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# **Can Japan Be a Global Partner for NATO?\***

**Masashi Nishihara**

On May 4, 2006, Japanese Foreign Minister Taro Aso attended the North Atlantic Council meeting in Brussels, the first Japanese foreign minister ever to do so. At the meeting he stated, “Down the road, it is my belief that we will eventually discover how we can cooperate not only in policy coordination but also in operational areas as Japan and NATO continue to deepen their mutual understanding.”<sup>1</sup> This is a bold statement for a foreign minister of Japan, considering the strict constraints of the country’s constitution regarding its defense posture and the modalities of defense cooperation it may wish to engage in. It also raises two questions: Why is Japan seeking a closer relationship with NATO? And, what can Japan contribute to NATO? In sum, the question is whether and how Japan can be a global partner for NATO? In undertaking to answer this question an examination of how Japan established its contacts with NATO is warranted.

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<sup>1</sup> “Japan and NATO in a New Security Environment,” speech by Foreign Minister Taro Aso, at the NAC Meeting in Brussels, May 2006, available at <http://www.mofa.go.jp/announce/fm/aso/speech0605.html>.

## Japan's Contacts with NATO

### *Political Contacts*

Japan's contacts with NATO date back to the Cold War when Japanese defense ministers<sup>2</sup> visited NATO headquarters in 1979, 1981 and 1984, respectively. But, it was not until after the Cold War ended that NATO's Secretaries General Manfred Wörner, Javier Solana and Jaap de Hoop Scheffer returned the visit to Tokyo in 1991, 1997 and 2005, respectively. Since the Cold War years, however, only one Japanese defense minister has called on the NATO headquarters. That was in 1992.

Contacts between Japan and NATO have grown stronger since that time, and especially since NATO began to expand its contacts with non-NATO countries. The first contacts were mainly between the political leaders in Tokyo and Brussels and they were fairly formal, with little serious discussion. Then, between 1990 and 1999, high-level seminars, attended by scholars as well as government officials, were organized. Talks between Japanese and senior NATO officials began in 1993. Since then they have met six times, most recently in April 2006. Increasingly substantive contacts between military officers can be added to these aforementioned political contacts. In 1991 the chairman of the Joint Staff Council of Japan's Self-Defense Forces (SDF) first went to Brussels and since then three more chairmen of the Joint Staff Council have visited the NATO headquarters.

### *Links with NATO through its Members and the United States*

Through its long time political and economic relations with many of NATO's member

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<sup>2</sup> The official title of the Japanese defense minister is the Minister of State for Defense Affairs. This is because Japan has a Defense Agency rather than a Defense Ministry.

countries, Japan is actually quite closely connected to NATO. Both the NATO member countries and Japan regularly hold ministerial and sub-ministerial talks on a wide range of issues of mutual concern, from the Middle East to the problems of an ageing society. Japan also is a member of the G8. Likewise, Tokyo has developed close relations with the European Union, culminating in the Japan–EU Declaration of 1991.

Japan also is a member of NATO's extended family through its alliance with the United States. In fact, article two of the Japan-U.S. Security Treaty of 1960 and article two of the North Atlantic Treaty of 1949 are almost identical with regard to their promotion of free institutions, economic collaboration and political cooperation. These links are not surprising, given that Japan, Europe and the United States all share political values such as human rights, freedom and free market economics. In addition, Japan is acutely aware of its responsibility for contributing to social and political stability in other parts of the world and has joined multinational groups in Europe to achieve this end. In 1992, Japan was accepted as a partner for cooperation by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and it has sent election-monitoring teams to Eastern European countries. In 1996, Japan was invited to become an observer at the Council of Europe and it is also an observer at NATO's Parliamentary Assembly.

Although security connections between Japan and NATO are not as close as their political connections, the SDF has had contacts with its counterparts in some of the other NATO member states. Countries like Canada and the United Kingdom regularly send their training ships to Japan and vice versa. Japanese forces also participate in the Pacific naval exercise conducted by the U.S. Navy.

Overt the last few years, Japanese troops have worked side by side with the troops of NATO member countries in various peace-support operations. For example,

since November 2001, Japanese naval vessels have been operating in the Indian Ocean and the Arabian Sea to provide fuel and water for the ships of friendly states fighting against Taliban terrorists in Afghanistan. As of early 2006, ships from eleven countries are engaged in Operation Enduring Freedom, of which eight are NATO members.<sup>3</sup>

Between January 200 and July 2006 Japanese ground troops were stationed in Southern Iraq for humanitarian and reconstruction missions, in a region controlled by British forces and for the first fourteen months, flanked by Dutch forces. Japanese ground troops, along with Polish and Slovak troops have also been part of a peacekeeping mission under the United Nations Disengagement Observation Force (UNDOF) on the Golan Heights on the Syrian–Israeli border. Japan joined UNDOF in 1996. In addition, Japan has sent observers to numerous Proliferation Security Initiatives (PSI) exercises, organized by NATO member countries.

## How Japan's Interests in NATO Have Changed

### *An Expanding Outlook*

These contacts, though still limited, are becoming more significant from Tokyo's point of view. For many years after World War II, Japan was reluctant to approach NATO and, for that matter, to discuss security issues with Western leaders other than those of the United States. Being sensitive to international fears that Japan might revive its militaristic past once it acquired sufficient economic power, it moved carefully. Thus, after 1975, when members of the Group of Seven, including Japan, began to meet annually, Japanese leaders were reluctant to discuss security.

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<sup>3</sup> Those NATO countries included Canada, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, the United Kingdom and the United States.

After the mid-1980s, however, this attitude slowly began to change. As Western Europe and Japan became more economically interdependent through trade and investments, they also cooperated more often on political matters.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, Japan began to sense a need to play a larger political and security role commensurate with its economic power, and the United States encouraged, often pressured, Tokyo into assuming more responsibility as its ally. The Gulf War of 1990 to 1991 became a watershed for Japan. Japan sent no troops and was not able to participate in the international peace support operation because its constitution is interpreted as meaning that the only legitimate mission for Japanese forces is the defense of its own country. Therefore, to compensate, Japan donated as much as 13 billion U.S. dollars to U.S.-led Operation Desert Storm, but received little recognition for its contribution. This prompted Japan to promulgate its International Peace Cooperation Law in 1992, to provide the basis for sending its troops overseas to take part in peacekeeping operations (PKO). In this way, sharing responsibilities with other like-minded countries has set a new tone for its relations with NATO.

### *Ambivalence towards NATO*

During the Cold War, security specialists and relevant government officials in Japan had a high regard for NATO as a powerful alliance whose members were experienced in diplomacy and had a military strategy that stood firm in the face of the military threat posed by the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact. Indeed, NATO's maintenance of a balance of power along the East-West German border, its nuclear deterrence capabilities and the attraction of freedom in the West, helped turn back the Communists. NATO's

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<sup>4</sup> Yukio Satoh, "Japan and NATO: Agenda for Political Dialogue," *NATO Review* 40, June 1992, pp. 18-22.

leadership was also admired for holding together a large and diverse membership, despite numerous internal differences.

At the same time, during the Cold War, Japan considered Western Europe as a strategic competitor. Situated at each end of the Eurasian continent, Western Europe and Japan, in a sense, competed with each other for U.S. protection. That is, if NATO united solidly against the Soviet bloc, Moscow might decide to shift its weapons to its Far East region, where they would pose a threat to Japan's security. Accordingly, in 1983, when the Group of Seven summit was held at Williamsburg, Virginia, in the United States, Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone opposed the European position to let the Soviets deploy their SS-20 missiles east of the Ural Mountains, stating that "the security of our countries is indivisible and must be approached on a global basis."<sup>5</sup>

Similarly, when Western Europe moved toward rapprochement with Russia in the early post-Cold War period, Japan became concerned, as several sources of regional tension remained in East Asia, such as strained relations between China and Taiwan and North Korea's suspected nuclear development. Until about the mid-1990s, Tokyo feared that with the establishment of NATO's Partnership of Peace (PfP) and better relations between Russia and NATO, Russia might shift its military personnel and arms to its Far East, thereby creating new tensions with Japan. Since the end of the Cold War, NATO has continued to handle its relations with Russia with care while at the same time expanding its membership to include Central and Eastern European countries. Moreover, as Japanese-Russian relations have improved, the Japanese-European competition for U.S. protection has waned. Today, therefore, the Japanese have come to regard NATO as a vital partner in promoting international peace support operations.

### Why Does Japan Seek a Closer Partnership with NATO?

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<sup>5</sup> Yukio Satoh, *op cit.*, p. 18.



### *Constitutional Constraints on Japan's Security Role*

Despite the restrictions of Japan's constitution, the government has sent its armed forces to participate in peacekeeping and disaster-relief missions, to Cambodia and Democratic Republic of Timor Leste in Asia, Mozambique and Zaire in Africa, and the Golan Heights, Iraq, Pakistan and the Indian Ocean / Arabian Sea area in the Middle East. Nonetheless, these missions have been severely limited, notwithstanding Japan's desire to act as a global player.

Article nine of Japan's 1947 constitution appears to state that Japan cannot maintain any armed forces.<sup>6</sup> But the government's position is that Japan has a sovereign right to defend itself, even though article nine does not specifically stipulate this. Indeed, it was in accordance with this reading that Japan created its Self-Defense Forces (SDF) in 1954. The government still, however, does not recognize Japan's "right of collective self-defense," as opposed to its "right of individual self-defense." The texts of both the original 1951 security treaty and the revised 1960 security treaty maintain that Japan has "the inherent right of individual and collective self-defense," as stipulated in article fifty-one of the United Nations Charter. But, since it established an alliance with the United States in 1952, the Japanese government has asserted that the country will not exercise the right to collective self-defense, because exercising that right would go beyond the minimum necessary level of defense capability, which it has claimed is

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<sup>6</sup> Article nine reads: "Aspiring sincerely to an international peace based on justice and order, the Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as means of settling international disputes ... In order to accomplish the aim of the preceding paragraph, land, sea, and air forces, as well as other war potential, will never be maintained. The right of belligerency of the state will not be recognized."

consistent with the spirit of the constitution.

The impact of Japan's defeat in World War II and its criticism of its own wartime militarism have been so strong that until 1991 the government insisted that the SDF should not participate in international peacekeeping operations. In that year, however, it reversed its position. The 1992 law allows the SDF to participate in United Nations peacekeeping operations, as long as their mission is restricted to humanitarian and reconstruction work. Their deployment on such missions is permitted only if there is a ceasefire, if the parties to the conflict consent to the Japanese peacekeeping role, if the mission is impartial and if the forces will withdraw if the conflict reignites.

This self-restraint still holds today and so the mission of Japan's ground forces in Iraq between January 2005 and July 2006 was limited to humanitarian and reconstruction work. Although Japanese troops regularly patrolled the streets, they did so primarily to ensure their own safety rather than that of the local people. Japan's air force still transports coalition forces between Kuwait and Baghdad, but only unarmed soldiers and not weapons and ammunition. A law passed in 2004 still prevents Japan from being associated with U.S.-led operations to restore Iraq's internal security. And, it was an antiterrorist law passed in November 2001 that allowed Japan's naval forces to dispatch ships to the Indian Ocean to provide fuel and water to the ships of friendly states. This law states that if friendly ships receiving fuel and water from Japanese ships are attacked by hostile forces, the Japanese ships can help to protect them. But, if the friendly ships are merely near Japanese ships, waiting to be supplied, Japan's ships cannot help protect them. This is because protecting friendly ships under attack is considered to be an exercise of the right of collective self-defense and, therefore, unconstitutional.

*Is Japan a "Global Partner"?*

At the NATO foreign ministers' meeting, held in Sofia, Bulgaria, in April 2006, the United States and Great Britain proposed that NATO reach beyond its traditional partnerships and establish stronger relations with those countries outside Europe that share NATO's core political values and that could contribute to its peacekeeping and peace support operations. Possible candidates included Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand. At the Sofia meeting, NATO Secretary General de Hoop Scheffer was quoted as saying, "*We will need to look as to how to strengthen our relations with other interested and potentially force-contributing countries.*"<sup>7</sup> He also said that NATO did not want to become a global alliance but instead sought "*an alliance with global partners.*"<sup>8</sup> Some scholars, however, advocate a "Global NATO."<sup>9</sup> The question for Japan is whether it can become an ally of NATO and whether it is entitled to be called a global partner.

Japan and the United States refer to themselves as "global partners." In January 1992, the two countries issued a joint declaration entitled the "Tokyo Declaration on the U.S.-Japan Global Partnership." This was probably the first time that the two countries called themselves "global partners." Since then, when Japan and the United States issue joint statements, they usually refer to their bilateral cooperation on such global issues as supporting the United Nations, preventing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, resolving the North Korean nuclear problem and promoting the economic well-being and democratic stability of developing countries. Yet, with regard to security matters, Japan has declined to exercise its right to collective self-defense, thereby narrowing the options of a fully functioning Japan-U.S. alliance. As an American

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<sup>7</sup> Patrick Goodenough, "NATO Eyes Partnerships in the East," available at <http://www.crosswalk.com/news/1393863.html>.

<sup>8</sup> See <http://www.nato.int/docu/update/2006/04-april/e0427c.html>.

<sup>9</sup> Ivo Daalder and James Goldgeier, "Global NATO," *Foreign Affairs*, September-October 2006, pp. 105-11.

specialist wrote, *“As long as Japan continues to interpret Article 9 as prohibiting collective self-defense actions, especially with the United States, it impedes Japan’s ability to participate fully in regional and global operations and missions.”*<sup>10</sup>

When NATO leaders refer to global partners, they of course mean global partners in security. NATO’s global partners are democracies willing to contribute their troops and arms to a common cause and to help prevent regional and internal conflicts and enforce peace in areas of conflict. Furthermore, NATO expects its global partners to fight together with it to bring peace and stability to the world.

According to this definition, Japan is not quite a global partner. Although Japan is a fully-fledged democracy, and its armed forces can only be deployed overseas for peacekeeping operations, their role is limited. Based on article nine of the constitution, the SDF cannot fight together with NATO’s other partners, because Japan cannot exercise its right to collective self-defense.

Japanese people and their leaders are becoming increasingly aware that Japan should play a larger political and security role in world affairs. Even though Japan lost its bid for a permanent seat on the UN Security Council in the fall of 2005, its campaign was indicative of its willingness to take on more responsibility for managing international peace and security. Indeed, Tokyo feels that it must enhance its political presence throughout the world by participating in international groups that frame the world order. It has slowly established a presence in European institutions, including NATO. But, Japan has not been able to resolve the constitutional constraints that currently impede its security policy, suggesting that it can be neither a global partner for NATO nor a new ally. Nonetheless, if Japan cannot be a “global partner,” it can still be a

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<sup>10</sup> Balbina Y. Hwang, “Japan’s New Security Outlook: Implications for the United States,” Policy Research and Analysis, Heritage Foundation, July 7, 2005, available at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/AsiaandthePacific/bg1865.cfm>.

useful partner. Accordingly, NATO should seek a partnership with Japan and not an alliance until Japan changes its interpretation of its constitution.

### *Multilateralizing Japan's Security Partnerships*

Japan has been seeking security partners, if not defense partners, beyond the Japan-U.S. alliance. Besides discussing security at ministerial level with many Asian Pacific countries, including South Korea, Vietnam, the Philippines, Singapore and China, Japan is an active member of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), to which the European Union also belongs, and its naval forces are a participants in the biannual U.S.-led Pacific Rim exercise. Japan's armed forces also participate in many other regional ground and naval exercises, including the multinational submarine rescue exercise organized by Singapore in 2000. Finally, foreign and defense ministers of Japan, the United States and Australia have begun strategic discussions, although some critics are skeptical of this three-party cooperation.<sup>11</sup>

Japan's security partners also include NATO member countries and its foreign and defense ministries conduct regular political-military and military-military talks with Canada, France, Germany and the United Kingdom. Thus, in the process of multilateralizing its security partners, Japan is seeking closer partnership with NATO.

### *Two Concerns about Pacific Rim Membership in an Expanded NATO*

NATO's efforts to involve Pacific Rim democracies as "global partners" raise two concerns for Japan. The first concern relates to the displeasure of China and Russia with Pacific Rim countries that cooperate with NATO, something that might lead to their

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<sup>11</sup> Purnendra Jain and John Bruni, "Japan, Australia, and the United States: Little NATO or Shadow Alliance," *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, no. 2, 2004 , pp. 265-85.

forming a counter alliance to NATO activities in the Pacific. Indeed, Beijing and Moscow must be apprehensive about NATO's reaching out to Eastern Europe and the Baltic countries for new members, to Afghanistan and Iraq for regional stability, to the Pacific Rim democracies for new partners and about the United States' reaching out to Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Mongolia. China, in particular, may see itself being sandwiched in by Europe and the Pacific, a feeling that may be at the root of its close cooperation with Russia and Central Asia to form the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).<sup>12</sup>

Organized in 2001, the SCO has grown quickly. In 2005 China and Russia held joint landing exercises near Qingdao facing the Yellow Sea and in September 2005 Uzbekistan demanded that the United States close its bases, promptly turning to Moscow for its security needs. NATO should, therefore, avoid forcing the Shanghai Cooperation Organization into becoming a counterweight. Second, if Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand joined NATO or established formal relations with the organization, what would happen to the bilateral alliances between the United States and the first three countries?<sup>13</sup> Japan and the United States often stress that their bilateral alliance is key to the peace and stability of the Asian Pacific region. How would the ties among Japan, Australia and the United States fit with an expanded NATO? Accordingly, if the Pacific Rim democracies form a closer partnership with NATO, they must make sure not to overlook regional security issues such as North Korea's nuclear program and the issues over the Strait of Taiwan.

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<sup>12</sup> The SCO's forerunner, the Shanghai Five, started in 1996 with China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. In 2001, it was expanded to the SCO, with Uzbekistan as a sixth member. Observer status was given to Mongolia in 2005 and to Iran, India and Pakistan in 2006.

<sup>13</sup> New Zealand withdrew from the Australia-New Zealand-United States (ANZUS) Treaty.

## What Can Japan Do for NATO?

### *Policy Coordination and Operational Cooperation*

Japan can offer NATO both policy coordination and operational cooperation. Given its current constitutional constraints, Japan can intensify its strategic dialogue and coordinate its policy with NATO without becoming a formal member. Such a relationship would be similar to that between Tokyo and Canberra, that is, although Japan and Australia are not formally allied, they do share a strategic outlook. Likewise, Japan and NATO could coordinate their policies on many security-related issues, including maintaining peace after conflict, solving transnational crime, preventing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, fighting terrorism, providing natural disaster relief, offering energy security, and dealing with environmental degradation. They even could begin to share intelligence. Foreign Minister Aso spoke of Japan's interest in "*establishing regular contact with the North Atlantic Council,*" adding that "*during the course of discussions, Japan will consider the most appropriate modality of cooperation within NATO within its constitutional framework.*"<sup>14</sup>

With regard to operational cooperation, Japan and NATO should start at a low level, perhaps in the area of education and training. For example, Japan's Self-Defense Forces and NATO officers could increase their understanding of each other's strategic thinking and together participate in seminars on defense and Peace Support Operations (PSO). As a beginning, in June 2006 Japanese officers attended a PSO seminar in Spain and observed a Cooperative Maco exercise held in Romania and one SDF officer is

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<sup>14</sup> Foreign Minister Aso, "Japan and NATO in a New Security Environment," available at <http://www.mofa.go.jp/announce/fm/aso/speech0605.html>.

attending the NATO Defense College in Rome, Italy. NATO officers also might consider attending Japanese defense colleges.

The next and a higher level of operational cooperation might be the provision of logistical support by Japan for NATO troops. Up until summer 2006, SDF and NATO member state troops worked side by side in Iraq, as well as in Northern Pakistan to help refugees from the 2005 earthquake, although they did not cooperate in logistical support. Japan and NATO, thus, could establish a mechanism for future operational cooperation, so that the SDF and NATO troops could provide logistical support to each other, with the United States as the contact country.

A third and further level of operational cooperation might be Japan's participation in NATO military exercises. In the biannual multinational naval exercise (Rim of the Pacific or RimPac exercise), held by the U.S. Navy in the Pacific theatre, Japan's Maritime Self- Defense Force is currently restricted to participating only in bilateral exercises with the United States. So that it might eventually participate with the United States in a NATO multinational naval exercise, Japan and NATO should study more closely the interoperability between their respective weapons systems.

## A Scenario for the Future

Prime Minister Shinzō Abe has made clear his interest in reviewing article nine of the constitution and reinterpreting Japan's "right of individual self-defense." Revision of the constitution requires the support of a two-thirds majority in both houses of the National Diet and the subsequent support of a simple majority in a national referendum. This will take time so the government should move quickly to reinterpret article nine so as to allow Japan to exercise its inherent right to collective self-defense.



This in turn will expand Japan's role in its alliance with the United States and enhance its level of cooperation with NATO. In the near future, then, Japan will not become a global partner for NATO, but will remain a useful and active partner. Then later, if Japan is able to establish a constitutional framework that is compatible with article five of the North Atlantic Treaty, it will have more policy options regarding its participation in a global NATO.