

NATO and the Pacific:
Extending Mutual Defense Beyond the North Atlantic

Richard C. P. Kaufman IV
Contemporary Political-Military Affairs in the North Atlantic Area
Dr. Michael John Williams
May 13th, 2023

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Introduction

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization, formed by the eponymous 1949 North Atlantic Treaty, has continued to grow in the decades since its formation, with the most recent expansion only weeks ago.¹ These 31 member nations however, have been limited to areas in the North Atlantic, Europe and North America, despite both strong allies and a growing antagonists in the South Pacific.

In addition to not including allies in the area, NATO's mutual defense –the idea on which the alliance is predicated– does not include some territories of exiting members that are key to potential NATO operations and strategies in the region. As NATO nations continue to develop plans to counter and cope with growing geopolitical and military power in China and North Korea, is it time for an antipodean expansion?

The prospect of Pacific allies joining the alliance is not a new one; Japan, South Korea, and Australia are all designated “major non-NATO allies,” and have been participating in NATO operations and summits for years. To this point though, them becoming full-fledged members of the alliance has remained a hypothetical.

This paper uses Brian Campbell's explanation of Chinese attitudes toward Taiwan as well as historical context and comparisons to Ukraine, Georgia, and Kosovo to to explore whether the conditions which would make conflict stemming from NATO expansion talks likely are present in Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand, and posit that The United States should push to reform the Washington Treaty by removing geographic limits on mutual defense to incorporate existing NATO lands and longstanding Asian-Pacific allies into NATO to increase the likelihood of continued peace in the region and strengthen American global influence.

¹ “Finland Joins NATO as 31st Ally.”

The North Atlantic Treaty and Limits to Mutual Defense

NATO's governing document, The North Atlantic Treaty, is divided into a preamble and 14 short articles. It sets in place the general overview of how, where, and when NATO acts and operates. Under the current treaty, Pacific expansion is impossible as specific provisions would prohibit it, particularly Articles V, VI, & X.

Article V

Article V is the provision of the Washington Treaty that provides for mutual defense, and forms the bedrock of NATO:

“The Parties agree that an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all and... each of them... will assist the Party or Parties so attacked... including the use of armed force, to restore and maintain the security of the North Atlantic area.”²

Baked into the text of Article V is the limitation of NATO mutual defense to “Europe or North America” for the purpose of maintaining security in “the North Atlantic Area.”

Article VI

Article VI of the NATO charter further specifies the scope of NATO members' commitment to mutual defense to air, land, and sea-based attacks on NATO member forces in “the North Atlantic area north of the Tropic of Cancer.”³ This leaves out areas both NATO areas and forces operating below the Tropic of Cancer and leaves several NATO members without total assurance that they would be backed up by their NATO allies.

Article X

Article X is the most direct obstacle to Pacific expansion. Article X covers the process of expansion, and places certain limitations on it. Not only is consensus among current members required to invite new members, but it also limits these new members to “European State[s].”⁴

² “The North Atlantic Treaty.”

³ “The North Atlantic Treaty.”

⁴ “Enlargement and Article 10”; “The North Atlantic Treaty.”

Threats in the Pacific

There are several current factors that make NATO expansion into the Pacific important. Threats posed by North Korea and China to longstanding post-war NATO allies in Japan, South Korea, and Australia as well as NATO lands in the area, should accelerate conversations about potential NATO expansion.

Current NATO Areas

Several areas of NATO nations of note that would not be covered under currently mutual defense obligations are Reunion & French Guiana (France); Hawai'i, Guam, & Puerto Rico (USA); and The Falkland Islands & Bermuda (UK). Hawai'i and Guam are important when considering threats from China and North Korea due to their positioning, and The Falkland Islands bears consideration due to eponymous war.

Hawai'i, despite being one of the fifty US states, is not covered by NATO's mutual defense. Achieving statehood in 1959, ten years after the Washington Treaty, Hawai'i falls below Article VI's Tropic of Cancer delineator, and in the absence of an exception to Article VI made for Hawai'i, it is not provided for.⁵

Guam is the NATO area outside of the North Atlantic that is perhaps under most threat. A Pacific Island territory of the United States and also below the Tropic of Cancer, Guam is in an important strategic location for the United States as a forward operating base about 1900 miles from the Chinese mainland. In early 2022, North Korea began testing missiles capable of reaching Guam.⁶ These are in addition to the hundreds of missiles already in operation by China which could be used to attack Guam.⁷

The limitation to mutual defense is what prevented a potential invocation of mutual defense during the Falklands War between the United Kingdom and Argentina in 1982. Though The United States was supportive of the UK during the war, it was not directly involved. Had this stipulation not been in place in 1982, it is possible that UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher would have invoked Article V, and The United States and other NATO allies would have been compelled to act.

NATO Allies

One of the original purposes of NATO being a deterrent to outside military aggression, as was further shown by recent Finnish and Swedish efforts to the join NATO in response to the

⁵ Tertrais, "Article 5 of the Washington Treaty," 2.

⁶ The Associated Press, "North Korea Has Confirmed That It Tested a Missile Capable of Striking Guam."

⁷ Clark et al., "Defending Guam," 46.

current war in Ukraine, it holds that pacific countries worried by Chinese and North Korean aggression may wish to join the alliance.

NATO members in Europe are not entirely hostile to cooperation with Asian allies: Japan, South Korea, Australia were all invited to participate in the 2022 NATO summit, an otherwise largely unprecedented invitation. NATO members also have publicly recognized the China challenge.⁸ In the communiqué released after the 2021 summit in Brussel that “China's stated ambitions and assertive behaviour present systemic challenges to the rules-based international order and to areas relevant to Alliance security. We are concerned by those coercive policies which stand in contrast to the fundamental values enshrined in the Washington Treaty.”⁹

⁸ Erskine, “The Western Flank,” 4.

⁹ “Brussels Summit Communiqué”; Erskine, “The Western Flank,” 2.

Avoiding War, or Causing It?

Some in the west may raise objections to a NATO expansion into the Pacific, calling it hubristic and provocative, and surely bound to start a conflict with China. Many have blamed the war in Ukraine on NATO expansion, insinuating that the expansion of American influence into areas seen as Russian domain has caused Russia to lash out violently. It can be shown that the geopolitical conditions that have led to the violence in Ukraine are more complex and go beyond simple Russian objections to NATO moving closer to its borders. This paper presents an explanation of three criteria present in Ukraine that make war or invasion in the face of a strong and credible movement toward NATO ascension more likely:

1. Territorial claims/ambitions from a NATO-antagonist state or close ally.
2. A history of subjugation from the antagonist state connected to the relative strength of that state.
3. A connection to the legitimacy and/or identity of the antagonist state for which NATO ascension and guarantee of independence of the theoretical NATO member threatens the legitimacy of the antagonist state.

Using these criteria in the context of states like Ukraine, Georgia, Taiwan, and Kosovo, the likelihood that Japanese, Australian, and South Korean ascent would lead to more peace, or conflict can be analyzed.

Ukraine and Georgia

The invasions of Ukraine and Georgia by Russia have been well documented and are better litigated in a dedicated piece, though a brief discussion is warranted. Both nations fit into the conditions outlined: Both nations were members of the Soviet Union, and a Russia lead by Putin with nostalgic waxings for a greater Russia in the mold of the Soviet Union has had ambitions of incorporating those lands into Russia. In Ukraine in particular, the concept of Russian identity can be traced back to the Kyivan Rus empire, which was governed from Kyiv in modern Ukraine.

In NATO's declaration following the 2008 Bucharest Summit, in addition to announcing the ascension of Croatia and Albania, NATO stated rather definitively regarding Ukraine and Georgia that "that these countries will become members of NATO," and outlined their next steps.¹⁰ Russia may have seen the prospect of these nations joining NATO as "forcing" their hand in the invasions, after largely respecting their independence before. Georgia was invaded directly following the summit, while the greater relative importance of Ukraine may have dissuaded Russia for a time.¹¹ Ukraine's pro-western Euromaidan protests in 2013 & resulting ousting of

¹⁰ "Finland Joins NATO as 31st Ally."

¹¹ Tertrais, "Article 5 of the Washington Treaty," 2.

Russia aligned President Yanukovych in 2014 as well as the installation of the Zelenskyy government in 2019 and further movement toward NATO and EU by Ukraine have been regarded as major contributing factors to Putin's decision to invade Crimea and then Ukraine as a whole in 2014 and 2022 respectively.¹²

Kosovo

Though several other Balkan and former-Yugoslav states have joined NATO, including Albania, North Macedonia, & Montenegro; and Kosovo has been a NATO ally for nearly a quarter century, it is not usually seriously mentioned as a possible target for NATO enlargement but is useful in this discussion.¹³

Kosovo meets the criteria outlined, with relation to Serbia. Both nations were part of the former Yugoslavia, which was lead from Belgrade. Though the tensions today are political, they were exceptionally violent during the late nineties, culminating in 1998 and '99's Kosovo War and leading to war crimes indictments at the highest levels of both sides.¹⁴ A collection of wars fought during the '90's as part of the break of Yugoslavia, the Yugoslav wars saw several NATO interventions, including a bombing campaign in Kosovo championed by former British Prime Minister Tony Blair.¹⁵ The four month campaign ended with acquiesce from Serbia to tolerate peacekeeping troops and the "substantial autonomy" of Kosovo as part of Resolution 1244 of the United Nations Security Council.¹⁶ Since then, peace has been kept by a combination of UN forces (UNMIK: United Nations Mission in Kosovo) and NATO troops (KFOR: Kosovo Force).¹⁷ In addition to receiving military support from NATO, the Kosovars remain strong supporters of The United States, such as naming roads and constructing statues for US leaders such as Madeleine Albright, Beau Biden, and the Clintons.¹⁸

Since its declaration of independence in 2008, the international community has been split over whether to recognize Kosovan sovereignty. Only 93 UN member States currently recognize Kosovo's independence and sovereignty, compared to 111 in 2016.¹⁹ Belgrade and its allies in Moscow and Beijing have successfully kept Kosovo out of NATO, the EU, Interpol, the UN, and several other international organizations, though an accord known as the "Washington Agreement" to normalize some relations was signed between the nations.²⁰

¹² Kirby, "Has Putin's War Failed"; Yuhas and Jalabi, "Ukraine's Revolution and Russia's Occupation of Crimea."

¹³ "NATO - Member Countries."

¹⁴ Simons, "Ex-Leader of Kosovo"; Truheart, "Milosevic."

¹⁵ Kuisel, *The French Way*, 258.

¹⁶ United Nations Resolution 1244, 2–3.

¹⁷ Judah, *Kosovo: What Everyone*, 90–91.

¹⁸ Parra, "Highway in Kosovo Named after Beau Biden"; Delauney, "Kosovo's Love Affair with the Clintons."

¹⁹ Newman and Visoka, "The Foreign Policy of State Recognition," 368.

²⁰ Muharremi, "The 'Washington Agreement,'" 2–3.

This history illustrates that Serbia has some territorial ambitions in Kosovo, and a history of subjugating the area during times of strength. Kosovo also meets the third criteria, as Kosovo is connected to a Serbian identity. Though the conflict in Kosovo was largely not a religious one, there is a strong connection between the Serbian Orthodox Church and some areas of Kosovo.²¹ Many churches and other significant locations to the church are located in Kosovo, including the seat of the Serbian Orthodox Patriarchy at the Peć Patriarchy monastery.²²

Taiwan

Like Kosovo, Taiwan fits into the prescribed criteria, hampered by issues of international recognition, a controversy over sovereignty, and historical connections to Chinese identity and legitimacy. Though Taiwan has governed itself as an independent country since 1949 and has been a liberal democracy since President Lee Teng-Hui lead a democratization campaign in the 1990's, Chinese claims to the island and the importance of Sino-American relations has meant that the American stance toward Taiwan has been officially ambiguous but informally quite clear²³. Though no official diplomatic relations exist between the two nations, the US is committed to the continued freedom of Taiwan: in 1979, President Jimmy Carter signed the Taiwan Relations Act which states that:

It is the policy of the United States

...

(2) to declare that peace and stability in [Taiwan is] in the political, security, and economic interests of the United States, and are matters of international concern;

...

(5) to provide Taiwan with arms of a defensive character; and

(6) to maintain the capacity of the United States to resist any resort to force or other forms of coercion that would jeopardize the security, or the social or economic system, of the people on Taiwan.²⁴

In early 2021, President Biden, alongside Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga, publicly reaffirmed the American and Japanese commitment to Taiwanese security.²⁵ "Other American allies, a key part of President Biden's approach to China, have also been showing force in the region, with the French having recently deployed one of their nuclear attack submarines to patrol the South China Sea, and the Canadian Navy stepping up their presence in the area."²⁶

²¹ Gajić and Ponomareva, "Accelerated Expansion," 4; Kaufman IV, "Kosovo."

²² Gajić and Ponomareva, "Accelerated Expansion," 4.

²³ Rahman, "Defending Taiwan, and Why It Matters."

²⁴ Zablocki, Taiwan Relations Act.

²⁵ Delaney, "Biden, Suga call for 'peace and stability across Taiwan Strait.'"

²⁶ McNulty, "South China Sea"; Dark, "South China Sea"; Kaufman IV, "Thucydides' Trap," 5.

Taiwan has become an important partner to NATO and its allied countries beyond security as a crucial trade and shipping partner.²⁷ This economic importance has circled back into a security issue over recent years as the world has encountered a shortage of computer chips; as more aspects of life are controlled, monitored, and operated by computers, the continued availability of processing chips continues growing in importance. Therefore, The United States is rightly concerned that a large gap in processor manufacturing knowledge and capacity between themselves and China would weaken their position.²⁸ Taiwan's Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company (TSMC), has been an important link in the U.S.'s strategy for combatting shortages and increasing domestic production by constructing new manufacturing facilities for TSMC, as well as domestic manufacturers such as Micron and Intel as part of Rep. Tim Ryan's 2022 CHIPS Act.²⁹

China remains publicly committed to ending Taiwanese independence, and "reunifying" China. In a 2021 address made during the Communist Party's 100th Anniversary celebration, Xi Jinping proclaimed that "resolving the Taiwan question and realizing China's complete reunification is a historic mission and an unshakable commitment of the Communist Party of China."³⁰ China continues to show their military prowess and capabilities in hopes of intimidating Taiwan.³¹ As an example of these intimidation campaigns, during the first four days of October, 2021 China violated Taiwan's Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) 149 times, flying fighters over their waters. Though no flights crossed over the Taiwanese mainland and the airspace violated is necessarily sovereign, these violations that continue to today are meant broadly as a tour de force and a psychological tool used by the Chinese to weaken Taiwanese and allied resolve in defending Taiwan.³²

Taiwan's independence is a matter of pride for China, both as a symbol of power and a threat to identity and legitimacy. Chinese control over Taiwan is correlated strongly with the strength of China as a whole, leading to an attitude that "the PRC cannot become a truly powerful nation without exerting control over Taiwan".³³ Throughout history, "when China was powerful, the mainland exerted control over the island. When the mainland was weakened at the hands of imperial [(such as the Dutch, Japanese, and American)] powers, Taiwan was lost."³⁴ The question of legitimacy and identity stems from the unresolved nature of the Chinese Civil War. Communist forces were able to capture mainland China, and continue to hold dominion

²⁷ Rahman, "Defending Taiwan, and Why It Matters," 71.

²⁸ Clark and Swanson, "U.S. Pours Money Into Chips."

²⁹ Rachman, "Why Taiwan Matters to the World," 2; Clark and Swanson, "U.S. Pours Money Into Chips"; Liu and Mozur, "Inside Taiwanese Chip Giant,"; Clark, "Intel"; Coin, "New Micron Details."

³⁰ Jinping, *100th Anniversary*; Campbell, "Record Setting Incursions," 162.

³¹ Erskine, "The Western Flank," 156.

³² Campbell, "Record Setting Incursions," 159.

³³ Campbell, 163.

³⁴ Campbell, 161.

over it, but were unable to capture Taiwan as well, due to the advent of the Korean War and the American presence in the region associated with it.³⁵

Beyond these shows of force and public statements, China has largely left Taiwan alone, instead focusing their autocratic expansion efforts on violating the Sino-British Joint Declaration, the 1984 treaty between China and the United Kingdom regarding the future of governance in Hong Kong, by eroding liberal democracy in Hong Kong.³⁶ Any plans or ambitions the Chinese may have for a **[forceable annexation]** of Taiwan might be accelerated if China is confronted by a serious notion of Taiwanese NATO.³⁷

³⁵ Campbell, 161–62.

³⁶ Wu, Blanchard, and Holden, “China Says.”

³⁷ Campbell, “Record Setting Incursions,” 169.

New Members to Consider

Japan

Japan has been a close American and NATO ally since the American Occupation of Japan following World War II. The 1960 Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security signed by the two nations, like the North Atlantic Treaty, has an Article V which contains a mutual defense pact.³⁸ The treaty also permits the operations of US Forces Japan, a segment of the US military comprising 39,000 Army, Navy, and Marine personnel stationed at 85 different facilities.³⁹

Japan participated in the 2022 NATO Summit, with Prime Minister Fumio Kishida's attendance marking the first Japanese attendance at an official NATO Summit. Following the summit, Japan announced its intention to increase defense spending to NATO's 2% of GDP benchmark by 2027 and increase cooperation with NATO with regards to "cyber and maritime security" in the near future.⁴⁰

Australia

Australia has also been a long-standing NATO ally, going back to the colonial period. Originally a British Penal Colony, Australia is now a member of the UK's *Commonwealth of Nations*. Australia was first invited to participate in NATO proceedings at the 2008 Bucharest Summit, and have been a critical piece of both NATO and American approaches in the South Pacific.⁴¹

Australia is a part of the AUKUS pact, a 2021 security agreement between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States. In addition to equipping Australia with conventionally armed but nuclear powered submarines, the pact brings the nations together on other technological security issues such as cyberwarfare, artificial intelligence, and quantum technology.⁴² The AUKUS pact did sour relations between Australia and NATO leader France, who they previously had a nuclear submarine agreement; then-French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian called the deal a "stab in the back," and then-French President François Holland recalled France's ambassadors to both Australia and The United States.⁴³

³⁸ "Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security."

³⁹ "Guidance from the Commander."

⁴⁰ France24, "NATO Chief"; Suzuki, "Japan PM Seeks."

⁴¹ Lyon, "NATO, Australia and the Future Partnership," 1–3.

⁴² "AUKUS Implementation."

⁴³ Wintour, "Recall of Ambassadors"; Willsher, "France Recalls."

South Korea

South Korea's strong relationship with The United States goes back to "VJ" (Victory over Japan), when America's defeat over Japan provided for the freedom of the Korean peninsula from Japanese rule, and the American involvement in the Korean War supporting South Korea, becoming "strategically important area in its overall military posture in Asia and the Pacific".⁴⁴ Like in Japan and Germany, The United States poured billions of dollars into rebuilding South Korea after World War II, and after the Korean War.⁴⁵ South Korea has also been a NATO ally in recent years, having been in cooperation since 2005 and a partner in NATO's interoperability initiative since 2014.⁴⁶

South Korea has the most precarious position of the proposed states, both geographically and politically. While Japan and Australia have distinct territorial sovereignty and are not connected to the legitimacy of any state, to an extent South Korea is. Like in Taiwan, an unresolved civil war has left North Korea with territorial ambitions of reuniting the country into a single Korean nation and identity, though short term goals focus more on sanctions relief and national security.⁴⁷ Like in Kosovo, The United States has worked to normalize relations between the nations.⁴⁸

In recent years, South Korea has also had frosty relations with Japan, in part over compensation to Korean "Comfort women" that had been forced to serve Japanese soldiers during the Japanese occupation of Korea, which resulted in both countries tightening trade regulations and the termination of an intelligence sharing agreement.⁴⁹ Though relations have "thawed" in recent months as both nations are under new leadership, tension between these two nations has implications for The United States.⁵⁰

Criteria	Ukraine	Kosovo	Taiwan	Japan	Australia	S. Korea
Territorial Integrity	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes
History of Subjugation	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No
Connection to Identity & Legitimacy	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No

⁴⁴ Sungjoo, "South Korea and the United States," 1075, 1086.

⁴⁵ Sungjoo, 1076.

⁴⁶ NATO, "Relations with the Republic of Korea."

⁴⁷ McEachern, "What Does North Korea Want?," 21.

⁴⁸ Sungjoo, "South Korea and the United States," 1080–81.

⁴⁹ Noland, "Alliances under Stress," 1–2.

⁵⁰ Pollman, "What's Driving the Japan-South Korea Thaw?"; Noland, "Alliances under Stress," 2.

Process for Southern Expansion

Article XII

Article XII of the North Atlantic Treaty provides for the amendment of the North Atlantic Treaty. Article XII does not outline a concrete process for amendment, beyond stating that “the Parties shall, if any of them so requests, consult together for the purpose of reviewing the Treaty.”⁵¹ The treaty has so far been amended twice, with both amendments being to Article VI:

1. On October 22nd, 1951, as part of the ascension to NATO of Turkey and Greece, to include Turkey in mutual defense agreement in Article V.⁵²
2. On January 16th, 1963 (retroactive to July 3rd, 1962) following the independence of Algeria to remove the French departments of Algeria.⁵³

The Turkish ascension of NATO can be used as a framework to project what changes to the Washington Treaty could look like as a result of Pacific Expansion. The Turkish changes explicitly included “the territory of Turkey” in mutual defense. Expansions of NATO into Pacific Nations could feature explicit inclusion of their territory.

There exists two elements to the Tropic of Cancer-related mutual defense stipulations in Articles V & VI: attacks on NATO member lands and NATO member forces. The continuing existence of the limitation of attacks on NATO member lands to above the Tropic of Cancer puts major American assets, as well as the assets of other member nations at risk. Guam and Hawai'i are both critical pieces in The United States' and NATO's defensive strategies in the Pacific as both naval and air-based forward operating bases.

Keeping the restriction on NATO member forces to in Europe or previous stations would be advantageous, as it would continue to allow NATO members to conduct outside operations in foreign countries without the risk of involving NATO. Without this, Article V would have been allowed to be invoked in response to events such as the Gulf of Tonkin and Pueblo incidents, in addition to the broader Vietnam War.⁵⁴

⁵¹ “The North Atlantic Treaty.”

⁵² “Protocol to the North Atlantic Treaty on the Accession of Greece and Turkey.”

⁵³ “The North Atlantic Treaty.”

⁵⁴ Tertrais, “Article 5 of the Washington Treaty,” 2.

Conclusion

The Washington Treaty was written and signed in an era when major threats to Europe and their allies came from northern parts of the globe, notably the Soviet Union and other Soviet-Aligned States, and conflicts that arose for NATO nations from below the Tropic of Cancer were largely a result of colonial independence movements. As global power shifts southward and the threat of wars of decolonization has been reduced, NATO needs to similarly shift its focus southward, by incorporating currently excluded NATO lands as well as new members in the Asia-Pacific region.

By leaving some of the existing restrictions to mutual defense in place, that mutual defense on which NATO is based has lost some effectiveness as areas of existing NATO states and potential new members currently outside of the bounds of Articles V and VI are strategically important to the international goals of NATO member states.

Pacific expansion and the removal of the Tropic of Cancer limitation to territorial attacks would strengthen the United States as it both creates a NATO buffer with China and North Korea and would ensure Hawaii was covered by the mutual defense agreement. While nations like Taiwan, Kosovo, and South Korea are important strategic partners and allies to NATO and The United States, their current issues with sovereignty should preclude them from consideration of joining NATO. However, concerns over potential conflict resulting from the ascension of Japan and Australia are not as founded, and the risk of conflict would likely outweigh the risk of conflict.

Additionally, the failure of Russia to win their war in Ukraine may also dissuade China from acting against NATO expansion, though the capabilities and capacity of China militarily, economically, and as an authoritarian state to compel citizen support and participation are far greater than that of Russia.

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