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Japan's Ishiba: Time for 'Asian NATO' to Counter China and North Korea

by Gordon G. Chang | November 2024

“The geopolitical crisis surrounding our country has risen to the point where war could break out at any moment,” Shigeru Ishiba declared in a September 25 article posted on the website of the Hudson Institute, shortly before his election as Japan’s 102nd prime minister.¹

It looks like war is coming to Asia, and Ishiba, a former defense minister, has a plan, which he proposed in his Hudson piece: the formation of “an Asian version of NATO.”

The U.S. has shunned the idea, but Ishiba is right. There is, due to the belligerence of China and North Korea, a need for more formal arrangements to provide for the common defense in East Asia.

The concept of an Asian NATO is nothing new, at least in Japan’s top political circles. The country’s leaders throughout this century believed that regional democracies had to band together. Taro Aso in 2006, before becoming prime minister two years later, proposed an “arc of freedom and prosperity.” The arc would be anchored by Japan’s “value oriented diplomacy” centered on the “universal values” of “democracy, freedom, human rights, the rule of law, and the market economy.”²

“Along that arc, we want to spread freedom,” Aso said the following year in a speech to the Diet.³

One of Aso’s successors as prime minister went even further. In 2014 at the Shangri-La Dialogue, the regional security forum in Singapore, Shinzo

Abe introduced the world to the “new Japanese.” “These ‘new Japanese,’” he explained, “are Japanese who are determined ultimately to take on the peace, order, and stability of this region as their own responsibility.”⁴

Abe’s words, the core of his keynote address, were especially remarkable. It was one thing for Japan’s leader to talk about rearming his own state, but it was quite another for him, in a high-profile public forum in another country, to assume a role protecting the region. Just a few years before, East Asians would have shuddered if anyone Japanese had spoken those words and virtually no one in Tokyo would have dared utter them. Abe’s audience in Singapore nodded approvingly, however.

At that time, Chinese aggression was paving the way for not only regional defense cooperation but also Japanese participation if not leadership. Abe, twice prime minister, often talked about a “democratic security diamond” of Australia, India, Japan, and the state of Hawaii,⁵ a grouping that in the face of China’s frightening moves would eventually solidify into the “Quad.”

Moreover, Tokyo is at the heart of two more recent security arrangements. Japan, the U.S., and the Philippines have recently formed JAROPUS, a group dedicated to integrated defense. In April, these three partners and Australia held their first joint naval and air exercise, in the South China Sea.⁶

The other arrangement is JAROKUS, which includes the Republic of Korea as well as Japan and the U.S. North Korea has called the trilateral relationship, even before it was formalized at Camp David in August of last year,⁷ “the Asian version of NATO.”⁸

Moreover, Japan may soon be cooperating with AUKUS, the security partnership formed in 2021 by Australia, the U.K., and the U.S.,⁹ and some believe Japan could one day become a full-fledged member. Japan’s integration into East Asia’s security architecture should not be surprising. The country is, after all, America’s “cornerstone” ally in Asia. Japan, says Lance Gatling of Tokyo-based Nexial Research, “already has quasi-alliance relationships with Canada, Australia, the Philippines, India, France, and the United Kingdom.”¹⁰

Moreover, the Japanese are fast getting over their post-war inhibitions on participating in military actions abroad, and the Japanese leadership is now ready to join in collective defense with neighbors and the United States. War in Eastern Europe quickly changed Japanese minds.

In his April address to a joint session of Congress, Fumio Kishida, Ishiba’s immediate predecessor, urged “indispensable” America to support Ukraine. “China’s current external stance and military actions present an unprecedented and the greatest strategic challenge, not only to the peace and security of Japan but to the peace and stability of the international community at large,” he said. “Ukraine of today may be East Asia of tomorrow.”¹¹

Everyone in Asia can see that Russia would not have attacked Ukraine if it had been a NATO member. The mood in East Asia, therefore, now favors greater cooperation. Gatling sees the possibility that alliances in the region could be upgraded creating a “hub-and-spoke system with the U.S.-Japan relationship at its core.” From there, “it will be possible to develop alliances into an Asian version of NATO.”¹²

The concept of an Asian NATO is nothing new, at least in Japan’s top political circles.

At the moment, the Biden administration is opposed to an Asian NATO. “It’s too early to talk about collective security in that context,” said Daniel Kritenbrink, assistant secretary of state for East Asia and the Pacific, in September, referring to Ishiba’s comments about formation of such a formal group. Kritenbrink instead talked about the “latticework” of American alliances.

“What we’re focused on is investing in the region’s existing formal architecture and continuing to build this network of formal and informal relationships,” the American diplomat told an audience at the Stimson Center. “And then we’ll see where that goes.”¹³

Kritenbrink, from all appearances, was attempting to placate China, which has been issuing a series of harsh comments about an Asian NATO. “The real purpose is to merge the small circle into the large circle of the Asia-Pacific version of NATO so as to maintain the hegemony led by the U.S.,” said Chinese Lt. Gen. Jing Jianfeng,¹⁴ who also said Washington was “tying the region’s countries to the U.S. war chariot.”¹⁵ In a *Global Times* editorial titled “Regional Countries Firmly Reject Japan’s Daydream of an ‘Asian NATO,’” the Communist Party called Ishiba’s proposal a “self-humiliating radical idea.”¹⁶

And what about the real NATO? Although warships from NATO states regularly patrol East Asian waters—last month, for instance, an American destroyer and a Canadian frigate transited the Taiwan Strait—so far the organization is staying out of the region. French President Emmanuel Macron in July of last year vetoed the establishment of a NATO liaison office in Japan.¹⁷

The rejection has not discouraged East Asian democracies, however. On the contrary, these countries are even willing to talk about acquiring the world’s most destructive weapons. Everyone can see that Russia would not have attacked Ukraine if the then newly independent republic had not surrendered nuclear weapons in the wake of the fall of the Soviet Union.

Ishiba, for instance, wrote in his Hudson article that the Asian NATO “must ensure deterrence against the nuclear alliance of China, Russia, and North Korea.” He also proposed “America’s sharing of nuclear weapons or the introduction of nuclear weapons into the region.”¹⁸ Some in Japan even want their country, the only nation ever attacked with such weapons, to build its own arsenal of them.¹⁹

“Ishiba is an outlier in the Japanese political world and has been saying ‘edgy,’ almost ‘provocative,’ things for many years,” Grant Newsham, author of *When China Attacks: A Warning to America*, told me last month. “Japan building its own nukes would cause an epic firestorm in the country.”²⁰

“There will be tremendous international political opposition, not just from China and North Korea, but also from elements in those various countries. Ishiba would seek to join Japan in an Asian NATO,” Gatling said, referring to the new leader’s comments about nuclear weapons.²¹

Since becoming prime minister on October 1, Ishiba has softened his tone, a reflection of both the reality that few in Japan want to go nuke and the Norwegian Nobel Committee announcing last month the award of the Peace Prize to Nihon

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Hidankyo, a Japanese grassroots organization of survivors of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki atomic bombings. The group, the committee stated, was dedicated to achieving “a world free of nuclear weapons.”²²

In fact, Ishiba knew his positions on national security were not popular: There was, for instance, no mention of an Asian NATO in his party’s campaign platform issued before the snap election that he called for October 27.²³

In the voting, his Liberal Democratic Party lost the majority that it had held for more than a decade in the Diet’s lower house. “Ishiba now faces high hurdles in implementing any expanded national security policy,” Gatling told me after the election. “He needs at least two minor parties to join in a coalition government. His positions on national security are controversial with likely partners, which are focused on domestic issues.”

“Except for the defense budget, everything is now on hold,” Gatling added.²⁴

In nearby South Korea, however, the call for development of nuclear weapons has been growing over the years as many there are not sure of America’s reliability, despite their mutual defense treaty, the “relationship forged in blood.” On September 2, Kim Yong-hyun, at his confirmation hearing for defense minister, said he would be “open” to the South developing these weapons. “That is included among all possible options,” Kim testified.²⁵

South Koreans certainly agree with their new defense minister. A Gallup Korea poll released in February shows that 72.8% of the population favored the possession of nukes.²⁶

In Japan’s neighborhood, two people’s republics, China and North Korea, are quickly increasing the size of nuclear weapons stockpiles. There is wide disagreement about the eventual size of the Chinese arsenal, but every analyst agrees with Admiral Charles Richard, then commander of U.S. Strategic Command, when he said in 2021 that “we

are witnessing a strategic breakout by China.”²⁷ The Defense Intelligence Agency put it this way last month in its 2024 Nuclear Challenges report: “China is undergoing the most rapid expansion and ambitious modernization of its nuclear forces in history.”²⁸

China’s only military ally is also on a tear. In early September, Kim Jong Un, the supremo of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, said he is implementing a plan to increase the number of nuclear weapons “exponentially.”²⁹ That’s unlikely, but he is nonetheless fast building his arsenal, undoubtedly in coordination with—and assistance from—China and Russia.

Close to these terrifying arsenals and not protected by the wide expanse of the Pacific Ocean, America’s regional allies know that neither Xi Jinping nor Kim Jong Un can be appeased and so believe something must be done fast.

Americans, on the other hand, see that great body of water as a blessing and a barrier. For more than a century, the United States has drawn its western defense perimeter at what the Chinese call “the first island chain,” in other words, off the coast of East Asia. Countries in that chain, including Japan, apparently no longer believe they can rely on a faraway Washington. They want a security structure—and nuclear weapons—of their own.

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