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## **NATO's Vilnius Summit: Implications for the Indo-Pacific and ASEAN**

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### **SYNOPSIS**

*The NATO summit in Vilnius saw the attendance of leaders from the “Indo-Pacific Four” (IP4) for the second year in a row. **SARAH SOH** examines the impact of the NATO-IP4 partnerships on the Indo-Pacific region and ASEAN.*

### **COMMENTARY**

North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) leaders convened in Vilnius, Lithuania, on 11–12 July with an agenda dominated by issues corollary to the Russia-Ukraine war. Of [interest](#) to many observers was the Indo-Pacific representation at the alliance's security meeting for the second consecutive year. Following last year's summit in Madrid, leaders from Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and South Korea, informally called the “Indo-Pacific Four” (IP4), were in attendance at Vilnius.

#### **NATO and the IP4**

At the conference in Vilnius, each of the four countries took steps to enhance bilateral cooperation with NATO through the adoption of the Individually Tailored Partnership Programme (ITPP). The ITPPs identified issues of common interest and mapped out cooperation in a wide range of areas, including climate change, cybersecurity, maritime security, space security, and emerging technologies, among others.

Broader in scope and containing more comprehensive specifications of the goals and outcomes of collaboration, the ITPP represented an upgrade from the Individual Partnership and Cooperation Programme (IPCP), which each of the IP4 concluded with NATO between 2012 to 2014. In sum, the ITPPs reflect deepening partnerships between NATO and the IP4.

The elevation in NATO-IP4 cooperation was not unexpected. In its [2022 Strategic Concept](#), the alliance had expressed its intention to “strengthen dialogue and cooperation with new and existing partners in the Indo-Pacific” as “developments in that region can directly affect Euro-Atlantic security”. This view was reiterated by NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg at the [post-summit press conference in Vilnius](#): “What happens in Europe matters to the Indo-Pacific, and what happens in the Indo-Pacific matters to North America and Europe.”

Moreover, in both its Strategic Concept as well as a [communiqué](#) issued midway through the Vilnius summit, NATO referred to Russia as “the most significant and direct threat ... to peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area” and to China’s “stated ambitions and coercive policies” as challenges to NATO’s “interests, security and values.”

While stopping short of making a direct attribution, it was apparent that NATO saw the “deepening strategic partnership” between Russia and China, and their “mutually reinforcing attempts to undercut the rules-based international order” as the basis for the intersection of security concerns between Europe and the Indo-Pacific. NATO’s increasing engagement with the IP4 is therefore rooted in its assessment of a growing nexus between the transatlantic and Indo-Pacific security environments.



The 2023 NATO Vilnius summit saw leaders of NATO and the "Indo-Pacific 4" (IP4) coming together to reaffirm bilateral ties while maintaining a hardline stance against Russia and China. Such a stance may intensify tensions in the Indo-Pacific, which ASEAN will have to mitigate to maintain stability and cooperation in the region.

*Image from Wikimedia Commons.*

## Impact on the Indo-Pacific

Unsurprisingly, China has come out strongly against NATO’s latest communiqué. A statement released by the [Chinese mission to the European Union](#) criticised NATO for “smear[ing] China” and “meddling in affairs beyond its borders.” It also warned that China would protect its “legitimate rights and interests” with a firm resolve.

NATO’s recent moves – the inclusion of the IP4 at its summits, its proposal to [open a liaison office in Japan](#), and its unequivocal stance on the threats posed by China – have antagonised China and reinforced Beijing’s perception of the alliance’s “eastward movement” into the Indo-Pacific. Although the ITPPs are geared towards strengthening NATO-IP4 cooperation in non-military areas, their association with geostrategic objectives is strong, given the context and timing of their adoption.

Relations in the Indo-Pacific are set to become even more polarised and contentious. Several middle powers in the region, including the IP4, have acted to defend their interests in the face of China's ascendancy by seeking closer strategic alignment with the United States and the West, albeit to varying degrees. At the same time, NATO's overtures to the IP4 signal the intent of the United States and its allies to continue expanding their network of diplomatic and security ties in the Indo-Pacific against China's encroaching influence.

### **How Should ASEAN Respond?**

Coincidentally, ASEAN held its annual Foreign Ministers' Meeting (AMM) in Jakarta over the same two days as the Vilnius conference, followed by the East Asia Summit (EAS) Foreign Ministers' Meeting and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in the later part of the week. China's top-ranking diplomat, Wang Yi, met separately with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and US Secretary of State Antony Blinken on the sidelines of the ASEAN meetings. The Wang-Blinken meeting took place just under a month from Blinken's official visit to China. ASEAN foreign ministers also reached an agreement with China on guidelines to expedite negotiations on the South China Sea Code of Conduct, although details are lacking.

The meetings did not suggest major shifts in US-China relations nor substantive breakthroughs in the management of the South China Sea issue. Even so, the overall more conciliatory and inclusive tone at the ASEAN meetings stood in stark contrast to the hardline approach adopted by NATO against Russia and China at Vilnius. ASEAN should continue to excel at what it does best – which is to provide a neutral context and engagement platforms for contending powers to meet and find ways to resolve their differences peacefully.

That being said, if the notion of ASEAN Centrality implies that ASEAN represents the central node for connections in the regional multilateral architecture, then the NATO-IP4 enhanced partnerships and the formation of minilaterals such as AUKUS and the Quad can be construed as attempts by the United States and its allies to seek alternative means of engagement with the Indo-Pacific, outside of ASEAN. At present, these arrangements have not replaced ASEAN-led mechanisms. Nonetheless, their emergence underscores the need for ASEAN to take a hard look at its “value-add” to the regional architecture, or risk being side-lined in the long term.

ASEAN had set out its vision for the Indo-Pacific as a region characterised by “peace, stability, and prosperity” in the [ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific \(AOIP\)](#). ASEAN should ensure that the AOIP remains a practicable rather than aspirational outlook. To this end, ASEAN should undertake proactive steps to work out the implementation of the AOIP among the member states and with its dialogue partners, which include the IP4.

ASEAN made some progress towards implementing the AOIP when leaders of its member states issued a declaration to “[mainstream](#)” the AOIP's four priority areas through ASEAN-led institutions. Since the four priority areas are not novel areas of cooperation between ASEAN and its dialogue partners, consolidation and coordination are essential to synergise current or ongoing programmes with the AOIP to prevent overlaps and redundancy. For instance, the areas of cooperation under the EAS do cover the AOIP's focus areas. ASEAN could perhaps consider ways to incorporate the AOIP priority areas into the EAS agenda. There is also a need to assess the efficacy of ASEAN-led institutions in promoting and facilitating the work of mainstreaming the AOIP. This may require that ASEAN improve on its existing institutional processes and mechanisms. On the issue of ASEAN's cooperation with the IP4, all four countries had expressed their support for the AOIP and identified potential areas for collaboration under the AOIP's four priority areas. ASEAN should continue engaging the IP4 dialogue partners and take steps to track the progress of cooperation.

At a time when tensions are high and competing interests threaten to undermine stability and cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, ASEAN needs to act decisively and in unity to assert its credibility and utility.

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