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NATO'S ASIA-PACIFIC PARTNERS & THEIR UKRAINE RESPONSE: WHY GLOBAL PARTNERSHIPS MATTER FOR AMERICA

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Introduction

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) is traditionally thought of as a military alliance between twenty-eight European member states and two North American member states (Canada and the United States). However, NATO has been stepping up engagement with its four “[Asia-Pacific partners](#)” (Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand) since December 2020, when these four countries participated for the first time in a NATO Foreign Ministerial Meeting. But these four countries have been involved with NATO as “partners across the globe” for decades — [Japan since the early 1990s](#), [South Korea and Australia since 2005](#), and [New Zealand since 2001](#).

With this background, it is clear why the Asia-Pacific partners attended the [NATO Foreign Ministers meeting in Brussels](#) from April 6–7, 2022. The purpose of the meeting was to increase cooperation with NATO partners, given the global implications of Russia’s war on Ukraine. Specifically, [the meeting resolved that NATO](#) will “increase its cooperation with Asia-Pacific partners in areas like cyber, new technologies, disinformation, maritime security, climate change, and resilience.” Following this, on April 26, the United States held its [first monthly “contact group” meeting at the US Ramstein Air Base in Germany](#) to discuss Ukraine’s defense needs, which not only included NATO country representatives, but also Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand. But these are not the only ways the Asia-Pacific partners have cooperated with both NATO and the United States in responding to the Ukraine crisis.

Japan

In February, [Japan swiftly enacted sanctions](#) on Russia alongside the United States, including crucial [export controls on technology transfers to Russia](#), alongside similar actions by South Korea and Australia. In March, [Japan decided to deliver bulletproof vests to Ukraine](#). As delivering defense equipment to a warring party is restricted by Japan’s constitution, the government had to revise the defense equipment transfer guidelines to complete the delivery. This non-lethal military aid was [transported by US aircraft to Ukraine](#), showing the US-Japan partnership in action.

On April 19, leaders from the United States, Japan, and the European Union met to discuss providing swift and continued support to Ukraine. During the call, [Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida announced](#) that the Japanese government will increase its loans to Kyiv from \$100 million to \$300 million. In the same meeting, Kishida also pledged more defense equipment to Ukraine, including protective masks, clothing resistant to chemical agents, and commercial surveillance drones.

South Korea

On February 28, [South Korea provided \\$10 million](#) in humanitarian assistance to Ukraine, such as bulletproof helmets, tents, blankets, and medical supplies. In response to South Korea’s sanctions against Russia, the [US Department of State announced](#): “The United States and the Republic of Korea are standing shoulder-to-shoulder in support of Ukraine by responding to Russia’s premeditated, unprovoked, and unjustified attack.”

On April 7, [South Korea announced an additional \\$30 million aid package for Ukraine](#), which included items such as defibrillators, general-purpose ventilators, and first-aid kits. On April 11, South Korea’s Defense Minister Suh

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explains how
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Korea, Australia,
and New Zealand)
in the wake of
Russia’s war on
Ukraine.

Wook held talks with [NATO Military Committee Chair Admiral Rob Bauer in Seoul](#) to discuss the Ukraine conflict. Bauer expressed his gratitude for South Korea's "proactive support for the efforts in Ukraine," and hopes to strengthen South Korea-NATO cooperation through "sustained military exchange," hinting at the potential for NATO-South Korea collaboration beyond Ukraine. On May 5, South Korea became the first in Asia [to join NATO's Cyber Defense Group](#), hinting at what this collaboration might look like.

Australia

Australia, like Japan and South Korea, quickly [imposed sanctions on Russia](#) following the invasion of Ukraine. However, unlike Japan and South Korea, Australia quickly moved to send [lethal as well as non-lethal aid to Ukraine](#) as early as February 27. As of April 17, [Australia's military aid to Ukraine](#) totals \$141.9 million, as well as \$48.3 million in humanitarian assistance to protect women, children, and the elderly, along with food, shelter, emergency medical supplies, and 70,000 tons of coal. Australia has also [provided over 6,000 humanitarian visas](#) to Ukrainian refugees.

On April 5, [the AUKUS trilateral partnership](#) between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States reaffirmed their commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific in the wake of the Ukraine war. Indeed, Australia has been one of the most active Asia-Pacific partners alongside Japan in working with the United States and the international community to address the Ukraine crisis.

New Zealand

Although New Zealand's response to Ukraine was slower than the other Asia-Pacific partners, it is still significant. On March 9, [New Zealand announced sanctions on Russia](#) in response to the Ukraine conflict, following the announcements of other Asia-Pacific partners. Additionally, as of March 21, [New Zealand has provided a total of \\$11 million in non-lethal military assistance to support Ukraine](#), which was primarily directed to the NATO Trust Fund. On April 11, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern announced [New Zealand will grant Ukraine another \\$13 million in aid](#), with \$7.5 million allotted to lethal aid.

Direct aid to Ukraine is not the only way New Zealand and other partners have offered a helping hand. [New Zealand has also released a total of 867,000 oil barrels](#) from its emergency stocks as part of the [International Energy Agency member countries' response](#) to energy security disruption from the Ukraine War (Australia released 3,300,000 barrels, South Korea 11,650,000 barrels, and Japan 22,500,000 barrels). New Zealand also [sent intelligence analysts](#) to work with NATO partners to aid military assessments, and [aircraft to move donated military provisions](#) to Ukraine. This demonstrates some of the more indirect, but nonetheless critical roles NATO's Asia-Pacific partners can play in global crises.

Conclusion: Global Partnerships Matter

While much focus has been placed on NATO's European members, the role of NATO's Asia-Pacific partners in the Ukraine conflict should not be discounted. Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand have been active partners in collaborating with both the United States and NATO on Ukraine. Beyond the Asia-Pacific partners, other strategic Indo-Pacific countries like Singapore have also aided in the Ukraine response by [swiftly imposing sanctions](#) and, as of April 5, sending [a total of \\$2.6 million in humanitarian aid](#) through the Singaporean Red Cross. Going forward, the lesson for the United States should be that both their Asia-Pacific and Indo-Pacific partners matter broadly for issues beyond their own region—they are global partners that can help the United States worldwide.

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