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Japan-NATO Alignment

Fostering Cooperation and Strategic Synergies

Stephen Nagy

Japan's relationship with NATO continues to evolve as part of a trajectory that connects synergies and shared concerns about how authoritarian states, specifically China and Russia, are aligning to weaken the international rules-based order, an order that has been beneficial to both Japan and all NATO members.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine, on 24 February 2022, has demonstrated that a might-is-right, Machiavellian approach to foreign affairs is still seen as a legitimate way to engage in international relations by authoritarian states. The downstream effects of the invasion have included higher energy prices and a disruption in supply chains, which has contributed to global inflation, food insecurity problems as well as increased instability in the Global South.

Most recently, Hamas' brutal terrorist attack on Israel, on 7 October 2023, and the subsequent defensive, yet sustained attack on Gaza to root out Hamas have created more instability and disruption with the deaths of tens of thousands of Palestinians. This instability includes the Houthi missile attacks on ships transiting the Red Sea from the Mediterranean Sea to the Indian Ocean.

These attacks have prompted shipping companies to bypass the Red Sea by using the Cape of Good Hope and the Straits of Magellan, increasing shipping costs by 175 to 200 per cent according to Marco Forgiione, Director General at the Institute of Export & International Trade.¹ There is also growing concern that a wider conflict in the Middle East could become a reality. This would further increase energy costs through the destabilisation of energy transportation. This would engender an economic slowdown related to energy and associated food insecurity issues expanding in both the developed and developing world. For Japan and NATO, these events have made it abundantly clear that states can no longer disconnect different regions of the world from the idea of preserving, protecting and investing in an international rules-based order.

Furthermore, for states that are highly dependent on sea lines of communication (SLOCs) such as Japan, Russia's invasion is a preview of the disruptions that could come to its own backyard, as is the disruption in SLOCs through the Red Sea.

Japan's Security Environment and Potential for Cooperation

Front and centre in Japan's security anxieties is China. Tokyo sees China as an important economic neighbour but also a country that continues to challenge the international rules-based order in sea lines of communication in the South China Sea (SCS), the Taiwan Strait, and the East China Sea (ESC). Collectively, these are all critical arteries that transport approximately 5.5 trillion US dollars in imports and exports each year.² They also transport critical energy resources that fuel the Japanese, Chinese and the South Korean economies, which are key engines of economic growth for the Indo-Pacific region and global community.

The highly coordinated response of Japan, the United States, the EU, Australia, New Zealand, South Korea and NATO to Russia's invasion of Ukraine has demonstrated the benefit of creating more synergy in the Japan-NATO relationship. It is this highly coordinated response that has helped Ukraine push back against Russian aggression with a plethora of tools including economic sanctions, financial instruments and the threat of NATO being mobilised to defend its members.

This coordination demonstrates how a multi-layered and multinational front is necessary to strengthen the current international rules-based

order that has brought peace and stability to the region and the world in the post Second World War era. For Japan, cooperation with NATO should include intelligence sharing, maritime and other domain awareness activities; this would build resilience in defence systems including cyber and coordinating training for contingencies that may have global repercussions, such as a forced reunification of Taiwan, a Korean peninsula incident, or a SCS incident that turns kinetic.

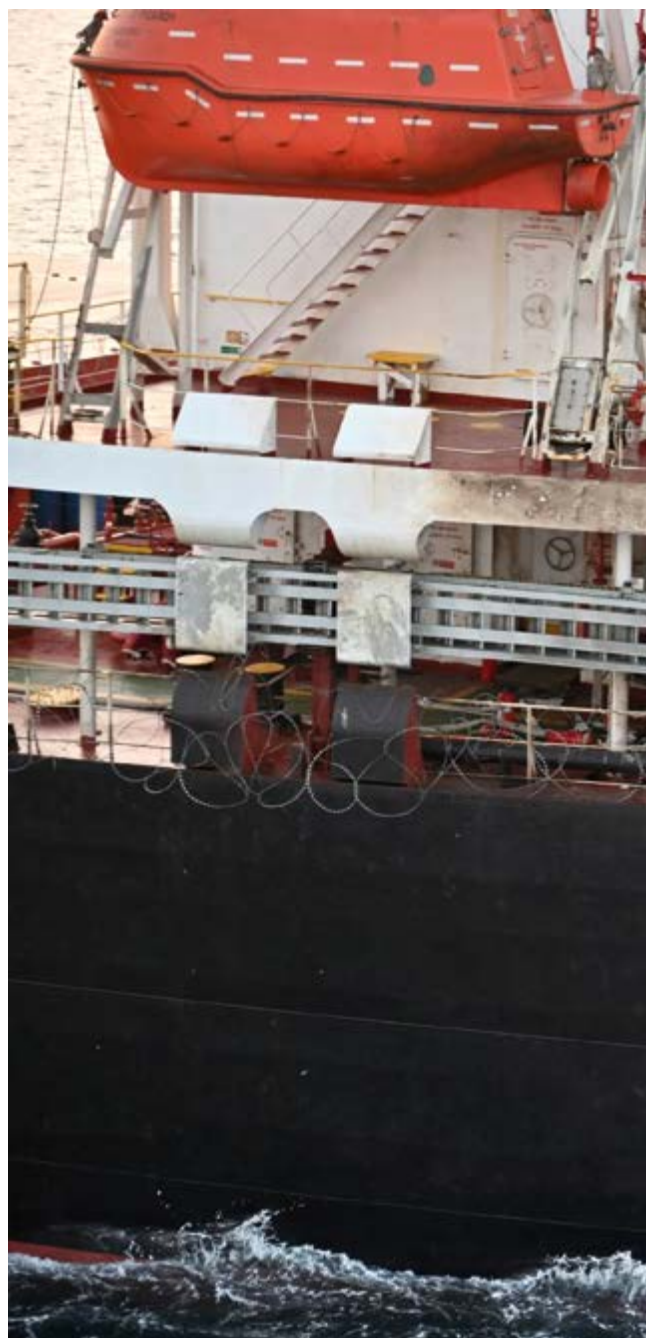
The coordinated response to Russia's illegal attack on Ukraine is in tandem with unilateral, bilateral and minilateral shifts in Japan's approach to security. At the unilateral level, in November 2022, Japan adopted a new National Security Strategy that advocated for doubling defence spending in five years and the acquisition of counter strike capabilities to deal with an increasingly severe regional security environment.³

Japanese policymakers long thought their society was immune to disinformation.

At the bilateral level, Japan has also deepened its cooperation with the US by strengthening the US-Japan alliance. Tokyo has also signed reciprocal access agreements with London and Canberra which facilitate "implementation of cooperative activities between the defence forces of the two countries and further promote bilateral security and defense cooperation".⁴

Core interests under attack: A US-owned ship is seen after being hit by a bomb-carrying drone launched by Yemen's Houthi rebels in the Red Sea. Open sea lines of communication are of central importance for Japan and NATO allies alike. [Photo: © Indian Navy via AP, picture alliance.](#)

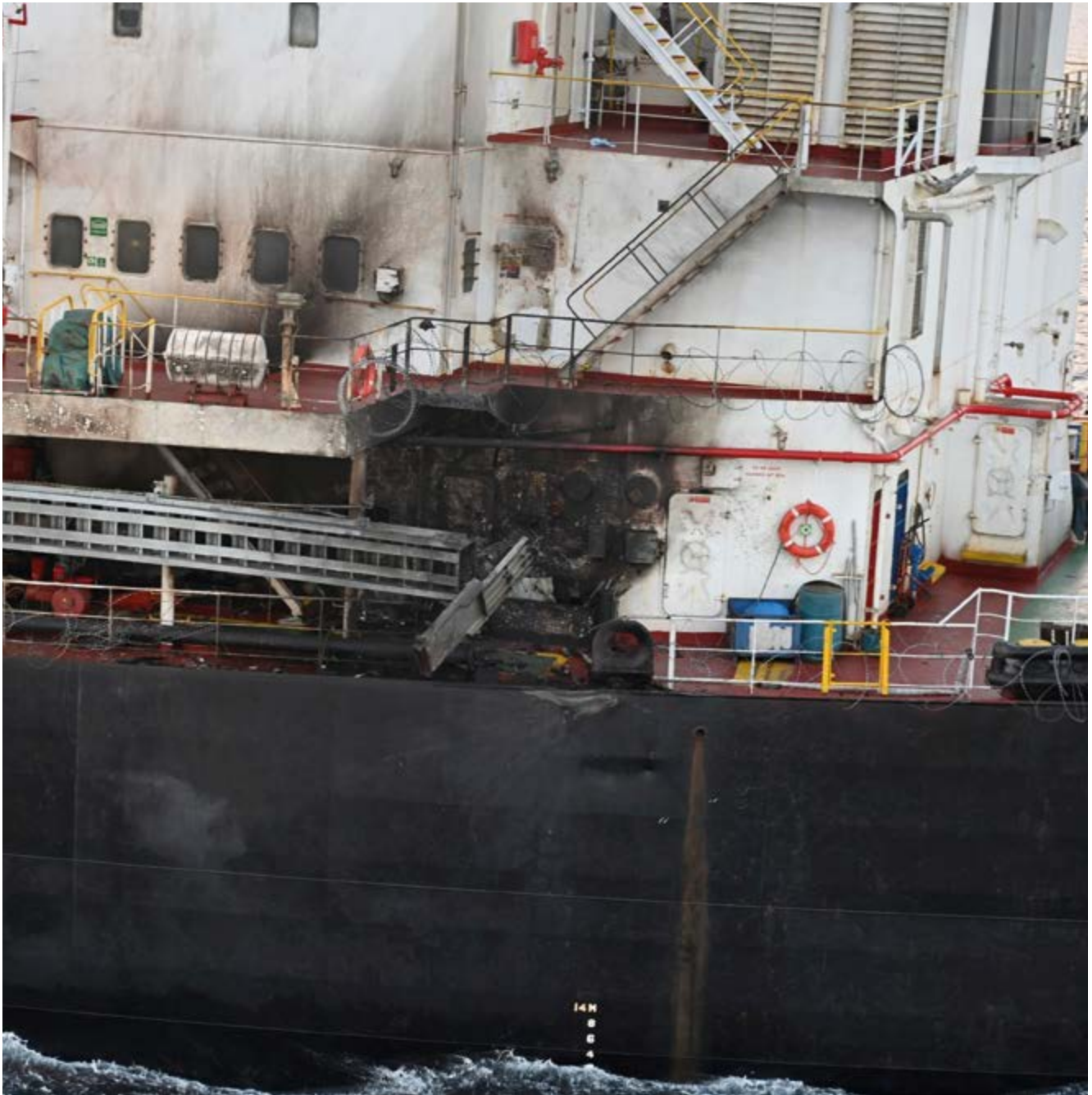
Lastly, Japan has used minilateral arrangements such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, trilateral cooperation between Seoul-Tokyo-Washington under the Camp David Principles framework⁵ and cooperation between the US, Japan, Australia and the Philippines to enhance its security through defence-oriented cooperation.⁶



Cybersecurity and Disinformation

Cybersecurity and identification of disinformation are a priority of Japan's cooperation with NATO. This is because of the importance of these two areas and NATO's experience with Russia in both. Each are seen as borderless,

non-traditional security challenges that affect everyone, and as areas of active authoritarian activity with no geographic focal point. For example, disinformation deployed by China vis-à-vis Taiwan and/or Hong Kong not only targets those who can read Chinese in these two locations, but also ethnic Chinese globally to shape



the views of ethnic Chinese living in countries or regions such as Canada, Japan, the EU etc. for the purpose of influencing local democratic choices and processes.

Similarly, Russia's use of disinformation in Europe and in the 2016 US elections has ramifications for Japan and NATO countries that require cooperation. Here, cooperation includes identification, tracking, analysis of origins and developing defensive tools to protect open societies from the harmful effects of disinformation disseminated by state and non-state actors.

In the case of China and Russia, we also witnessed how both states disseminated disinformation about COVID-19 during the pandemic both domestically and internationally with regard to the origins of the virus, the efficacy of vaccines, and various governments' response to the pandemic; here the aim was to enhance support for policies at home and create political and social divisions in Western countries.

Japanese policymakers used to think that their society was immune to disinformation and, less so, cybersecurity threats. In her research on disinformation, Kyoko Kuwahara of the Japan Institute of International Affairs (JIIA) has highlighted that this has started to change with growing awareness of Chinese activities in Okinawa, which use disinformation to fuel a Ryukyu independence movement as part of a longer-term strategy to eject US troops from Japan.⁷ This disinformation campaign in Okinawa symbolises the nefarious nature of disinformation. By deploying disinformation that supports separation from Japan and the establishment of a separate country of the Ryukyu, Beijing hopes to dismantle the presence of US bases on Okinawa that form the first line of defence on the first island chain.

There is also growing awareness that disinformation campaigns deployed in Taiwan, the US and other places can create unfavorable outcomes for Japan such as the election of a US President that may not be an ardent supporter of the Japan-US alliance, NATO or the South Korea-Japan-US cooperation.

Japan continues to support its traditional interpretation of the One-China Policy, a policy that recognises Beijing as the capital of a unified China with Taiwan as a province of the People's Republic of China. At the same time, it also recognises that the status quo in which Taiwan continues to be on a good footing with Japan is critical to its security interest. This delicate balance is related to Taiwan's political and cultural affiliation with Japan as fellow democracies and to a shared history regarding the Taiwanese people's most favourable impression of the Japanese colonial period, but also the reality that Taiwan's geographic location lies on critical SLOCs that ferry existential imports, exports and energy resources to Japan. As a result of Taiwan's importance in SLOCs, Japan is worried that disinformation targeting Taiwan by Mainland China and its interests could negatively impact Japan-Taiwan relations. Tokyo increasingly recognises that combating disinformation and cybersecurity challenges emanating from revisionist states including China, Russia, North Korea and Iran will require coordination and cooperation with NATO and other like-minded countries including Australia, South Korea and New Zealand.

The Houthi attacks on ships in the Red Sea have negative downstream effects on NATO and Japan.

Sea Lines of Communication

Another area of cooperation is SLOCs. The recent Houthi attacks on ships transiting the Red Sea and its associated negative impact on SLOCs have numerous negative downstream effects that impact on NATO and Japan.

First, the use of sea routes that bypass the Red Sea increases the cost and time of transporting energy. With its paucity of energy resources and

dependence on open and rules-based sea lines of communication, Japan, but also related economies such as South Korea, China and South-east Asia will have to bear the increased cost of disruptions in SLOCs that transit the Red Sea. This will aggravate the existing structural slowdown in the Chinese economy with downstream effects on economies that rely on the Chinese economy for their sustainable economic growth, including Australia, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and Southeast Asian states, to name a few.

Second, disruptions in SLOCs may impact economies and the provision of public goods, including security to countries in the Indo-Pacific. Japan and NATO both have a deep-seated interest in ensuring the integrity of sea lines of communication so they can provide security and relevant resources to the areas within the geographic scope of their mandates.

Emerging and Disruptive Technologies

A third area of cooperation that Japan is interested in exploring includes the area of emerging and disruptive technologies (EDTs), AI and quantum computing and their associated applications. Furthermore, maritime and space domain awareness as an area of technological cooperation, and the importance of logistics preparation and resilience are lessons learnt from the war in Ukraine.

In terms of EDTs, NATO has prioritised nine areas, including artificial intelligence (AI), autonomy, quantum computing, biotechnologies and human enhancement, hypersonic systems, space domain awareness, novel materials and manufacturing, energy and propulsion, and next-generation communications networks.⁸ Ukraine's innovative use of drone technology to defend itself against Russian aggression have also influenced how NATO views the importance of EDTs and developing partners that have the ability to cooperate in these spaces. Unsurprisingly, Japan sees these as key areas for prioritisation and seeks to work with NATO in order to accelerate the realisation of these EDTs with China, Russia and North Korea in mind.

The Individually Tailored Partnership Programme (ITPP) discussed at the July 2023 NATO summit in Vilnius, Lithuania, has been proposed as the key framework for core partners to jointly participate in activities with NATO, such as workshops, joint training exercises, competence building and political negotiations. As an update from the Individualized Partnership and Cooperation Programme (IPCP), it is hoped that the ITPP will be a useful vehicle to initiate meaningful and sustained cooperation with NATO.

NATO resources should be placed in the geographic region with the greatest potential for disruption.

Tokyo also sees value in attaching itself to international institutions such as NATO to enhance its international image and enabling it to inform geographically distant security partners as to what security challenges in the Indo-Pacific they should be aware of.

Obstacles to Closer Cooperation

The challenge for Tokyo as it attempts to deepen cooperation with NATO relates to divisions within NATO about where to concentrate its limited resources, the geographic limits of NATO's mandate, Japan's legal and resource constraints when engaging in security cooperation and the limited number of programmes available to engage in concrete, sustainable and meaningful cooperation between NATO and Japan.

Japan needs to be sensitive to the views of Central and Eastern Europe, which does not want NATO resources to be redirected to the Indo-Pacific region to mitigate and push back against Chinese assertive behaviour in the South China Sea, across the Taiwan Strait and the East China Sea. This makes sense for Central and Eastern European countries. NATO resources should

be placed in the geographic region that has the greatest potential for disruption; that is, the border with Russia.

Despite most European states wanting NATO's resources to be concentrated in Europe to defend against an aggressive Russia, there are states such as Hungary that continue to advocate a rapid de-escalation of support by NATO for Ukraine and a compromise with Russia. These voices are a minority as most NATO members do not envisage the problem of Russia disappearing anytime soon.

For an Atlantic-centred alliance such as NATO, expanding the geographic scope of its activities to the Indo-Pacific region is problematic. Japan's priority areas such as the SCS, Taiwan Strait and ECS may be a bridge too far for NATO to extend its resources to, especially since Russia's war on Ukraine is expected to continue over the coming years. The best Japan may be able to expect is NATO pooling its resources to secure a sea line of communication in the Mediterranean and Red Sea areas to ensure that trade routes remain stable and unobstructed by terrorism or Iranian proxies such as the Houthis.



Japanese Prime Minister Kishida facing questions on his country's new National Security Strategy in parliament: While Japan has ramped up its defence efforts in recent years, there are still a number of homegrown obstacles to closer cooperation with NATO. Photo: © Masanori Genko, AP, picture alliance.

Japan has limits to the extent of its cooperation with NATO related to Article 9 of its Constitution, the disjunction between the national government and local governments, and lastly resources.

A conflict in the Taiwan Strait would be an existential threat to Japan.

Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution that makes it illegal to use military power as a legitimate foreign policy tool continues to be a major hurdle in fostering security cooperation to deal with Japan's increasingly severe security environment. By eschewing the use of military force as a foreign policy tool, this provision has hamstrung Japan's ability to cooperate and coordinate with multilateral military organisations like NATO in terms of creating the defensive cooperation needed to combat and mitigate military threats, hybrid and grey zone tactics.

As Mirna Galic, Senior Policy Analyst for China and East Asia at the U.S. Institute of Peace writes, there are other obstacles within Japan that may challenge a deeper Japan-NATO cooperation.⁹ For example, Tokyo has yet to develop a coordination mechanism between the central and local governments as to how to coordinate action in the event of an Indo-Pacific contingency, nor have the physical and human resources been distributed throughout Japan to deal with a security challenge. Coordination between the local and central government is critical for ensuring that security directives are translated into viable initiatives in parts of Japan that face security threats.

If coordination with NATO will eventually become a reality, some sort of joint command and coordination mechanism will need to be established to facilitate joint action. Resources will need to be allocated and distributed throughout Japan as well. This could include ammunition, replacement parts, fuel, emergency equipment and radios, among others.

Steps to Take

To overcome these obstacles, Japan may establish a reciprocal access agreement (RAA) or equivalent that would enable Japanese self-defence forces to train with NATO forces in Europe. This would have the effect of enhancing interoperability and developing shared perspectives on how to deal with security challenges facing NATO and Japan. While this would be an important step forward, it still would not overcome the geographic limitations on NATO activities.

These limitations notwithstanding, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has demonstrated that Japan needs to and must coordinate its activities, diplomacy and defence, and build experience to contribute to a rules-based order not only in its geographic backyard, but in all parts of the world.

At the same time, Japan needs to continue to articulate to NATO the serious concerns it has in the Indo-Pacific region. On the top of this list is a conflict or friction across the Taiwan Strait. Japanese policymakers are keenly aware that this would disrupt SLOCs and technology supply chains and would be an existential threat to Japan.

Tensions could spiral into a regional conflict involving the United States, Australia, Japan and others. This would have economic repercussions for the world's most dynamic economic region; it would disrupt supply chains that provide valuable goods to NATO countries, and would likely make the supply chain disruptions associated with Russia's invasion of Ukraine look insignificant by comparison.

Here, Japan needs to find opportunities for NATO to cooperate within the region to ensure that sea lines of communication remain arbitrated by rules and are as inclusive as possible. All states in this region depend on stable SLOCs for trade and economic engagement.

There are many things that Japan needs to do to be a more reliable partner for NATO. These include rethinking legislation to allow for Japan to participate in security operations. Article 9



of the constitution needs to be reconsidered in light of Japan's security situation within the region. Second, on the operational side, Japan needs to think about what appropriate assets it needs to contribute to NATO-Japan cooperation and where it can locate these resources within the region so that they can be accessed immediately. Lastly, the decision-making process or preparations within Japan for more seamless cooperation with NATO and other security partners are of great importance. Key questions will include: what is the appropriate coordination mechanism between local and national governments? How do you mobilise resources in a way that enables Japan to work in a way that complements NATO members on issues within the Indo-Pacific region and beyond?

Japan-NATO cooperation is imperative to protect the rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific.

Trial balloons to iron out these challenges could include search and rescue operations, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, maritime domain awareness activities and possibly participation in Quad activities and/or the Rim of the Pacific Exercise (RIMPAC) activities within the region. This joint participation by Japan and NATO partners in Quad training activities or RIMPAC activities could build shared norms, shared practices, trust and communication between like-minded countries to defend a rules-based order.

Japan and NATO may wish to find ways to cooperate with the AUKUS members (Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States) in order to enhance their cooperation in the area of EDTs, AI and quantum computing and their associated applications. Alternatively, a separate initiative could be established to engage in joint research and development as well as application of technologies for defensive and economic purposes.

At the same time, this form of cooperation embeds Japan into a community of like-minded countries that understand the importance of pushing back against authoritarian states; such states want to revise regional orders in such a way that their neighbours defer to authoritarian wishes rather than rule-of-law.

The Japan-NATO partnership will continue to evolve to be one that provides public goods and security to regions challenged by military force. While this partnership evolves, it will be important to find ways to be as inclusive as possible so that neighbouring states see the Japan-NATO partnership as one that provides public goods to the Indo-Pacific region.

Non-traditional security cooperation in the areas of anti-piracy or combatting illegal fishing and sanctions evasion could provide platforms for building trust in such an inclusive manner. Another area of focus for Japan-NATO cooperation should be the reaction to grey zone operations and lawfare operations conducted within the Indo-Pacific. Grey zone operations include using Chinese merchant vessels to move in and out of territorial waters of the Senkaku Islands or to swarm around geographic features in the South China Sea. Lawfare operations, such as the 2021 Chinese Coast Guard law, enable the Coast Guard to use force in areas it considers Chinese territory but international law does not. Both contribute to a high probability of accidental conflict and highlight how Japan-NATO cooperation is imperative to protect the rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific.

Both grey zone and lawfare operations are likely to be the tools of transforming the Indo-Pacific region's security architecture and rules-based management for sea lines of communication in favour of China's strategic imperatives. Through their cooperation, communication and collaboration, Japan and NATO should be clear that their activities must find creative ways to mitigate these challenges, while also presenting a positive, contributing form of cooperation to the region so that the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and other stakeholders

see Japan-NATO cooperation as a stabilising partnership that does not entail choosing between China and this emerging partnership.

Lastly, Japan-NATO cooperation needs to address not only security-related challenges in the Indo-Pacific but also the dearth of public goods provision among the Global South. Here, cooperation will face many of the obstacles and limitations outlined in this article. However, finding opportunities for functional, ad-hoc cooperation between Japan and NATO in the provision of public goods to the Global South, such as securing SLOCs to protect energy and food security, could attract broader support for Japan-NATO or NATO-AP4¹⁰ cooperation.

Stephen Nagy is a Professor of Politics and International Studies at the International Christian University, Tokyo, and Visting Fellow with the Japan Institute for International Affairs (JIIA).

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