

The Evolution of the Partnership between NATO and Japan

By Komei Isozaki

The Vilnius Summit in 2023

On July 11-12, a historic NATO summit meeting was held in Vilnius, Lithuania. In addition to 31 NATO member states, four heads of government of Indo-Pacific countries attended the meeting. Japan and South Korea signed an Individually Tailored Partnership Programs (ITPP) with NATO. This paper examines the trend and significance of the new partnership between NATO and Japan.

Inseparability of Euro-Atlantic Zone and Indo-Pacific Security

The summit showcased the strong ties among NATO countries and partnered states 17 months after the ruthless Russian aggression against Ukraine that started in February 2022. Perhaps the most important nature of this summit was mutual recognition of the inseparability of the security of the Euro-Atlantic Zone and that of the Indo-Pacific arena. The Vilnius Communique began with the denunciation of Russian aggression against Ukraine and then dedicated a significant portion of its length to outlining various challenges posed by the People's Republic of China. The communique also condemned North Korea's WMD and missile programs.

These security concerns have long been shared and coordinated among Japan, South Korea, and the United States but never addressed in such a decisive manner alongside NATO members. These new initiatives came from the realization that deepening strategic cooperation between Russia and China poses a threat to the rules-based international order.

Growing Partnership between Japan and NATO

Over the past decade, Japan has expanded its cooperation with NATO. To this point, during his administration, Prime Minister Abe took every opportunity to visit NATO HQ and led the strengthening of Japan's relationship with the Atlantic alliance. In 2010, Japan signed the Agreement on Security of Information and Material with NATO. In 2013, then Prime Minister Abe met with NATO Secretary-General Rasmussen during his visit to Japan, and the two leaders signed a Joint Political Declaration that established principles of cooperation and proposed areas for strengthening the partnership, including cyber defense, disaster relief, and counter-piracy operations.

After this meeting, Japan and NATO immediately established a study group for future collaboration in HADR (humanitarian assistance and disaster relief) and issued a report in 2014. In the same year, the IPCP (Individual Partnership and Cooperation Programme) was agreed upon and was subsequently revised and renewed in 2018 and 2020. Japan also started participating in NATO's Crisis Management Exercise (CMX) in 2015.

Personnel aspects of diplomatic and defense relations between NATO and Japan have included establishing a NATO section in the Japanese Embassy in Belgium, the dispatch of personnel from the Ministry of Defense in addition to the Defense Attaché, and the dispatch of Self Defense Force officers to NATO headquarters. On the diplomatic front, the Ambassador to Belgium has been appointed as the Permanent Representative to NATO since 2014. Japan finally established the Mission of Japan to NATO in 2018.

Significance of the Vilnius Summit for Japan-NATO Relations

In signing the ITTP, Japan has made it clear that it will organize, develop, and strengthen its existing relationship with NATO. This step further promotes the practical cooperation that Japan has advanced over the last decade. For example, cybersecurity was an early area of collaboration. Japan now participates in the NATO cyber defense

Komei Isozaki, Japan Chair Fellow at the Hudson Institute, explores the significance of Japan-NATO relations in the wake of the Vilnius Summit and new cooperation agreements between Japan and NATO.

exercise and dispatches staff to NATO's Cooperative Cyber Defense Centre of Excellence (CCDCOE) in Tallinn, Estonia.

In the emerging technology arena, including quantum computing and outer space, strengthening cooperation benefits both sides. The strategic documents Japan published last December showed Japan is in the process of linking security and technology in more meaningful ways. Japan probably estimates that cooperation with NATO can contribute to this process.

The signing of the ITTP can also be positioned as part of efforts to actualize a comprehensive deterrence strategy. Although not explicitly articulated, phrases such as "upholding and strengthening the Rules-Based International Order" in the language of the ITTP indicate an element of countering revisionist countries that attempt to change the status quo by force, and this idea is consistent with Japan's National Security Strategy.

On the equipment side, Japan has recently announced a "Global Combat Air Programme (GCAP)" to jointly develop a next-generation fighter aircraft with the United Kingdom and Italy, which are both NATO members. Not only will this program be the cornerstone of Japan's future cooperation with the United Kingdom and Italy, but it has also been designed with Japan's broader Allies and partners in mind. The use of "Global" in the program's name reflects the potential of future interoperability with partners around the world, including NATO.

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It is also interesting to see that strengthening relations with NATO was described within the context of FOIP (Free and Open Indo-Pacific) in Japan's National Security Strategy and National Defense Strategy. Therefore, it can be said that Prime Minister Abe was the father of both initiatives.

In the past, Japan's security cooperation emphasized dealing with global challenges. However, the National Defense Strategy of 2022 stated that Japan—alongside some NATO member states such as the UK, France, Germany, and Italy—will be involved in challenges in Europe and the Indo-Pacific in addition to global ones. For example, some NATO countries cooperate in the areas of monitoring North Korean ship-to-ship transfer of goods and fuel, counter-piracy operations, international peacekeeping operations, and disaster relief. In fact, Japan cooperated with NATO in providing emergency assistance in response to the earthquake in Turkey earlier in 2023. Therefore, the establishment of a joint operational infrastructure is an urgent necessity. NATO's function of standardization could contribute to this regard.

Challenges and Hopes

As described in the ITTP for Japan, NATO's partnership with Japan is rooted in practical cooperation. It does not go beyond the previously established framework of information exchange, policy consultation, and capacity building. It is inconceivable that Japan would exercise its right of self-defense or provide logistical support under Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty, and it is unrealistic to expect NATO to act for Japan's defense. By fully understanding the limitations of both sides, cooperation within the practical and technical spheres can be of great significance.

Furthermore, the relationships with the other three partner countries (Australia, New Zealand, and South Korea), which have also strengthened their relationships with NATO during this summit, are essential. It should be interesting to see how Japan and these three Asia-Pacific partners will work together to promote security in the Indo-Pacific in multinational security frameworks, including the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus).

Japan's rapidly growing security relations with South Korea, with which Japan has had deep relations since ancient times and is an immediate neighbor, is arguably the most important phenomenon for the stability of the Asia-Pacific region. Although disagreements remain over historical issues and territory, I believe it is essential for the peace and prosperity of the Indo-Pacific region that Japan and South Korea have robust security relations from a broad and long-term perspective rather than using the disputes as a tool for domestic political leverage.

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