴ “Indonesia | Disaster Assistance | U.S. Agency for International Development,” November 23, 2018, <https://www.usaid.gov/crisis/indonesia>.

⁵⁵ “Indonesia Earthquake and Tsunami: RAF Bring in UK Aid - CBBC Newsround,” accessed October 6, 2019, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/newsround/45698348>.

⁵⁶ Charles Pope, “Air Force Generals Goldfein, Brown Make Historic Visit to Vietnam,” U.S. Air Force, accessed October 6, 2019, <https://www.af.mil/News/Article-Display/Article/1958744/air-force-generals-goldfein-brown-make-historic-visit-to-vietnam/>.

environment.”⁵⁷ It is clear that the reality of both Indonesia and Vietnam working together with NATO leaves little room for a narrative that claims those two nations are exploited by former colonial powers.

CONCLUSION

An economically and militarily rising China is a concern for the whole world, not just for the U.S. or the regional countries China seeks to dominate. At this time, China is willing to rely on informational, economic, and gray zone tactics in an attempt to normalize their maritime claims, while ignoring international law. When the time arrives, that China reaches regional military parity with the U.S., they may not hesitate to execute aggressive military actions to consolidate their claims. Therefore, it is important that the U.S. leverage NATO and NATO leverage focused partnerships with both Indonesia and Vietnam in an effort to create a newer and stronger *international regime* to contain Chinese aggression both militarily and in the information domain. NATO partnerships strengthen China’s competitors and unify them in a common goal.

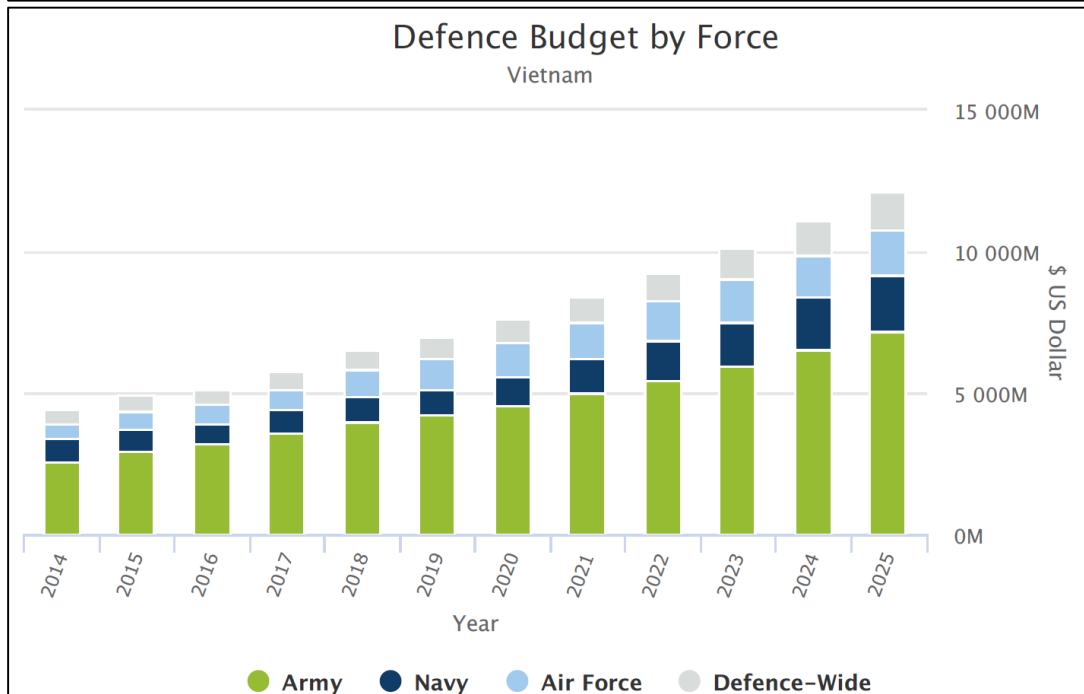
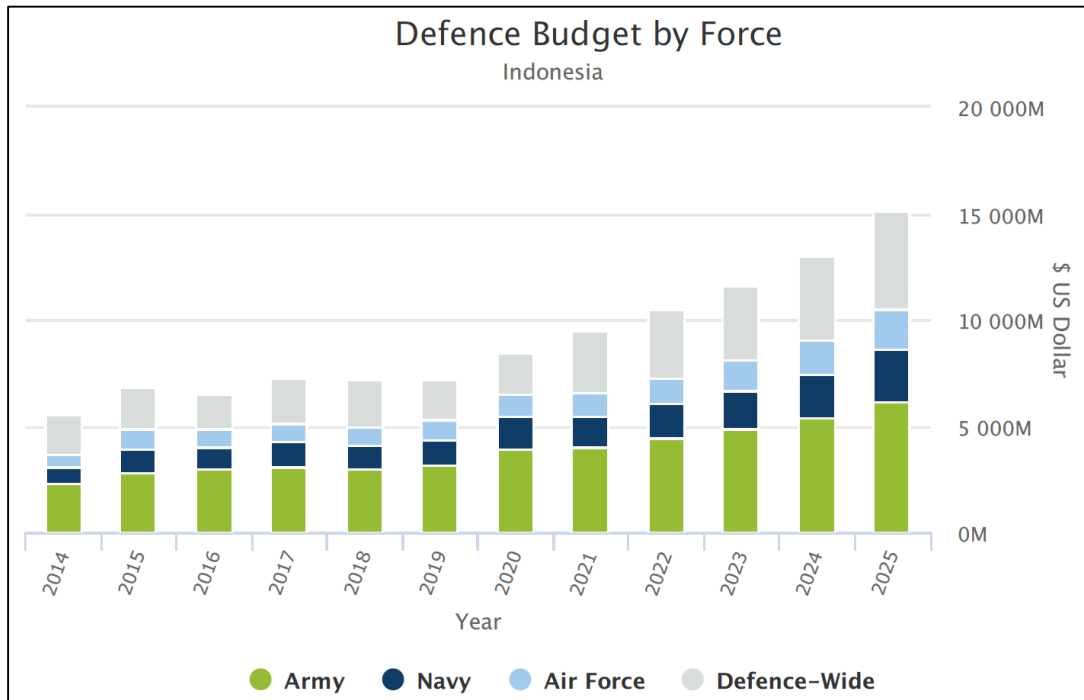
Indonesia and Vietnam are the strongest potential regional partners for NATO based on their economic commitment, complementary military capabilities, and reliability as partners. Furthermore, both sides bring complementary messaging capabilities that echo and enforce international law. Finally, thoughts that NATO partnerships with SCS states would force a Russian response or post-colonial backlash are not supported up by facts. Therefore, it is prudent for Indo-Pacific Command to begin focusing its outreach lines of effort, not as a series

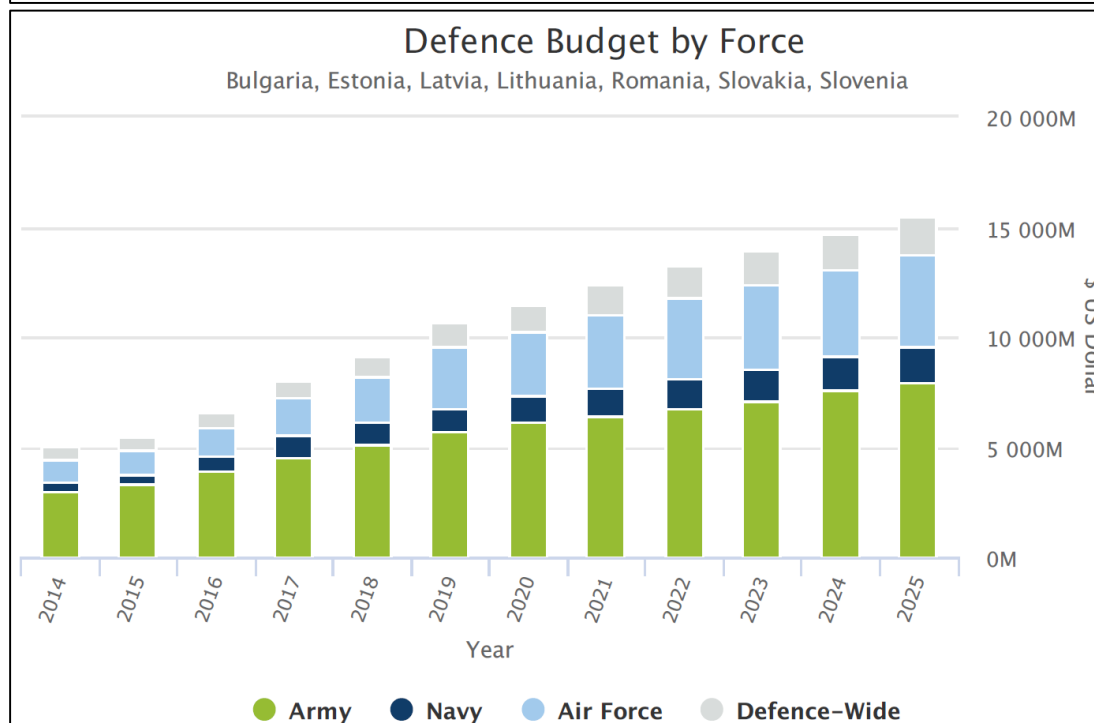
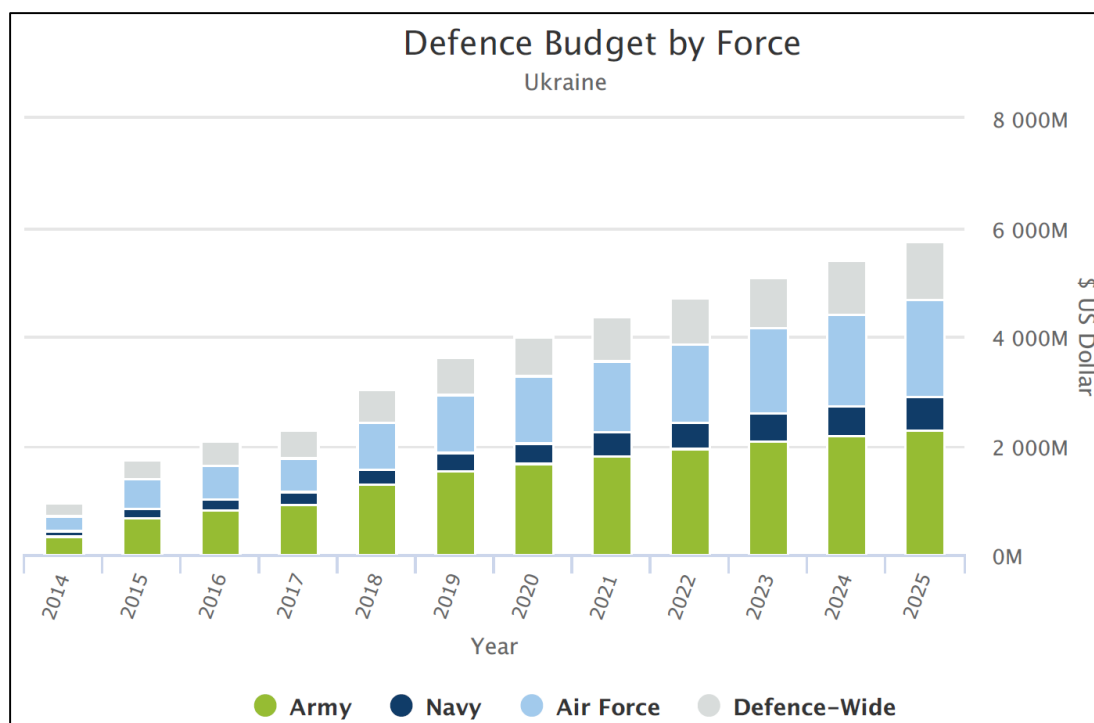
⁵⁷ “Vietnam, France Sign Deals Worth More Than \$10 Billion,” Voice of America, accessed October 6, 2019, <https://www.voanews.com/east-asia/vietnam-france-sign-deals-worth-more-10-billion>.

of independent bi-lateral actions, but as a global regime capable of competing with China diplomatically, informationally, economically and militarily if need be.

APPENDIX A: Defense Budgets of Select Countries

(source: https://janes-ihc-com.usnwc.idm.oclc.org/Visualisation/Display/FG_1031257-JIMDA)





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