

KAS Seminar: NATO in a World of Strategic Uncertainty: Roles, Partners, and Challenges

(Summary)

Date: June 17th, 2025

Opening Remarks

Mr. Paul LINNARZ, Country Representative Japan/Director of Economic Programme Asia, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS) Japan, welcomed the participants to the seminar and stated that the world is in difficult waters, citing the many geopolitical crises taking place. NATO member countries are affected by these developments directly and indirectly in various fields. Against this challenging backdrop, this year's NATO Summit will be held from June 24 in the Netherlands. This will be a short but important summit, where NATO members must reaffirm unity, especially regarding support for Ukraine, and consider the planning process for the 3.5%+1.5% defense spending formula.

Mr. Linnarz concluded his speech by stating that the seminar today will shed light on what NATO is and should be aiming for and how NATO affects the Asia-Pacific region, and expressed the hope that it will be a fruitful and interesting discussion.

Introduction by moderator

Prof. Yuichi HOSOYA, Faculty of Law, Keio University, acting as moderator, began by noting that the NATO Summit will be significant in many ways amid the growing geopolitical crises and concerns regarding the Trump administration, with some experts saying we are seeing the end of NATO as we know it. He added that NATO can still be regarded as the most successful alliance in world history, despite its weaknesses.

He then invited the panelists to give their presentations.

Remarks on the changing role of NATO from the Cold War era to the present

Prof. Michito TSURUOKA, Faculty of Policy Management, Keio University, gave the first presentation, stating that NATO is in an era of great power competition, and the deterrence and defense posture of NATO is needed more and more in order to counter Russia. NATO is committed to defending every inch of NATO territory, which is a concept shared by Japan. NATO also needs to consider the issue of China, which is a long-standing discussion for NATO.

NATO also needs to consider the current Trump situation. Following the Trump-Zelensky fiasco in March, the situation in Europe has been improving, as Europe is now committed to increasing defense budgets. Assuming NATO announces the 5% GDP defense budget formula—3.5% core defense and 1.5% security-related matters—there will be serious implications for Japan. There are also challenges in gathering not only finance, but human resources and materials, and Japan and NATO are focusing on closing these gaps. The 3.5% core defense budget proposal by NATO is based on the need to increase capabilities, and to make weapon supply chains more sustainable and resilient. These are issues that the U.S. is also facing, which is why the U.S. is more interested in working closely with Japan on shipbuilding and other matters.

The emerging core challenge for Japan and NATO is deterring and preventing simultaneous military contingencies in Europe and the Pacific region. As the U.S. cannot support two regions at once, it is in Japan's interest to help deter Russia from invading NATO countries in Europe, and it is in Europe's interest to prevent China from invading Taiwan. Both deterrence and practical operations will be central topics for NATO cooperation in the coming years.

Remarks on NATO's extended deterrence

Prof. Yoko IWAMA, National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies (GRIPS), stated that NATO has always focused on defense and deterrence, but the details of deterrence are not so simple. During the Cold War era, it relied on nuclear weapon capabilities, but today NATO needs to rethink what constitutes deterrence. The world is in a different age, with the situation in Ukraine and developments in air raid and air defense capabilities. This has been leading to a rethinking of defense and deterrence in NATO, such as the integrated air and missile defense (IAMD) policy. The meaning behind this policy and what capabilities need to be strengthened need to be considered. The post-Cold War mindset of mutual vulnerability is no longer valid; people prefer being protected, so there is increasing support for protecting cities. However, recent warfare shows that air and missile defense can never be perfect. Therefore, nuclear deterrence remains the ultimate backbone of both NATO and the Japan-U.S. alliance.

As political situations change, people are asking if the American extended nuclear deterrence is still credible. It is likely this discussion will go on. The question becomes what kind of nuclear capabilities are needed and who is best suited to possess them. In the case of East Asia, many of the military scenarios in the region would play out in maritime theatres. The discussion in Japan has evolved into a repeated call for the development of tactical maritime nuclear capabilities, which have never existed in the European theatre. The European and Asian discussions should be converging, particularly on extending deterrence capabilities within Europe and whether the current American deterrence posture is credible for the 21st century.

Another important discussion topic is nuclear sharing, which is desired by Japan for maritime systems. This will include many technical challenges, but it should be part of the discussion when considering what kind of capabilities are needed both in European and Asian theatres.

Remarks on Japan-Germany or Japan-NATO defense industry cooperation

Col. (GS) Ralf Oliver PERSICKE, Defense Attaché, German Embassy in Japan, stated that, with the understanding that security in Europe is linked to the security of Japan and the Indo-Pacific, Germany's security policy commitment in the region is not a one-off symbol, but has become an expression of strategic continuity.

Regarding security policy, Japan and Germany have further strengthened the cooperation between armed forces through new agreements like ACSA, which elevates defense cooperation to a new level, and through hosting a variety of joint exercises and exchange activities between their respective armed forces, as well as with other countries in the Indo-Pacific region. All these activities are time and budget-consuming. To be able to continue them in the near future, Germany and Japan have to become more efficient in realizing armament projects and saving money through closer cooperation.

An important response to the challenges facing the region is to extend natural cooperation and economic interdependence, which has developed over decades, especially to armaments. An armaments cooperation is a central building block when it comes to maintaining the ability to act in security policy as a nation state and within the alliance. It is not an accessory, but rather part of the strategic response to threats to national security and a peaceful world order. It is important to

find ways to remain at the forefront of key technologies relevant to armaments and to strengthen national security architectures through strong international partnerships.

The armaments industry is an integral component of national defense capabilities and collective national security. It is therefore all the more important that industries think about armament together, including through cooperation and advancing flagship projects that clearly demonstrate the solidarity of the states in security policy, even to the outside world.

Remarks on NATO and Japan facing China's challenge

Dr. Scott HAROLD, Senior Political Scientist, RAND, and Professor of Policy Analysis, RAND School of Public Policy, stated that the U.S. is focusing first and foremost on meeting the challenge of China. Indo-Pacific nations, most notably Japan, have recognized that the fear exists that Europe's today could be Asia's tomorrow. European nations have long been increasing their attention to this region, and are focusing on developing new coalitions among mid-sized powers.

The China issue presents six challenges that European NATO states, together with Japan, need to address. The first and most urgent challenge is the possibility that the Chinese Communist Party might conclude that it can succeed in coercing Taiwan through the use of force. The second is that China might provoke a conflict in the South China Sea, either with a claimant state or by a direct attack on the U.S. or another nation trying to operate in the South China Sea militarily. The third challenge is China's no limits partnership with Russia, enabling Russia's war of illegal aggression against Ukraine and other parts of Europe. Fourth, Beijing continues to shield, enable, and support North Korea as the largest trading partner and military ally. Fifth, Chinese forces have in recent years engaged in aggression against India along their common border, and there is a possibility of major conflict between China and India. Sixth, it is possible that China might achieve some form of insuperable military, economic, or other technological advantage that would be akin to the nuclear revolution.

There are many ways that Europe and Japan can respond to each of these challenges. On the first challenge, Europe and Japan can expand trade and investment agreements with Taiwan, giving Taiwan additional economic resilience against China. On the second major challenge, European NATO states and Japan can contribute many things to prevent Chinese provocation, such as regularly reiterating that the 2016 international tribunal on the law of the sea ruling is in fact binding international law, and that other countries will not treat China's claims that the nine-dash line represents sovereign blue territory as something they will respect.

On the issue of China's support to Russia, it is important that European states and Japan regularly condemn this support, and note Russia's clear war crimes. It is important for Europe and Japan to regularly message the U.S. to help Washington continue to gain insight into how Europeans and Japanese think about this. These measures can also be applied to the fourth challenge of China's support for North Korea, in particular emphasizing that the U.S. needs to remain on the Korean peninsula. On the potential conflict between India and China, it is important for Japan and Europe to continue bilateral and minilateral engagement with India to support its military and economic modernization. On the sixth challenge, China is racing towards artificial general intelligence as a priority, and NATO states and Japan can do a variety of things to counter this, including coordinating on semiconductor exports to China and other elements of supply chains.

European NATO members and Japan share common values, a common threat perception, and a commitment to a shared rules-based international order, and they represent an enormous asset for the United States. For that reason, the U.S. should prioritize cooperation with these value-added partners.

Panel Discussion

Prof. Hosoya then moved to the panel discussion. He began by noting that the two biggest challenges to NATO are the potential for a Russian invasion of NATO member states including using grey-zone operations, and the possibility of the U.S. leaving NATO. He then asked the panelists to share their opinions on these two possibilities.

Dr. Harold responded first. On the possibility of a Russian invasion of a NATO state, Russia's economy has been damaged by the prolonged aggression against Ukraine and the resulting economic sanctions by other countries around the world. In that context, Russia may not be well-positioned to attempt an invasion of another country.

He also asked Prof. Iwama, looking at the challenges in technology and defense strategy, whether she considers military operations such as Operation Spider Web by Ukraine as invalidating, undercutting, or impairing the wisdom of trying to build IAMD systems to stop missiles coming in when the threat is already there.

Prof. Iwama first responded to the possibility of a Russian invasion and grey zone operations, stating that this is already happening every day through attacks on infrastructure and infiltration of Russian agents, reminiscent of the Cold War era. Operation Spider Web was impressive, and demonstrates that grey zone operations can already be taking place. NATO will need to consider such activities and consider its priorities.

Col. Persicke commented on the potential for a Russian invasion of a NATO country that nobody expected the attack on Ukraine, and as such, one should never be sure that Russia would not attack a NATO country. Once the war with Ukraine has ended, Russia will have the capacity to refill its arsenals and decide to attack another smaller bordering nation. Regarding the U.S. leaving NATO, President Trump has stated such views, but currently the U.S. has much more of an interest in European countries such as Germany because they are increasing their defense budgets. It is also important to note that NATO is important for the U.S. because the U.S. cannot respond to every geopolitical situation.

Prof. Tsuruoka noted that many in the U.S. consider China as the larger threat, but even if the U.S. wants to focus on China, it will still be affected by what takes place in other regions. In terms of capabilities, Europe should be able to defend itself without relying on the U.S. This is why the U.S. is encouraging Europe to spend more on defense to maintain the alliance and secure the protection of the U.S. But the reality is that as the U.S. strategic priority shifts, there will be a disengagement from Europe. It is important for NATO to consider what options there are for replacing the U.S. in a stable manner.

Prof. Iwama added to this, stating that the feeling in Asia is that to see the U.S. leaving Europe and focusing on the Indo-Pacific does not strengthen belief in the U.S. as a guarantor of peace, but rather weakens the belief in the U.S. as a global power.

Q&A Session

The floor was then opened to questions from the participants.

The first question asked the panelists to give their views on the inseparability of the security environment of the Indo-Pacific and the Euro-Atlantic regions.

Another question asked how Japan can contribute towards stabilizing European security.

Col. Persicke responded to the first question, stating that Japan is already a partner of NATO and is working with other NATO nations. However, the NATO area of responsibility does not include the Indo-Pacific. He noted that many NATO nations that participate in exercises in the Indo-Pacific only display their flags to show their support for like-minded countries in the region.

Dr. Harold agreed with Col. Persicke, noting that the U.S. administration recognizes that China is a global challenge not only for the Indo-Pacific. It is possible that the current dimensions of the U.S. national strategic thinking will evolve under pressure from China's activities, which will lead them to recognize that China poses a threat to the Euro-Atlantic, just as it does in other regions. It is also important to note that Russia may play a role in a Taiwan Strait scenario, and therefore, trying to segment security focus is going to be difficult.

On the Japanese contributions to Europe, Prof. Tsuruoka noted four things that will contribute to European security: support for Ukraine; sanctions on Russia; equipment development cooperation; and defense industrial cooperation. The Japan-UK-Italy joint development project for the next generation of jet fighters is a great example of what Japan's cooperation with European countries could bring about. On the indivisibility between Europe and the Indo-Pacific, all countries will be affected by what takes place in different regions, and that is why they need to pay attention to situations occurring around the world.

Prof. Iwama added that treaties and alliances will not be triggered by events happening outside their jurisdiction, but at the same time, they still share the risks in areas such as supply chains and economic security. The strengthening of the defense industrial base as a total of the Western world needs to be addressed not only bilaterally, but in multilateral forums. It makes no sense not to share information among allies and partners, and not doing so will make it difficult for nations to meet the challenge.

Wrap-up

Prof. Hosoya thanked the panelists for their participation and rich contributions.