



Institutional cooperation between NATO and IP4: expectations, constraints, and cooperation prospects

A planning toolkit for Indo-Pacific and Euro-Atlantic
cooperation to prevent and manage crises

July 2026



*This project
is supported by:*

The NATO Science for Peace
and Security Programme

Institutional cooperation between NATO and IP4

Working group members*

CHAIR: Professor David CAPIE

Victoria University of Wellington

Mr. Flynn ACWORTH

Doctoral Candidate, Victoria University of Wellington

Professor Stephan FRÜHLING

Australian National University

Ms. Mirna GALIC

Non-Resident Senior Fellow, Foreign Policy Research Institute

Dr. Gorana GRGIĆ

Head of Global Security Team, Centre for Security Studies, ETH Zürich

Ambassador Masafumi ISHII

Former Ambassador of Japan to the United States

Dr. Saeme KIM

Associate Research Fellow, Asan Institute for Policy Studies

Dr. Julia MACDONALD

Director of Research and Engagement, Asia New Zealand Foundation

Dr. Oliver MEIER

Head of Programme for Nuclear and Multilateral Disarmament, ELN

Dr. Frank O'DONNELL

Senior Research Adviser, APLN

Mr. Joel PETERSSON-IVRE

Senior Policy Fellow, APLN

Ms. Shatabhisha SHETTY

Executive Director, APLN

Mr. Piotr SZYMAŃSKI

Deputy Head, Security and Defence Department, Centre for Eastern Studies

* All members endorse the full report in their personal capacities.

This research was sponsored by the NATO Science for Peace and Security Programme under grant id. SPS. MYP. G7935. The views expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the position of NATO, the European Leadership Network, the Asia-Pacific Leadership Network, or the other institutions mentioned in this report.

Introduction

The relationship between the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and its four Indo-Pacific partners – Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and the Republic of Korea (ROK) – has witnessed an evolution in recent years. This group is now often known as Indo-Pacific 4 (IP4) (a term coined by NATO), and the leaders of these countries have attended NATO summits and deepened their respective Individually Tailored Partnership Programmes (ITPP) with NATO. This burgeoning NATO-IP4 alignment reflects a mutual recognition that security issues in one region are linked with those in the other.

But the partnership is now facing significant headwinds. This report identifies diverging threat perceptions of China, North Korea, and Russia, as well as resource and capacity constraints, and ongoing intra-NATO tensions between the United States and other alliance members. These each present significant limitations on the ability to further deepen cross-theatre cooperation under a formal NATO-IP4 label.

The report is based on senior Track-II working group discussions between Euro-Atlantic and IP4 experts convened between December 2025 and April 2026. It explores shared NATO-IP4 outlooks and strategic expectations, key divergences, and potential areas for cross-regional cooperation between IP4 states and NATO at the institutional level. The report finds that efforts towards crisis **prevention** can be further pursued, even under the significant constraints facing NATO in particular. However, the potential for cross-theatre crisis **management** is severely limited, in terms of NATO's ability to support the management of a crisis in the Indo-Pacific theatre, and vice versa.

This report is aimed at decision-makers in NATO and IP4 states exploring greater NATO institutional cooperation with IP4 states and vice versa. The report also seeks to engage IP4 policymakers considering potential agenda development and institution-building for this minilateral, both as a means to promote shared Indo-Pacific security preferences and to institutionally engage with NATO on cross-theatre cooperation. This institutional focus largely precludes analysis on how individual NATO and IP4 states can cooperate at the interstate level. A separate report, *State-to-state cooperation between NATO and IP4 member states*, develops policy recommendations that can be implemented at this interstate level.

Shared outlooks and strategic expectations between NATO and the IP4

Working group participants agreed that there is a clear and mutual recognition between NATO members and IP4 partners that the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific strategic theatres are increasingly interconnected, and that this convergence is largely driven by the perception of strengthening relations between Russia, China, and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK). Both NATO members and IP4 partners view these growing strategic alignments, which span military coordination, diplomatic support, and the pushing of a joint narrative against Western leadership as a worrisome development that increases the likelihood of cross-regional crises emerging.

Facing this challenge, the participants agreed that the key interest aligning NATO and the IP4 is the preservation of the rules-based international order. Both groups see themselves as being threatened by the erosion of international law, and find themselves relying on a shrinking pool of supporters while simultaneously facing increased resource demands.

Institutionally, working group members argued that IP4 partners continue to see NATO as a useful platform for security engagement with European allies. Conversely, NATO members view the IP4 as essential providers of direct regional input and information that the alliance is not able to generate on its own. As the four member states rarely take joint actions independently of interactions with NATO, the IP4 does not constitute an institutionalised minilateral group in itself. Yet IP4 partnerships are effectively institutionalised at NATO ministerial and working level, through regular invitations to defence and foreign minister events. Each IP4 state's bilateral ITPP with NATO also serves as a foundational baseline for future cooperation, though they have not been designed specifically for crisis prevention and management.

Despite the existing strategic alignment, cooperative mechanisms, and shared expectations between NATO and IP4 partners, the working group concluded that multiple converging factors are constraining the development of deeper institutional cooperation; in particular, the divergent strategic priorities and resource constraints of European allies due to Russia's war in Ukraine, and the destabilising effects of recent shifts in US strategy.

Divergent priorities and capacity constraints

Participants highlighted that NATO currently lacks a unified strategy for the Indo-Pacific region. While the institution never intended to project military power into the Indo-Pacific, its strict geographic remit means that even lower-level cross-regional security cooperation can come under internal scrutiny. With Russia's war in Ukraine consuming much of NATO's resources and attention, members remain focused on Europe, and extra-regional institutional engagement risks encountering concern about the dilution of NATO's core remit.

Reinforcing this limitation, the US National Security Strategy (NSS)¹ contains specific wording aimed at avoiding the perception of NATO as a perpetually expanding alliance, underscored by US pressure that European allies shoulder the major burden of the conventional defence of Europe.² This constraint raises critical strategic questions regarding the upper bounds of NATO-IP4 cooperation.

The impact of US strategy on institutional cooperation

For the IP4, the working group agreed that deepening institutional ties with NATO can introduce diplomatic sensitivities and bureaucratic burdens, and may risk validating adversarial narratives of NATO expansion into the Indo-Pacific, inviting negative reactions from major regional trading partners. The IP4 partners are unified by their interest in engagement with European NATO members and their willingness to engage in security issues beyond the Indo-Pacific theatre, as demonstrated in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Ukraine. However, discussions highlighted that the strategic priorities and threat perceptions of IP4 states remain heterogeneous, particularly in relation to China.

Underlying much of the NATO-IP4 relationship, and appearing as a recurring theme in all working group meetings, is the challenge of ensuring the United States remains committed to security in both the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific theatres. Historically, NATO-IP4 cooperation has been partially driven by the desire to demonstrate that US allies in Europe and Asia are working in tandem, reinforcing the idea that Washington does not need to choose to prioritise one region over the other. However, participants argued that the foreign and security policies of the second Trump administration have severely complicated this dynamic, and that a key constraint on further NATO-IP4 institutional development is the US administration's explicit preference that European allies assume a greater burden for their local security. The Trump administration has also indicated similar preferences for Indo-Pacific allies, although these preferences are perceived to have been less intensely and repeatedly expressed in comparison to European engagements.³

Aggressive US unilateral actions have created internal uncertainty for the alliance. The working group discussions highlighted that the administration's posture regarding Greenland threatens NATO cohesion, and that kinetic operations in Venezuela and Iran are seen as fundamentally incompatible with the sustainment of the rules-based international order. This uncertainty undermines the foundational narrative of the NATO-IP4 partnership – which is aimed at strengthening the international rules-based order – and makes it difficult for IP4 leaders to justify deepening institutional cooperation with NATO, and vice versa. However, the uncertainty might also have a countervailing effect of encouraging working-level cooperation between non-US NATO members and the IP4.⁴

Ultimately, however, the United States is only one member of NATO, and the institution operates on consensus. While the working group agreed that the current friction in Washington makes highly visible, top-down strategic integration politically challenging, the barriers to building stronger NATO-IP4 institutional ties are not insurmountable. This strategic uncertainty dictates a shift in approach, incentivising IP4 partners to pursue durable, working-level, and low-profile cooperation with NATO at the institutional level. Building such working-level ties is especially feasible in a context where serious advancement on high-level NATO-IP4 institutional cooperation may be unlikely while NATO members remain preoccupied with managing the current uncertainty regarding US security commitments to Europe.

Opportunities for institutional NATO-IP4 cooperation

The working group conceded that opportunities for NATO-IP4 institutional cooperation on crisis *management* are currently extremely limited by NATO's capacity constraints due to Russia's war in Ukraine, the lack of a unified NATO strategy towards the Indo-Pacific, and the uncertainties introduced by recent developments in US strategy.⁵ Cooperation in this area is likely to occur under a coalition-of-the-willing framework, rather than through NATO at the institutional level, as neither group is prone to intervene kinetically in a crisis as NATO or as IP4. Cooperation below the institutional level is discussed in the *State-to-state cooperation between NATO and IP4 member states* report.

Therefore, the working group's recommendations focus on opportunities for improving cross-regional crisis *prevention* mechanisms through NATO-IP4 institutional cooperation. These recommendations include:

1. Resolve NATO-IP4 information-sharing blind spots and establish genuine two-way information flows.

In the past, IP4 partners have provided intelligence inputs for NATO reports, but have not been cleared to view the finalised documents. Mechanisms could be established to ensure IP4 states have access to assessments they help create, and NATO could consider providing IP4 partners with more granular threat intelligence to ensure threat perceptions are founded on shared facts and understanding.

2. Conduct longitudinal joint assessments of the cross-regional security environment.

NATO and IP4 partners could pool resources to produce joint internal reports on Russia, China, and North Korea relations, aiming to build a lasting dataset against which to track future behaviour.

3. Develop coordinated strategic communications.

Formulate strategic communication strategies and ready-to-deploy counter-narratives during a crisis, such as a Taiwan contingency, to frame adversarial actions as violations of international law.

4. Sustain joint military exercises.

NATO and IP4 partners should maintain participation in regional military exercises to ensure and signal interoperability between Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific forces. Exercises could also be paired with joint tasking and a regularised presence at existing European regional bases in the Indo-Pacific. Special Forces engagements, such as the participation of European forces in Japan's 2026 New Year Jump Drill, are a highly feasible high-value addition to traditional joint military exercises.⁶ Conversely, IP4 participation in NATO exercises is vital. The deployment of Australian airborne early warning and control aircraft to NATO's eastern flank provides capability that NATO itself does not have readily available. NATO and IP4 should identify other areas where IP4 states can fill capability gaps in the existing Euro-Atlantic deterrence architecture, without undermining the same in the Indo-Pacific.

5. Develop non-military contingency support frameworks for Indo-Pacific crises.

Institutional mechanisms can be developed for NATO member states to provide non-kinetic support during Indo-Pacific contingencies. Explicitly modelled on the assistance that IP4 states have provided to Ukraine, this effort should focus on coordinating economic sanctions, diplomatic responses, countermeasures against hybrid activities, and frameworks for financial support.

6. Favour informal, adaptable intra-IP4 cooperation over heavy institutionalisation.

Establishing a formal IP4 secretariat risks mission creep and resource strain. Instead, IP4 partners should pivot towards an approach based on shared strategic alignment, and specific modular projects. To address the lack of a 'control tower' in the grouping, IP4 states should consider holding regularised meetings of senior level officials to set and maintain an annual agenda and manage coordination where necessary. For example, leader or ministerial meetings could be organised on the sidelines of established global events (such as the East Asia Summit, APEC Economic Leaders' Meeting, and Shangri-La Dialogue). Over time, such informal IP4 coordination could also potentially extend to operating as an Indo-Pacific Contact Group, leveraging established consultation frameworks to address specific shared domains.

7. Prioritise bottom-up NATO-IP4 cooperation and working-level integration.

Each IP4 partner should consider posting a permanent IP4 liaison officer at NATO Headquarters, and should aim to facilitate durable, low-profile institutional cooperation to build long-term strategic cohesion. Contributions from Australia, New Zealand, and most recently Japan to NATO Security Assistance and Training for Ukraine should be deepened. The ROK should consider sending officers as well.

8. Build durable inter-parliamentary and political linkages between NATO and IP4 lawmakers.

A NATO-IP4 Inter-Parliamentary Group that connects IP4 lawmakers with the NATO Parliamentary Assembly can help ensure institutional continuity across domestic election cycles. To reduce potential logistical issues, the current system of individual bilateral parliamentary visits should be maintained, rather than attempting to host joint regional meetings in a single Indo-Pacific capital.

9. Build cross-theatre supply chains, scale multi-year munitions production, and pursue targeted defence specialisation.

Deepen defence industrial collaboration to meet common standards, guarantee interoperability, and create interlinked supply chains capable of sustaining two-theatre strategic simultaneity. NATO and the IP4 should drive joint production, standardisation, and multi-year procurement contracts, and cooperation should transition from transactional exports and local assembly towards advanced joint design and development. IP4 states should deepen engagement in joint procurement and standardisation talks by

utilising established NATO frameworks like the Conference of National Armaments Directors (CNAD).

The IP4 states should implement targeted defence specialisation by leveraging the unique comparative advantages of each state. For example, capitalising on proven systems (like ROK missile defence technology) could reduce single-point reliance on US infrastructure. Simultaneously, encourage partners to focus on niche areas of expertise, such as dual-use manufacturing in drone, maritime, and commercial space launch sectors.

Conclusion

The working group discussions clearly highlighted that current institutional constraints, compounded by the resource pressures of Russia's war in Ukraine and the effects of recent US strategy, make NATO-IP4 institutional cooperation on crisis management unfeasible. Consequently, the most productive path forward lies in fostering bottom-up, working-level efforts focused on crisis prevention and preparedness. Such a bottom-up approach further lends itself to the creativity, experimentation, and gradual routinisation of new mechanisms that is characteristic of this cooperation-building pathway, as opposed to the relative inflexibility and mismatch of expectations and actual activities that frequently accompany top-down approaches. The above recommendations, pursued through working-level engagements, can best yield meaningful cooperation and a durable base for closer partnership.

Notes

- 1 White House, “National Security Strategy of the United States of America”, December 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/2025-National-Security-Strategy.pdf>.
- 2 See for example, US Department of Defense, “Remarks by Under Secretary of War for Policy Elbridge Colby at the NATO Defense Ministerial”, February 12, 2026, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Speeches/Speech/Article/4404801/remarks-by-under-secretary-of-war-for-policy-elbridge-colby-at-the-nato-defense/>.
- 3 See, for example, the US statement that “South Korea is capable of taking primary responsibility for deterring North Korea with critical but more limited U.S. support” in US Department of Defense, “2026 National Defense Strategy”, January 23, 2026, <https://media.defense.gov/2026/Jan/23/2003864773/-1/-1/0/2026-NATIONAL-DEFENSE-STRATEGY.PDF>, p. 20. See also blunt and short-notice US demands that Japan increase its defence budget leading to Japanese cancellation of a key alliance meeting, in Demetri Sevastopulo, Leo Lewis, and Henry Foy, “Japan scraps US meeting after Washington demands more defence spending”, Financial Times, June 20, 2025, <https://www.ft.com/content/53f646e7-b4e7-4bf4-8d5d-7142b4460080?syn-25a6b1a6=1>.
- 4 Cooperation between individual NATO members and IP4 states is explored in the *State-to-state cooperation between NATO and IP4 member states* companion report.
- 5 However, one working group member argued that ongoing cooperation between NATO and the IP4 on Ukraine does constitute crisis management (see recommendation 5).
- 6 “Record 15 nations join GSDF’s new year jump drill”, Japan Times, January 11, 2026, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2026/01/11/japan/g sdf-new-year-jump-drill/>.

The European Leadership Network (ELN) is an independent, non-partisan, pan-European NGO with a network of nearly 200 past, present and future European leaders working to provide practical real-world solutions to political and security challenges.

The Asia-Pacific Leadership Network (APLN) is a network of former and serving political, diplomatic and military leaders, as well as senior government officials, scholars and experts, dedicated to addressing security challenges in the Asia-Pacific.

Contact

Published by the European Leadership Network
and the Asia-Pacific Leadership Network, July 2026

European Leadership Network (ELN)
8 St James's Square
London, UK, SW1Y 4JU

Asia-Pacific Leadership Network (APLN)
4th fl., 116, Pirundae-ro, Jongno-gu
Seoul, ROK, 03035

@theELN | europeanleadershipnetwork.org
@APLNofficial | www.apln.network

Published under the Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0

© The ELN and the APLN 2026

The opinions articulated in this report represent the views of the authors, and do not necessarily reflect the position of the European Leadership Network, the Asia-Pacific Leadership Network, or any of their members.



European Leadership Network
8 St James's Square
London, SW1Y 4JU
United Kingdom

Email: secretariat@europeanleadershipnetwork.org
Tel: 0203 176 2555

Follow us    

europeanleadershipnetwork.org



*This project
is supported by:*

The NATO Science for Peace
and Security Programme