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Positioning Japan-NATO Cooperation

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The recently held NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organisation) Summit in Madrid, from June 28 to 30, has been a significant one, as Jens Stoltenberg, NATO Secretary-General, called it a transformative meeting that is aimed at strengthening defences against Russia amidst the Ukraine crisis. It was for the first time that the New Strategic Concept of NATO clearly identified China as a major threat.¹ NATO has been working on developing a close relationship and partnership with the Asia-Pacific partners and working effectively to address the Chinese and Russian threats. According to NATO's strategic concept, the invasion of Ukraine made Russia the most direct threat to NATO's security.

Japan has been involved with the NATO alliance since the early 1990s, and other Asia-Pacific partners such as Australia, South Korea, and New Zealand have been involved in dialogues with NATO since the 2000s. Japan's Prime Minister, Fumio Kishida, became the first Japanese PM to attend the NATO summit, and he also committed to enhancing its partnership with NATO due to the link between Asia and Europe. On the other hand, China strongly condemned the inclusion of the Asia-Pacific partners within NATO. The NATO Military Committee Chief, Rob Bauer, visited Tokyo and met with Nobuo Kishi, Japan's Defence Minister, and Japanese Chief of Staff, Koji Yamazaki, wherein they agreed to elevate military cooperation as they believe that the Ukraine crisis is affecting the security environment in Asia and Europe.² Moreover, Japan also aimed at strengthening its relationship with the European nations and focusing on NATO's involvement in the Indo-Pacific region. Bauer's visit to Japan was a significant one as Japan's Maritime Self-Defence Force (MSDF) has been participating in the naval exercises of NATO in the Mediterranean Sea. To check China's rise, Japan is working with Europe and other countries in the Indo-Pacific to improve its military.

Areas of cooperation between Japan and NATO

Japan's ties with NATO started during the cold war, in the early 1990s, and contacts between the two have expanded since then as NATO began to enhance its partnership with non-NATO countries. Japan is one of the few countries with which NATO has been keen on developing relations. Japan and NATO committed to deepening their cooperation in 2013 through a Joint Political Declaration, and this commitment has been taken forward through an individual partnership and cooperation programme.³ NATO and Japan have been cooperating in wider areas such as cyber defence, humanitarian and disaster relief assistance, maritime security, human security, and peace and security.

Japan has been participating in the interoperability platform since 2014 under the 'Partnership Interoperability Initiative,' which aims at bringing all the allies together that contribute to NATO's operations. Japan is keen on developing interoperability in the domain of maritime security, and its

MSDF has also trained efficiently with the NATO ships off the coast of Spain as well as in the Baltic sea. During the Afghan war and Afghanistan crisis, Japan also provided its support to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) by contributing to the reconstruction and development in Afghanistan. Furthermore, Japan played a prominent role in the stabilization of the Balkans in the 1990s by supporting peace through NATO-led operations.

According to NATO, China and Russia have both been striving to subvert the rules-based international order, and it is due to this concern that four of the Asia-Pacific countries were included in the NATO Summit. Chinese officials have condemned the decision of including the Asia-Pacific countries in the summit and claimed it to be a cold war strategy to contain their country. However, for China, the Quad grouping is also an Asian-NATO. Chinese officials also blamed the United States for using the NATO alliance to suppress China and Russia.

For NATO, the interest in the four Asia-Pacific countries is due to their established democracies and shared values with NATO allies, their capable militaries must have also played an important fact. Japan, South Korea, and Australia have a strong alliance with the US and there are several identified areas where these nations can cooperate with NATO such as emerging technologies, cyber security and securing rules-based international order.

The growing importance of these Asia-Pacific countries is in the broader Indo-Pacific region. The Indo-Pacific and Europe are indeed two distinct regions that do share certain linkages. NATO is a part of continental Europe, while the Indo-Pacific includes the Indian and Pacific Oceans respectively. Both NATO and the Indo-Pacific share mutual global threats such as Russia in Europe and China in the Indo-Pacific. This is an area where NATO and Quad can look for synergy to defend the rules-based liberal order in a scenario where NATO is also looking to deepen its partnerships with the Asia-Pacific nations. Moreover, through the deepening of this partnership, cooperation in the areas of supply chain resilience, climate change, and capacity building could prove to be effective.

South Korean President Yoon Seok-Youl aims at building a relationship with NATO to be able to face North Korea's nuclear ambitions and also since South Korea is enhancing its reach in the Indo-Pacific region.⁴ PM Kishida's participation in the summit displays the belief that Japan sees its security as being linked with the international institutions and collective defence. Shinzo Abe, former PM of Japan, attempted to embed Japan into several international institutions and include it in the international rules-based process in the Indo-Pacific as well as in the European Union and North

America. This can be observed from Japan's participation in the Japan-EU Economic Partnership Agreement and the Japan-EU Infrastructure Connectivity Agreement.

Way forward

In terms of Japan's defence security, it has also established a Reciprocal Access Agreement with Australia, India, and the UK too, which shows Japan's effort to contribute to its security and secure a rules-based order. Therefore, Japan's participation in the NATO summit has shown that Japan is attempting to look at its security beyond the Quad, AUKUS, and also the US-Japan alliance, which is one of the cornerstones of Japan's foreign policy. Furthermore, Japan believes that security is attained effectively by participating and contributing to multilateral organizations and through cooperation that focuses on diplomatic and economic cooperation.

Since India-Japan relations have been deepening over the years and NATO is considering elevating its ties with Japan as well, It remains pertinent to explore how India-Japan ties may get affected. Even though India and Japan have boosted their ties, they have shown differences in their stance toward the Ukraine Crisis. While Japan has imposed strict sanctions against Russia, India has remained quite neutral. It remains to be seen how NATO's inclination towards Japan could affect India's relationship with Japan.

Japan-NATO cooperation will be further defined in the near future by pragmatic cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region that does not over time take the resources away from NATO's purpose to defend against Russia. For securing peace in the Indo-Pacific region as well as in NATO and around the world, NATO and its partners must implement their commitments and pledges effectively, and Japan, along with other Asia-Pacific partners should focus more on creating an efficient regional security architecture. Moreover, Japan must also increase its defence capability and needs to be able to face new threats in the global environment, as committed by Kishida in the Shangri-la Dialogue. Japan's cooperation and alliance with the US should be a cornerstone of its engagement with the Indo-Pacific and NATO.

NOTES:

¹ “NATO declares China a security challenge for the first time”, *Al-Jazeera*, June 30, 2022 <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/6/30/nato-names-china-a-strategic-priority-for-the-first-time>. Accessed on July 05, 2022.

² “Japan, NATO step up ties amid Russia's invasion of Ukraine”, *The Hindu*, June 07, 2022 <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/japan-nato-step-up-ties-amid-russias-invasion-of-ukraine/article65503530.ece>. Accessed on July 06, 2022.

³ “Joint Political Declaration between Japan and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation”, *NATO (Official Website)*, April 13, 2013 https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_99562.htm. Accessed on July 06, 2022.

⁴ “Mitch Shin, From Europe, Yoon Suk Yeol Calls for International Cooperation on North Korea’s Nuclear and Missile Threats”, *The Diplomat*, June 30, 2022 <https://thediplomat.com/2022/06/from-europe-yoon-suk-yeol-calls-for-international-cooperation-on-north-koreas-nuclear-and-missile-threats/>. Accessed on July 07, 2022.

