

Towards a deeper NATO-Japan cooperation

Marc Ozawa *

While NATO and Japan have a long history of cooperation dating back to the 1990s, changes in their respective regional and global security environment are creating converging interests. This, in turn, presents new areas of potential cooperation. The developments driving convergence are Russia's war with Ukraine and possible spill over effects in the Indo-Pacific, China's growing global assertiveness and military posturing in the South China Sea, and a deepening security partnership between Russia and China. At the same time, NATO's view is increasingly global, and Japan has signalled both a willingness and interest to deepen cooperation with NATO, exemplified by Prime Minister Kishida's participation in the Madrid Summit last summer. While NATO's short-term focus will be deterring and defending the Eastern flank, the current timing is right to consider deeper cooperation in the future. This could entail expanding cooperation beyond the 'soft' areas of humanitarian assistance and non-proliferation into defence through interoperability, cyber, and intelligence. There are already lessons from the Russia-Ukraine war that can assist in laying the groundwork for practical steps to NATO-Japan cooperation including a focused expansion of interoperability of forces, joint exercises in the maritime domain, political support, countering disinformation, and developing contingency plans for logistics and intelligence cooperation in the event of military conflict.

Of all NATO's partners in the Indo-Pacific, Japan spends the most on defence and represents the largest economy, about three times the size of the Republic of Korea (ROK) or Australia. Japan is the only non-NATO member of the G7, and as the longest-standing NATO partner beyond Europe, Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg described Japan as a "natural partner" with

shared values and challenges.¹ These factors alone warrant revisiting NATO-Japan relations in light of recent events.

Evolution of cooperation

NATO-Japan cooperation has evolved from one of ad hoc political dialogue to expanded practical cooperation covering humanitarian, security and non-proliferation activities. There are three phases beginning with political dialogue in the 1990s that resulted in Japan contributing financially to post-conflict recovery of the Balkans region following NATO's stabilization operations. Japan also played a role in supporting the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and reconstruction development in Afghanistan. Political dialogue continued in the early 2000s according to "general guidelines on relations with Contact Countries".

However, NATO revised the term "Contact Countries" to "Partners Across the Globe" (PaG) after the Riga Summit of 2006 marking the second phase of cooperation.² At the Bucharest Summit in 2008, Allies took the decision to institutionalize relations with PaG Partners to include activities such as "cyber defence, maritime security, humanitarian assistance, disaster re-

Keywords

NATO partners
Japan
Indo-Pacific

* Senior Researcher at the NATO Defense College (NDC).

1 "Joint Press Point by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg and the Prime Minister of Japan, Shinzo Abe," NATO, 31 October 2017.

2 "NATO's relations with Contact Countries", NATO, 9 April 2009.

lief, non-proliferation, technology, and Women, Peace and Security.”³

In 2013, NATO and Japan relations entered a third phase with the signing of a joint political declaration “signalling their commitment to strengthening cooperation”.⁴ This was followed by Japan participating in NATO’s Interoperability Platform under the framework of the Partnership Interoperability Initiative (PII), which NATO established in 2014. In recent years, the primary areas of cooperation have been in maritime security, non-proliferation and cyber defence. Prime Minister Kishida’s visit to NATO Headquarters in March 2022 followed by his participation in the Madrid Summit signifies interest on both sides to further expand cooperation. NATO reinforced this goal in the new Strategic Concept, which designated Japan as one of a handful of “key Partners” to address future global challenges.⁵

Converging interests

Converging interests between NATO and Japan have accelerated over the past year. These include Russia’s second invasion of Ukraine in 2022, China’s military posture in the Indo-Pacific region and increased security cooperation between Russia and China. Other areas

While NATO’s short-term focus will be deterring and defending the Eastern flank, the current timing is right to consider deeper cooperation in the future

of mutual interests prior to 2022 include counter terrorism and anti-piracy, maritime security, cyber security, non-proliferation of nuclear weapons, human security and enhancing interoperability.⁶ However, recent events have produced alarm for both

NATO and Japan. Even before 2022, China’s growing presence in Europe and economic rise were recognised by both NATO and Japan as a potential challenge in the context of ‘great power competition’. China’s acquisition of strategic infrastructure in Europe, such as the Huawei case and ports throughout Europe, instigated concern among Allies.

As a result, NATO’s new Strategic Concept declared that “China’s (PRC) stated ambitions and coercive policies challenge our interests, security and values”.⁷ While Japan’s current national security strategy emphasises the

need for “stable relations between Japan and China... [as] an essential factor for peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific”, there is already a growing sense in Tokyo that the strategy is outdated.⁸ Prime Minister Kishida’s government has committed to devising a new national security strategy.

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and the ongoing war has brought a new sense of urgency to counter Russia in Europe and potentially China in Asia. It is widely understood that events in Ukraine could draw a roadmap for China to invade Taiwan, and Beijing is likely observing developments in Ukraine for lessons.⁹ Above all, the response of NATO, the European Union (EU), individual Allies and the international community could be a prelude to what China could expect as a response to invading Taiwan. As such, Japan’s support for Ukraine, in addition to other Partners in the Indo-Pacific region, represent a signal and deterrent to China.

Cooperation, benefits, limits and obstacles

NATO-Japan cooperation is part of a web of international links that overlaps with the US-Japan Alliance, bilateral relations and the G7 along with international organizations such as the UN. In this way, NATO-Japan cooperation can reinforce and benefit from interactions in other fora and bilateral arrangements. The mutual benefits of cooperation are most evident through the principle of reciprocity, ‘value add’ for both NATO and Japan. While it remains unlikely that either NATO or Japan would participate militarily in defence of each other’s territories, defensive bilateral military support with Pacific Allies may be possible in the future preceded by deepening security cooperation today.

The limits to Japan’s use of lethal force in military operations proceed from its pacifist constitution and a strategic culture that remains reluctant “to use or develop military power beyond very limited scenarios”.¹⁰ However, new interpretations of its constitutional limits and signs of change to Japan’s strategic culture appear to be expanding the realm of what is militarily possible. These developments took place under the late Shinzo Abe’s tenure with Prime Minister Kishida continuing to support Abe’s defence positions. For the first time, Japanese public opinion has reached a record high of 64 percent in favour of bolstering defensive capabilities,

3 “Relations with Partners across the Globe”, NATO, 25 August 2021.

4 NATO, “Relations with Japan”, NATO, 23 May 2022.

5 “NATO 2022 - Strategic Concept”, NATO, 29 June 2022.

6 NATO, “Relations with Japan”.

7 “NATO 2022 - Strategic Concept”.

8 “National Security Strategy (NSS)”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 6 April 2016.

9 M. Santora and S. Erlanger, “Taiwan and Ukraine: Two Crises, 5,000 Miles Apart, Are Linked in Complex Ways”, *The New York Times*, 3 August 2022.

10 A. Oros, “Japan’s Strategic Culture: Security Identity in a Fourth Modern Incarnation?”, *Contemporary Security Policy*, Vol.24, No.2, 2014, p.227.

probably reinforced by Russia's invasion of Ukraine and concerns over China following suit in Taiwan.¹¹ Whether this means that Japan would, for example, participate militarily, supporting the US in the event of a 'Taiwan contingency', appears unlikely today but perhaps not in the foreseeable future. Furthermore, it is not only China drawing lessons from Russia's war with Ukraine, Japan and other Indo-Pacific Partners are no doubt observing the mix and impact of Allied, NATO and EU support for Ukraine. Approaches that have worked to counter Russia's invasion (military, logistical-administrative, economic and humanitarian) could be useful in planning a Japanese response for Taiwan.

NATO's strategic culture is also changing as exemplified in the most recent summit communiqués and new Strategic Concept. The Alliance has a greater recognition of the interconnected nature of global security threats and the implications of China's continued rise and partnership with Russia, connecting the Indo-Pacific with NATO's Eastern flank.

Concerning the Russia-Ukraine war, NATO is already benefiting from the cooperative relationship with Japan. Tokyo sided with Ukraine and supported NATO's position. Japan not only condemned the invasion, it also provided tangible support for Ukraine and sanctioned Russia and Belarus (for Minsk's participation in the invasion). This includes non-lethal supplies, humanitarian and financial assistance, and safe passage with visa waivers for Ukrainian refugees to Japan. While financial sanctions are not at the level of the EU, they include enforcement of financial blocks to Japanese and international banks, restricting transactions of the Russian Central Bank, freezing assets (of the RF, target individuals and sanctioned Russian banks), enforcing exclusion from the SWIFT systems and the prohibition of transactions in Russian sovereign debt. Japan also participates in trade penalties in targeted sectors including revoking Russia's most favoured nation status. With respect to European energy security, Japan has diverted LNG supplies from Japan to Europe to assist in preparing for natural gas shortages as a result of Russia cutting off supplies.¹²

For Japan, near and long-term benefits of working with NATO overlap. Cooperation sends a signal and puts pressure on China to deter aggressive tactics in Japan's immediate neighbourhood. Japan also receives access to discussions at NATO and to Allies with whom Japan does not have existing security relations. In terms of practical cooperation, Japan can also benefit from further interoperability activities through participa-

tion in joint missions and exercises, cyber, intelligence sharing (for situational awareness) and interaction with Indo-Pacific Allies (with direct interests in the region). Furthermore, Japan would continue to gain from stability measures in the region such as counter terrorism, anti-piracy, and nuclear non-proliferation.

NATO's "key partners" in the region

Converging interests between NATO and Japan may resemble those of other "key partners" in the Indo-Pacific.¹³ As previously mentioned, Japan's economic size, level of defence spending and position in international fora such as the G7 differentiate it from other Partners. The following figure illustrates the defence spending of NATO's "key partners" in the region.

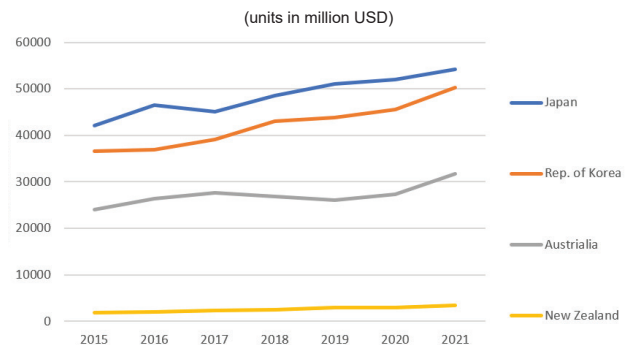


Figure 1: Defence Spending for "Key Partners" in the Indo-Pacific

Data source: SIPRI Military Expenditure Database, 2022

This includes the ROK, Australia and New Zealand, however, there are differences. Japan and the ROK are more directly impacted by nuclear weapons sabre rattling from the DPRK and both would be equally threatened by Chinese pressure over territorial disputes in the Sea of Japan. Japan and the ROK are likewise threatened by a Chinese attack on Taiwan as they are regional maritime neighbours. In this way, China poses a potential threat to Japan and the ROK as Russia currently poses to the

Even before 2022, China's growing presence in Europe and economic rise were recognised by both NATO and Japan as a potential challenge in the context of 'great power competition'

11 Y. Isobe, "Survey: Record 64% of Japanese want national defense bolstered", *The Asahi Shimbun*, 2 May 2022.

12 L. Lewis *et al.*, "Japan to Divert Energy Supplies to Europe in Solidarity over Ukraine," *Financial Times*, 9 February 2022.

13 "Madrid Summit ends with far-reaching decisions to transform NATO", NATO, 30 June 2022.

countries of NATO's Eastern flank. Australia and New Zealand, while not in the same proximity of Taiwan and the DPRK are impacted by China's growing presence and territorial claims in the South China Sea. All of NATO's key Partners in the Indo-Pacific have their own alliances and arrangements with the US and, in the case of Australia, the UK.

What differentiates Japan in this group is the level, timing and type of cooperation with NATO. Because of Japan's constitutional constraints of defensive operations, it is currently limited to non-lethal support of

Cooperation in humanitarian support, maritime interoperability, cyber and operational logistics could be more frequent and expanded into new theatres

NATO missions. At the same time, Japan is the largest economy of the Indo-Pacific Partners and consequently could offer higher in-kind and financial support. This means that while Japan's interests may overlap with other Indo-Pacific Partners, its limitations,

capabilities and perceived responsibilities will vary. Thus, an optimal strategy for NATO engagement with Japan and other Partners will be flexible and tailored to these constraints. The level of engagement, should reflect capabilities, institutional limitations, and the degree of mutual interests.

Planning for a deeper practical partnership

The evolution of NATO-Japan cooperation took place in tandem with geopolitical events in the Indo-Pacific and on NATO's Eastern flank. When Shinzo Abe was prime minister, the domestic debate in Japan began to focus more on security. Consequently, the government implemented changes within the boundaries of Japan's pacifist constitution. While a constitutional reform may be too far on the horizon, the mere possibility of reform has, for the first time, entered Japanese political debate. In the meantime, defence reforms under Abe,

and continued under Kishida's government, have increased defence spending, expanded the US-Japan Alliance, broadened the mandate of Japanese troops to aide Allies under attack, created a National Security Council, and proposed cooperation with the Five Eyes intelligence alliance.

These changes to Japan's defence approach combined with China's growing assertiveness, collaboration with Russia and Russia's invasion of Ukraine have created conditions for a new and deeper phase in NATO-Japan relations. While NATO and Japan already have a long history together, there is reason to consider deeper cooperation in both existing and new domains. Cooperation in humanitarian support, maritime interoperability, cyber and operational logistics could be more frequent and expanded into new theatres. In addition to operations in the Indo-Pacific, NATO and Japan may consider a degree of cooperation on NATO's Eastern and Northern flanks. Given Japan's alliance with the US and security relations with some NATO members, bilateral security discussions could also assist with NATO's situational awareness for members with interests in the Indo-Pacific region such as the UK and France.

In the near term, however, there are obstacles that may inhibit expanding NATO-Japan cooperation. The first is the 'classified wall'. For NATO and Japan to have a more substantive discussion, they will need to develop a system for sharing information. Models of NATO cooperation with Partners may offer a template to overcome this obstacle with Japan. At the very least, NATO allies would benefit from intelligence sharing concerning the Indo-Pacific.

Another obstacle is NATO's focus on reinforcing its deterrence and defence posture on the Eastern flank given Russia's ongoing war with Ukraine. This will require substantial investments, resources and a greater allied presence on NATO's eastern borders. As a result, NATO's demand for attention will be Ukraine and the Eastern flank in the short term. In order to garner support across the Alliance, it will be important for Japan to demonstrate the value of cooperation not only for Pacific Allies but also to eastern and southern members to clearly link activities to NATO's three core tasks.



The views expressed in this *NDC Policy Brief* are the responsibility of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the NATO Defense College, NATO, or any government or institution represented by the contributors.

Research Division

Marc Ozawa, PhD, and Cynthia Salloum, PhD,
Series Editors
NATO Defense College
Via Giorgio Pelosi 1, 00143 Rome – Italy
www.ndc.nato.int



The NATO Defense College applies the Creative Commons Licence "Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs" (CC BY-NC-ND)

Follow us on Twitter and Facebook
at https://twitter.com/NDC_Research
at https://facebook.com/NDC_Research
NDC Policy Brief
ISSN 2617-6009