

The Case for an EU-NATO Hybrid Centre of Excellence in the Indo-Pacific

by Gabriele Abbondanza

The 21st century is riddled with both old and new security challenges, and the Indo-Pacific – with its vast extent and massive diversity – is emblematic of this condition. While it displays a plethora of conventional security issues, it also effectively embodies the 21st century propensity for non-conventional security challenges, including hybrid warfare.

The latter problematically blends conventional military warfare with non-conventional strategies, tactics and tools, comprising cyberattacks, disinformation campaigns (or, to use more recent NATO and EU jargon, foreign information manipulation and interference – FIMI), cognitive warfare, attacks below the threshold of open aggression (see below), proxy conflicts, economic coercion and many others.¹

¹ Frank G. Hoffman, "Hybrid Warfare and Challenges", in *Joint Force Quarterly*, No. 52 (1st quarter 2009), p. 34-39, <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/tr/pdf/ADA516871.pdf>.

As the Indo-Pacific exhibits all the above on a regular basis, what can be done to bolster counter-hybrid warfare capabilities in the region? The establishment of an Indo-Pacific hybrid threats centre of excellence, under the auspices of NATO, the EU, or both, could be an appropriate answer.

The Indo-Pacific's hybrid threats

Several major examples from the past five years illustrate the extent of hybrid hostilities in the region. First, there have been thousands of cases of cyber-espionage and cyberattacks across the region, particularly in Southeast Asia and Oceania, with strategic, political and/or industrial goals. These mainly originated from China, Russia and North Korea.

Second, especially between 2020 and 2023, the region was riddled with disinformation campaigns surrounding the Covid-19 pandemic,

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its origins and its (mis)management. While the US also employed such tools, Beijing's and Moscow's actions exemplify this. They comprised regional influence operations to shift blame and promote their own pandemic response models, coupled with cyberattacks on health infrastructures and institutions, as well as tying access to Chinese and Russian vaccines to political compliance on sensitive regional issues, such as Taiwan and the South China Sea.²

Third, skirmishes and localised conflicts, such as China-India border clashes, which are routinely supported by reciprocal media campaigns depicting the counterpart as the aggressor, while concurrently promoting a strong national image domestically. Moreover, the April-May 2025 Pakistan-India crisis is another apt illustration. It entailed a terrorist attack targeting India, the latter's response involving missile strikes and the suspension of the Indus Waters Treaty and a Pakistani counter-response through drone attacks, while both nations conducted media campaigns to blame the opponent.

Fourth, Taiwan, which has been the object of countless hybrid attacks by China. To name but a few, Taiwan receives thousands of distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attacks, AI-based disinformation and deep-fake

campaigns, in addition to several military drills in the Taiwan Strait which simulate a full-scale invasion.³

Fifth, Japanese efforts to effectively manage the wastewater of the 2011 Fukushima nuclear disaster have been met with Chinese campaigns across the Indo-Pacific depicting Tokyo as an irresponsible actor that pollutes the whole region due to its alleged incompetence.

Sixth, the 2024 protests in New Caledonia, a French overseas territory in the Southwest Pacific where independence debates have been increasingly common in recent years. The unrest was reinforced and prolonged by Azerbaijan-originated – likely Russia-linked – foreign interference campaigns, aiming at delegitimising France's rule while destabilising its Indo-Pacific presence.⁴

Lastly, there are hybrid threats in the context of space competition too. China will likely equip its *Tiangong* space station with small robots, which, although reportedly for self-defence purposes, might also be utilised to manipulate or damage space infrastructure given their robotic thrusters.⁵ Relatedly, the

² Sascha-Dominik Dov Bachmann, Doowan Lee and Andrew Dowse, "COVID Information Warfare and the Future of Great Power Competition", in *The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs*, Vol. 44, No. 2 (Summer 2020), p. 11-18, https://www.fletcherforum.org/s/Fletcher-Forum-44-2_13-20.pdf.

³ Tzu-Chieh Hung and Tzu-Wei Hung, "How China's Cognitive Warfare Works: A Frontline Perspective of Taiwan's Anti-Disinformation Wars", in *Journal of Global Security Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 4 (December 2022), Article ogac016, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jogss/ogac016>.

⁴ Daniel Harper, "How Is Azerbaijan Involved with France and New Caledonia?", in *Euronews*, 19 May 2025, <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2024/05/19/how-is-azerbaijan-involved-with-france-and-new-caledonia>.

⁵ Ling Xin, "China Plans to Arm Tiangong Space

International Space Station is planned to be decommissioned in 2030, thus potentially leaving the Chinese station as the only one in orbit.

Institutional and cross-institutional efforts to tackle hybrid threats

Against the complex and evolving nature of hybrid threats, institutional efforts to address them have multiplied. NATO has formally acknowledged them as strategic challenges since 2014, and in 2016 it confirmed that large-scale hybrid and cyberattacks may trigger the Alliance's article 5. In 2018, NATO formed its Counter-Hybrid Support Teams (CHSTs), which respond to hybrid threats below the article 5 threshold.⁶

The EU took more time to recognise this shifting context, although its 2022 Strategic Compass established both the Hybrid toolbox and the FIMI toolbox. Two years later, the EU formed its Hybrid Rapid Response Teams (HRRTs), whose tasks are comparable to NATO's hybrid teams. In the case of major crises, the Integrated Political Crisis Response (IPCR) offers a stronger response.⁷

These two major institutions have also progressively "pivoted" to the Indo-Pacific, on account of the interconnectedness of the latter with

the Euro-Atlantic region and in light of the growing Indo-Pacific's significance for both organisations, as attested by the two most relevant documents they have issued.⁸ Relatedly, although not much was said about the region at the 2025 NATO Summit in The Hague, a post-summit statement underscored the ongoing significance of this region for the Alliance's broader goals.⁹

NATO has been indirectly focusing on this macro-region through the policies of its member states, dedicated documents and key regional partnerships such as the Indo-Pacific Four – IP4 – Australia, Japan, New Zealand and South Korea. The IP4 grouping, in particular, may also help to navigate US-Europe relations amid an unpredictable and potentially destabilising second Trump presidency.¹⁰ The EU has its own Indo-Pacific strategy, as well as numerous agreements which are supported by the ongoing regional "pivots" of its most active member states.

The converging interests of these two institutions have led to major

Station with Self-Defence Bots, Scientist Says", in *South China Morning Post*, 29 May 2025, <https://www.scmp.com/node/3312063>.

⁶ NATO, *Countering Hybrid Threats*, 7 May 2024, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_156338.htm.

⁷ European External Action Service, *Countering Hybrid Threats*, March 2024, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/node/411328_en.

⁸ European Commission, *The EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific* (JOIN/2021/24), 16 September 2021, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/en/TXT/?uri=celex:52021JC0024>; NATO Allied Command Transformation, *Regional Perspectives Report on the Indo-Pacific*, July 2022, <https://www.act.nato.int/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/regional-perspectives-2022-07-v2-1.pdf>.

⁹ NATO et al., *Statement between NATO Secretary General and the Four Indo-Pacific Partners*, 25 June 2025, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_236714.htm.

¹⁰ Gabriele Abbondanza, "NATO-Europe-US Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific: Challenging Times Ahead", in *IAI Commentaries*, No. 25|15 (March 2025), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/19742>.

cooperation aiming to counter hybrid threats, with such common efforts potentially holding valuable lessons for the Indo-Pacific. First, they share dozens of joint proposals in the security dimension, about a fourth of which pertain to hybrid threats. This should not come as a surprise as the two organisations have 23 common member states.

Second, a 2017 initiative by the Finnish government, under the auspices of both NATO and the EU, resulted in the European Centre of Excellence (COE) for Countering Hybrid Threats, headquartered in Helsinki. Europe's hybrid COE successfully assists participating countries in countering hybrid threats through training courses, exercises, workshops for policymakers and practitioners and research papers.

A potential Indo-Pacific hybrid threats centre of excellence

With these premises, the establishment of an Indo-Pacific hybrid threats centre of excellence – under the auspices of NATO, the EU, or both – may well be a viable initiative to boost hybrid threats' literacy across the region.

Although two comparable proposals have been voiced in the past,¹¹ they

have not eventuated so far. Moreover, when this proposal was made at a recent event organised by the NATO Defense College Foundation, experts from a large array of regional and international organisations showed interest in the idea.¹²

On a procedural note, COEs do not necessarily have to be hosted by a NATO member, as attested by Finland, a country whose membership took place six years after the creation of the European hybrid COE. While there are several potential candidate states, Australia is arguably the most appropriate one in this specific case, for a number of reasons.

First, it is a member of NATO's Interoperability Platform, which promotes interoperability between members and partners through operations, exercises and other initiatives.

Second, it is a member of the Indo-Pacific Four, whose significance in strengthening capacity building among like-minded states, as well as in navigating a complex phase of transatlantic relations – in addition to the four countries' strategic experience in the region – warrants an emphasis on this specific grouping.

Third, it is one of the Enhanced Opportunities Partners (EOPs), which are deeper, tailored agreements with

¹¹ European Commission, *Action Document for Addressing Hybrid Threats in the Indo-Pacific – Pilot Action (HIPPA)*, Annex 2 to Implementing Decision of 13 October 2023 on the Financing of the Annual Action Plan in Favour of the Asia Pacific Region for 2023, https://fpi.ec.europa.eu/document/download/f86d6efa-45bb-492c-b14d-e90c20303e2d_en; Lesley Seebeck, Emily Williams and Jacob Wallis, "Countering the Hydra: A Proposal for an Indo-Pacific Hybrid Threat Centre", in *ASPI Policy Briefs*, No. 60/2022

(June 2022), <https://www.aspi.org.au/?p=44975>.

¹² Adnkronos, "La Nato guarda all'Indo-Pacifico: qui si gioca la geopolitica del XXI secolo", in *Eurofocus*, 19 June 2025, <https://eurofocus.adnkronos.com/politics/nato-indo-pacifico-qui-si-gioca-la-geopolitica-del-xxi-secolo>.

few partner countries which provide more substantial contributions to the Alliance.

Fourth, it exhibits high levels of Indo-Pacific involvement and activism, notionally and operationally. This applies both domestically and regionally, and can be traced back to the very origins of the modern Indo-Pacific concept.

Fifth and last, it is able to provide a substantial contribution to counter-hybrid warfare efforts in the region, thanks to direct experience with them and significant national capabilities.

While there are several excellent candidates that address the majority of these criteria, Australia is the only country that's concurrently a member of NATO's Interoperability Platform, the IP4 group and the EOPs.¹³

Moreover, it is arguably the staunchest supporter of the Indo-Pacific construct alongside Japan. Additionally, Australia has long been the target of hybrid attacks and it has remarkably developed counter-hybrid and cyber capabilities. The latter, in particular, rank 4th in the latest Asia Power Index and 5th in the latest National Cyber Power Index.¹⁴

Given Canberra's very solid bond with NATO, its deepening defence relations with the EU (negotiations for a new security partnership will start soon), its anti-hybrid warfare capabilities, and its deeply-rooted regional relations, Australia would be the ideal candidate for a new Indo-Pacific hybrid COE.

As asymmetric threats are unquestionably poised to become an increasingly challenging feature of the 21st century, and since cooperative security cannot work properly without a sound strategic literacy across interdependent states in the same region, initiatives such as this one hold the potential to boost regional security and therefore regional stability.

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¹³ NATO, *Relations with Australia*, last updated on 23 June 2025, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_48899.htm.

¹⁴ Lowy Institute, "Cyber Capabilities", in *Asia Power Index 2024*, <https://power.lowyinstitute.org/data/military-capability/signature-capabilities/cyber-capabilities>; Julia Voo, Irfan Hemani and Daniel Cassidy, *National Cyber Power Index 2022*, in *Belfer Center Reports*, September 2022, <https://www.belfercenter.org/node/24643>.

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