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Japan and NATO

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Introduction

Japan-North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) relations have steadily evolved over the past 15 years. However, because this process has been advancing relatively inconspicuously, it cannot necessarily be said that this relationship is widely recognized and acknowledged. Japan is NATO's longest-standing out-of-theater partner, while for Japan, NATO stands as a long-term partner with which it shares values and interests. Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, efforts to develop closer ties between Japan and NATO have been gaining momentum. This article reviews the historical development of Japan-NATO relations and discusses related current and future issues.

Past developments

During the Cold War, although Japan and NATO were both part of the "West," there was very little interaction between the two. This can be attributed to the fact that both had their hands full with pursuing national security in their own respective regions. The strong anti-militarism that reigned in post-war Japan was another contributing factor, ensuring that the Japanese government would maintain a passive stance toward approaching NATO, that had been formed as a "military alliance."

Nevertheless, toward the end of the Cold War, the two sides did undertake

to initiate some informal contact. During this period, Japan and Western Europe shared a common concern with the Soviet deployment of its new Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) and the direction of the US-Soviet INF negotiations that had started in 1981. The Nakasone administration, which took office in 1982, feared that the United States and Western Europe would determine their negotiating policies without the participation of Japan and that this would result in the redeployment of the Soviet INF to the Far East after being reduced and removed from Europe. At the same time, there was a sense that it was necessary to respond to Soviet pressure with a strong showing of "Western unity." Consequently, Japan set out to upgrade and activate its consultations, not only with the United States, but also with the European members of NATO. A certain theme was repeatedly emphasized in these consultations, and this was embedded in the G7 Williamsburg Summit Statement of May 1983 as the following basic principle: "The security of our [G7] countries is indivisible." This continued to define the West's basic policy until the conclusion of the INF Treaty in 1987. When the INF negotiations reached an impasse, Japan expressed its unequivocal support for the US deployment of its new INF in Europe that was based on NATO's "double-track decision." Although Japan and NATO thereafter did not engage in formal consultations throughout the 1980s, the series of close informal strategic consultations marked a clear milestone.

It was in the 1990s that formal talks between Japan and NATO commenced. With the end of the Cold War, NATO was now reassessing its role and seeking to build relationships with non-member countries. Japan, on the other hand, was looking for new approaches to contribute to the international community based on the lessons of the Gulf War and the self-criticism that it had not been able to play a satisfactory role in the Gulf War. At the same time, the broad range of national security issues that were emerging at this time gave new impetus to discussions between Japan and Europe on matters related to political security, which previously had not received significant attention.

Against this backdrop, Japan actively endeavored to deepen its relations with various European organizations, such as the European Community (EC) and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). It was in this context that formal dialogue with NATO was initiated. As the first step, the Japan-NATO Security Conference was established in 1990, bringing together senior officials and security experts from both sides. This was followed in 1991 with the visit of NATO Secretary General Manfred Wörner to Japan, the first visit of its kind, while 1993 saw the launch of Regular High-Level Consultations between Japan and NATO, which continues to the present day. While progress was made during this period toward generating a better mutual understanding of respective interests

and concerns, these interactions did not go so far as to result in direct cooperation. Thus, the situation during these years may be characterized as “dialogue for the sake of dialogue.”

What changed this situation dramatically were the 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States and the Afghanistan War that followed. The United States, an ally of Japan, had come under terrorist attack. By the end of the same year, the administration of Prime Minister Koizumi had signed on to the maritime interdiction operations launched under the US-led “Operation Enduring Freedom.” Japan’s contribution would be to dispatch vessels of the Maritime Self-Defense Force to the Indian Ocean to engage in refueling the warships of countries participating in interdiction operations (Japan’s involvement continued until 2010, including a period of temporary suspension). While this initiative grew out of Japan’s support for the United States, Japan’s refueling efforts involved the ships of various NATO nations, including the US.

Although Japan was unable to make a direct military contribution in Afghanistan, it did play a leading role in reconstruction and development projects, thus expanding its diplomatic horizons. It was in this arena that Japan crossed paths with NATO that was globalizing its activities after the terrorist attacks of 2001.

In August 2003, NATO took over command of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). Its sphere of activity was initially limited to the capital city of Kabul and its environs, but was later expanded to cover the entire country. As NATO's mission expanded to include reconstruction, it became necessary for it to partner with various international organizations and NGOs, as well as with out-of-theater countries.

It was in this process that direct cooperation between Japan and NATO started. Since 2007, Japan has collaborated with Provincial Reconstructions Teams (PRT) sponsored by NATO member states and provided support to NGOs and local administrative bodies in implementing more than 100 projects in such areas as primary education, vocational training, and medical services and public health. To facilitate the operation of this framework and to work in closer coordination with NATO, Japan dispatched liaison and coordination officers to the NATO Senior Civilian Representative in Kabul in 2008. In the following year, Japan sent a civilian support team consisting of development experts to a PRT led by Lithuania. Given the continued poor security situation, Japanese assistance and activities were made possible only with the cooperation and support of NATO/ISAF.

Japan has supported medical and educational activities for the Afghan military through the NATO Afghan National Army Trust Fund and has also assisted in strengthening the management of

arms and ammunition through the Partnership for Peace Trust Fund. Projects implemented under the latter program include ones undertaken in countries other than Afghanistan (such as Tajikistan and Ukraine).

Alongside these examples of frontline cooperation, progress has also been made in strengthening political partnerships. Following the 2006 NATO Riga Summit, NATO embarked on bolstering its cooperative ties with Japan, Australia, and other countries. In response, Japan has identified NATO as a partner with which it shared vital common values. In January 2007, Prime Minister Abe became the first Japanese premier to attend the North Atlantic Council (NAC). Noting that Japan and NATO could not afford to act separately and without coordination in the face of a diverse range of security challenges, Prime Minister Abe called on Japan and NATO to "move on to a new phase of cooperation." In addition to the discussion of Afghan assistance, time was given in this session to the threats posed by North Korean nuclear missiles and the rise of China. For Japan, NATO would henceforth serve as an increasingly important "forum" for providing input on East Asian affairs, particularly to the European member states.

This momentum toward enhanced Japan-NATO cooperation was maintained during the approximately three years of the Democratic Party of Japan government that began in September 2009. For instance, in May 2012, Foreign

Minister Gemba attended the Meeting on Afghanistan held at the NATO Chicago Summit, and Japan and NATO concluded an Agreement on the Security of Information and Material in 2010 in light of the growing interactions at practical levels.

The second Abe administration that came into office in December 2012 would later become the longest-serving government in Japan's constitutional history. It was under this administration that further progress was made in Japan-NATO relations now characterized as a "reliable and natural" partnership. While remaining firmly moored in its relationship with the United States, under the principle of "proactive contribution to peace" espoused by the second Abe administration, Japan sought to expand and enhance cooperation with countries of the Indo-Pacific region and European countries, including NATO, with which it shared common values and interests. For its part, NATO revised its partnership policy in 2011, and a Joint Political Declaration was adopted during NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen's visit to Tokyo in April 2013. Japan acted at this time to create a new ambassador post to NATO to be held concurrently by Japan's ambassador to Belgium (Japan's permanent mission to NATO was established in 2018).

In May 2014, the Individual Partnership and Cooperation Programme (IPCP) was announced, containing the details of policies, principles, and specific areas of

cooperation between Japan and NATO. The IPCP called for the strengthening of high-level dialogue and the promotion of defense cooperation and exchanges, and identified the following as priority areas for cooperation: cyber defense, maritime security, humanitarian assistance, disaster relief operations, arms control, non-proliferation, and disarmament. In the following years, the IPCP was revised twice, in May 2018 and June 2020, with the latter version containing the addition of human security to the areas for cooperation and a reference to enhancing consultation on the East Asian situation.

Various examples can be cited of specific cooperative programs and actions implemented under the IPCP. In 2019, staff from the Ministry of Defense were dispatched to NATO's Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence (CCDCOE) in Estonia, and Japan participated in cyber defense exercises organized by NATO and CCDCOE. In the area of maritime security, Japan has participated in joint training exercises such as those held in the Gulf of Aden and the Baltic Sea, and Japan's defense attaché stationed in the United Kingdom has been dispatched to NATO's Allied Maritime Command as a liaison officer since 2019. Personnel exchanges have also included the dispatch of Self-Defense Force officers to the NATO Headquarters.

Over the past decade, Japan-NATO cooperation has expanded beyond support for Afghanistan for several reasons.

First, the two sides share a commitment to basic values that include freedom, democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. Second, there is a growing sense of urgency on both sides that rises from the recognition that the rules-based international order is being threatened and shaken. Of particular concern are the increasing attempts made by China and Russia to change the status quo through the use of force, which has given rise to a shared awareness of the interdependence and mutual impact of security in various regions of the world. Addressing the NAC in May 2014, Prime Minister Abe stated that Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea and its military aggression in eastern Ukraine was a "global issue that also impacts Asia" and warned that frequent attempts were being made to unilaterally change the status quo by force or coercion in the East China Sea and South China Sea. NATO Secretary General Rasmussen responded by stating that the "security and stability in the Euro-Atlantic and Asia-Pacific regions cannot be treated separately" and went on to stress the importance of dialogue with like-minded partners such as Japan.

In recent years, NATO has shown a growing interest in China and the Indo-Pacific region. The joint press statement issued during Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg's visit to Japan in October 2017 strongly criticized North Korea's nuclear and missile programs and expressed concern about the situation in the East China Sea and South China Sea.

The London Declaration, issued by NATO leaders in December 2019, contains a brief reference to China's growing influence and states that this presents "both opportunities and challenges." This statement is the first-ever reference to China in NATO history. Subsequently, in December 2020, the NATO Asia-Pacific Partners (AP4) consisting of Japan, the Republic of Korea, Australia, and New Zealand, participated in the NATO Foreign Ministers' Meeting, where issues related to the changing global balance of power, including China's rise, were discussed.

Current status and challenges

Faced with the ongoing Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the NATO 2022 Summit in Madrid marked a historical milestone in reaffirming the Alliance's unity. To coincide with the adoption of NATO's new 2022 Strategic Concept, leaders of partner countries, including the AP4, were invited to attend the Summit. The 2022 Strategic Concept identifies Russia as the "most significant and direct threat" and refers to China as posing "systemic challenges." Furthermore, the document once again expresses concern for the deepening strategic partnership between China and Russia. While it is only natural for NATO to be focused on Russia given the current situation, Japan should certainly welcome its continued demonstration, from a medium- to long-term

perspective, of vigilance against China's movements and the stance for strengthening relations with the AP4 countries.

Prime Minister Kishida was the first Japanese prime minister to attend a NATO Summit. It should be noted that the decision to travel abroad ahead of a House of Councillors election was highly unusual and indicative of the great significance assigned by Prime Minister Kishida to face-to-face participation in the Summit. Moreover, this decision sharply boosted interest in NATO and Japan-NATO relations inside Japan.

Since Russia invaded Ukraine, the Kishida administration has closely worked with the G7 countries and has imposed unprecedented sanctions on Russia. Public support for the sanctions remains relatively high, and many Japanese do not view the war in Ukraine as a distant event with no personal repercussions.

Discussions and actions to strengthen Japan's deterrence and defense posture, including an increase in defense spending, have accelerated. While Japan continues to provide Ukraine with large-scale assistance in various fields, it is particularly noteworthy, in the context of Japan-NATO relations, that during his visit to Kyiv in March 2023, Prime Minister Kishida announced that Japan would henceforth supply non-lethal equipment to Ukraine through NATO's Trust Fund for Comprehensive Assistance Package (CAP).

Japan's decision to become actively involved in geographically distant European affairs is based on the recognition that Russia's actions constitute a problem that goes beyond Europe to affect the very foundations of the international order and that the international community, including Japan, must not send the wrong message on changing the status quo through the use of force. This decision by Japan was made with China and North Korea foremost in mind. Furthermore, the decision embodies the hope and expectation that NATO (and the European countries) will respond and reciprocate in the event of any future conflict that may arise in East Asia with the same show of solidarity and support.

Prime Minister Kishida stated at the NATO Madrid Summit that the "security of the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific are inseparable," thus emphasizing the "indivisibility" of the security of the two regions, and underscored his strong sense of urgency that "Ukraine today may be East Asia tomorrow." To further deepen Japan-NATO cooperation, the two sides agreed to fundamentally update the current IPCP to match the requirements of the new environment. It is Japan's understanding that the first critical steps were taken at the NATO Summit for "opening up horizons for a new era of Japan-NATO cooperation."

Responding to these developments, Secretary General Stoltenberg visited Japan in January 2023. The Japan-NATO

Joint Statement released at this time welcomed the revision of strategic documents undertaken by each side and applauded the progress made in drafting the Individually Tailored Partnership Programme (ITPP) between Japan and NATO, which identifies specific and practical areas of cooperation. The Joint Statement also reaffirmed the importance of cooperation in addressing challenges in areas such as cyberspace, outer space, and disinformation.

In order to further advance Japan-NATO cooperation in the future, it will be necessary to explore opportunities for consultation and cooperation in new areas of common interest beyond the existing arrangements on cyber defense and maritime security. For instance, there is an urgent need to address the issue of intermediate-range missiles in the “post-INF era,” which can very easily affect the deterrence and defense posture of both Japan and NATO countries. In addition, both have a common interest in addressing the challenges posed by the modernization of Russia and China’s nuclear arsenals, which have serious implications for the current structure of arms control, arms reduction, and non-proliferation. In recent years, China and Russia have made particularly striking progress in deepening their political and military alignment and cooperation. In February 2022, the leaders of the two countries agreed to promote mutual cooperation on a wide range of issues, including military cooperation, and clearly stated

their opposition to the NATO enlargement. Even after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, China has maintained its pro-Russian stance, and the two countries have become more actively engaged in joint military activities in the areas surrounding Japan. It would prove beneficial to both Japan and NATO to jointly evaluate the possibilities and limitations of Sino-Russia military cooperation and to discuss possible responses. To do so, it will be necessary to deepen consultations at various levels and to allocate the necessary human and financial resources.

Conclusion

Today, the rules-based international order is facing challenges and turbulence. In order to maintain and strengthen this order, Japan has been diligently strengthening its bilateral and multilateral partnerships with both intra-regional and extra-regional partner countries, while continuing to regard the Japan-US alliance as the cornerstone of its security. It is in this context that Japan has been steadily developing its relationship with NATO in what has been described as a “reliable and natural partnership.” Since Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, there has been a growing awareness of the link between the affairs of the European region and those of the Indo-Pacific region. This, in turn, has further increased the need for Japan-NATO cooperation. Against this background, Prime Minister Kishida attended the NATO Vilnius Summit in July 2023 for the second consecutive year.

At this meeting, Japan and NATO agreed to an ITPP for the four-year period from 2023 to 2026 with 16 goals covering four priority issues. It will now be important to move forward on meaningful cooperation while reviewing the actual activities being carried out in each area.

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