

Anarchy Is a Bridge: Russia and China Are Pushing NATO and Japan Together

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After nearly 70 years of distant relations, security ties between NATO and Japan are flourishing. A number of important initiatives have recently been adopted, including high-level political dialogues, joint military training, and cooperation in science, technology, and cyber security. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg visited Tokyo in February 2023 and signed a [joint declaration](#) with Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida committing the two parties to increased strategic cooperation as "reliable and natural partners who share common values and security interests." In May, Japan announced plans to open a NATO liaison office in Tokyo, marking a significant milestone in the burgeoning cooperation: Such offices can portend future NATO membership and, if established, would be the only of its kind in Asia. On July 11, Kishida will attend the two-day NATO summit in Lithuania, where an agreement on further security and practical cooperation is expected. Indeed, the recent rapprochement is beginning to transform the relationship into a strategic partnership, and there are many potential benefits to both parties in terms of military, nontraditional, and economic security.

This rapid advancement in relations between the security bloc and Japan follows the signing of the E.U.-Japan Strategic Partnership Agreement in 2019 and has largely come about as both sides seek to balance against Chinese expansion and Russian aggression. Beijing is increasingly the focus of European and American security interests and is now seen as a threat to the alliance. NATO's [2022 Strategic Concept](#) outlined for the first time how China challenges member country "interests, security, and values." Beijing uses bombastic wolf warrior diplomacy, where Chinese diplomats in the Xi Jinping administration use overtly hostile rhetoric, and has overseen [coercive policies](#) to weaponize strategic dependencies in space, cyber, and sea and disrupt materials and supply chains to its advantage. The Chinese Communist Party has also overseen strategic expansion into several NATO member states via the Belt and Road Initiative, all of which has raised security concerns among members of the alliance. While Japan [has long viewed](#) Chinese behavior as threatening, NATO now also sees it as such, which has pushed the alliance to expand its presence in the Indo-Pacific and collaborate with partners in the region.

Moscow's [recent aggression](#), especially its invasion of Ukraine, has also changed Japanese [threat perceptions](#) and [security policy](#), which has led to its closer alignment with like-minded nations. Tokyo was proactive in joining the sanctions regime led by G7 nations (the other six of which are NATO members) against Russia and openly condemned its attack on Ukraine. Kishida has pledged steadfast support to Ukraine, including recently at the 2023 G7 summit in Hiroshima, and has already committed over [\\$7.1 billion](#) in humanitarian, financial, and nonlethal defense equipment aid to "lead the world" in fighting Russian aggression. In just a few years, Japan has abandoned its policy of [preferential treatment](#) toward Russia, even labeling it a serious violator of international law in its 2022 National Security Strategy. Thus, while Russia was long a factor complicating Japan's engagement with NATO, it is [now a factor promoting it](#).

China's expansion, Russia's aggression, and increased Chinese-Russian "no limits" [military and political alignment](#) have fundamentally shifted threat perceptions around the world. In response, the security calculus

in both NATO and Japan has moved from being regionally to globally focused: China now falls within NATO’s scope of concern in addition to the bloc’s primary focus on the European continent, and Russia within Japan’s, which has traditionally been fixated on threats emanating from Northeast Asia. This has incentivized defense cooperation, resulting in a genuine upgrading of political and military ties between Japan and countries within the NATO alliance. As Japanese Foreign Minister Yoshimasa Hayashi [recently put it](#) when asked about the growing cooperation, “It is not possible to speak about the security of Europe and the Indo-Pacific region separately.”

Washington has welcomed, indeed pushed for and helped facilitate, the warming of relations between its principal multilateral and bilateral alliances as it continues its reorientation toward the Indo-Pacific. As part of this shift, the United States is now actively uniting its allies in Europe and Asia in order to take on China and Russia. This includes promoting dialogue to address common challenges, such as safeguarding the rules-based international order among NATO’s Indo-Pacific partners — Japan, South Korea, Australia, and India — who have not cooperated extensively in post–Cold War security affairs. To this end, President Joseph Biden arranged an [historic](#) trilateral meeting with Japan and South Korea on the sidelines of the 2022 NATO Madrid summit, the first ever attended by a Japanese prime minister. Japan will again join the summit to be held in Lithuania in July 2023. All of this comes at a time when Japan is also simultaneously developing a number of [bilateral security agreements](#) with NATO members, including the United Kingdom, France, Germany, and Italy, which should help it to align with the bloc’s security objectives over time.

However, more must be done to further cement these relationships if the current rapprochement is to last long-term and benefit all parties involved. First and foremost, a concerted effort must be made to increase trust and reduce misperceptions between NATO members and Japan. The United States, as the common denominator to both the Atlantic and Japanese alliances, should take the lead in institutionalizing interoperability — the capacity of military technologies and people to operate in conjunction with each other — on land, sea, air, and space. There are many opportunities, in particular, for maritime cooperation to meet [increasing security demands](#) at a time of [rising competition at sea](#), such as monitoring and protecting shipping routes and subsea cables. Building on recent progress, Japanese diplomatic representation within NATO should also be further expanded in both decision-making bodies such as the North Atlantic Council (as a regular observer) and in project-level prioritized areas of cooperation, including disarmament and nonproliferation, arms transport, and weapons storage. Such efforts can assist in aligning military and economic security at a time of heightened competition in both pillars of statecraft. Finally, France’s untimely [protest against](#) the proposed NATO liaison office in Tokyo should not stymie efforts to open it: The office would start small, likely nestled within the sprawling U.S. Yokota Air Base, but can serve critical bureaucratic functions while also sending a clear signal that NATO and its Asia-Pacific partners stand together. Strengthening the alignment will require slow, incremental action, but this is as it should be. Stepwise growth can meet key objectives without drawing criticism at home or abroad. After all, it’s the tortoise, not the hare, that wins the race.

Bridges Over the New Geography of Danger

The rapprochement between Japan and NATO has been spearheaded by high-level political exchanges and agreements, including the [2013 Joint Political Declaration](#) and [2014 Individual Partnership and Cooperation Program](#), which put in writing the commitment to work together to enhance interoperability and build capabilities to address challenges to “shared strategic interests” inherent to the shifting security environments in both Europe and Asia. In their joint statement in early 2023, Stoltenberg and Kishida [reinforced the](#)

[importance](#) of a “staunch” NATO-Japanese partnership, which “will demonstrate its value under this severe and complex security environment.”

Japanese personnel have been increasingly integrated into NATO’s institutions, participating in political dialogues and in NATO foreign minister meetings, in addition to the Madrid and forthcoming Vilnius summits. In 2019, Japan [established](#) an initial formal mission to NATO in its embassy in Belgium and then [upgraded](#) it to a permanent diplomatic mission and ambassadorship at NATO headquarters in 2023. The May 2023 announcement of plans to [open a NATO liaison office](#) in Tokyo would cement the alignment, literally. At the Vilnius summit in July, a further upgrade and even more ambitious partnership agreement will be unveiled under the auspices of NATO’s new Individually Tailored Partnership Program, with the understanding that cooperation on priority issues will be [accelerated, streamlined, and expanded](#). NATO-Japan relations have gradually been institutionalized over the past decade, but the pace, level of integration, and planned commitment to the relationship over the past year alone are unprecedented.

These political developments have been coupled with practical steps toward interoperability and capability-building, especially in the maritime domain. In 2018, Tokyo established a designated liaison officer in NATO’s Maritime Command, and Japan’s Self-Defense Forces conducted [exercises](#) with NATO’s Maritime Standing Group I in the Baltic Sea and in Spain. In 2022, cooperation intensified when Tokyo participated in [training missions](#) alongside NATO vessels in the Mediterranean for the first time. In June 2023, Japan joined the historically massive two-week Air Defender exercise alongside 23 NATO members and Sweden, demonstrating Japan’s commitment to the alliance’s show of solidarity amid the ongoing war in Ukraine. The exercise took place shortly after the NATO ministers of foreign affairs informal meeting in Oslo, where Stoltenberg [declared that](#) “what happens in Asia matters for Europe and what happens in Europe matters for Asia.” Stoltenberg’s statement echoed that of Kishida a year earlier at the Madrid summit when [he remarked that](#) the “the international community stands at a crossroads in history” and that the participation of NATO’s Asia-Pacific partners in the summit “expresses the realization that the security of Europe and of the Indo-Pacific is inseparable. Russian aggression against Ukraine is not a problem for Europe alone, but instead an outrageous act that undermines the very foundation of international order.”

Japan has also started to work alongside NATO countries to provide relief and military assistance. In March 2023, for the first time, Japan conducted joint [international emergency operations](#) as part of the NATO-coordinated air bridge that delivered disaster relief to earthquake-stricken regions in Turkey. The contribution was described by NATO spokesperson Oana Lungescu as “a historic first” that “demonstrates again how Japan’s cooperation with NATO helps bolster international peace and security.” Japan has also shown checkbook commitment to NATO and has emerged as the lead nonmember financial supporter of NATO missions, including over \$30 million to its comprehensive assistance package trust fund to provide [equipment and supplies](#) to Ukraine. Yoshimasa clarified [Japan’s rationale](#) for such recent engagement with NATO as “Something happening in East Europe ... affects directly the situation here in the Pacific.”

Finally, cooperation has also [increased](#) in the realm of technology and cyber defense. In 2021, Japan and NATO jointly held the world’s largest cyber defense war game, and in 2022, Tokyo formally [joined](#) the NATO Cyber Cooperation Center in Estonia and designated experts to be stationed there. There has also been an uptick in emerging and disruptive technology sharing, including in areas such as quantum computing, novel materials, and AI. NATO approved Japan as an enhanced opportunity partner of its science and technology organization in 2021, expanding the group of then-nonmembers to four along with Australia, Sweden, and Finland. Japan now contributes to NATO’s [Science for Peace and Security](#) program, with experts on such issues as border and port security and nanotechnology for infrared sensors, as well as health

responses to chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear agent exposure. A leading innovator in this field, Japan is also one of four partners to join Science for Peace and Security’s most recent initiative “[Futures in the Indo-Pacific](#),” launched in early 2023, [with the aim](#) to strengthen ties with partners who “play an important role in the new international security landscape.”

Alignments Have Consequences

The implications of NATO-Japan alignment are significant, not least in terms of how China and Russia might respond. Beijing has already stated its disapproval on several occasions; China’s foreign ministry called alignment between NATO and Japan “[a push for bloc confrontation \[that\] calls for high vigilance](#).” At the recent Shangri-La Dialogue, Asia’s top security summit, in June 2023, Defense Minister Li Shangfu [blasted](#) such ties in its neighborhood as “holding countries in the region hostage and play[ing] up conflict and confrontation.” Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova [said in May](#) that the plan to open the NATO office in Tokyo is “yet further proof of NATO’s ambitions to entrench in the region to spread an anti-Russia and anti-China agenda” and that “NATO’s advance in Asia will lead to the militarization of the region and an escalation in bloc conflicts.” Both countries such rhetoric to foment support for what otherwise could be unpopular or costly foreign policies, framing the United States and the West as threatening Chinese and Russian sovereignty. It is therefore likely that NATO-Japan engagement will lead to more Chinese Communist Party and Kremlin statements that focus on U.S.-led containment and encirclement, which can grease the wheels of defense production to meet Xi’s “[comprehensive national security](#)” goals and Putin’s war machine in Ukraine.

China’s and Russia’s displeasure is not totally unfounded — a closer NATO-Japan relationship could, in fact, mean a stronger deterrent in both Europe and Asia. Although currently at the fledgling stage, as NATO and Japan continue to increase cooperation, interoperability between America’s two great alliances will only increase. The strengthening of this interoperability should be a key objective for the burgeoning NATO-U.S.-Japanese nexus, and it should undertake expanded joint exercises, defense training, and weapons development. Both NATO and Japan also have strong capabilities and mutual interests in outer space, but so far there are few concerted joint initiatives. This should be expanded.

Japan in particular can [learn a great deal](#) from how NATO is assisting Ukraine in terms of resupply of both arms and noncombat materials, a role it would likely find itself in if China invades Taiwan. And while, for example, NATO joining the fight in a Taiwan contingency or Japan doing the same in the Baltics is difficult to imagine, deepening of NATO-Japan interoperability, understanding, and solidarity will increase costs for any potential aggressor and will decrease their likelihood of victory.

Increased NATO-Japan cooperation will also help both parties to address shared nontraditional security challenges. Peacekeeping operations, for example, should be better prioritized. Japan could support [ongoing and deepening](#) NATO operations in Kosovo, for instance. Japanese expertise in [institution-building](#), gleaned from its deployments and building and training programs in Africa and Southeast Asia, would be particularly helpful, especially in the northern regions that have seen recent instability.

NATO and Japan should also begin to plan for managing the monumental task of stabilizing and rebuilding postconflict Ukraine — reconstruction planning and security planning go hand in hand, after all. They can take advantage of NATO’s expertise in security provision and Japan’s in reconstruction and capacity-building. Likewise, further effort should also be paid to deepening maritime domain awareness and information exchange on counterpiracy, illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing, human trafficking, and drug

smuggling, areas where Japan coordinates closely with Indo-Pacific allies outside of the NATO context, such as India. By uniting NATO and Japanese resources, capabilities, and networks in nontraditional security contexts, both parties can better address these common threats.

Closer military relations can also facilitate closer cooperation in economic security — trade and industrial policy tend to [follow the flag](#). The United States, Japan, and the European Union are all in the process of adopting new “support and protect” regimes in frontier technologies — such as the [CHIPS and Science Act](#) and a series of export controls focused on AI and semiconductors in the United States. These programs seek to promote domestic technological capabilities through increased investment in research and development while protecting critical supply chains from adversaries. In order to achieve this, the United States and Europe must decrease interdependence with rivals, including China and Russia, while building closer ties with like-minded countries, especially Japan, which accounts for 52% of materials and 30% of equipment in the global value chain for semiconductors. Such an agenda is daunting but is qualitatively less so among militarily aligned countries where trust and transparency are high and shared interests many.

Early signs of success can be seen in the recent U.S.-Dutch-Japanese [export control agreement](#) on semiconductors designed to “choke off” strategic rivals from supply networks. Yet far more must be done to militarily and economically integrate Japan. One of many new initiatives that could help do this would be NATO’s [recently announced](#) Undersea Infrastructure Coordination Cell. Japan, a [juggernaut in this area](#), should be brought into this initiative, and joint strategies should be developed to lay, repair, and protect subsea fiber optic cables and other assets [critical to data flow for economic security](#). NATO-Japanese cooperation can produce much-needed economic security benefits in an era of growing protectionism and great power rivalry.

Charting the Future Course

The rapprochement under way and its military, nontraditional, and economic security implications signal to friends and foes alike that two of the world’s most powerful alliances have a shared vision of how the world ought to be and the intention to realize it together. Doing so sends a strong message to the many neutral countries attempting to [hedge](#) between the United States and China that NATO and Japan stand together. This can simultaneously reassure allies and potential allies while dissuading rivals from aggression. This will help ensure peace and stability in a [free and open Indo-Pacific](#) and beyond.

While cooperation is increasing, the relationship will likely remain evolutionary rather than revolutionary due to article nine of Japan’s constitution, which restricts the use of force abroad. Articles five and six of NATO’s charter also define the territorial boundaries of the bloc’s collective defense, which exclude Japan. Dissent within NATO, including France’s opposition to opening the office in Tokyo, and [longstanding hesitation](#) within Japanese political circles to militarily engage outside of the U.S. alliance, may slow progress. This is both expected and reasonable — careful incremental growth should be prioritized over radical and risky change.

Still, it is clear that Chinese and Russian behavior is building a bridge of solidarity between NATO and Japan that is buttressed by mutual and wide-ranging security challenges that demand closer cooperation moving forward. While a fully institutionalized global alliance between NATO and Japan remains a distant prospect, it is closer today than ever before. Given the momentum for and shared interests in further rapprochement, the future course of engagement between NATO and Japan is both hopeful and imperative.

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