

FRS – Japan Program

The security dialogue between the EU and Japan and NATO's role

Interview with Yoko Iwama



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Question 1: In Japan's perspective, should NATO further expand its role to include China and its activities beyond the transatlantic scope?

The position of China in the international society has drastically changed during the past two decades. It replaced Japan as the world's largest economic power in 2010. At the time, expectations that China may achieve a peaceful rise was still quite high. The entire ODA (Official Development Aid) of Japan since the late 1970s had been based on the hope that a more affluent China would become a middle-class society which cares more about human rights, and which may gradually move towards democratization. We had seen several cases in Asia, such as South Korea and Indonesia, where economic growth led to democratization.

There were lot of discussions in the 1980s about the danger that the economic growth of Japan may pose to the United States and others and whether Japan would attempt to transform its economic prowess into military and political dominance. Such an evolution never arrived. There were several who predicted Japan becoming a nuclear weapons power, but that has also not happened. If you follow strict realist IR theory, it would have been natural to expect Japan to do so. But instead, Japan followed its pacifist instinct even after getting richer, and kept its allegiance to the preexisting institutions. The liberal international order and the US-Japan security regime served Japan very well. So, Japan's case (alongside Germany's) was a typical case where liberal and constructivist IR theory proved more appropriate in explaining its behavior.

Unfortunately, China seems to have taken a different path. It has proven to be the typical case of “offensive realism” come true. Not only is China working to ensure its survival in this uncertain world, but it also seems to be working towards maximization of its power. How much of this is due to Xi Jinping’s personal philosophy, and how much to China’s civilizational understanding of the world and its place in it is hard to say at this stage. But it is a fact that China in recent years has acted increasingly assertively.

With the possibility that it will soon become the number one economy in the world and outspend the United States on military capabilities, it is only natural that NATO should pay more attention to China. It is posing not only military but also political and ideological challenges of a sort that we have not seen since the end of the Cold War. There are at least two areas where NATO needs to pay particular attention to with respect to China. One is nuclear weapons and missiles control, the other is new domains including space, cyber and AI.

The United States is still by far the biggest military spender in the world, but China is steadily catching up, and by some forecasts is expected to reach the same level later in the decade. China has also repeatedly expressed its wish to become the dominant power in the world. In the past decade, it has steadily built up its naval power, and, more recently, its missile strike capabilities. The military power balance in the Western Pacific is, as a result, in favor of China *vis-à-vis* the United States and its allies. This is partly the result of the INF Treaty, which was crucial in the European transition to the end of the Cold War. Although this served to mitigate the tension between Russia and the West for a long time, China,

because it was not bound by this treaty, could freely build up its medium-range missile forces in recent years, and this has led to a “missile gap” in the Western Pacific. The result is that all the Japanese and American bases in Japan are vulnerable to potential Chinese missile attacks. There is an urgent need to close this gap. I have argued elsewhere about the urgent need for Japan to close this gap and restore the balance¹.

But China’s military power has grown also from the global point of view. There has been a series of revelations about Chinese capabilities in recent months, which is forcing specialists to reassess China’s intentions. First, there was the revelation that China was probably building a new ICBM silo site in Hanggin Banner, Ordos City, Inner Mongolia². China also conducted two hypersonic weapons tests in July and August. The July 27th test is reported to have launched a hypersonic glide vehicle that travelled around the earth³. General Mark A. Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, testifying during a House Armed Services Committee hearing, described the impact of this revelation saying “*I don’t know if it’s quite a Sputnik moment, but I think it’s very close to that*”⁴. As if these were not enough, the annual China military capability report released by the Pentagon in November highlighted the much faster than expected rate of Chinese nuclear weapons build up. The report predicted that the PLA Rocket Force was likely to increase its stockpile to at least 1,000 nuclear warheads by 2030⁵.

China now has the largest navy in the world in sheer numbers and the third largest air force. In August, Admiral Charles Richard, Commander of the U.S. Strategic Command, described the situation in these words: “*We are witnessing a strategic breakout by China. The explosive growth*

and modernization of its nuclear and conventional forces can only be what I describe as breathtaking. And frankly, that word breathtaking may not be enough"⁶. China specialist Taylor Fravel described the likely increase in the number of Chinese nuclear warheads as "*the most significant change in China's nuclear weapons programme since testing its first atomic device*"⁷. All this seems to suggest the possibility that China is abandoning its minimum deterrence policy and moving on to challenge the United States. So there is an urgent need to engage China in strategic talks on at least two levels: medium range missiles and strategic missiles. The arms control regime between the Soviet Union and the United States has been partly inherited by Moscow and Washington. One part of it was the INF treaty, which was in force until August 2019, and the other is the New START treaty, which earlier this year was extended until February 2026. China needs to become part of the arms control regime on these two levels. The world is no longer bipolar. China has definitely become one of the poles and we need to acknowledge this fact in the arms control regimes.

It is necessary that NATO clearly recognizes these facts and starts expressing its position on these issues. The nuclear balance is global, the INF treaty included the Asian region as well, for which Japan participated very actively⁸. Now we need to widen the scope of strategic talks, and although the frontline is in Asia, missiles can fly in all directions and it is in NATO's interest to closely associate itself with the management of these problems. The Biden-Xi summit on 16 November 2021 seems to have opened a small window of opportunity for such talks. As close American allies, NATO and Japan need to deepen cooperation in this field and work together for the sake of global strategic

stability. Whether this should be done on the level of U.S.-China bilateral talks, U.S.-China-Russia trilateral talks, or on a different level also needs to be discussed amongst the allies.

The other perspective is the new domains opening up with technological advances. When internet arrived in our world, the way it enabled citizens to access and process information was thought to strengthen democratic movements *vis-à-vis* authoritarian regimes. It has turned out otherwise. Many authoritarian regimes are using the power of information technology to strengthen control of its citizens. They are also using various communication methods like SNS for the purpose of disinformation. Looking at the growing tension at the Polish-Belarusian border in late November, it is obvious that even migrants can be turned into weapons to destabilize the situation. Disinformation campaigns have often accompanied such moves. The next crisis will most likely combine these features, where Russia and China are most active. NATO needs to engage with its Indo-Pacific partners to consult over these issues in order to better prepare our societies against such threats.

China and Russia have both conducted anti-satellite weapons tests recently. The speed with which space is being weaponized is worrisome. It may cause danger for commercial and civilian uses of space, and this is another area where talks with China and Russia will be useful. We are also at the threshold of military use of AI and lethal autonomous weapons. Even if we cannot reach some sort of regulations in these areas, where boundaries in the traditional sense are non-existent, we can still try to come up with some sort of code of conduct as a reference point for the participants. Such codes of conduct are non-binding by nature, but they are not

meaningless since they set standards and become point of reference for governments and civil societies.

The global security situation is increasingly intertwined, and NATO and Japan will definitely benefit from concrete consultations on these issues.

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Question 2: What are the potential limitations to practical cooperation between Japan and NATO?

The geopolitical conditions are obviously different. NATO is more directly exposed to the Russian threat, the Ukraine situation is a constant source of instability. NATO has also been more concentrated on the western side of the Eurasian continent, whereas we are operating in a more maritime environment. Only several of the NATO member countries have relatively large naval forces. Japan has extended naval cooperation with the United Kingdom and France in Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy. Germany has joined in 2021, sending Frigate Bayern to Asia. But the German contribution remains relatively limited.

The manner in which AUKUS was launched was rather unfortunate⁹. But democratic allies cannot afford to remain divided. We must intensify our dialogue and deepen the understanding of the working of the several institutions that operate in the region.

Question 3: What could be the content of the Japan-EU security dialogue compared to the Japan-Nato security dialogue, and are these two dialogues complementary? If yes, in what manner?

As things now stand, the European Union concentrates more on the civilian side of security and there are a lot of potential here for dialogue between the EU and Japan. There are various problems we could approach together in order to strengthen the rule of law in the developing countries of the Indo-Pacific region. We already cooperate in counter-piracy operations and that can be expanded into other rule of law operations in the region. Rule of law capacity-building is another aspect where we can cooperate. My institution, GRIPS, provides capacity-building to coast guards of the Indo-Pacific region in the framework of the Maritime Safety and Security Policy Program (MSP). This course is also open to countries in other regions, and European countries are quite welcome to participate¹⁰.

The Japan-EU and Japan-NATO dialogues can be complementary in as much as NATO and the EU are complementary. This year, the EU is working towards developing its Strategic Compass. That this process is advancing alongside NATO's working out its new Strategic Concept will probably help the participating countries to think about how best these two organizations can complement each other and how autonomous the EU should be in security and defense matters. It will also need to work out the proper place of the United Kingdom after Brexit with regard to the European security and defense policy.

But since our security is more closely connected than ever before, we need to increase dialogue in order to understand the problems from the other sides'

perspectives. In some problem fields, like cyber, the environment, and space, the traditional understanding of defense based on territorial sovereignty is no longer valid, and together we need to find out rules and norms to apply to these new territories.

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¹ See Iwama Yoko and Murano Masashi, “Thinking about Deterrence for Japan and Stability in Asia”, PHP Institute, October 18, 2021 (originally published in *Japanese in Voice*).

² Rod Lee, “PLA likely begins construction of an intercontinental ballistic missile site near Haggin Banner”, Air University, China Aerospace Studies Institute, August 12, 2021.

³ Demetri Sevastopulo, “China conducted two hypersonic weapons tests this summer”, *Financial Times*, October 21, 2021.

⁴ Sara Sorcher, Karoun Demirjian, “Top U.S. general calls China’s hypersonic weapon test very close to a ‘Sputnik moment’”, *The Washington Post*, October 27, 2021.

⁵ *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2021: A Report to Congress Pursuant to the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2000*, Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2020.

⁶ David Vergun, “China, Russia Pose Strategic Challenges for U.S., Allies, Admiral Says”, U.S. Department of Defense, August 12, 2021.

⁷ Demetri Sevastopulo, “China’s nuclear build-up: ‘one of the largest shifts in geostrategic power ever’”, *Financial Times*, November 15, 2021.

⁸ It was Prime Minister Nakasone who, starting in 1982, insisted that SS-20s should not be moved from the European to the Asian theaters, and that the balance needed to be global, including Soviet forces in Siberia and the Far East.

⁹ For an analysis of the Japanese response to AUKUS, see TSURUOKA Michito, “Japan’s Ambivalent AUKUS Response: Tokyo has been generally welcoming, but not without a feeling of unease”, *The Diplomat*, November 16, 2021.

¹⁰ For further details, see https://www.grips.ac.jp/en/education/inter_programs/maritime/