



REPORT

# JAPAN, NATO, AND THE DIVERSIFICATION OF SECURITY PARTNERSHIPS

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Cover page photo: Members of an honour guard watch the aircraft carrying Japan's Prime Minister Fumio Kishida as it arrives Wednesday, 10 July 2024, at Andrews Air Force Base for the NATO summit in Washington (AP Photo/Manuel Balce Ceneta/Scanpix)

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<b>ACSA</b>	Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement
<b>A2/AD</b>	anti-access/area denial
<b>ASEAN</b>	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
<b>AUKUS</b>	Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States
<b>BRI</b>	Belt-and-Road Initiative
<b>CCDCOE</b>	Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence
<b>CHST</b>	Counter-Hybrid Support Team
<b>CoE</b>	Centre of Excellence
<b>CP</b>	comprehensive partnership
<b>CPS</b>	comprehensive strategic partnership
<b>DCA</b>	defence cooperation agreement
<b>DX</b>	digital transformation
<b>EPA</b>	Economic Partnership Agreement
<b>EDT</b>	emerging and disruptive technologies
<b>ESP</b>	extensive strategic partnership
<b>FOIP</b>	Free and Open Indo-Pacific
<b>GCAP</b>	Global Combat Air Programme
<b>GSOMIA</b>	General Security of Military Information Agreement
<b>GX</b>	green transformation
<b>HADR</b>	humanitarian assistance and disaster relief
<b>IPD</b>	Indo-Pacific Deployment
<b>ITPP</b>	Individually Tailored Partnership Programme
<b>ISA</b>	information sharing agreement
<b>JEF</b>	Joint Expeditionary Force
<b>JIMEX</b>	Japan-India Maritime Exercise
<b>NSS</b>	National Security Strategy
<b>NTS</b>	non-traditional security
<b>ODA</b>	official development assistance
<b>OSA</b>	official security assistance
<b>PLA</b>	People's Liberation Army
<b>PRC</b>	People's Republic of China
<b>ROK</b>	Republic of Korea
<b>RAA</b>	Reciprocal Access Agreement
<b>SCC</b>	Security Consultative Committee
<b>SDF</b>	Japan Self-Defense Force
<b>SLOC</b>	sea lines of communication
<b>SP</b>	strategic partnership
<b>SPS</b>	Science for Peace and Security
<b>SPA</b>	Strategic Partnership Agreement
<b>TTA</b>	technology transfer agreement
<b>TS</b>	traditional security
<b>Quad</b>	Quadrilateral Security Dialogue
<b>UNCLOS</b>	United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea
<b>VFA</b>	visiting forces agreement
<b>VCISC</b>	Virtual Cyber Incident Support Capability



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The US-led military alliances remain an integral part of the defence and deterrence strategies of countries in the Indo-Pacific and Euro-Atlantic regions. Whereas the European security architecture is centred on a multilateral alliance, that is, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the Asian security order is rooted in the hub-and-spokes system – the network of US-led bilateral alliances with key partners in Asia, such as Japan. Traditional security threats remain a key priority for the alliances in both regions. At the same time, the rapidly shifting global security environment is increasingly putting pressure on the US-led alliances to adapt to the evolving threat context. Washington's allies are now facing a growing array of hybrid challenges, as well as witnessing the rise of low-intensity or grey-zone conflicts. These conflicts typically fall outside the scope of the alliance's conventional military deterrence. Fuelled by the great power competition and increased military threats, coupled with the rise of challenges in new domains, cooperation with like-minded global partners is, therefore, steadily growing in importance in both regions.

Bringing in experts from Europe and Japan, this report examines the key shifts in US allies' threat perceptions and strategic thinking on policy responses with a focus on the Japan-US alliance and NATO. It also explores the rise of informal security alignments designed to address both traditional and hybrid challenges and exemplified by the minilateral-type security cooperation pursued by Japan. Finally, the report zooms in on the growing interlinkages between security in the Indo-Pacific and Euro-Atlantic regions, as evidenced by the deepened security ties between like-minded partners, notably Japan, the European Union, and NATO.

The report argues that the Russian invasion of Ukraine should be seen as a critical juncture for alliance politics. Military alliances, exemplified by the US-Japan alliance, are now increasingly being operationalised as a means to enhance military readiness and effectively generate combat power in case of a contingency. Corresponding to the major shifts in America's global military posture, which now focuses on great power wars, the US-led alliance system is seeking to re-adapt to the new strategic environment so as to effectively deter and prepare for future contingencies. The US-Japan alliance, the report finds, should be perceived as a manifestation of some of the broad and enduring changes in the role of alliance politics in international security, which are observable both in the Western Pacific and Europe.

While the US-led alliance remains a key pillar of the security and defence policies of the 'junior' allies, notably Japan, the report highlights the allies' uncertainties about the sustainability of the American security commitments in the medium- to long-term, both in the Indo-Pacific and Euro-Atlantic region. Assessing Japan's updated conceptualisation of security in the context of the Ukraine war and the rise of hybrid threats, the report detects a sense of urgency in Tokyo to develop a diverse set of capabilities and expand Japan's security partnerships. For Japanese strategists, the countries that can potentially make more direct contributions to Japan's defence needs, such as Australia, India, and the Republic of Korea (ROK), remain a priority in terms of alignment cooperation. At the same time, the report demonstrates how the changing nature of security challenges is steadily raising the importance to Japan of cooperation with geographically distant partners, as seen in Tokyo's evolving security partnership with the EU and NATO.

Having no less than 38 strategic partnerships with countries and organisations around the globe, including in East Asia, the Middle East, and Europe, the report suggests that Japan's partnership policy exemplifies a broader trend of strategic diversification observable in the Indo-Pacific. This policy goes well beyond engaging only countries that can provide a more direct contribution to one's defence needs. Mapping Japan's strategic partnership diplomacy, the report finds that Tokyo has been successful in utilising alignment policy to promote an interconnected network of partners and accomplish issue-based, functional cooperation in various areas. The report, however, highlights some shortcomings of Tokyo's strategic partnerships, which include their often merely declaratory normative basis, as well as the difficulties involved in the utilisation of these types of agreements for the purpose of contributing to the rules-based multilateral order.

The report explains that similar approaches to security cooperation that go beyond the formal alliance and the geographically defined region can also be observed in the Euro-Atlantic space. From NATO's perspective, addressing hybrid challenges requires collaboration with various actors, including NATO member states and partnerships with geographically distant players, such as Japan. The report suggests that minilateral and multilateral formats involving a small group of like-minded countries can provide NATO with the opportunity to work closely with Japan and other Indo-Pacific partners on specific issues related to hybrid threats. Through these formats, partners can leverage NATO's expertise and resources while also gaining valuable insights from its collective knowledge. The report asserts that this can lead to the development of joint Japan-NATO strategies and initiatives to effectively counter hybrid threats, such as cyberattacks and disinformation campaigns.

The report thereby makes the following recommendations:

- The US and Japan should engage in robust bilateral discussions that examine possible future contingency scenarios in the Western Pacific, clarify the allies' division of labour, and address the trade-offs in defence planning both for effective deterrence and contingency planning.
- Japan, in cooperation with the US, should reinforce and institutionalise its ties with Australia, the ROK, and the Philippines in minilateral settings. Priority should be given to improved interoperability and strengthened joint deterrence that can contribute both to Japan's immediate security needs and address hybrid threats, especially in the area of maritime security.
- Japan should pursue a tailored approach to its relationship with the EU by prioritising cooperation in the digital domains (cybersecurity and countering disinformation), new technologies (5G, AI, and quantum), and defence industrial cooperation and technology sharing.
- NATO and Japan should seek to establish effective communication channels and mechanisms in order to facilitate a more coordinated response to security challenges. Joint exercises and training should be prioritised with a view to improving interoperability and coordination between the two. NATO, the EU, and Japan should explore ways to deepen trilateral security cooperation in tackling hybrid threats, especially in cybersecurity and countering disinformation.
- Japan should be involved in NATO's and the EU's Centres of Excellences, possibly as part of a minilateral grouping with other like-minded Indo-Pacific partners. This will help strengthen Japan's cooperation with NATO and the EU on specific issues related to hybrid threats.



## INTRODUCTION

*Elena Atanassova-Cornelis*

Military alliances have been an integral part of the defence and deterrence strategies of countries in the Indo-Pacific and Europe-Atlantic regions, as well as of both regions' security architecture. Being primarily a response to an external threat, the key US-led alliances were established in the early Cold War years to tackle the communist and Soviet threats. Whereas the European security architecture has been centred on a multilateral alliance – the North Atlantic Treaty Organization – the Asian security order has been rooted in what is known as the hub-and-spokes system – the network of US-led bilateral alliances with key partners in Asia, such as Japan. The main focus of military alliances is still on addressing the traditional (territorial integrity/sovereignty) aspects of security, as seen both in Europe, especially in the wake of Russia's aggression against Ukraine, and the Indo-Pacific.

At the same time, US allies in both regions are now facing a growing array of hybrid threats, such as cyber, disinformation, supply chain insecurity, and economic coercion. This, in turn, leads to the rise of low-intensity or grey-zone conflicts, which typically fall outside the scope of the alliance's conventional military deterrence and below the threshold of war that is expected to trigger the alliance's joint response. However, as the dividing line between war and peace is increasingly being blurred, these new threats are making their way to the top of the alliance's agenda in both the Indo-Pacific and Euro-Atlantic regions.

The continuing pressure of military threats, coupled with the diversification of security challenges, is becoming a key driver of increased cooperation between US allies and friends in both regions. While keeping their alliance with the US strong, America's partners are now investing more resources in strengthening security cooperation with each other. This includes reaching out to like-minded players in distant regions and joining various (informal) configurations, such as strategic partnerships and minilateral groupings.

Against this background, in January 2024, the Japan Chair at the ICDS held a roundtable in Tallinn with Japanese and European experts to examine the evolution of the formal US-led alliances in the Indo-Pacific and Euro-Atlantic regions, as well as the rise of alignment cooperation in the context of the changing nature of security threats. The current report builds upon the roundtable discussions. It explores the key shifts in allies' threat perceptions and strategic thinking on policy responses with a focus on the Japan-US alliance and NATO. It also examines the rise of informal security alignments designed to address both traditional and hybrid challenges, which are made manifest, for example, in the minilateral-type security cooperation pursued by Japan. Finally, the report zooms in on the growing interlinkages between security in the Indo-Pacific and Euro-Atlantic regions, as evidenced by the deepened security ties between like-minded partners, notably Japan, the European Union, and NATO.

The first chapter, written by Takuya Matsuda, explores the key drivers and changes in Japan's defence policy, as well as the corresponding transformation of the US-Japan alliance in an age of great power competition. The chapter demonstrates how the evolution of the alliance represents a fundamental shift in the way alliances are operationalised from a platform to project power to a means to jointly create combat power. Corresponding to the major shifts in America's global military posture, which now focuses on great power wars, the US-led alliance system is seeking to readapt to the new strategic environment so as to effectively deter and prepare for future contingencies. The chapter, therefore, argues that the US-Japan alliance should be perceived as a manifestation of some of the broad and

enduring changes in the role of alliance politics in international security, which are observable both in the Western Pacific and Europe.

The second chapter, written by Elena Atanassova-Cornelis, examines how the changing nature of security threats, namely the rise of hybrid threats and grey-zone conflicts, influences Japanese thinking on and responses to national security threats through alignment cooperation. To this end, the chapter explores Japan's updated conceptualisation of security under the Kishida Fumio administration and illustrates how it informs Tokyo's main approaches to tackling national security threats with key non-US partners. For Japanese strategists, the countries that can potentially make more direct contributions to Japan's defence needs, such as Australia, India, and the Republic of Korea, remain a priority in terms of alignment cooperation. At the same time, the chapter also demonstrates how the changing nature of security challenges is steadily raising the importance to Japan of cooperation with geographically distant actors, as seen in Tokyo's evolving security partnership with the EU and NATO.

The third chapter, written by Bart Gaens, takes a closer look at Japan's strategic partnership diplomacy, which has flourished during the past decade and currently comprises 38 such agreements with partners around the globe, including in East and Southeast Asia, Central Asia, Europe, and the Middle East. Japan's partnerships show a wide variety, ranging from mere diplomatic vehicles to substantive defence cooperation agreements. The chapter argues

that Tokyo has been successful in applying strategic partnership diplomacy in promoting an interconnected network of partners, accomplishing functional cooperation in various areas, and engaging developing and emerging countries from the so-called Global South. However, the chapter also points out that Japan faces several remaining challenges. These include the limited scope of some strategic partnerships and their often merely declaratory normative basis, as well as the difficulties involved in the utilisation of these types of agreements for the purpose of contributing to the rules-based multilateral order.

The fourth chapter, by Nele Loorents, explores the progress, challenges, and cooperation with global partners, notably Japan, in NATO's response to hybrid threats. The Alliance has demonstrated significant progress in its efforts to combat these types of new threats, especially in response to Russia's actions in Ukraine. At the same time, the chapter argues that there are still a number of challenges that NATO must address in order to effectively mitigate the impact of hybrid threats. The multifaceted nature of these challenges has set limitations on NATO's collective response to them, thus leaving openings for other formats for cooperation in Europe and beyond – both for NATO and individual Allies. Therefore, by leveraging the expertise and resources of global partners, notably Japan, NATO can further enhance its capabilities to effectively address hybrid threats on a global scale. In doing so, there is a need to raise awareness and mutual understanding of different approaches to the common threats.

# CHAPTER 1. THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE US-JAPAN ALLIANCE: CREATING MILITARY POWER THROUGH ALLIANCE POLITICS

Takuya Matsuda

What explains the evolution of Japan's defence policy? How has the US-Japan alliance transformed itself accordingly? These questions not only have profound implications for East Asian security but also contain broader and enduring implications for understanding the evolving role of alliances in the US grand strategy. The Korean War is often considered a critical juncture that consolidated the US alliance system.<sup>1</sup> The Russian invasion of Ukraine may have a similar impact in prompting major changes in the way we understand alliances. The war brought about dramatic shifts in the way we understand collective defence and alliance politics in the Nordic-Baltic region, as manifested in the accession of Finland and Sweden to the Transatlantic Alliance. Great power competition – especially the erosion of US military primacy in contested spaces – has made the creation of military power a vital element of alliance politics.

*Japan's upgraded defence posture did not occur in isolation from the broader changes that the US alliance system is currently going through*

The US-Japan alliance is no exception. Japan's gradual embrace of military power as a critical component of national strategy has attracted attention in the past decade, especially due to Tokyo's peculiar post-war pacifist foreign policy.<sup>2</sup> Yet, Japan's upgraded defence posture did not occur in isolation from the broader changes that the US alliance system is currently

<sup>1</sup> Robert Jervis, "The Impact of the Korean War on the Cold War," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 24, no. 4 (1980): 563-92.

<sup>2</sup> Andrew Oros, *Japan's Security Renaissance: New Policies and Politics for the Twenty-First Century* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2017); Adam P Liff, "Japan's Security Policy in the 'Abe Era': Radical Transformation or Evolutionary Shift?," *Texas National Security Review* 1, no. 3 (2018): 8-35.

going through both in the Western Pacific and Europe. In short, the ongoing transformation of the US-Japan alliance illuminates a fundamental shift in the way alliances are operationalised from a platform to project power to a means for jointly creating combat power in an age of great power competition.<sup>3</sup> To these ends, this chapter illustrates the underlying forces that have driven the transformation of the US-Japan alliance and the regional security architecture as well as its challenges ahead. The findings of this chapter contain numerous scholarly and policy implications regarding our understanding of the role of alliances in international security not only in the Western Pacific but also in the Nordic-Baltic region, which is going through equally significant changes to its security arrangements.

## 1.1. EXPLAINING THE EVOLUTION OF THE US-JAPAN ALLIANCE

What are the driving forces that have shaped the aforementioned trajectory of the US-Japan alliance? Japan's post-war foreign policy was not simply informed by pacifism.<sup>4</sup> Rather, Tokyo's foreign policy was animated by the unique strategic environment that Japan had benefitted from in the post-war era. The large bodies of water surrounding the archipelago state and US naval primacy in the Western Pacific as a result of the Allied Victory in the Pacific during the Second World War had produced an exceptionally benign strategic environment for Japan.<sup>5</sup> As political scientist Richard Betts observes, military readiness is a trade-off between internal welfare and external security.<sup>6</sup> For Tokyo, it made sense to prioritise post-war economic reconstruction while eschewing

<sup>3</sup> Jeffrey W Hornung, "[The United States and Japan should Prepare for War with China](#)," *War on the Rocks*, 5 February, 2021; Takuya Matsuda, "Japan's Emerging Security Strategy," *The Washington Quarterly*, 46, no.1 (2023), 85-102.

<sup>4</sup> Jennifer Lind, "Pacifism or Passing the Buck?: Testing Theories of Japanese Security Policy," *International Security* 29, no. 1 (2004): 92-121.

<sup>5</sup> Christopher P Twomey, "Japan, a Circumscribed Balancer: Building on Defensive Realism to make Predictions about East Asian Security," *Security Studies* 9, no. 4 (2000): 167-205.

<sup>6</sup> Richard Betts, *Military Readiness: Concepts, Choices, Consequences* (Washington DC: Brookings, 1995), 29.

heavy investments in national defence, a policy that is commonly referred to as the Yoshida Doctrine.

Due to these favourable strategic settings, the US-Japan alliance had not been regarded as a platform from which to jointly generate combat power. Indeed, a division of labour between the two allies had been defined where the two states had separate missions – the US military offered an offensive “spear” while the Japanese Self-Defense Force functioned as a defensive “shield.” Nevertheless, the alliance had fundamentally been a key enabler for the US to project power in the Western Pacific.

*Due to the favourable strategic settings, the US-Japan alliance was not regarded as a platform from which to jointly generate combat power*

Since the Second World War, Japan has been considered vital for the US to maintain naval primacy in the region. In addition, access to military bases in Japan has been crucial to the US’s implementation of a global strategy informed by nuclear weapons and air power.<sup>7</sup> In other words, the alliance was basically informed by an exchange between access to military bases and extended deterrence.

*The US had deliberately discouraged Tokyo from playing a larger role in the common defence*

Additionally, from Washington’s perspective, the fact that Japan enjoyed a secured position in the Western Pacific had interestingly led to hesitancy in encouraging Japan to spend more on national defence, especially in the 1970s during the Nixon administration. It is often assumed that burden-sharing has been an enduring political agenda for the US-Japan alliance and beyond. Yet, alliance politics is inherently not only about cost-sharing but also about control.<sup>8</sup> Since Japan enjoyed a benign

<sup>7</sup> Alexander Lanoszka, *Atomic Assurance: The Alliance Politics of Nuclear Proliferation* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018), 30-7.

<sup>8</sup> Brian Blankenship, *The Burden-Sharing Dilemma: Coercive Diplomacy in US Alliance Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2023).

strategic environment, a militarily formidable Japan could become more independent from the US. The US had, therefore, deliberately discouraged Tokyo from playing a larger role in the common defence. As a result, Japan only maintained minimal military capabilities so as not to become a power vacuum in the region – an approach based on its Basic Defence Force Concept, which informed Tokyo’s underlying defence policy well into the 21st century.<sup>9</sup>

Moreover, maritime geography also shaped the bilateral-based alliance structure in the Western Pacific, often referred to as the hub-and-spokes system, where a multilateral security arrangement akin to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization is absent. Indeed, Cold War hot spots – namely the Korean Peninsula and the Taiwan Strait – were present in East Asia. The US had, therefore, preferred a multilateral defence arrangement in the Western Pacific. However, the large bodies of water that separate major powers in the Western Pacific have made it difficult for the US’s regional allies to align their strategic priorities. If the international system is characterised by self-help, a state benefitting from a benign strategic environment would be less inclined to get involved in its neighbour’s fight. Japan, hence, decided to pursue a bilateral arrangement with the US, which led to the collection of bilateral alliances in the Western Pacific, referred to as the hub-and-spokes system.<sup>10</sup>

The resurgence of great power competition – especially China’s military modernisation – has triggered profound changes to the regional strategic setting that have also fundamentally transformed the circumstances illustrated in this section. The defence of Taiwan, for instance, has enormous strategic value for sea control and the overall balance of power in the Western Pacific.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Tsuyoshi Kawasaki, “Postclassical realism and Japanese security policy,” *Pacific Review* 14, no. 2 (2001): 221-40.

<sup>10</sup> Yasuhiro Izumikawa, “Network Connections and the Emergence of the Hub-and-Spokes Alliance System in East Asia,” *International Security* 45, no. 2 (2020): 7-50.

<sup>11</sup> Alessio Patalano, “Seapower and Sino-Japanese Relations in the East China Sea,” *Asian Affairs* 45, no. 1 (2014): 34-54; Brendan Rittenhouse Green and Caitlin Talmadge, “Then What? Assessing the Military Implications of Chinese Control of Taiwan,” *International Security*, 47, no. 1 (2022): 7-45.



The US-Japan alliance is no longer merely an enabler for the so-called Command of the Commons – otherwise called American military hegemony – but is rather increasingly being regarded as a means to effectively generate military power.<sup>12</sup> While it is arguable that the US remains a superpower, the erosion of US military primacy, at least in contested spaces, has increasingly become a critical factor that informs the alliance.<sup>13</sup>

## 1.2. JAPAN'S 2022 SECURITY DOCUMENTS AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS FOR THE ALLIANCE

Japan's new security documents, released in December 2022, underscore Tokyo's intentions to further upgrade its role in regional security. This builds on Japan's efforts to untangle the legal and institutional hurdles that had hindered closer coordination with US armed forces in Japan, including the instalment of Tokyo's version of a National Security Council in 2013.<sup>14</sup> The newest security strategy demonstrates Japan's consistent commitment to enhancing its contribution to the common defence as realised in, for example, the country's pledge to increase its defence spending to 2% of GDP.<sup>15</sup> It also indicates Tokyo's intent to develop a more combat-capable force, including the instalment of a joint command structure that will improve coordination among the three force units of the Japan Self-Defense

Forces (SDF). In addition, Japan announced plans to adopt counterstrike capabilities while adjusting its posture towards the defence of Japan's southwest islands. Despite Japan's unprecedented upgrade of its defence posture, increasing the defence budget, for example, is merely a part of a political agenda that signals burden-sharing but does not necessarily translate into effective combat power.<sup>16</sup>

High on the agenda for the US-Japan alliance in the 2020s is determining the necessary steps to collectively generate military power through the alliance so as to be prepared for a situation where the armed forces of the two nations need to fight together.<sup>17</sup> Policymakers often invoke the term force multiplier to highlight the benefits that alliances offer. This view resonates with the common understanding that the aggregation of military capabilities among the respective allied states to maintain a favourable balance of power is the fundamental role of alliances.<sup>18</sup>

*High on the agenda for the US-Japan alliance in the 2020s is determining the necessary steps to collectively generate military power*

Nevertheless, combining the different capabilities and aligning their distinct strategic interests among a collection of allied states is no straightforward task. Military power cannot be measured simply by the sum of tanks or fighter jets that a state possesses. For instance, a duplication of capabilities and contributions from allied members does not necessarily enhance the collective combat capability of allied states. Since an alliance is a collection of different states with a shared strategic challenge yet different capabilities, as opposed to conventional wisdom, alliances are not necessarily the most efficient way to enhance military effectiveness.<sup>19</sup> It is also worth noting

<sup>12</sup> Barry R Posen, "Command of the Commons: The Military Foundation of U.S. Hegemony," *International Security* 28, no. 1 (2003): 5-46.

<sup>13</sup> Evan Braden Montgomery, "Contested Primacy in the Western Pacific: China's Rise and the Future of U.S. Power Projection," *International Security* 38, no. 4 (2014): 115-49. On optimistic views over the durability of the American position as a superpower, see Stephen G Brooks and William C Wohlforth, "The Myth of Multipolarity: American Power's Staying Power," *Foreign Affairs*, 18 April 2023.

<sup>14</sup> Adam P Liff and Andrew S Erickson, "From Management Crisis to Crisis Management? Japan's Post-2012 Institutional Reforms and Sino Japanese Crisis (In)Stability," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 40, no. 5 (2017): 604-38.

<sup>15</sup> It is useful to note that Japan adopted the NATO metric to measure defence spending which includes retirement pensions, research and development costs, and other costs that are not necessarily administered by the ministry of defence. In reality, Japan's defence budget will increase by roughly 60% by 2027. For a closer analysis, see Adam P Liff, "No, Japan is not planning to 'double its defense budget'," *Brookings Institution*, 22 May 2023.

<sup>16</sup> Alexander Lanoszka, *Military Alliances in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2022), 134.

<sup>17</sup> Zack Cooper and Eric Sayers, "Japan's Shift to War-footing," *War on the Rocks*, 12 January 2023.

<sup>18</sup> Randall L Schweller, "New Realist Research on Alliances: Refining, not Refuting Waltz's Balancing Proposition," *American Political Science Review* 91, no. 4 (1998): 927-30.

<sup>19</sup> Nora Bensahel, "International Alliances and Military Effectiveness: Fighting Alongside Allies and Partners" in Risa Brooks and Elizabeth Stanley (eds), *Creating Military Power: The Sources of Military Effectiveness* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007).

that many US allies, including Japan, commonly confront an acute challenge of reconciling the requirements for long-term great power competition and demands for austerity. It is, therefore, crucial to generate effective combat power in a cost-efficient manner.<sup>20</sup>

*Many US allies commonly confront an acute challenge of reconciling the requirements for long-term great power competition and demands for austerity*

As the concept of Integrated Deterrence suggests, effectively generating combat power through alliances involves strategic, institutional, and tactical integrations in order to effectively generate military power.<sup>21</sup> For example, interoperability at the tactical level and a joint command structure at the strategic and institutional levels become critical if different forces are to effectively combine their capabilities and roles.

US leadership and commitment are, therefore, vital to ensuring that the members of a multilateral alliance such as NATO can combine their capabilities in an effective manner that translates into combat power.<sup>22</sup> In a similar vein, further debate is necessary between Washington and Tokyo to determine how to operationalise Japan's growing military power as well as how to integrate the former into the US-Japan alliance. While further clarification over Tokyo's defence strategy, especially at the operational level, remains necessary, Japan's new security-related documents illustrate the fundamental changes from the way the US-Japan alliance had previously been operationalised.

As highlighted in Japan's latest security strategy, unveiled in December 2022, one of the key agendas is to further the integration of

the two armed forces in preparation for future conflicts. As mentioned earlier, due to the benign strategic environment Japan previously enjoyed, it has not been assumed that the SDF would fight alongside US armed forces in Japan. Hence, in contrast to the US-South Korea alliance, a robust command and control structure has been absent from the US-Japan alliance. It is, therefore, unsurprising that restructuring the alliance's command and control structure to streamline coordination between the two armed forces has been one of the key concerns for Washington and Tokyo.<sup>23</sup> Developing a solid combined command structure that is durable not only during peacetime but also in times of crisis is a critical step if the alliance is to effectively and jointly generate combat power.

*In contrast to the US-South Korea alliance, a robust command and control structure has been absent from the US-Japan alliance*

Moreover, it is vital for the alliance to develop a military doctrine or strategy that takes into account the looming challenges, advantages, and limitations of the alliance. Observers often emphasise how emerging technologies such as cyberspace and drones may transform warfare. While tactical changes in warfare cannot be dismissed, force employment deserves equal, if not more, attention with respect to enhancing combat effectiveness, especially in a contested space.<sup>24</sup>

The erosion of US military dominance in contested spaces and the re-emergence of great power competition are among the principal driving forces behind changes in how we understand deterrence, US military posture, and the role of alliances in those endeavours. This includes significant changes in force planning, which is now geared towards

<sup>20</sup> Eric Heginbotham and Jacob L Heim, "Deterring without Dominance: Discouraging Chinese Adventurism under Austerity," *Washington Quarterly* 38, no.1 (2015): 185-99.

<sup>21</sup> Stacie L Pettyjohn and Becca Wasser, "No I in Team: Integrated Deterrence with Allies and Partners," *Center for a New American Security*, 14 December 2022.

<sup>22</sup> Hugo Meijer and Stephen G Brooks, "Illusions of Autonomy: Why Europe Cannot Provide for Its Security If the United States Pulls Back," *International Security* 45, no.4 (2021): 7-43.

<sup>23</sup> "US and Japan plan biggest upgrade to security pact in more than 60 years," *Financial Times*, 25 March 2024.

<sup>24</sup> Stephen Biddle, *Military Power: Explaining Victory and Defeat in Modern Battle* (Princeton University Press, 2004).



focusing on fighting a great power war.<sup>25</sup> Hence, posture resiliency and an active denial strategy, including the implementation of an anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) strategy, have become crucial aspects of bolstering deterrence through alliances. Echoing the 2022 US National Defense Strategy, as represented by their emphasis on the importance of the defence of Japan's southwest islands,

*Posture resiliency and an active denial strategy have become crucial aspects of bolstering deterrence through alliances*

Japan's security documents show how Tokyo is embracing deterrence by resilience and denial.<sup>26</sup>

The question of how a great-power conflict may unfold in the Western Pacific presents a dilemma for defence planners. As US defence experts Hal Brands and Zack Cooper highlight, there is an urgent need for American and Japanese policymakers to debate the numerous scenarios so as to address the trade-offs in defence planning that stem from the aforementioned scenarios.<sup>27</sup> Defence planners, for example, need to take into account the trade-offs between focusing on a high-intensity great power war and a so-called grey zone such as a *fait accompli* situation. If China is a confident rising power, it will likely resort to *fait accompli* to change the status quo without the use of brute force. On the other hand, if it is a desperate peak power or even a declining power, it may take more drastic measures, such as attacking US military bases in Okinawa, as it perceives a window of

opportunity to be closing.<sup>28</sup> The various possible scenarios make it challenging for policymakers to explore ways to bolster deterrence and enhance readiness by reconciling the trade-offs associated with the different ways that a conflict may play out.

First and foremost, military assets that are adjacent to Taiwan and China are increasingly vulnerable to missile strikes by the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA). Instead of concentrating forces at the frontline, there is a need to pursue posture resiliency by dispersing military capabilities so as to maintain a certain degree of resiliency and turn the conflict into a war of attrition.<sup>29</sup> As defence analyst Stephen Biddle emphasises, force employment that focuses on cover, concealment, and dispersion is vital for combat effectiveness.<sup>30</sup> As the preponderance of American military power erodes, alliances need to enhance their readiness to operate in a contested space where survivability and combat resilience also become crucial concerns.

*As the preponderance of American military power erodes, alliances need to enhance their readiness to operate in a contested space where survivability and combat resilience also become crucial concerns*

Another critical element of the US-Japan alliance's strategy is to implement an active denial strategy. Japan's contribution to sea control and potentially its own A2/AD strategy is not only compatible with Tokyo's exclusive defence policy but also presents a number of important advantages in regard to bolstering deterrence.<sup>31</sup> First of all, it complicates the

<sup>25</sup> On debates over America's global military posture in an age of great power competition see, for instance, Jim Mitre, "A Eulogy for the Two-War Construct," *The Washington Quarterly*, 41 no.4 (2018): 7-30 and Hal Brands and Evan Braden Montgomery, "One War Is Not Enough: Strategy and Force Planning for Great-Power Competition," *Texas National Security Review* 3, no.2 (2020): 80-92.

<sup>26</sup> Ken Jimbo, "Japan's future security lies in a 'denial and competition' strategy," *Japan Times*, 26 January 2023.

<sup>27</sup> Hal Brands and Zack Cooper "Dilemmas of Deterrence: The United States' Smart New Strategy to has Six Daunting Trade-offs," *CSIS Briefs, The Marshall Papers* (March 2024).

<sup>28</sup> Michael Beckley, "The Peril of Peaking Powers: Economic Slowdowns and Implications for China's Next Decade," *International Security* 48, no.1 (2023): 7-46.

<sup>29</sup> Stacie L Pettyjohn, Andrew Metrick, and Becca Wasser, "The Kadena Conundrum: Developing a Resilient Indo-Pacific Posture," *War on the Rocks*, 1 December 2022.

<sup>30</sup> Stephen Biddle, *Military Power: Explaining Victory and Defeat in Modern Battle* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

<sup>31</sup> Stephen Biddle and Ivan Oelrich, "Future Warfare in the Western Pacific: Chinese Anti-access/Area Denial, U.S. AirSea Battle, and Command of Commons in East Asia," *International Security* 41, no. 1 (2016): 7-48; Michael Beckley, "The Emerging Military Balance in East Asia: How China's Neighbors Can Check Chinese Naval Expansion," *International Security* 42, no. 2 (2017): 78-119.

PLA's strategy of achieving a quick and decisive victory by hindering its ability to project power in areas that are adjacent to Taiwan, which enables the US and Japan to turn the conflict into a war of attrition.<sup>32</sup> In addition, an A2/AD strategy implemented by Japan would be beneficial for escalation control while maintaining crisis stability in the region. The Sakishima Islands – a group of islands among the Ryukyu Islands that are particularly close to Taiwan, including Miyako, Ishigaki, and Yonaguni – could be a vital strategic asset for the alliance in implementing an A2/AD strategy. From the US side, the instalment of the US Marine Littoral Regiment in 2025 – a mobile and lethal unit designed to defend the Sakishima Islands – demonstrates how the alliance is focusing on posture resiliency and an active denial strategy to defend Japan's remote islands and beyond.

At the same time, it is important to note that these remote islands, including the Senkaku Islands, are exposed and vulnerable. In August 2023, for example, Chinese and Russian naval vessels transited through the Miyako strait, which separates the Sakishima Islands from the main Okinawan Island. These islands could potentially be a target for a fait accompli scenario where states alter the territorial status quo without the use of brute force.<sup>33</sup> A fait accompli scenario over these islands would be difficult to reverse, especially given Japan's strict legal restrictions on the use of force,

*Despite the challenge of predicting how a war may unfold, it is necessary for the US and Japan to candidly discuss the potential scenarios, strategic ends, and operational goals by addressing ways to reconcile the trade-offs*

which could further complicate the alliance's response and may drive a wedge between the US and Japan. An A2/AD strategy would, again,

<sup>32</sup> For a closer analysis of protracted war and its implications for a Sino-US conflict, see Iskander Rehman, *Planning for Protraction: A Historically Informed Approach to Great-power War and Sino-US Competition*, (London: Routledge, 2023).

<sup>33</sup> Dan Altman, "The Evolution of Territorial Conquest After 1945 and the Limits of the Territorial Integrity Norm," *International Organization*, 74, no. 3 (2021): 490-522.

be useful in preventing these scenarios from occurring.

In sum, despite the challenge of predicting how a war may unfold, it is necessary for the US and Japan to candidly discuss the potential scenarios, strategic ends, and operational goals by addressing ways to reconcile these trade-offs. By doing so, defence planners in both states would have a clearer idea of the division of labour between the two nations in any response to a future conflict.

### 1.3. TOWARDS A REGIONAL APPROACH TO CONTINGENCY PLANNING

The growing appetite for a regional approach to contingency planning is another important issue that reveals how concerns over a great power conflict demand US allies to consider ways to jointly generate military power in an effective manner. The resurgence of great power competition as a defining principle has animated changes in the alliance structure in the Western Pacific. Multilateral defence relationships that build on the existing bilateral-based alliance system flourished in the Indo-Pacific.<sup>34</sup> The US, Japan, and South Korea Trilateral Defence Relationship, for example, has made remarkable progress, as represented by the Camp David Summit in August 2023. The Summit highlighted the importance of developing a platform for the three nations to increase opportunities for consultation, especially to prepare for the eventuality of a regional crisis. The expansion of this trilateral defence relationship deserves attention as an example of how concerns over great power competition prompted closer alignment among like-minded states.

Improved ties between Tokyo and Seoul provide numerous benefits with respect to regional security. Chiefly, closer security ties between the US, Japan, and South Korea would assist coercive diplomacy by discouraging opponents from attempting to drive a wedge

<sup>34</sup> Luis Simón, Alexander Lanoszka, and Hugo Meijer, "Nodal defence: The changing structure of US alliance systems in Europe and East Asia," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 44 (2021): 360-88.

between the three nations.<sup>35</sup> However, a multilateral security arrangement would not automatically result in an effective aggregation of capabilities that would produce a favourable balance of power. The trajectory of this trilateral relationship reveals some of the underlying challenges in developing closer security arrangements – if not a military alliance.<sup>36</sup>

In order to further consolidate the trilateral defence relationship, it is important to foster closer alignment not only at the tactical and operational level but also at the strategic level.<sup>37</sup> As highlighted earlier in this chapter, the large bodies of water have made it difficult for major regional powers to align strategic priorities, a fact that has also informed the bilateral structure of the alliance system. During the Obama administration, there were constant efforts to strengthen security relations between Tokyo and Seoul,

*The trilateral defence relationship has had significant achievements in institutionalising defence coordination at the tactical and, to a certain degree, operational levels*

*While Japan and South Korea face similar security challenges, there is an enduring difference in their strategic priorities*

including the 2016 General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA). Yet, the absence of a shared strategic challenge had allowed political disputes to derail efforts to forge closer security relations between the two neighbours.<sup>38</sup> While Japan and South Korea face similar security challenges, there is an enduring difference in their strategic priorities since Seoul's primary focus is on North Korea, while Tokyo's main concern has increasingly been China's maritime expansion. It is indeed especially important to consolidate and institutionalise this security framework so that changes in political leadership do not reverse the progress made.

Despite these underlying obstacles, in parallel with Finland and Sweden's accession to NATO, the unthinkable happened in East Asia when growing concerns over a great power conflict in the region facilitated closer security ties between Japan and South Korea. The trilateral defence relationship has had significant achievements in institutionalising defence

coordination at the tactical and, to a certain degree, operational levels. For instance, the three nations established a mechanism to exchange real-time missile warning data from Pyongyang and agreed on the development of a multi-year trilateral joint military exercise plan that serves to further institutionalise defence coordination. This has become a crucial concern as Japan acquires counterstrike capabilities that may also impact South Korea if those capabilities are also intended to handle North Korean missiles.

Moreover, in order to further consolidate the trilateral security relationship, it would be productive to explore ways to develop closer coordination at the strategic level. Despite their differences in strategic priorities, the allied states must consider ways to align their strategic ends in case of a regional great power war. The key element for this trilateral arrangement to develop into a solid security framework, if not an alliance, is to coordinate at a strategic level to develop a regional approach to contingency planning. For instance, while a Taiwan contingency has attracted wide attention, a regional contingency could potentially involve both the Taiwan Strait and the Korean Peninsula – both of which have been key areas for great power rivalry in East Asia.<sup>39</sup> In parallel with the Nordic-Baltic region, clarifying the division of labour among the three states would be a crucial step in developing a solid regional approach to

<sup>35</sup> Thomas J Christensen, *Worse than a Monolith: Alliance Politics and Problems of Coercive Diplomacy in Asia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).

<sup>36</sup> Tongfi Kim, "By Any Other Name? The Camp David Summit, US-Japan-South Korea Trilateral Security Cooperation and Military Alliances", *CSDS Policy Brief*, 22 January 2024.

<sup>37</sup> Paul Poast, *Arguing about Alliances: The Art of Agreement in Military-Pact Negotiations* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019).

<sup>38</sup> Takuya Matsuda and Jaehan Park, "Geopolitics Redux: Explaining the Japan-Korea Dispute and its Implications for Great Power Competition," *War on the Rocks*, 7 November 2019.

<sup>39</sup> Jaehan Park "Geopolitics in East Asia: Korea and Taiwan as Flash Points and "Chiplands", in Z Cope (ed), *The Palgrave Handbook of Contemporary Geopolitics* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024).

contingency planning that will also bolster deterrence by raising the cost for China to initiate a military conflict.<sup>40</sup> Especially due to the diverging strategic priorities and

*In parallel with the Nordic-Baltic region, clarifying the division of labour among the three states would be a crucial step in developing a solid regional approach to contingency planning*

specialisation in the respective states' capabilities, an effective division of labour among the three states is critical for further advancing and consolidating the emerging trilateral security framework.

#### 1.4. THE US-JAPAN ALLIANCE IN AN AGE OF GREAT POWER COMPETITION

The Russian invasion of Ukraine served as a critical juncture for alliance politics. As peace comes into doubt, alliances are increasingly being operationalised as a means to enhance military readiness and effectively generate combat power in case of a contingency. Corresponding to the major shifts in America's global military posture, which now focuses on great power wars, the US alliance system needs to readapt to the new strategic environment so as to effectively deter and prepare for future contingencies. The US-Japan alliance illustrates some of the broad and enduring changes in the role of alliance politics in international security that are observable both in Europe and in the Western Pacific.

The strengthening of alliances – chief among them expanding contributions from US allies and multilateral security arrangements – represents a fundamental shift in the way we understand security in an age of great power competition. While these upgraded postures are seemingly significant initiatives with respect to maintaining a favourable balance of power, they do not necessarily present a complete picture of the critical steps that must be considered to effectively bolster deterrence

<sup>40</sup> Matti Pesu, "NATO in the North: The emerging division of labour in Northern European security," *FIIA Briefing Paper* 370 (2023).

and prepare for a contingency. Intellectual debates over the role of alliances in American grand strategy have often evolved around the merits of alliances based on the financial, military, and political costs that they impose upon the US.<sup>41</sup> However, excessive attention to the costs entailed by alliance commitments has often distracted policymakers from the fundamental question of how to effectively create military power through alliances.<sup>42</sup>

As this chapter highlighted, it is much more productive to focus our attention on when and how alliances could enhance military effectiveness. Though jointly creating military power through the aggregation of capabilities is the fundamental function of an alliance, it is no simple task to fight alongside different states that possess distinct capabilities and have different priorities. As illustrated earlier, the US-Japan alliance is making important progress towards facilitating closer coordination both between the two nations and with other regional allies. The restructuring of the command-and-control structure announced during Prime Minister Kishida's visit to Washington in April 2024 is a vital step forward for the alliance as it transforms itself into a platform to jointly generate combat power. Nevertheless, it is vital that policymakers on both sides of the Pacific further examine the different scenarios that may arise in the eventuality of a regional contingency so as to address the strategic and operational trade-offs that demand our attention in defence planning. A robust discussion over these challenges is crucial to implementing the necessary adjustments in force posture, political arrangements, and military strategies by building on the security strategy that Japan outlined in December 2022.

<sup>41</sup> On the financial costs of alliance politics, see Joshua Alley and Matthew Fuhrmann, "Budget Breaker? The Financial Cost of U.S. Military Alliances," *Security Studies* 30 no. 5 (2021): 661-90. Scholars have also debated the political and military costs, such as entrapment and free-riding, that alliance commitments may entail. See for example Michael Beckley, "The Myth of Entangling Alliances: Reassessing the Security Risks of US Defense Pacts," *International Security* 39, no. 4 (2015): 7-48.

<sup>42</sup> Alexander Cooley and Daniel H Nexon, "Estimating Alliance Costs: An Exchange Alliances Cost What States Spend on Them," *Security Studies* 31, no. 3 (2022): 510-32.



As the US alliance system goes through a transitional phase that places emphasis on jointly creating military power, intellectual discussions between like-minded nations in the Western Pacific and Europe become increasingly important. While this analysis of the US-Japan alliance illustrated how the alliance is shifting towards the creation of military power, there is no easy answer to the question of how to effectively operationalise alliances in such a manner. There are indeed obvious differences between a continental-based northern Europe, namely the Baltic-Nordic region, and the Western Pacific, in which maritime geography plays a major role in shaping alliance politics. Nevertheless, intellectual exchanges that help us refine our understanding of how to bolster deterrence and effectively operationalise alliances are productive exercises for like-minded states in both regions as defence planners tackle a new strategic environment where they need to take potential great power wars into account.

## CHAPTER 2. ALIGNMENT THINKING UNDER KISHIDA: JAPAN'S CONCEPTUALISATION OF AND RESPONSE TO SECURITY THREATS

*Elena Atanassova-Cornelis*

In 2022, the Kishida Fumio administration issued Japan's National Security Strategy (NSS), along with a revised National Defense Strategy and a Defense Buildup Program. These documents provide the key guiding principles and objectives for Japan's security and defence policy in the short- to medium-term. The NSS emphasises traditional security threats and examines Japanese responses to these in terms of both Japan's own defence build-up and the framework of the US-Japan alliance. Importantly, the NSS also stresses the rise of hybrid threats as a key characteristic of the evolving global security environment. In particular, the document states that "the boundaries between military and non-military, peacetime and contingency, have become blurred," and "grey-zone situations are constantly arising."<sup>43</sup> This reflects a shared understanding across the Indo-Pacific and Euro-Atlantic regions that the dividing line between traditional security (TS) and non-traditional security (NTS) challenges is now less clear-cut, as low-intensity conflicts are increasing in frequency.

From a Japanese perspective, the above developments necessitate a broadening of Japan's security approaches beyond its military alliance with the US in order to achieve a more complex set of national security objectives. The changing nature of security threats, therefore, provides an important context for understanding the evolution of Japanese security policy, in general, and Tokyo's thinking on responses to key national security threats through security alignment, in particular. To this end, this chapter examines how Japan's updated conceptualisation of security informs Tokyo's approaches to tackling national security threats with non-US partners. While the focus is on countries that can potentially

<sup>43</sup> Cabinet and National Security Council of Japan, [National Security Strategy of Japan](#) (Tokyo: Ministry of Defence, 2022), 23.

make a more direct contribution to Japan's defence needs, namely Australia, India, and South Korea, the chapter also looks beyond the Indo-Pacific region by exploring Tokyo's security alignment with the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

## 2.1. SECURITY ALIGNMENT AMID THE RISE OF HYBRID THREATS

The importance of understanding the non-military aspects of warfare and their implications for state and societal security was largely brought to the forefront of security analysis by NATO in the wake of Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 when the Alliance stressed the "broad, complex, adaptive, opportunistic and often integrated combinations of conventional and unconventional methods"<sup>44</sup> of warfare. The EU, too, has since focused on the urgency of responding to threats that combine conventional and nonconventional (i.e., diplomatic, military, economic, and technological) methods used by an opponent in an integrated manner.

Differently from tactics during an armed conflict, hybrid threats should be seen as representing "a distinct (but related) challenge," which includes the use of multiple (non-violent) means to target vulnerabilities across society to achieve (political) goals without triggering a military conflict and thus remaining in the grey zone.<sup>45</sup> Examples of grey-zone tactics are cyberattacks on critical infrastructure, economic coercion, information warfare through the spread of disinformation, and lawfare. The use of hybrid tactics to undermine opponents has gained prominence, as seen in Russia's and China's activities in Europe and the Indo-Pacific over the past decade.

While grey-zone challenges may have non-military sources, such as economic, technological, or political ones, they do have an impact on the security of the state from the

perspective of a more traditional (territorial integrity/state sovereignty) understanding of security. Nonetheless, grey-zone threats typically fall below the threshold of war and outside the scope of conventional military deterrence and territorial defence as associated with the key functions of the traditional (military) alliance. Although such threats require other (than pure military) means to address them, they have steadily made their way to the top of the agenda of the traditional alliance. For example, the 2023 joint statement of the US-Japan Security Consultative Committee (SCC) (2+2 meeting) paid special attention to space, cyber, and information security domains, in which the alliance is expected to be strengthened in order to better respond to the changing security environment. "Attacks to, from, or within space" are said "to present a clear challenge to the security of the Alliance" and, in certain circumstances, "could lead to the invocation of Article V of the Japan-US Security Treaty."<sup>46</sup> The growing array of hybrid threats and NTS challenges, such as pandemics, natural disasters, and environmental issues, is thus putting additional pressure on alliances, including the US-Japan alliance, to devise policy responses, develop capabilities, and embrace missions for which the alliance was not originally designed.<sup>47</sup>

*The growing array of hybrid threats and NTS challenges is putting additional pressure to devise policy responses, develop capabilities, and embrace missions for which the alliance was not originally designed*

The changing nature of security threats and the need, as well as urgency, to engage with different partners have driven the interest of Indo-Pacific states, including Japan, in forging security alignments with both intra- and extra-regional players (in bilateral or mini/multilateral frameworks). Representative of a broad form of security cooperation, alignments are typically partnerships between two or more states (or with organisations) that emphasise

<sup>44</sup> North Atlantic Treaty Organization, "[NATO Transformation Seminar](#)," *Next Steps in NATO's Transformation: To the Warsaw Summit and Beyond: White Paper* (Washington, March 2015), 5.

<sup>45</sup> Sean Monaghan, "Countering Hybrid Warfare," *PRISM* 8, no. 2 (2019): 86.

<sup>46</sup> US Department of Defense, [Joint Statement of the 2023 U.S.-Japan Security Consultative Committee \("2+2"\)](#) (Virginia: Department of Defense, 2023).

<sup>47</sup> Elena Atanassova-Cornelis, "Alignment Cooperation and Regional Security Architecture in the Indo-Pacific," *The International Spectator* 55, no. 1 (2020): 18-33.



shared security goals and may be formal or informal in nature.<sup>48</sup> The traditional military alliance, including Japan's alliance with the US, can be conceptualised as one type of alignment alongside strategic partnerships or coalitions, among others.<sup>49</sup> Whereas alliances are rooted in formalised and treaty-based agreements specifying the conditions for the use of military force and are typically formed against specific threats, the *raison d'être* for non-alliance alignments are shared interests.<sup>50</sup> The latter exhibit a certain level of like-mindedness with regard to the respective perceptions of threats and/or policy responses, which can vary in terms of the level of convergence between partners. Unlike the military-strategic focus and formalised nature of alliances, the other types of alignments are low-cost partnerships that primarily (but not exclusively) focus on NTS issues and, increasingly, hybrid threats.

## 2.2. JAPANESE STRATEGIC PERSPECTIVES

From a geostrategic point of view, the Asia/Indo-Pacific is a priority region for Tokyo, with Northeast Asia seen as a subregion defining Japan's strategic interests. The 2022 NSS refers to a severe and complex security environment around Japan. Similarly to the 2013 NSS released by the Abe Shinzo administration, Kishida's strategy documents identify Chinese attempts to "unilaterally change the status quo by force" in the East and the South China Sea and North Korean missile and nuclear developments as key concerns for Japan. Differently from the previous version, however, the 2022 NSS perceives Russian aggression against Ukraine and its growing strategic coordination with China in East Asia as a security concern for Japan. Notably, "the growing use of hybrid warfare and grey-zone tactics by hostile neighbours" are identified as

"threats against Japanese interests."<sup>51</sup> In order to meet these threats and deter contingencies, Japan will continue to rely on three pillars in its defence: upgrading Japan's own capabilities and expanding the Self-Defense Forces' roles, reinforcing the US-Japan alliance, and strengthening security alignments with like-minded countries. Essentially, the third pillar refers to reliance on minilateralism as a means for Japan to tackle security threats.<sup>52</sup>

A strong alliance with the US focused on the deterrence of military threats in Northeast Asia (the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, China, and Russia) remains "a cornerstone of Japan's security policy."<sup>53</sup> The strengthening of the alliance has been stepped up over the past few years at various levels. These range from US-Japan cooperation in new domains, such as cyber and space, to optimisation of force posture and new strategic planning to enhance operational coordination between the SDF and US forces in Japan. Possible crises in Northeast Asia, especially across the Taiwan Strait or on the Korean Peninsula, remain a priority for Japanese strategists. Japan's current policy on Taiwan suggests that Tokyo is now more willing to get involved in a Taiwan contingency, which, as pointed out by some observers, has been a direct outcome of the war in Ukraine.<sup>54</sup>

*Japan's current policy on Taiwan suggests that Tokyo is now more willing to get involved in a Taiwan contingency, which has been a direct outcome of the war in Ukraine*

Despite the US's reiterated commitment to Japan's defence and the strengthened alliance under successive US administrations since the 2010s, concerns in Tokyo about the sustainability of Washington's security commitments to Japan and the region, more

<sup>48</sup> Thomas S Wilkins, *Security in Asia Pacific: The Dynamics of Alignment*. (Boulder, CO and London: Lynne Rienner, 2019).

<sup>49</sup> Thomas S Wilkins, "A hub-and-spokes 'plus' model of US alliances in the Indo-Pacific: Towards a new 'networked' design." *Asian Affairs* 53, no. 3 (2022): 457-80.

<sup>50</sup> Rohan Mukherjee, "Japan's Strategic Outreach to India and the Prospects of a Japan-India Alliance," *International Affairs* 94, no. 4 (2018): 835-59.

<sup>51</sup> Cabinet and National Security Council, *National Security Strategy of Japan*, 5-10.

<sup>52</sup> Elena Atanassova-Cornelis and Sato Yoichiro, "Japan-US alliance 'Plus': Evolving Perspectives on Alignment Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific," in *Security Order and Strategic Alignment in Europe and the Asia-Pacific in Times of Global Power Shifts*, eds. Elena Atanassova-Cornelis, Yoichiro Sato and Tom Sauer (Routledge, forthcoming, 2024).

<sup>53</sup> Cabinet and National Security Council, *National Security Strategy of Japan*, 5.

<sup>54</sup> Eric Heginbotham, Samuel Leiter, and Richard J Samuels, "Pushing on an Open Door: Japan's Evolutionary Security Posture," *The Washington Quarterly* 46, no. 2 (2023): 47-67.

broadly, have continued to linger.<sup>55</sup> Some Japanese experts observe that with the ongoing war in Ukraine, Japan may have become even more anxious than a few years ago about a possible US abandonment, because of which many resources have been devoted to strengthening relations with Washington and to Tokyo's enhanced burden-sharing within the alliance.<sup>56</sup> Contemporaneously, the Ukraine war has accelerated major defence reforms, now pursued by the Kishida administration, but which were already in the making.<sup>57</sup> Over the past 10 years, Japanese security policy has gone through some evolutionary changes, with a growing focus on military power as a key component of its national security strategy.<sup>58</sup> These changes have included, among others, an increased defence budget, the acquisition of new defence capabilities, and a steady reduction in constraints on security roles in conjunction with Tokyo's willingness to have a more prominent security presence in Asia and beyond. There is a clear understanding in Tokyo that Japan has to assume more responsibilities for its own defence in the context of the rapidly shifting security environment.<sup>59</sup> At the same time, the ongoing

*The ongoing defence reforms are blurring the long-standing sword-and-shield division of labour that had defined the allies' responsibilities since the Cold War years, making the military alliance more 'mature'*

defence reforms are blurring the long-standing sword-and-shield division of labour between the US and Japan that had defined the allies' responsibilities since the Cold War years, making the military alliance more 'mature' from military integration and war planning perspectives.<sup>60</sup>

<sup>55</sup> Elena Atanassova-Cornelis and Yoichiro Sato, "The US-Japan alliance dilemma in the Asia-Pacific: Changing rationales and scope," *The International Spectator* 54, no.4 (2019): 78-93.

<sup>56</sup> Author's interviews (Tokyo, autumn 2023).

<sup>57</sup> Heginbotham et al, (2023).

<sup>58</sup> Takuya Matsuda, "Japan's Emerging Security Strategy," *The Washington Quarterly* 46, no. 1 (2023): 85-102.

<sup>59</sup> Jeffrey W Hornung and Christopher B Johnstone, "Japan's Strategic Shift is Significant, but Implementation Hurdles Await," *War on the Rocks*, 27 January 2023.

<sup>60</sup> Matsuda (2023).

While the 2022 strategy documents point to the existence of traditional security concerns related to sovereignty and territorial integrity, they also emphasise an expanded scope of national security that now includes several non-military areas. The NSS identifies economic, technological, critical infrastructure, and information/cyber areas, pointing out that "the boundary between military and non-military fields is no longer clear-cut."<sup>61</sup> Factors that were not considered a security challenge in the past, such as supply chain vulnerabilities or competition over advanced technologies, are now major security concerns for Japan.

*Comprehensive security has now been transformed into a comprehensive national power with a particular emphasis on economic and energy security*

For example, China's reliance on paramilitary forces to support its territorial claims in the East and South China Seas has been a particular concern for Japan from the perspective of low-intensity grey-zone conflicts.

It should be noted that this expanded perspective on security – comprehensive security – is not new for Japan and was adopted back in the 1980s. However, this concept has now been transformed into a comprehensive national power with a particular emphasis on economic and energy security to reduce Japan's vulnerabilities associated with economic coercion

and reliance on energy imports – lessons learned from the Ukraine war.<sup>62</sup> As stated in the 2022 NSS, Japan will strive to achieve its national security objectives by "taking full advantage of comprehensive national power, including diplomatic, defence, economic, technological, and intelligence capabilities."<sup>63</sup> Diplomacy and defence are listed as the first and second priorities. The latter emphasises the deterrence, disruption, and defeat of threats and is linked to the first and second pillars of the NSS, that is, the bolstering of Japan's own defence capabilities and the US-Japan alliance.

<sup>61</sup> Cabinet and National Security Council, [National Security Strategy of Japan](#).

<sup>62</sup> Heginbotham et al, (2023).

<sup>63</sup> Cabinet and National Security Council, [National Security Strategy of Japan](#), 3.

The remaining three elements of Japan's comprehensive national power – economic, technological, and intelligence capabilities – provide opportunities for Japan to engage with various non-US partners in a range of challenges related to NTS and new domains, which now have come to be perceived by Japan as significant from a national security perspective as are diplomacy and defence.

The 2022 NSS makes references to Australia, India, Korea, and related minilateral frameworks, as well as European countries, the EU, and NATO. Specifically, the document calls for “enhanced engagement with like-minded countries and others in the Indo-Pacific region” through, among other means: bilateral and multilateral dialogues, training and exercises; the signing of information-protection agreements, the Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA), and the Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA); joint development and transfer of defence equipment and technology; and the provision of capacity building support and strategic communication.<sup>64</sup> The reference in the 2022 NSS to Japan's intention to “build a multi-layered network among its ally and like-minded countries” reflects an ongoing trend in Japanese security policy defined by some scholars as decentring, that is, reducing the centrality of the US while keeping the alliance strong.<sup>65</sup>

### 2.3. AUSTRALIA, INDIA, AND THE REPUBLIC OF KOREA

Japan has established numerous strategic partnerships with countries around the world (as discussed in Chapter 3). However, only a few bilateral and minilateral alignments have particular significance for Japan from both a more traditional national security perspective and in terms of responses to threats in new domains. Japan's partnership with Australia and the US-Japan-Australia grouping stands out as an extension of the US-led alliances in the Indo-Pacific. Tokyo's partnership with

Canberra falls short of a formal treaty alliance but is, nonetheless, defined as the “closest cooperative relationship second only to the Japan-US defence cooperation.”<sup>66</sup> Australia is perceived as “a special strategic partner” for

*Japan's partnership with Australia and the US-Japan-Australia grouping stands out as an extension of the US-led alliances in the Indo-Pacific*

Japan in the Indo-Pacific region due to both countries' respective alliances with the US, shared values and, notably, convergent strategic interests.<sup>67</sup> In addition to the traditional deterrence and defence functions, Japan's alignment with Australia places a strong emphasis on tackling threats in new domains such as space, cyber, supply chain security, and the protection of critical infrastructure. Recent developments in the partnership include the signing in 2022 of a new Japan-Australia Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation and the RAA, the latter of which enables quicker deployment of defence personnel between the two nations. The joint declaration clearly emphasises defence/deterrence and grey-zone collaboration alongside threats in new domains. Thus, enhanced interoperability between the two armed forces via military exercises and operations, intelligence cooperation, and law enforcement is paralleled by the shared awareness of cyber threats and space collaboration. Ensuring an “effective response to contingencies” is a key objective of Japan's operational cooperation with Canberra.<sup>68</sup>

In addition to developments on the bilateral level, a strengthening of the trilateral security framework with the US has been an essential component of Japan's strategic thinking on alignment cooperation. Having achieved the highest level of institutionalisation among Japan's other alignments, the key strategic objective of the US-Japan-Australia trilateral security framework is to supplement the

<sup>64</sup> Cabinet and National Security Council, *National Security Strategy of Japan*, 13.

<sup>65</sup> Paul Midford and Wilhelm Vosse (eds), *New Directions in Japan's Security: Non-US Centric Evolution*. (Routledge, 2021).

<sup>66</sup> Cabinet and National Security Council, *National Security Strategy of Japan*, 21.

<sup>67</sup> Ministry of Defence of Japan, *Defense of Japan* (Tokyo: Ministry of Defence, 2023), 407.

<sup>68</sup> Cabinet and National Security Council, *National Security Strategy of Japan*, 21.

US-led alliance system with inter-spoke relations.<sup>69</sup> The value of this minilateral for Japan consists in its role in constraining the People's Republic of China's (PRC) maritime advances and responding to regional contingencies in the Indo-Pacific, especially in the maritime domain in the South China Sea and the Pacific Ocean region.

*The value of this minilateral for Japan consists in its role in constraining China's maritime advances and responding to regional contingencies in the Indo-Pacific, especially in the maritime domain in the South China Sea and the Pacific Ocean region*

In April 2024, it was announced that Japan may participate in Pillar II of the AUKUS security framework, which seeks to enhance the US, the UK, and Australia's joint capabilities and interoperability through developing and sharing advanced defence technologies. Pillar II covers several areas, including cyber capabilities, artificial intelligence, and hypersonic missiles. This cooperation will provide opportunities for Japan to internationalise its defence industry, as well as enhance ties with key US allies in Europe and Asia, that is, the UK and Australia, in a minilateral context. From a geopolitical perspective, Japan's collaboration with the AUKUS countries will be a way for Japan to

*From a geopolitical perspective, Japan's collaboration with the AUKUS countries will be a way for Japan to connect the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific strategic theatres*

connect the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific strategic theatres. It should also be noted that the UK remains Japan's closest security partner in Europe. In 2023, Japan and the UK signed an RAA (the first one for Tokyo with a European country) and agreed on a new global strategic partnership, the Hiroshima Accord. The latter

<sup>69</sup> Wooyeal Paik and Jae Jeok Park, "The Quad's Search for Non-Military Roles and China's Strategic Response: Minilateralism, Infrastructure Development, and Regional Balancing," *Journal of Contemporary China* 30, no. 127 (2021), 4.

aims to increase the number of British troops participating in Japan-based military exercises alongside the deployment of a British aircraft carrier to the Indo-Pacific in 2025 and promoting Japan-UK cooperation on semiconductors.<sup>70</sup>

India comes second only after Australia in Japanese strategic thinking, and its significance is based on its geopolitical location at the centre of the sea lanes that connect Japan with the Middle East and Africa. Since the upgrade to the Japan-India Special Strategic and Global Partnership in 2014, Japan-India security relations have deepened, with a focus on maritime security and defence equipment and technology cooperation. Japan-India military interoperability has been sought through military exchanges and exercises in bilateral (e.g., Japan-India Maritime Exercise, JIMEX), minilateral (e.g., with US and Australia, the Quad) and multilateral (e.g., Indo-Pacific Deployment, IPD) formats. However, unlike Japan's defence relations with Australia, Japan's growing defence partnership with India has not explicitly spelt out any hypothetical contingency or joint response.<sup>71</sup> Additionally, in contrast to Japan's convergence with the US, Australia, and the ROK on Russia's aggression in Ukraine, India has adopted a more cautious stance, shying away from directly condemning Moscow's full-scale invasion. Neither Japan's security alignment with India nor the trilateral with the US directly addresses Japan's immediate security concerns in the East China Sea or the Korean Peninsula. At the same time, over the past few years, US-Japan-India security engagements have gradually come to emphasise power projection and war-fighting, which may suggest a more explicit focus on joint deterrence.<sup>72</sup> The

<sup>70</sup> "U.K. cements defense ties with Japan by signing Hiroshima Accord," *Nikkei Asia*, 18 May 2023.

<sup>71</sup> Elena Atanassova-Cornelis and Sato Yoichiro, "Japan-US alliance 'Plus': Evolving Perspectives on Alignment Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific," in *Security Order and Strategic Alignment in Europe and the Asia-Pacific in Times of Global Power Shifts*, eds. Elena Atanassova-Cornelis, Yoichiro Sato and Tom Sauer (Routledge, forthcoming, 2024).

<sup>72</sup> Elena Atanassova-Cornelis and Yoichiro Sato, "Asia and Europe in Japan's Alignment Policies: Drivers, Strategic Expectations and Future Outlook," *Asian Affairs* 53, no. 3 (2022): 520-41.



strategic value of this grouping for Japan is to help Tokyo secure its interests in the Indian Ocean region, particularly with regard to the stability of the Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs) and trade routes connecting Asia and Europe. Future cooperation between Japan and India is also discussed in the areas of new and critical technologies, including semiconductors, artificial intelligence, renewables, and electric mobility.<sup>73</sup>

Japan's cooperation with India has also been strengthened in the framework of the Quad grouping. Quad's initiatives have steadily expanded to include responses to grey-zone challenges, such as maritime domain awareness, maritime capacity-building, and cyberspace. Although the four-way joint military exercises have remained limited, the iterations of the Malabar exercise over the past four years have included all four Quad members. This indicates an increased focus on joint deterrence. The strategic significance of Quad to Japan is its potential evolution as a mechanism to respond to the PRC's behaviour in situations that fall short of a military conflict (and thus do not require traditional deterrence) without provoking a security dilemma with other states but still signalling intention and resolve.<sup>74</sup> At the same time, the future of Quad remains uncertain. Under the Joe Biden administration, the US seems to be shifting its attention to focus on the Squad minilateral (US-Japan-Australia-Philippines) and the US-ROK-Japan trilateral – frameworks that include US treaty allies that share concerns about China.

*The strategic significance of Quad to Japan is its potential evolution as a mechanism to respond to the PRC's behaviour in situations that fall short of a military conflict*

The ROK is seen as an important partner to Japan from the perspective of more traditional security concerns, although these remain limited to Northeast Asia. Since 2022, Tokyo

<sup>73</sup> Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, "India's Top Diplomat Points to 'New Phase' in Japan Defense Ties," interview by Kiran Sharma, Satoshi Iwaki and Nupur Shaw, *Nikkei Asia*, 6 March 2024.

<sup>74</sup> Atanassova-Cornelis and Sato (forthcoming, 2024).

and Seoul have significantly improved their bilateral diplomatic and security relations due to the deteriorating situation on the Korean Peninsula and, increasingly, the convergence of their positions on China. The focus has been on advancing deterrence and response capabilities both bilaterally and trilaterally, that is, with the US, in order to address the Democratic People's Republic of Korea's nuclear and missile threats. To this end, trilateral cooperation on the ground has been deepened through missile defence and anti-submarine exercises, as well as maritime interdiction and anti-piracy drills.<sup>75</sup>

*The ROK is seen as an important partner to Japan from the perspective of more traditional security concerns, although limited to Northeast Asia*

In June 2024, the US, Japan, and the ROK announced a series of new initiatives designed to further reinforce and institutionalise their trilateral defence cooperation. These initiatives are expected to range from senior-level policy consultations and information sharing to trilateral exercises, including tabletop ones, and defence exchange collaboration.<sup>76</sup>

## 2.4. THE EU AND NATO

As the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific security theatres have become increasingly interconnected, Japan has stepped up its security cooperation with the EU and NATO. As pointed out by observers, "Russia's invasion of Ukraine has introduced greater urgency" for Tokyo to deepen its defence ties with US allies and partners in Europe in order to respond to China and not only to show solidarity with Ukraine.<sup>77</sup>

Japan perceives the EU as a partner that both appreciates Japan's expanded international security role and assists Tokyo in its pursuit of global responsibilities, while also

<sup>75</sup> Ministry of Defence of Japan, *Defense of Japan* (Tokyo: Ministry of Defence, 2023), 420.

<sup>76</sup> Gabriel Dominguez, "Japan, South Korea and U.S. unveil new initiatives to cement defense ties," *The Japan Times*, 2 June 2024.

<sup>77</sup> Adam P Liff, "Kishida the Accelerator: Japan's Defense Evolution After Abe," *The Washington Quarterly* 46, no. 1 (2023): 63-83.

engaging with Japan in the joint preservation of the rule-based international order.<sup>78</sup> Since the 1990s, the two partners have gradually developed security cooperation in various NTS areas, such as development, climate change, and conflict prevention and peacebuilding. In 2018, the EU and Japan concluded the Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA) and the Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA). Although there

*Japan perceives the EU as a partner that both appreciates Japan's expanded international security role and assists Tokyo in its pursuit of global responsibilities, while also engaging with Japan in the joint preservation of the rule-based international order*

was a noticeable prominence of geopolitical issues on the EU-Japan summit agenda already during the 2010-19 period, since 2019, the geopolitical drivers have arguably accelerated the evolution of the EU-Japan strategic partnership in the security dimension.<sup>79</sup> At the 2023 EU-Japan summit, the leaders agreed to launch a regular strategic dialogue at the foreign ministerial level, which was their first such dialogue on national security. In early 2024, the EU announced its intention to conclude a security and defence partnership agreement with Japan. The two sides will explore deepening cooperation in

*Since 2019, the geopolitical drivers have accelerated the evolution of the EU-Japan strategic partnership in the security dimension*

a wide range of areas, including maritime security, intelligence sharing, protecting critical

<sup>78</sup> Elena Atanassova-Cornelis, "Shifting constraints, evolving opportunities and the search for the 'strategic' in the EU-Japan bilateral partnership," in *The European Union in the Asia Pacific: Rethinking Europe's Strategies and Policies*, eds, W Song and J Wang (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019), 164-83.

<sup>79</sup> Elena Atanassova-Cornelis and Bhubhindar Singh, "Security relations between the EU and Japan," in *The European Union's Security Relations with Asian Partners*, eds Thomas Christiansen and Emil Kirchner (2021); Seng Tan, *The European Union in International Affairs (EUIA) Series* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 369-89.

infrastructure, and coping with hybrid attacks.<sup>80</sup> For Japan, major impetuses for strengthening its security ties with the EU have been, on the one hand, the deteriorating security situation in both Europe (especially in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022) and the Indo-Pacific and, on the other, the rise of grey-zone conflicts and hybrid threats.

Recent years have seen a series of bilateral EU-Japan agreements aimed at developing the various priority areas of cooperation between the two, with an emphasis on responses to challenges in new domains. These areas, in which Japan sees particular value in cooperation with the EU from the perspective of the 2022 NSS, include cybersecurity and digital connectivity and defence equipment

and technology transfers. Some of the key developments include the 2019 EU-Japan Partnership on Sustainable Connectivity and

*Economic security has emerged as one of the most promising areas of cooperation between Tokyo and Brussels*

Quality Infrastructure and the 2022 EU-Japan Digital Partnership. Against the backdrop of the intensifying US-China strategic competition and the G7's policy of de-risking, or reducing the dependency on China, many of the issues addressed by the digital partnership have an inherent strategic dimension.<sup>81</sup>

Economic security and supply chain resilience (e.g., semiconductors) are directly linked to the objectives of the Japan-EU digital partnership. Cooperation on semiconductor production

and supply chain security is one of the most relevant issues in this context. Economic security has emerged as one of the most promising areas of cooperation between Tokyo and Brussels, especially in the context of the all-encompassing US-China strategic rivalry. As mentioned earlier, it is notable that Kishida's

<sup>80</sup> "EU to seek security accord with Japan amid China's assertiveness," *Kyodo News*, 20 February 2024.

<sup>81</sup> Elena Atanassova-Cornelis and Eva Pejsova, "The EU-Japan Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA) in 2023: Drivers, Achievements and Limitations," paper presented at the 2023 *European Japan Advanced Research Network (EJARN) Conference* at Lund University, 15-16 September 2023.



2022 NSS devotes special attention to economic security as part of Japan's conceptualisation of its national security policy areas, after diplomacy and defence.<sup>82</sup>

The need to boost cooperation in defence technology between Japan and the EU and its Member States has become more apparent in the context of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which has been a trigger for European countries and US allies in Asia to step up on defence.<sup>83</sup>

*Relying on foreign arms procurements only from the US has been questioned in the context of the deteriorating security environment in Asia, marked by China's stepped-up naval advances in the China Seas and North Korea's missile tests*

Relying on foreign arms procurements only from the US as a basis for national defence has been increasingly questioned in Japan in the context of the deteriorating security environment in Asia, marked by China's stepped-up naval advances in the China Seas and North Korea's missile tests. Japan still faces domestic restrictions regarding exports of defensive technologies and has long maintained a ban on third-country exports of internationally developed weapons under its war-renouncing constitution. Although Tokyo has bilateral agreements on the transfer of defence technology and equipment with France, Germany, and Italy, its emerging defence industry struggles to secure defence contracts outside the US. The noticeable exception within the European context has been the Global Combat Air Programme (GCAP), which includes collaboration among three top aviation companies – Japan's Mitsubishi Heavy Industries, the UK's BAE Systems, and Italy's Leonardo. The GCAP, officially announced in December 2022, aims to develop and construct a sixth-generation supersonic fighter jet that should be operational in 2035. This is the first time for Tokyo to cooperate with countries other than the US in order to meet its defence

needs. In March 2024, the Kishida government made a landmark decision to revise the strict guidelines on Japan's defence equipment transfer rules, enabling the export of GCAP next-generation fighter jets to 15 nations that have signed pacts with Japan on defence equipment and technology transfers.<sup>84</sup> This will help Japan diversify its partners and maintain a technological edge. The GCAP project also has a clear geopolitical objective, that is, providing Tokyo with an opportunity to bridge the European and the Indo-Pacific security theatres.

Although NATO is often dissociated from the debate on EU-Japan security cooperation, Japan's greater involvement within the Transatlantic Alliance can be instrumental in forging closer defence ties with the EU. Japan has been NATO's longest out-of-theatre partner, contributing to the Alliance's reconstruction efforts and activities already since the 1990s (in the Balkans and later in Afghanistan and Iraq). Japan's participation in NATO's Science for Peace and Security (SPS) Programme over the past decade has included activities related to technologies for radiation detection, cyber defence, and devices for demining operations. The focus of Japan's cooperation with NATO so far has been capability- and military interoperability-centred, while practical areas of engagement have included cyber defence, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR), and

*The overlap in the issue areas covered by Japan's partnerships with the EU and NATO can be beneficial for Japan's relations with both partners*

science and technology.<sup>85</sup> In 2023, Japan and NATO signed the Individually Tailored Partnership Programme (ITPP). The ITPP seeks to expand collaboration on hybrid threats and lists 16 areas of cooperation, some of which overlap with those a part of the Japan-EU

<sup>82</sup> Cabinet and National Security Council, *National Security Strategy of Japan*, 21.

<sup>83</sup> Elena Atanassova-Cornelis and Eva Pejsova, "The EU-Japan Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA) in 2023."

<sup>84</sup> Ryo Nemoto, "Japan approves export of cutting-edge fighter jets: 3 things to know," *Nikkei Asia*, 26 March 2024.

<sup>85</sup> Iro Särkka, "NATO and the Indo-Pacific region," *Vilnius Summit Series, Brief No. 6*. (ICDS, July 2023).

security partnership.<sup>86</sup> The overlap in the issue areas covered by Japan's partnerships with the EU and NATO can actually be beneficial for Japan's relations with both partners, as Tokyo's deepening ties with Brussels can stimulate its collaboration with NATO in some domains and vice versa.<sup>87</sup> From a Japanese perspective, therefore, the two partnerships can be seen as mutually reinforcing and of great overall value for advancing Japan's strategic objectives.<sup>88</sup>

## 2.5. EVOLVING THREATS, EVOLVING ALIGNMENTS

Japan's updated conceptualisation of security in the wake of the Ukraine war and Russia's warfare tactics have brought a strong sense of urgency in Tokyo for developing a diverse set of capabilities in response to security challenges that cross territorial borders. With the rise of hybrid threats and grey-zone conflicts, Tokyo increasingly understands that the tackling of regional and global security

*It is in the domain of new threats where the strategic value to Japan, not only of Indo-Pacific partners but especially of extra-regional partners, is likely to increase in the years to come*

issues necessitates a coordinated approach with other players in bilateral, minilateral, or inter-regional settings, as they cannot be dealt with by a single country. As this chapter has demonstrated, cyber defence, space security, and protection of critical infrastructure, among others, have become key priorities for Japan from a national security perspective, alongside the traditional defence/deterrence security concerns. It is in the domain of new threats where the strategic value to Japan, not only of

Indo-Pacific partners but especially of extra-regional partners, is likely to increase in the years to come. At the same time, the division of labour between the various alignments is likely to become less clear-cut. In most cases, Japan's

*Overlap of areas of cooperation and members is likely to become more common*

alignments with countries that are seen as key from a traditional security perspective (such as Australia) will also encompass cooperation in new domains. Overlap of areas of cooperation and members is likely to become more common.

What concerns extra-regional partners, European countries, and NATO is direct exposure to the Russia-Ukraine war and various hybrid threats. Their responses to these challenges, technological know-how, and exchange of best practices with Japan in addressing common threats are particularly valuable to Japan as it seeks to develop its own capabilities and devise policy responses.

In the past, cooperation with the EU was assigned a rather low priority in Japanese security policy. However, the changing global strategic environment has raised the value to Tokyo of extra-regional security partners. While neither NATO nor the EU is expected to contribute to the defence/deterrence areas of Japan's security policy, engaging with them is now seen by Japanese strategists as critical in the context of a more complex set of Japan's national security concerns and related policy responses.

<sup>86</sup> North Atlantic Treaty Organization, *Individually Tailored Partnership Programme between NATO and Japan for 2023 – 2026* (NATO, July 2023).

<sup>87</sup> Eva Pejsova and Elena Atanassova-Cornelis, "Going 'strategic': the EU-Japan SPA five years on," *Policy Brief*, 2024/09 (Global Governance Programme, European University Institute, 2024).

<sup>88</sup> Michito Tsuruoka, "Japan-Europe Security cooperation: how to 'use' NATO and the EU," *NIDS Bulletin* (2011).

## CHAPTER 3. JAPAN'S STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP DIPLOMACY: EVOLUTION, ACHIEVEMENTS, AND CHALLENGES

Bart Gaens

The hub-and-spokes system, that is, the network of alliances constructed around the US and its regional allies, remains at the heart of the security architecture in the Indo-Pacific. Japan, for its part, has doubled down on its “global alliance” with the US. The visit by Prime Minister Kishida Fumio to Washington in April 2024 was highlighted by an agreement to strengthen cooperation in command and control and joint military operations, in addition to numerous other agreements relating to economy, defence, and security. Parallel to the strengthening of the alliance, Japan has also been heavily investing in more informal cooperation structures with other partners in the region at bilateral, trilateral, and quadrilateral levels. This is a process that took off in earnest during the second administration under former Prime Minister Abe Shinzō (2012-20) when Tokyo markedly started promoting strategic ties with other countries or groupings.

*In the Indo-Pacific, where many countries strongly adhere to the principle of non-interference, informal agreements that focus on a small number of issues have become widespread as a flexible foreign policy instrument*

Japan has not been alone in promoting these forms of cooperation. Throughout the past two and a half decades, major powers such as the US and China have been very active in building flexible interstate relations in the pursuit of their political, security, and economic objectives.<sup>89</sup> In particular, in the Indo-Pacific, where many countries strongly adhere to the principle of non-interference, informal agreements that focus on a small number of

<sup>89</sup> Georg Strüver, “China’s partnership diplomacy: International alignment based on interests or ideology,” *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 10, no. 1 (2017): 31-65.

issues have become widespread as a flexible foreign policy instrument.

For the Abe administration, creating strategic partnerships (*senryakuteki pātonāshippu*) was a prime tool of a “foreign policy that takes a panoramic perspective of the world map” (*chikyūgi gaikō; chikyūgi wo fukan suru gaikō*).<sup>90</sup> This guiding policy concept implied maintaining a focus on the Japan-US alliance as the linchpin of Japanese foreign policy, but at the same time, pursuing multifaceted, strategic diplomatic relations with other countries and regions. In just over a decade, coalition-building with like-minded partners, regionally as well as globally, has become a key pillar of Japan’s security policy. Today, Japan has close to 40 countries as well as regional organisations – that include the EU, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and the Mekong grouping – that it refers to as strategic partners. These forms of alignment (i.e., strategic partnership diplomacy) show a wide variety, ranging from loose constructs with little content to robust agreements on close defence cooperation. This chapter first takes an overall look at Japan’s strategic partnerships, points out some general differences between them, and tentatively categorises them. It then proceeds by outlining the main achievements and challenges of partnership diplomacy before providing some conclusions.

### 3.1. JAPAN’S STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS

At present, Japan has no less than 38 strategic partnerships (SPs) with countries and organisations around the world.<sup>91</sup> While a few go back to the

2000s, the majority of these structures were created starting in the 2010s. Their importance is reflected in Tokyo’s National Security Strategy documents.<sup>92</sup> The NSS 2013 pointed out that,

<sup>90</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, *Diplomatic Bluebook 2015* (Tokyo: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2015: 25-172).

<sup>91</sup> Based on information gathered from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, *Gaikō seisho [Diplomatic Bluebook]*, (Tokyo: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2024).

<sup>92</sup> Cabinet and National Security Council of Japan, *National Security Strategy of Japan* (Tokyo: Ministry of Defence, 2013); Cabinet and National Security Council, *National Security Strategy of Japan* (Tokyo: Ministry of Defence, 2022).

in addition to boosting the Japan-US alliance, Japan should strengthen cooperative relations with countries with which Japan shares universal values and strategic interests. The NSS 2022 went a step further and emphasised the need “to build a multi-layered network among its ally and like-minded countries, expand it, and strengthen deterrence. Thus, while utilising frameworks such as the Japan-US-ROK, and Japan-US-Australia, Japan will enhance security cooperation with Australia, India, the Republic of Korea, European countries, ASEAN countries, Canada, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, the EU, and others.” Japan has been especially active in creating or upgrading partnerships during the Kishida administration, which started in 2021. Since coming into office, Kishida has instigated or upgraded no less than 19 strategic partnerships. Geographically, Japan has 14 strategic partners in Europe, nine in Southeast Asia, two in South Asia, one in Central Asia, one in East Asia, two in Australasia, three in Latin America, and five in the Middle East. Especially noteworthy are the proliferation of SPs with European countries (nine newly created or upgraded), the agreements with Italy and the UK to facilitate the trilateral defence equipment development programme,<sup>93</sup> and the upgrades in diplomatic ties with five Southeast Asian countries as well as ASEAN as an entity in its own right.

These partnerships are of a confounding variety. Some are very embryonic, to the point of being of mere rhetorical value, serving as general mechanisms to facilitate dialogue and diplomacy. Others are much more substantive and include concrete issues such as defence cooperation agreements (DCAs). Countries labelled strategic partners are highly heterogeneous in terms of size, value system, and level of development. However, what all partnerships have in common is that they are pragmatic, goal-driven, and based on shared interests. They are part and parcel of what Envall and Hall have called “practice-oriented security governance.”<sup>94</sup> Additionally, a second commonality is that they are agreements

between like-minded partners and are based on a set of shared principles, norms, or values. Except for the presence of common goals and shared norms, what constitutes an SP is seldom rigidly defined conceptually. Following Wilkins, strategic partnerships can generally be described as a specific form of alignment through bilateral relations that is 1) built around a general (security) purpose; 2) primarily goal-driven (positive) rather than threat-driven (negative); 3) rather informal in nature and entailing low commitment costs; and (4) driven by economic exchange as well as security concerns. The additional security dimension distinguishes strategic partnerships from economic partnership agreements.<sup>95</sup>

In terms of security, SPs typically comprise one or more of the following issue areas:

- diplomacy (e.g., high-level talks);
- military-to-military dialogue (strategic communication);
- defence-related unit-to-unit exchanges and visiting forces agreements (VFAs);
- bilateral military exercises;
- acquisition and cross-servicing agreements;
- reciprocal access agreements;
- joint development of defence equipment;
- transfer of defence equipment and technology;
- capacity-building support;
- information sharing agreements (ISAs).

SPs are not static but evolve. In the case of Japan, the alignment agreement often morphs into an SP from a comprehensive partnership (CP). SPs can subsequently be upgraded into comprehensive strategic partnerships (CSPs). These different tiers defy rigid definitions. In general, CPs, SPs, and CSPs all aim to foster deeper ties and cooperation, but they differ in terms of scope and depth of cooperation.

<sup>93</sup> See Chapter 2 in this report by Elena Atanassova-Cornelis.

<sup>94</sup> David HDP. Envall and Ian Hall, “Asian strategic partnerships: new practices and regional security governance,” *Asian Politics & Policy* 8, no.1 (2016): 89, 100.

<sup>95</sup> Thomas S Wilkins, “Japan’s alliance diversification: a comparative analysis of the Indian and Australian strategic partnerships,” *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 11, no. 1 (2011): 123.

Whereas CPs seek to promote broad collaboration across different fields, SPs are more focused, targeting specific strategic areas of mutual concern. CSPs indicate deeper and more long-term levels of engagement and carry more symbolic significance as a diplomatic tool. For example, bilateral relations between Japan and Vietnam were labelled as an SP already in 2009. This SP was subsequently upgraded to an extensive strategic partnership (ESP) in 2014 and then, in 2023, to a CSP. The latter occurred just after Vietnam upgraded its relations with the US to the highest tier of CSPs, typically reserved for Vietnam's traditional partners Russia and China. For Japan, Vietnam has always been an important partner in terms of both trade and economy and geopolitics. After diplomatic relations started in 1973, the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of bilateral ties coincided with the upgrade to a CSP. This included deeper cooperation in security (defence exchanges, transfer of defence equipment, and the use of official security assistance to provide training-related equipment to the Vietnam Coast Guard Education and Training Centre); cooperation in supply chain resilience, the high-tech sector, digital transformation (DX), and green transformation (GX); major Official Development Assistance (ODA) and investment projects; and people-to-people exchanges.

Overall, in terms of depth and breadth, Japan's SPs can be categorised into four tiers.

- **The first and highest tier** comprises deep special strategic partnerships. These include the most advanced cooperation agreements, as visible in Japan's alignment with Australia, India, France, and the UK. These have all been given out-of-category denominations. The Japan-Australia alignment is referred to as a special strategic partnership, the Japan-UK relation is labelled a global strategic partnership, Japan-India ties are part of a special strategic and global partnership, and Japanese-French relations are referred to as an exceptional partnership. They all include far-reaching cooperation, encompassing military-to-military dialogue and exchanges, bilateral exercises, defence equipment and technology transfer, and agreements such as ACSA, RAA, and ISA. Together with France, Japan recently announced the Roadmap on Cooperation
- **The second tier** includes goal-oriented CSPs, primarily with countries from Southeast Asia. These are aimed at providing a counterweight to China in the region and often involve a strong element of capacity-building through official security assistance (OSA), as well as defence equipment and technology transfer agreements (TTA). Japan has CSPs with ASEAN as well as its individual member states Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, and Vietnam. There is no formal CSP with the Philippines. Instead, 2011's SP was upgraded to a strengthened SP in 2015. The further deepening of the SP in 2023 to include numerous fields and talks on defence and (maritime) security at various levels shows that the Japan-Philippines SP is a de facto CSP.
- **On the third tier**, we find diplomatic strategic partnerships, which most commonly denote a basic political agreement to deepen mutual ties and to conduct high-level talks in order to promote cooperation or to confirm like-mindedness and shared norms and values. These constitute the bulk of, often embryonic, partnerships between countries and include high-level talks, sometimes accompanied by military-to-military dialogue. The addition of a diplomatic level of interaction through these partnerships is more important than achieving short-term results. Examples of recently established diplomatic SPs include those with Argentina, Denmark, Egypt, Greece, Norway, and Romania.
- **The fourth and last tier** includes partnerships that are strategic in anything but name (absent SPs). Indeed, Japan has deepened defence cooperation with partners with whom it has not concluded

under the Exceptional Partnership (2023-27) to further cooperation in new fields such as economic security, civil nuclear energy, and innovation and start-ups. These plans complement ongoing joint efforts in maritime cooperation in the Indo-Pacific; security and defence; economy, science, and technology; global governance; and culture, research and education, people-to-people, and sports.



an SP. Partnerships of this kind can arise for a number of reasons. For one, some countries are not willing to openly align. In other cases, structured relations are already sufficiently well developed. For example, Japan and Singapore signed a defence equipment and technology transfer deal in 2023 and have had a Partnership Programme for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century since 1997. Japan has signed ACSAs with Germany and Canada, even though neither country is an official strategic partner. In Germany's case, cooperation in the security and military sphere has been beefed up considerably in the past few years. This has included the start of 2+2 meetings (between defence and foreign affairs ministers) in 2021 and high-level intergovernmental talks kicking off in 2023. These examples illustrate the strategic importance of bilateral relations even when they are not officially labelled as an SP. In other cases, historical differences and political disagreements have prevented the creation of an SP, such as in the case of the Japan-South Korea relationship. Japan has an ISA with South Korea, and under ROK President Yoon Suk Yeol, relations have vastly improved.<sup>96</sup> This was obvious in the Camp David agreement of August 2023 on trilateral defence cooperation together with the US, joint trilateral maritime and aerial drills (October 2023) and the start of a trilateral real-time system for sharing data on tracking North Korean missiles (December 2023). The absence of an SP agreement, therefore, does not preclude advanced defence cooperation.

### 3.2. ACHIEVEMENTS

Japan has implemented its alignment policy and strategic partnership diplomacy at a rapid pace. It has been successful in at least three fields: promoting the concept of an Indo-Pacific region, which for Japan needs to be one with the US at the core of an interconnected network of regional

partners; establishing issue-based, focused, and goal-driven cooperation with others based on mutual interests and commonly defined goals in areas such as joint military exercises, defence technology transfers, or information sharing; and engaging developing and emerging countries from the so-called global south.

*Japan has implemented its alignment policy and strategic partnership diplomacy at a rapid pace*

**First**, SPs have occupied a central position in Japan's idea of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) region, which aims to safeguard a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific region. Japan's SPs are nodes in a comprehensive, relatively informal network of security cooperation centred on the US as its main security provider. SPs contribute to keeping the US committed to the region by interlinking allies and partners. As Barry Buzan has argued, against the background of a rising China and a US in relative decline, countries such as Japan, India, and Australia increasingly look to each other, as well as to the US, to balance the threat they see from China.<sup>97</sup> In other words, SPs serve as tools for "the addition to the hub-and-spokes model of a tire that links allies to one another without interfering with their strong ties to the US hub."<sup>98</sup> For Japan, references to the FOIP denote a strategy in which countries such as India, Japan, and Australia and Southeast Asian nations equally wary of China's ascendancy, such as Vietnam and the

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Philippines, contribute to countering China's strong maritime ambitions in the South China Sea and beyond. The trend towards alignment has, therefore, gained importance in parallel

<sup>96</sup> Japan and Republic of Korea, Government of Japan, and the Government of the Republic of Korea, *The General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA)* (Seoul, 2016).

<sup>97</sup> Barry Buzan, "Asia: A geopolitical reconfiguration." *Politique étrangère* 77, no. 2 (2012): 8.

<sup>98</sup> Kurt Campbell, *The pivot: The future of American statecraft in Asia* (Hachette UK, 2016), 206.

with China's growing clout, clearly visible not least in Southeast Asia. Japan has also used SP agreements to bring Europe into the fold of the FOIP. Though focussed on militarily strong countries such as France, the UK, and, to a lesser extent, Germany, Tokyo has also succeeded in spreading the Indo-Pacific as a strategic concept in smaller EU Member States through policy documents that were later "Europeanised" at the EU level. These states include, for example, the Netherlands, which published its Indo-Pacific strategy in 2020.<sup>99</sup>

**Second**, Japan's policy of alignment through strategic partnerships has served as a rather informal and not very costly means to facilitate issue-based, focused, and goal-driven cooperation based on mutual interests and commonly defined goals. Japan's special strategic partnership with Australia, for example, has progressed steadily and robustly and is further buttressed by their status as quasi-allies as a result of their independent defence pacts with the US.<sup>100</sup> The Japan-Philippines SP is another example. The initial SP agreement dates back to 2011, but in 2023, it was substantially deepened through the provision of OSA to boost the Philippine Navy's maritime domain awareness capabilities, as well as agreements to cooperate further in connectivity infrastructure, mining, and tourism. An RAA is under negotiation in order to facilitate joint training, maritime patrols, and the rotational deployment of troops.<sup>101</sup> The RAA would be the first with an ASEAN member country. Most recently, in May 2024, Tokyo agreed to provide ODA loans to the extent of 64 billion yen (roughly 380 million euro) for the purchase of five large patrol ships. Furthermore, the SP feeds into the trilateral US-Japan-Philippines framework, which focuses on economic resilience, connectivity through the Luzon Economic Corridor, critical technologies, and clean energy. It also focuses on maritime

security, explicitly to counter "the People's Republic of China's (PRC) dangerous and aggressive behavior in the South China Sea" and oppose "the militarization of reclaimed features and unlawful maritime claims" in the region.<sup>102</sup> The SP also chimes with the "Squad," a new quadrilateral grouping formed in 2024 and composed of the defence ministers from Japan, Australia, the Philippines, and the US, which aims to expand joint maritime military exercises and increase intelligence-sharing and interoperability. In effect, bilateral partnerships often spill over into trilateral or minilateral formats. Other examples include the India-Japan-US, Australia-Japan-US, and India-Japan-Australia trilateral dialogues, as well as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, commonly referred to as "the Quad," between the US, Japan, India, and Australia, a format in place during 2007-08 and re-launched in late 2017. In sum, Japan's SPs have successfully served as political agreements that augment the framework of bilateral relations and lead to increased cooperation as well as the conclusion of new (and legally binding) agreements.

**Third**, SPs and, in particular, CSPs have turned into prime instruments for Japan to engage developing and emerging countries from the so-called Global South, and Southeast Asia especially, which has been a policy priority for Japan in particular since the start of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine.<sup>103</sup> It has

*It has been Tokyo's explicit aim to pay more attention to the interests and views of emerging powers and developing countries in an increasingly post-western world*

been Tokyo's explicit aim to pay more attention to the interests and views of emerging powers and developing countries in an increasingly post-western world. It has done so in order to offer an alternative to China and to promote

<sup>99</sup> Government of the Netherlands, *Indo-Pacific: Guidelines for strengthening Dutch and cooperation with partners in Asia* (Hague: Government of the Netherlands, 2020).

<sup>100</sup> Thomas S Wilkins, "From strategic partnership to strategic alliance? Australia-Japan security ties and the Asia-Pacific," *Asia Policy* 20 (2015): 81-112.

<sup>101</sup> Jesse Johnson, "With eye on China, defense chiefs agree to bolster interoperability," *Japan Times*, 3 May 2024.

<sup>102</sup> United States of America, The White House, *Joint Vision Statement from the Leaders of Japan, the Philippines, and the United States* (Washington: The White House, April 2024), 11.

<sup>103</sup> For some, Russia's war on Ukraine has given rise to *Three Worlds*, i.e., three geopolitical and ideological groupings, namely the global West, the global East, and the global South. See John G Ikenberry, "Three Worlds: the West, East and South and the competition to shape global order," *International Affairs* 100, no. 1 (2024): 121-38.

trade and connectivity partnerships in the region. At the same time, Japan recognises the more prominent collective role of countries in the Global South in the rules-based order and their increasingly strong voice in it. In many cases, these countries have welcomed Japan's presence, as it offers them a chance to hedge their bets as well as a balance against a strong Chinese presence. For countries such as Indonesia, Singapore, the Philippines, and Malaysia, Japan remains the most trusted partner in Southeast Asia, has increasing political and strategic influence, and serves as an important third party to hedge against the uncertainties of the US-China strategic rivalry.<sup>104</sup> More concretely, the inclusion of the Philippines in the Squad together with Japan, the US, and Australia, for example, can be seen as a successful example of strengthening ties with a country from the Global South by incorporating it in a grouping aimed at upholding the regional rules-based order, including through adherence to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).

Japan has engaged in a CSP with ASEAN and has eight other agreements with countries or groupings in the region.<sup>105</sup> Capacity-building through development assistance and the expanded use of foreign aid for security purposes are key to these. Japan has provided securitised ODA for some years already, but this has always been limited to coast guards, law enforcement agencies, maintenance, and capacity-building. After the introduction of OSA in the NSS 2022, this support has now been expanded to also cover foreign armed forces. In practice, through its OSA, Tokyo has given warning and surveillance equipment (in the amount of 400 million yen) to Malaysia and made a deal to deliver patrol boats to Fiji. As mentioned above, OSA was used to provide training-related equipment to the Vietnam Coast Guard Education and Training Centre. Japan has also signed an agreement with Bangladesh to enhance that country's maritime security capabilities.

<sup>104</sup> Sharon Seah, Joanne Lin, Melinda Martinus, et al, *The State of Southeast Asia: 2024 Survey Report* (Singapore: ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute, 2024), 49.

<sup>105</sup> These include the Japan-Mekong partnership, including Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam. Summits have not taken place since 2021 due to the political situation in Myanmar.

While the overall monetary amounts are modest, they carry symbolic significance, showing Japan's determination to contribute to counterbalancing China by deepening links with Southeast Asia and securing critical sea lanes.<sup>106</sup>

### 3.3. CHALLENGES

The construction of a network of strategic security partnerships faces certain challenges – for Japan and other countries. SPs are limited in scope, their normative basis is often merely declaratory, and it is doubtful to what extent SPs can contribute to “effective multilateralism.”

**The first challenge** is that SPs are focused and issue-based and, hence, are not comprehensive agreements. Countries in Southeast Asia and elsewhere are very pleased to be able to hedge between China and Japan or are very reluctant to pick and choose in the US-China

*Countries in Southeast Asia and elsewhere are very pleased to be able to hedge between China and Japan or are very reluctant to pick and choose in the US-China great-power competition game*

great-power competition game. China has built up substantial political clout in Southeast Asian countries, and countries in the region often seek to maintain a neutral position between the major powers. Furthermore, Japan's cooperation with countries from the so-called global south will not result in swaying these countries' stances towards the war in Ukraine or the need to condemn and impose sanctions on Russia, for example. As another example, Japanese and Indian economic interests are highly convergent, and both share apprehensions about a Sino-centric economic order realised through China's Belt-and-Road Initiative (BRI). However, India will continue to pursue its own national interests, as well as engage with China bilaterally in order to diffuse tensions over their mutual border dispute. India would certainly refrain from getting involved in a possible Japan-China conflict,

<sup>106</sup> Gabriel Dominguez, “[With China in mind, Japan expands security ties with ASEAN](#),” *Japan Times*, 18 December 2023.

let alone enter into a US-style mutual defence alliance with Japan.

**A second challenge** is the normative dimension. SPs prioritise mutual interests but are also explicitly based on shared principles and common values and norms. This makes sense in view of the fact that shared values are important facilitators of cooperation and that appealing to shared norms and principles contributes to coalition-building. In practice, however, disagreements about domestic politics or human rights violations, for example, are muted in the interest of working together on matters of shared concern.<sup>107</sup> Japan is very aware that an overly strong emphasis on certain values can have an adverse effect, as counterpart countries may seek to engage with more pragmatically inclined countries such as China. Currently, Japan is more openly stating that it takes a pragmatic approach and does not seek to preach or impose values.<sup>108</sup> This

*Japan is more openly stating that it takes a pragmatic approach and does not seek to preach or impose values*

is especially the case in Japan's engagement with the global south. For example, Vietnam is a vital strategic partner for Japan but also an authoritarian state and closed autocracy. Vietnam and Japan are on opposite sides when it comes to condemning Russia over its invasion of Ukraine. Furthermore, one reason why bilateral ties between Japan and Vietnam are solid is that Japan never raises issues of human rights and democracy in its dealings with Vietnamese leaders; ODA is not tied to political conditions; and an acknowledgement of universal values is absent from summit meetings.<sup>109</sup>

<sup>107</sup>Japan has certainly been criticised for this. See, e.g., Jeff Kingston, "The Emptiness of Japan's Values Diplomacy in Asia," *The Asia-Pacific Journal* 18, no. 19/1 (2020): 1-23.

<sup>108</sup>For example, this was clear in the recently proclaimed "realism diplomacy for a new era." See Fumio Kishida, "The Future of the Indo-Pacific – Japan's New Plan for a 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' Together with India, as an Indispensable Partner," Policy speech at the Indian Council of World Affairs (ICWA), New Delhi, 20 March 2023.

<sup>109</sup>See Andre Asplund, "Normative power Japan: settling for 'Chinese democracy'," *Contemporary Japan* 30, no. 1 (2018): 127-28.

**A third challenge** is the extent to which SPs contribute to effective multilateralism, that is, a rules-based multilateral order. It is clear that global and transnational challenges require a multilateral approach, but SPs are essentially bilateral, trilateral, or minilateral in nature. SPs, therefore, need to include the ambition to go

*It cannot be denied that both bilateralism and minilateralism have gained tremendously in importance in today's global order, to the detriment of multilateralism and (inter-) regionalism*

beyond these levels by agreeing on how to cope with joint global challenges – in other words, they should be seen as instruments to further effective multilateralism. However, it cannot be denied that both bilateralism and minilateralism have gained tremendously in importance in today's global order, to the detriment of multilateralism and (inter-)regionalism. As argued by Thomas Renard, in the case of the EU, "strategic partnerships were a reaction to the failure of the EU's interregional and multilateral approach of international affairs."<sup>110</sup> Japan as well is prioritising bilateral relations over regionalist projects, not only because regional institutions often constitute "talk shops" without binding decisions but also because regional organisations such as ASEAN are too divided internally.<sup>111</sup> As for multilateralism, Japan fully acknowledges that multilateral approaches centred on the UN system are facing ever more difficulties in light of Russia's aggression against Ukraine and the diversification of international society as a result of the rise of the global south.<sup>112</sup> For Japan, as well, it remains a challenge to ensure that "bilateral partnerships are also an instrument to facilitate convergence or consensus within the multilateral system, and

<sup>110</sup>Thomas Renard, "The Treachery of Strategies: A call for true EU strategic partnerships," *Egmont Papers* 45 (2011): 36.

<sup>111</sup>Bart Gaens, "Japan's evolving regional security policy: The quest for strategic partnerships," in *Japan's Search for Strategic Security Partnerships* (London: Routledge, 2018), 9.

<sup>112</sup>Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, *Gaikō seisho [Diplomatic Bluebook]* (Tokyo: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2024), 18.



to implement multilateral decisions.”<sup>113</sup> For now, a bilateral approach in order to promote global action certainly takes precedence over collective multilateralism.

### 3.4. ASSESSING JAPAN'S STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP DIPLOMACY

In conclusion, Japan's strategic partnership diplomacy has flourished during the past decade, currently comprising 38 SP agreements. This attests to the growing global importance of these pragmatic, issue-based, and goal-driven bilateral constructs rooted in mutual interests and shared values. Japan's SPs show a wide variety, ranging from mere diplomatic vehicles to substantive defence cooperation agreements. They can be divided roughly into robust special SPs, comprehensive SPs, diplomatic SPs, and absent SPs. This chapter has argued that Japan has been successful in, first, applying strategic partnership diplomacy to promote an interconnected network of partners, in addition to its alliance with the US, in the newly constructed region called the Indo-Pacific; second, in accomplishing focused cooperation in areas such as joint military exercises, defence technology transfer, or information sharing; and third, in engaging developing and emerging countries from the so-called global south. Remaining challenges include the fact that SPs are by nature limited in scope, that their normative basis is often merely declaratory, and that the task remains to make SPs contribute to rules-based multilateralism.

<sup>113</sup>Thomas Renard, “The EU strategic partnerships with emerging powers,” in *Strategic partnership as an instrument of EU foreign policy*, eds. Dara Marcus and Marcel Sangsari (Workshop Report of Carleton University, 2015), 39.

## CHAPTER 4. NATO'S RESPONSE TO HYBRID THREATS: PROGRESS, CHALLENGES, AND COOPERATION WITH JAPAN

Nele Loorents

In recent years, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization has demonstrated significant progress in its efforts to combat hybrid threats. This has been particularly evident in its response to Russia's actions in Ukraine. This progress has been marked by increased unity and resolve among the Allies and greater recognition of the severity of the threat posed by Russia's actions. However, despite these advancements, there are still challenges that must be addressed in order to effectively mitigate the impact of hybrid threats. The multifaceted nature of hybrid threats has set limitations on NATO's collective response to cyber and hybrid attacks, leaving openings for other formats of cooperation in Europe and beyond – both for NATO and individual Allies.

One of the key aspects of properly responding to hybrid threats is information sharing and identification of best practices in addressing common security challenges. This extends beyond NATO's allies to other organisations such as the European Union as well as to closer collaboration with global partners. In today's interconnected world, the security of the Euro-Atlantic region is closely intertwined with that of other regions. NATO's partnerships with global partners, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region, hold great potential for growth and strengthening in the face of shared security challenges. By leveraging the expertise and resources of these partners, NATO can further enhance its capabilities to effectively address hybrid threats on a global scale. However, doing so requires increasing awareness and mutual understanding of different approaches to common threats.

Furthermore, for NATO, it is important to recognise and address the differing priorities and interests of each Ally when working with global partners. This can sometimes lead to conflicting views and priorities, hindering cooperation and coordination in addressing



security challenges. It is imperative to establish a strong sense of trust among all parties involved in order to facilitate the sharing of sensitive information. This can be achieved through regular communication, joint exercises, and the establishment of strong

*For NATO, it is important to recognise and address the differing priorities and interests of each Ally when working with global partners*

partnerships based on mutual respect and understanding. Against this background, this chapter will explore the progress, challenges, and cooperation with global partners, especially Japan, in NATO's response to hybrid threats.

#### 4.1. EVOLUTION IN NATO'S RESPONSE TO HYBRID THREATS

As the world evolves, so do the threats to global security. In recent years, hybrid threats have emerged as a significant challenge for governments and international organisations, as well as for the traditional notions of warfare and security. These threats, which combine conventional and unconventional tactics, pose a unique challenge to the traditional security framework. As a key player in global security, NATO has been at the forefront of addressing hybrid threats. However, with the ever-changing nature of these threats, NATO faces challenges and must continuously adapt its responses to them.

NATO has made significant progress in its response to hybrid threats since 2014, including increased unity and resolve among the Allies and greater recognition of the threat posed by Russia's actions in Ukraine. However, there are still challenges that need to be addressed, including differences among the Allies on the urgency and means of supporting Ukraine and limitations in NATO's collective response to cyber and hybrid attacks. Closer cooperation with global partners is crucial for effectively combating hybrid threats and ensuring the security of the Euro-Atlantic region and beyond.

According to NATO's terminology, hybrid warfare involves both military and non-military

tactics and both covert and overt methods such as disinformation, cyberattacks, economic coercion, the deployment of irregular armed groups, and the utilisation of regular forces, which together fall under the label of hybrid means.<sup>114</sup> These methods are employed to

obscure the distinction between war and peace and to instil uncertainty in the minds of the targeted populace. Their ultimate goal is to disrupt and weaken societies. While various actors have used hybrid warfare throughout

history, it has gained renewed attention in recent years due to its use by Russia, especially – but not only – in Ukraine. In Ukraine, Russia has employed a combination of conventional military force, covert operations, cyberattacks, and disinformation campaigns.<sup>115</sup> This hybrid approach enabled Russia to achieve its objectives, to some extent, in Crimea and Donbas before the start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, while NATO's response remained contained and hesitant.<sup>116</sup>

Russia has also persistently employed hybrid tactics against the NATO Allies, including disinformation, deception, and sabotage.<sup>117</sup> As part of its hybrid warfare, Russia regularly uses military actions in the grey zone against the Allies, including airspace violations, GPS jamming, illegal migration flows, and maritime exercises that disrupt economic activity. These actions have posed significant challenges to the security and stability of the Allies.

For the first time, the 2016 Warsaw Summit declaration recognised Russia's hybrid tactics as threatening Euro-Atlantic security and stressed the importance of countering them. This shift in attitude among NATO members has been a significant step towards a more cohesive and united response to hybrid threats.<sup>118</sup> For example, NATO now has Virtual Cyber Incident

<sup>114</sup>“[Countering hybrid threats](#),” North Atlantic Treaty Organization, last updated on 7 May 2024.

<sup>115</sup>Craisor-Constantin Ionita, “Conventional and Hybrid Actions in the Russia's Invasion of Ukraine”, *Security and Defence Quarterly* 44, no. 4 (2023): 5-20.

<sup>116</sup>Marina Miron, “Russian ‘hybrid warfare’ and the annexation of Crimea: the modern application of Soviet political warfare”, *International Affairs* 99, no. 1 (2023), 397-98.

<sup>117</sup>Ivana Strander, “[How NATO Should Fight Back Against Russia's Hybrid Warfare](#)”, *Kyiv Post*, 11 July 2023.

<sup>118</sup>North Atlantic Treaty Organization, Heads of State and Government, *Warsaw Summit Communiqué*, (Warsaw: North Atlantic Treaty Organization Heads of States and Government, 8-9 July 2016).

Support Capability (VCISC) and a mechanism for deploying Counter-Hybrid Support Teams (CHSTs). The latter are tasked with providing tailored and targeted assistance to Allies upon their request. However, up to now, these have only been deployed twice – in 2019 to Montenegro in connection with hybrid and cyberattacks by pro-Russian factions and to Lithuania in 2021 in response to illegal migration pressures on the border with Belarus.<sup>119</sup>

The war in Ukraine has revealed the necessity for greater agility and readiness in the face of evolving threats. In response to this, in July 2022, NATO leaders endorsed comprehensive preventive and response options to counter hybrid threats. These options incorporate both civil and military tools, which can be tailored for responding to specific situations.

However, despite NATO's decision in 2016 that a hybrid attack can trigger an Article 5 response, there is still a lack of clarity about what circumstances would warrant such a response, which hinders NATO's ability to respond collectively to cyber and hybrid attacks. NATO's decision-making processes are designed to be comprehensive and inclusive, involving all member states in the deliberation and implementation of strategic decisions. This collective approach allows for a thorough assessment of potential threats. However, while this enables the development of a cohesive response, hybrid tactics often have complex and covert origins, which makes it difficult to attribute and respond to such attacks.<sup>120</sup> Hybrid tactics by Russia have blurred the lines between war and peace, making it more difficult for NATO to determine when and how to respond. Some Allies have also expressed the notion that collective countering of hybrid threats could be seen as provocative and escalatory.<sup>121</sup> Moreover, NATO explicitly regards dealing with cyber and hybrid attacks as a national-level responsibility. Indeed, the first sentence of the NATO website's "Countering

hybrid threats" page states that "the primary responsibility to respond to hybrid threats or attacks rests with the targeted country."<sup>122</sup> These limits to NATO's capacity to collectively respond to hybrid threats leave openings for

*As hybrid threats incorporate a combination of conventional and non-conventional tactics, coordination with the EU has played an important role in enhancing NATO's response to hybrid threats*

other formats of cooperation in Europe and beyond – both for NATO and individual Allies. As hybrid threats incorporate a combination of conventional and non-conventional tactics, coordination with the EU has played an important role in enhancing NATO's response to hybrid threats. The different tools available to both organisations provide complementarity means to counter such threats. NATO and the EU have established a strategic partnership in 10 areas of common interest, including countering hybrid threats, and in 2016, a Joint Declaration on EU-NATO cooperation was signed to facilitate cooperation and joint efforts to do so.<sup>123</sup>

In practice, the two organisations regularly share information and conduct joint exercises to enhance their ability to address hybrid threats. With the establishment of a European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats in 2017, the collaboration to counter hybrid threats was institutionalised. In concrete terms, the EU and NATO's partnership should be based on complementarity and mutual support, with each organisation bringing its unique strengths and capabilities. However, it is important to note that the EU's and NATO's definitions of hybrid threats differ.<sup>124</sup> The EU has a strong focus on resilience, which is crucial in countering hybrid threats. Through its policies and initiatives, the EU

<sup>119</sup> "NATO Counter Hybrid Support Team arrives in Lithuania," *The Baltic Times*, 7 September 2021.

<sup>120</sup> Bernard Siman, "Hybrid Warfare: Attribution is Key to Deterrence," *Egmont Royal Institute for International Relations*, 30 January 2024.

<sup>121</sup> Dick Zandee and Adaja Stoetman, "Countering hybrid threats: The role of the Joint Expeditionary Force," (Clingendael Report, March 2023), 13.

<sup>122</sup> "Countering hybrid threats," North Atlantic Treaty Organization, last updated on 7 May 2024.

<sup>123</sup> European Union and North Atlantic Treaty Organization, *Joint Declaration by the President of the European Council, the President of the European Council, the President of the European Commission, and the Secretary General of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization* (Warsaw, 8 July 2016).

<sup>124</sup> For more on the definition of hybrid threats, see Dick Zandee, Adaja Stoetman and Sico van der Meer, October 2021.

works to strengthen the resilience of the Member States against hybrid threats, such as cyberattacks and disinformation campaigns. On their part, NATO has set seven baseline requirements for resilience, which focus on three core functions of civil preparedness: continuity of government, essential services to the population, and civil support to the military. However, these functions are implemented on a voluntary basis, resulting in significant differences among the Allies depending on their priorities.

In response to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and its use of hybrid tactics, the EU and NATO established the EU-NATO Task Force on resilience of critical infrastructure on 16 March 2023. The Task Force presented a final assessment report on strengthening the resilience and protection of critical infrastructure in June 2023 that identified four key sectors: energy, transport, digital infrastructure, and space.<sup>125</sup> The expectation is that aligning efforts and sharing best practices in these areas would help better address the multifaceted and complex nature of threats to critical infrastructure.

## 4.2. COOPERATION WITH GLOBAL PARTNERS

In the current interconnected and rapidly evolving global landscape, effective management of security threats necessitates a collaborative approach involving multiple actors. This not only includes NATO member states but also partnerships with global players. In particular, cooperation with global partners is imperative in addressing the ever-changing and intricate nature of hybrid threats.

Besides its partnership with the EU, NATO already has cooperation agreements with global partners including countries from the Indo-Pacific region. The Indo-Pacific region holds increasing significance in the global security context, especially with the emergence of security challenges such as territorial disputes, cyberattacks, and terrorism. NATO's partnerships in the Indo-Pacific with Australia,

New Zealand, Japan, and South Korea provide valuable contributions to countering a variety of global security threats.

With regard to these partnerships, the Alliance has established tailored partnership framework documents that identify areas of mutual interest for cooperation with each of these nations. Furthermore, a shared Agenda for Tackling Shared Security Challenges was agreed upon in 2022. The Agenda sets a framework for deepening cooperation in various areas, including cyber defence and hybrid threats, as well as issues such as emerging and disruptive technologies and military exercises.<sup>126</sup>

As an example, the importance of the relationship between NATO and Japan has become increasingly evident in recent years. While Japan faces a variety of threats that entail military conflicts, the nation also faces broader security challenges such as cyberattacks, espionage, and economic security.<sup>127</sup> As a result, Japan has proactively taken measures to bolster its self-defence forces, including investing in cutting-edge defence technologies. Furthermore, Japan has recognised the value of collaborating with international partners, particularly NATO and like-minded countries within the Indo-Pacific region and the Euro-Atlantic area, to address these multifaceted threats.

The partnership between Japan and NATO has significantly strengthened since the signing of the Joint Political Declaration in 2013. This

*Collaboration in areas such as maritime security, cyber defence, humanitarian assistance, and disaster relief has been a key focus*

is evidenced by the establishment of various initiatives and agreements that reflect a growing recognition of the interconnected nature of global security. Collaboration in areas such as maritime security, cyber defence, humanitarian assistance, and disaster relief

<sup>125</sup> "On the Resilience of Critical Infrastructure. Final Assessment Report," EU-NATO Task Force, June 2023.

<sup>126</sup> "Relations with partners in the Indo-Pacific region" North Atlantic Treaty Organization, accessed 15 March 2023.

<sup>127</sup> Cabinet and National Security Council, *National Security Strategy of Japan*.

has been a key focus of this partnership. Additionally, Japan and NATO are increasingly engaging in high-level dialogues and joint exercises, both of which serve to further solidify their partnership.

Notably, NATO's perception of China has undergone a significant transformation in recent years. While before China was viewed primarily as an economic competitor, it is now increasingly seen as a strategic challenge on the global stage. In its 2021 communiqué, NATO addressed China's growing influence and international policies for the first time, acknowledging them as "systemic challenges" to Euro-Atlantic security. There are several driving factors behind this shift in perception, including China's rapid military modernisation, its assertive stance in the South China Sea, and its expanding global footprint through initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative. NATO's approach to China now encompasses a broader range of considerations, including technological competition, cybersecurity threats, and the implications of China's global infrastructure projects that make collaboration with Indo-Pacific partners even more essential.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has greatly impacted NATO's relations with its Indo-Pacific partners, particularly Japan. However, despite the political commitment and desire for closer ties, efforts must be undertaken to achieve more tangible results in practice. Notably, Japan – alongside other Indo-Pacific Partners such as the Republic of Korea, Australia, and New Zealand – attended the NATO Summit for the first time in Madrid in 2022, and all the NATO Summits thereafter. Since the outbreak of Russia's war in Ukraine, Tokyo has actively pursued closer ties with NATO while also seeking closer cooperation within the Euro-Atlantic region through minilateral or multilateral partnerships. Japan's adoption of this proactive stance highlights its dedication to promoting peace and stability not only in its immediate region but on a global scale.

An increased emphasis on joint military exercises, intelligence sharing, and technological cooperation characterises the evolving relationship between Japan and the NATO Allies. These areas of cooperation reflect a mutual understanding of the

complexity of the security challenges and the need for a united approach to address them. The partnership with NATO extends beyond traditional military cooperation and encompasses broader security concerns such as cyberthreats, economic security, and the protection of global supply chains. Over time, Japan has become one of the key partners in supporting efforts to secure peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region. Japan has unique insight on how to counter China's economic coercion and ambitious plans to enhance military capabilities especially in cyber and maritime defence.<sup>128</sup> This partnership not only addresses immediate threats but also shapes a long-term strategic approach to global security challenges.

One fundamental aspect of this collaboration involves a strong emphasis on information sharing and the identification of best practices in addressing common security challenges. As global security dynamics continue to evolve, these partnerships will become increasingly important in addressing common threats and promoting a peaceful international order. The NATO 2022 Strategic Concept highlights the significance of enhancing dialogue and cooperation between NATO and its partners in the Indo-Pacific region.<sup>129</sup> In July 2023, NATO and Japan agreed upon the Individual Tailored Partnership Programme for 2023–26. This programme provides a framework for strengthened cooperation in 16 areas to address global security challenges such as cyber defence, emerging and disruptive technologies (EDT), hybrid threats, outer space, maritime security, and climate change.<sup>130</sup> During the 2023 NATO Summit in Vilnius, Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg underlined Japan's importance when he welcomed Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida and stated that no partner is closer than Japan.

Japan is undoubtedly one of NATO's most crucial partners, particularly in addressing the primary concern of its largest ally, the US: China. Japan's

<sup>128</sup> Ryan Ashley and Jada Fraser, "Smoke or Substance? NATO-Japanese Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific," *War on the Rocks*, 8 February 2024.

<sup>129</sup> North Atlantic Treaty Organization, "NATO 2022 Strategic Concept".

<sup>130</sup> "Individually Tailored Partnership Programme between NATO and Japan for 2023 – 2026," North Atlantic Treaty Organization, last updated 20 July 2023.



strategic location in the Indo-Pacific region, as well as its strong economic and military capabilities, make it an invaluable partner for NATO in ensuring stability and security in the region. However, there are diverging opinions among the NATO Allies regarding the type of dialogue and engagement expected with respect to the Indo-Pacific partners.<sup>131</sup> This has resulted in a lack of consensus within the Alliance and a failure to establish a permanent liaison office in Tokyo.<sup>132</sup> This not only hinders NATO's ability to effectively communicate and collaborate with Japan but also sends a message of disunity and indecision among the Allies.

With its National Defence Strategy, Japan has set a goal to develop intelligence capabilities by 2027 to effectively address hybrid and integrated information warfare. The development of these capabilities could also prove beneficial for the Allies in enhancing the common understanding of potential threats and supporting decision-making processes.<sup>133</sup>

The Japanese National Defence Strategy also aims to enhance collaboration with the Nordic-Baltic countries in advanced initiatives such as information warfare, cybersecurity, strategic communication, and hybrid warfare.<sup>134</sup> In practice, the Centres of Excellence (CoEs), which work alongside NATO and the EU to build shared knowledge and expertise, can offer a valuable platform for more substantial collaboration. Japan's membership in the NATO Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence (CCDCOE) in Estonia since 2022 has facilitated joint participation in cyber defence exercises with NATO Allies and EU members. Japan's interaction with the CCDCOE has shown potential for mutual benefits, particularly in terms of understanding and responding to cyber threats. Furthermore, the interaction of Japan with the NATO and EU CoEs strengthens the overall relationships by fostering trust and understanding. The CoE for Countering

Hybrid Threats in Helsinki and the Strategic Communications CoE in Riga also have the potential to facilitate closer ties and mutual capacity building.

### 4.3. THE LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE POTENTIAL OF NATO'S PARTNERSHIPS

While NATO's partnerships with its global partners have brought numerous benefits with respect to addressing security challenges, there are also limitations and challenges that need to be addressed in order to strengthen these partnerships. One of the main challenges to NATO's partnerships with its global partners is the differing priorities and interests of each Ally. As an alliance of 32 member states, NATO must consider the priorities and interests of each member in its decision-making process. This can sometimes lead to conflicting views when working with global partners, which can hinder cooperation and coordination in addressing security challenges. For example, as explained above, differing views of Allies on what kind of dialogue is expected with Indo-Pacific partners have led to a lack of consensus and the failure to establish a permanent liaison office in Tokyo.

There may also be challenges in terms of interoperability and coordination between NATO and its global partners. This is especially true in the Indo-Pacific region, where NATO's partners have different military structures and capabilities than NATO. This can create difficulties in joint operations and exercises, which can impact the effectiveness of the partnership in addressing security threats. However, the recent rise in Japan's defence spending has been interpreted as a manifestation of its aspirations to assume a more prominent role in global security and increase its alignment with international organisations such as NATO.<sup>135</sup>

Both NATO and Japan prioritise the development of agile and flexible defence capabilities. Noteworthy investments in

<sup>131</sup> Michito Tsuruoka, "6 Myths about NATO's Engagement in the Indo-Pacific. No matter where you stand, at least get the facts straight," *The Diplomat*, 27 October 2023.

<sup>132</sup> Masahiro Matsumura, "Japan misread the signs in pushing plan for a NATO office," *Nikkei Asia*, 19 September 2023.

<sup>133</sup> Cabinet and National Security Council, *National Security Strategy of Japan*, 27.

<sup>134</sup> Cabinet and National Security Council, *National Security Strategy of Japan*, 22.

<sup>135</sup> The latest National Security Strategy outlines Japan's plan to increase its defence spending by 65% over the next five years, reaching the NATO guideline of approximately 2% of GDP by 2027.



innovative technologies, including cyber defence systems, missile defence, and unmanned systems, have been earmarked for the near future. The mutual recognition of the significance of rapid response forces in confronting diverse threats further highlights the vital role of adaptability and resilience in contemporary military strategies, both of which are needed to guarantee preparedness for a variety of potential scenarios.

However, the lack of a comprehensive and coordinated response to hybrid attacks places limits on NATO's partnerships. While NATO and its partners have made progress in addressing hybrid threats, there is still a need for a more robust and coordinated response. This would entail improving intelligence sharing and investing in research and development to stay ahead of emerging threats. Collaboration in the sharing of intelligence and sensitive data has the potential to accelerate the growth of defence capabilities by way of the exchange of knowledge on advanced strategies and technologies. Nonetheless, it is imperative to recognise the obstacles that arise when sharing intelligence due to the sensitive nature of this information, and, therefore, crucial, too, to establish a strong sense of trust and cooperation among all parties involved. To achieve closer cooperation with its global partners, NATO should establish clear and effective communication channels and mechanisms, which would, in turn, facilitate a more coordinated and efficient response to security challenges. Additionally, joint exercises and trainings can help to improve interoperability and coordination between NATO and its partners.

Minilateral and multilateral formats involving a small group of like-minded countries can provide Japan and other Indo-Pacific partners with the opportunity to work closely with NATO on specific issues related to hybrid threats. Through these formats, partners can leverage NATO's expertise and resources while also gaining valuable insights from its collective knowledge and expertise. This can lead to the development of joint strategies and initiatives to effectively counter hybrid threats such as cyberattacks and disinformation campaigns. One possible format for more active collaboration is the UK-led Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF), which has lately focused more on

its possible role in the hybrid domain.<sup>136</sup> The JEF has developed a range of response options for responding to various threats, and in November last year, activated one of these for the first time by deploying a mostly maritime force to the Baltic region following the severing of several undersea pipelines and cables.<sup>137</sup> Partners' participation in joint exercises and training, even if only as observers, would facilitate information exchange and increase resilience against hybrid threats.

To summarise, in today's globalised world, addressing security threats requires collaboration between various actors, including NATO's member states and its international partners. This is particularly important when it comes to addressing hybrid threats, which are complex and constantly evolving. NATO has formed partnerships in the Indo-Pacific region with countries such as Australia, Japan, and South Korea to address the emerging security challenges in the region, including cyberattacks and terrorism. These partnerships are formalised through tailored agreements and a common agenda for addressing shared security challenges. To benefit from this collaboration in more practical terms, NATO must focus more persistently on establishing clear and effective communication channels and mechanisms, building up trust, and more actively making use of smaller collaboration formats.

<sup>136</sup> Dick Zandee and Adaja Stoetman, "[Countering hybrid threats](#)," Clingendael Report, March 2023

<sup>137</sup> Helen Wright (ed), "[JEF sending ships to increase protection of Baltic Sea undersea infrastructure](#)," *ERR News*, 28 November 2023.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The rapidly shifting regional and global security environment, which increasingly combines traditional security threats with hybrid challenges, is putting pressure on US-led alliances in both the Indo-Pacific and Euro-Atlantic regions to adapt. In many ways, traditional security concerns associated with sovereignty and territorial integrity continue to dominate these alliances' agenda in both regions. Indeed, as argued by Takuya Matsuda, we should consider the Russian invasion of Ukraine as a critical juncture for alliance politics. Military alliances, exemplified by the US-Japan alliance, are now increasingly being operationalised as a means to enhance military readiness and effectively generate combat power in case of a contingency. The strengthening of alliances – chief among them expanding contributions from US allies such as Japan and multilateral security arrangements – represents a fundamental shift in the way we understand security in an age of great power competition. While the US-Japan alliance system goes through a transitional phase with an emphasis on jointly creating military power, challenges remain regarding how effectively to operationalise alliances in such a manner, considering that different states have distinct capabilities and diverging priorities.

It is clear that US-led alliances, whether multilateral or bilateral, remain a key pillar of the security and defence policies of the “junior” allies in both regions. At the same time, uncertainties about the sustainability of the US's security commitments in the medium- to long-term continue to linger in the Indo-Pacific and Euro-Atlantic regions. Additionally, the rise of hybrid threats, which the traditional alliance has not been designed to address, is a key driver for US allies to seek alternative forms of security cooperation. Elena Atanassova-Cornelis contends that Japan's updated conceptualisation of security in the wake of the Ukraine war and Russia's warfare tactics has created a strong sense of urgency in Tokyo for developing a diverse set of capabilities for responding to security challenges that cross territorial borders. With the rise of hybrid threats and grey-zone conflicts, Tokyo increasingly understands

that the tackling of regional security issues necessitates a coordinated approach with global players in various bilateral, minilateral, or inter-regional settings. This is where the value to Japan of non-US partners is increasing in strategic significance. These players involve both countries in the Indo-Pacific that can address Japan's immediate security concerns, such as Australia and the ROK, but also extra-regional, geographically distant actors such as the EU and NATO.

In many ways, Japan's alignment policy exemplifies a broader trend of strategic diversification observable in the Indo-Pacific region. This policy goes well beyond engaging only regional partners that can contribute to one's defence needs from a traditional security perspective. As outlined by Bart Gaens, Japan has implemented strategic partnership diplomacy at a rapid pace, with now no less than 38 strategic partnerships with countries and organisations including in East Asia, the Middle East, and Europe. In this way, Japan has been successful in promoting the concept of an Indo-Pacific region, which for Japan needs to be one with the US at the core of an interconnected network of regional partners. Tokyo has also accomplished issue-based, focused, and goal-driven cooperation with other nations based on mutual interests and commonly defined goals. At the same time, a major challenge for Japan remains how to utilise these partnerships to pursue effective multilateralism, that is, a rules-based multilateral order.

Similar approaches to security cooperation that go beyond formal alliances and geographically defined regions can be observed in the Euro-Atlantic space as well. From NATO's perspective, as argued by Nele Loorents, addressing security threats requires collaboration with various actors, including NATO member states and partnerships with international players. Minilateral and multilateral formats involving a small group of like-minded countries can provide NATO with the opportunity to work closely with Japan and other Indo-Pacific partners on specific issues related to hybrid threats. Through these formats, partners can leverage the Alliance's expertise and resources while also gaining valuable insights from NATO's collective knowledge. This can lead to the development

of joint strategies and initiatives to effectively counter hybrid threats such as cyberattacks and disinformation campaigns.

Collectively, the chapters in this report demonstrate that the Indo-Pacific and Euro-Atlantic regions are becoming increasingly interconnected in security terms, not least due to the war in Ukraine. In both regions the traditional alliances are undergoing a process of restructuring, including through increased burden-sharing, while remaining instrumental for the allies from a defence and deterrence perspective. At the same time, the multifaceted nature of hybrid threats is driving the interest of US partners in both regions to increasingly engage with each other. From this perspective, the research conducted for this report illustrates that Japan, while reinforcing its alliance with the US, is simultaneously emerging as a key actor in establishing a network of interconnected alignments. These partnerships involve intra- and extra-regional players in various configurations, including NATO and the EU. This network is designed to support and strengthen the rules-based global order, which has been fundamental for the stability and prosperity of both the Indo-Pacific and Euro-Atlantic regions.

In this light, the report's principal recommendations are as follows:

- Considering the traditional security threats that Japan continues to face, the US-Japan alliance must step up its efforts to effectively deter and prepare for future contingencies. To this end, there is a need for a robust discussion between policymakers in Washington and Tokyo that examines different possible contingency scenarios in the Western Pacific. Aligning US and Japanese strategic and operational goals should be a key objective for the alliance in the near-term. By doing so, the two nations would be able to further clarify their division of labour, as well as address the several trade-offs in defence planning both for effective deterrence and contingency planning.
  - Given the US's relative decline and the uncertainties associated with the US's future security commitments in the region, Japan should seek to reinforce and
- further institutionalise ties with its key strategic partners in minilateral settings. These include the US-Japan-Australia and US-Japan-ROK trilaterals, and the new quadrilateral defence cooperation framework among Japan, Australia, the Philippines, and the US. Priority should be given to improved interoperability and strengthened joint deterrence with partners that can contribute both to Japan's immediate security needs and to tackling new threats, such as those in the maritime domain in the Indo-Pacific region.
- Beyond the area of traditional defence, and in order to tackle a diverse set of hybrid threats, Japan should pursue a tailored approach to its security cooperation with key extra-regional strategic partners, particularly the EU. Based on each partner's strategic priorities, existing capabilities, and resources, Japan should give priority to those areas in which there is the most potential for the EU and Japan to achieve tangible results. The recommended areas include cooperation in the digital domain (specifically regarding cybersecurity and countering disinformation) and new technologies (5G, AI, quantum), as well as defence industrial cooperation and technology sharing.
  - In order to effectively combat hybrid threats, NATO, similarly to Japan, should prioritise closer cooperation with global partners in specific areas. This can be achieved through initiatives such as tailored partnership frameworks, increased information sharing, and joint programmes. NATO and Japan should seek to establish effective communication channels and mechanisms in order to facilitate a more coordinated and efficient response to security challenges. Particular attention should be paid to joint exercises and trainings, as these can play a significant role in improving interoperability and coordination between the two partners.
  - In light of the deepening NATO-EU collaboration in addressing hybrid threats, on the one hand, and the growing Japan-EU security partnership in tackling challenges in new domains, on the other, NATO, the EU, and Japan should explore ways to

deepen trilateral security engagement, especially in cyber defence and countering disinformation. This will be facilitated by the already overlapping issue-areas of cooperation between Japan and NATO and Japan and the EU and the strategic convergence connecting these three players through the US-led alliances in the Indo-Pacific and Euro-Atlantic regions.

- To strengthen collaboration and increase shared understanding between NATO Allies and partners, it is recommended to leverage minilateral and multilateral formats involving a small group of like-minded countries and partners in NATO's and the EU's Centres of Excellence. This approach will provide Japan with the opportunity to work closely with NATO and the EU on specific issues related to hybrid threats.

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