

New Zealand and NATO: A Developing Relationship

By Dr. Jim Rolfe

The 2024 Washington DC summit was the third attended by New Zealand. During the summit, officials from NATO's Indo-Pacific partner countries, commonly referred to as the Indo-Pacific four (IP4) and comprising Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and South Korea, reinforced personal links. The partner countries also agreed on four collaborative projects across artificial intelligence, disinformation, cyber security, and support for Ukraine. These new undertakings mark a substantial widening of the IP4's relationship with NATO.

The substantive relationship between New Zealand and NATO, however, goes back some three decades. New Zealand's military commitment to the conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the 1990s was made alongside NATO. Subsequently, there have been shared military missions in Afghanistan, the Mediterranean, and the Horn of Africa.

Since the early 21st century, New Zealand has been a part of NATO's Partners Across the Globe program, which broadens NATO's relationships beyond Europe. In 2012, New Zealand formalized its first Individual Partnership and Cooperation Programme with NATO. Since then, the relationship has progressed significantly, fueled by a mutual belief in the rules-based international order, a shared understanding of the global consequences of regional events, and, more narrowly, by specific worries about China's regional ambitions. In 2020, New Zealand participated in its first NATO ministerial meeting, marking the start of closer political coordination with NATO in the IP4 partnership.

Currently, each IP4 country defines its relationship with NATO via an Individually Tailored Partnership Programme (ITPP). New Zealand finalized the details of its ITPP, which updated its 2012 agreement with NATO, in 2024, a year after the other IP4 countries had completed theirs. The strategic objectives for the partnership agreement for 2024-27 are general and relate to the rules-based international order, cooperating to address common security challenges, and the ability of New Zealand's armed forces to work effectively with their NATO counterparts. Supporting these are six specific individualized partnership goals under the headings

- Dialogue and Consultation
- Operations Preparation and Training
- Public Diplomacy
- Emerging and Disruptive Technologies
- Cyber Defense
- Climate Change and Security

Each of the areas will undoubtedly generate specific programs of work over the coming years.

Of the remaining IP4 countries, only Japan has released its partnership goals. These are similar but not identical to New Zealand's. Thus, it is safe to assume that the other two agreements are also similar in principle, if not in detail. Additionally, all the countries seem to have a secret or non-public version of the partnership agreement.

However, New Zealand's support is not completely unconditional. New Zealand has its own understanding of what is important in the international sphere, influenced, of course, by domestic politics. Consequently, this understanding is not always identical with that of its regional allies and partners.

Dr. Jim Rolfe,
Senior Fellow at
the Victoria
University of
Wellington's
Centre for
Strategic Studies,
explains that New
Zealand's
relationship with
NATO has grown
through its
inclusion in the
Indo-Pacific Four,
focusing on
cooperation in
areas like cyber
defense, emerging
technologies, and
climate security,
despite domestic
concerns over
defense spending
and independent
foreign policy.

Domestic politics could be a future issue for New Zealand's ties with NATO. Not all in New Zealand are completely supportive of relations with NATO. Opposition seems to have three main strands. They are interconnected but each is distinct in its own right.

One strand stems from reservations regarding the potential cost of committing to NATO's 2% of GDP for defense spending target. Commentators worry that if New Zealand were to move from defense expenditures of around 1.5% of GDP, there would be a massive shift in taxpayer priorities, entailing austerity for everything else. This reaction is an emotive exaggeration. There is no expectation in the publicly revealed partnership agreement about defense spending levels. They are an issue for the future.

The second strand of critique relates to the concept of New Zealand's so-called "independent foreign policy." According to critics of the current approach, led by former leaders of the two main political parties, Helen Clark and Don Brash, independence reached a high point during the mid-1980s rift with the United States over allowing port visits to New Zealand by US warships. Now, proponents of the independent foreign policy concept argue that almost any form of military cooperation is a renunciation of independence. The rhetoric used is over-hyped as a radical change in foreign policy and misses the point that having a choice, in and of itself, is independence.

The third strand of opposition rejects the notion that NATO has a role in the region. There are fears of the militarization of regional politics and the consequences for New Zealand, in addition to the wider region, should that occur. There is little discussion of the counter-factual case in which NATO is unprepared to support the international rule of law and stability in the Indo-Pacific region in the face of a credible and unambiguous threat.

These criticisms all need to be taken with a degree of skepticism. For the last eight decades since the end of World War II, New Zealand has been a member of the Western group of states that argue for the need for domestic democracy, the rule of law in the international sphere, cooperation by the democracies to maintain international stability and the benefits of open markets for the prosperity of most, most of the time. This signaling has been a constant feature of New Zealand's participation in world affairs.

However, New Zealand also generates a lot of noise. At times, it manifests as political nationalism and rejection of group norms or agreements on specific issues. At other times, New Zealand may feel the need to display a holier-than-thou approach to issues, which may manifest itself as lecturing the world, especially allies, on appropriate behavior. This tendency may grate on the nerves of cooperating states, but it is not likely to alter the broad international norms held by the West. The noise can be noisy indeed, but it is not the signal.

New Zealand's future role in its relationship with NATO will be that of a supportive partner, as it has been since the 1990s. The IP4 grouping is a forum for Indo-Pacific countries to collectively enhance their support for NATO and, thereby, the democratic world. It also allows the individual members to develop their own mutually supportive relationships with NATO through tailored partnerships that meet the needs of both NATO and the partner country. Eventually, and ideally, similar relationships can be developed with other regional and like-minded democracies.

Dr. Jim Rolfe, Senior Fellow at the Victoria University of Wellington's Centre for Strategic Studies, can be contacted at jim.rolfe@vuw.ac.nz.

"New Zealand's support [for NATO] is not completely unconditional. New Zealand has its own understanding of what is important in the international sphere, influenced, of course, by domestic politics. Consequently, this understanding is not always identical with that of its regional allies and partners."