

Paul, Michael

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NATO Goes East

NATO-Japan Cooperation and the “Pivot to Asia”

Michael Paul

Europe should not fear the rebalance to Asia, Europe should join it, said former US Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta in January 2013. One step in that direction is NATO-Japan cooperation. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization will not become a global policeman, but it has increasingly acquired a global perspective – stabilization through consultation and cooperation. Accordingly, Japan does not expect NATO to play a direct military role in the Asia-Pacific region. But it expects a partner with shared perceptions and approaches. Thus, the Joint Political Declaration, signed by NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe on April 15, 2013, should be interpreted as a foundation to build political partnership and as a starting point for further initiatives embedding other regional actors.

In the past, the NATO-Japan relationship was limited to infrequent and loosely focused dialogue, with little concrete cooperation. This changed substantially when NATO engaged in international security beyond its traditional geographical area and became involved in Afghanistan, which was a catalyst for NATO and Japan for cooperation. Now, jointly tackling new emerging global security challenges is one of the priorities for NATO-Japan cooperation identified in the Joint Political Declaration. What does this cooperation entail beyond sharing perceptions and approaches? Clearly, NATO countries are interested in enhancing cooperation with Japan in the area of defense science and technology. The cooperation will cover such areas as cyber defense, counter-terrorism and non-

proliferation. Beyond that, NATO Europe must be concerned about maritime security.

As export nations, Japan and Germany have an eminent interest in open sea lines of communication and free trade. Trade and economy hinge on security and stability. But maritime East Asia is becoming increasingly dangerous.

Dangerous waters

The past months have seen a series of crises in the East China Sea and South China Sea that threaten to get out of control. Unanimously shared by regional security policy experts is the belief that one of the main sources of danger is the way regional actors conduct maritime operations to assert or

defend claims to territory as well as their rights to natural resources. Additionally, all parties demonstrate a weak capacity to conduct crisis management under domestic nationalistic pressures. In strengthening its ties with Japan, would NATO risk becoming entangled in Asian conflicts?

In April 2013 NATO Secretary General Rasmussen declared that the alliance's global perspective does not mean that NATO seeks a military presence in the Asia-Pacific region. Rather, it means NATO seeks to work with the Asia-Pacific region to enhance security and stability. And Japan is a key partner for this endeavor. But what does that mean for maritime East Asia?

The military build-up of the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA), especially its naval modernization, clearly has implications for the security of the neighbors in the Asia-Pacific region and allows it to challenge the existing maritime status quo in a way that was inconceivable even a decade ago. Now the PLA has so-called anti-access and area denial capabilities – centered on ballistic and cruise missiles, capable air forces, submarines and surface combatants, long-range radars and sophisticated C4ISR (Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance) networks. Combined with its growing military and paramilitary presence along the East Asian littoral and beyond, those capabilities provide China with a greater capacity to influence the security environment in the Asia-Pacific region. Although China must avoid a direct confrontation with the United States and its allies, it can probe the strength of the US and allied commitment to peripheral issues, such as the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands. In the long term, China's growing military capabilities could even weaken Japanese confidence in America's security commitment and increase support for a much larger and offensive-oriented military in Japan – and perhaps even for a nuclear deterrent (although the latter remains a highly hypothetical issue). Thus, as concluded in a strategic net assessment

of the Carnegie Endowment in 2013, if this challenge remains without effective reaction from Tokyo and Washington, "China's growing offshore military capabilities could eventually increase the likelihood of serious political-military crises in East Asia, weaken the US-Japan alliance, and undermine overall regional stability." The future peace and prosperity of the whole Asia-Pacific region could be endangered. Some problems are already evident in relations between China, Japan and the United States – the standoff over the sovereignty of the Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea is but one example.

China's emergence as a major regional and – in some aspects – global power poses as many opportunities as threats to Tokyo (and there is a clear understanding among Japanese elites that China is seeking to become Asia's new hegemon). People in Brussels see many opportunities, although European NATO members such as the Baltic states and Poland might view a new focus toward the "Far East" with skepticism in view of lingering doubts about Russia's intentions in the "Near East."

Supporting both NATO-Japan cooperation and dialogue with China is one way to proceed. Twenty years of dialogue with Russia's armed forces (the "Deutsch-Russischer Streitkräftedialog" has existed since 1993) has demonstrated that an open dialogue about threat perceptions can make a difference – although there still exists Cold War thinking in military and political circles in Europe and Russia.

In the Asia-Pacific region – and Russia is part of that region, too – capabilities and actions must not only deter truly threatening behavior. There is also the need for confidence-building measures to reduce distrust and strengthen cooperation. Beijing must be assured that its most vital interests are not imperiled – such as Chinese sea lines of communication. The PLA's buildup of a blue water navy is one of the reasons for the United States' "pivot to Asia." But how else should one expect Beijing to protect its vital sea lanes?

The need for dialogue

There is ample room for misunderstandings and, therefore, a need for dialogue. Officials from the United States and China met in September 2013 in Beijing for the 14th Defense Consultative Talks. They discussed how to enhance strategic trust and build upon opportunities to expand cooperation in areas of mutual interest, including humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, peacekeeping and maritime safety. They also discussed ways to enhance communications to improve understanding and avoid misperceptions. Hopefully, there will be similar positive momentum in China-Japan relations in the future.

The economic success of China depends very much on a stable world order. A policy that favors a rules-based approach must be backed by the capacity to counterbalance efforts to ignore, violate or unilaterally rewrite existing arrangements. NATO can help to support the rules-based international system, and eventually the European Union will also support that in its future maritime security strategy. But the very first line of action is bilateral dialogue between Beijing and Tokyo, which should be supported by European nations. In the long term, some multilateral structures in the Asia-Pacific region may be possible. Europeans love to share their experience as to how they have succeeded in creating a Europe free and at peace, built on multilateral structures. But one always has to remember that this was possible only through a strong alliance with the United States.

Pivot to reality or wishful thinking?

In the end, it will be decisive how the so-called pivot to Asia will truly lead to a rebalancing of US military capabilities that strikes a delicate balance of reassuring both allies, such as Japan, and partners, such as China. Instead of a strategy called “offshore balancing” (which involves a degree of re-trenchment), the strategy should be forward-partnering, assuming that the end-

state shall enable America’s partners to operate together with US forces in order to enhance stability in the region by ensuring interoperability. Furthermore, forward-partnering would involve a division of labor (and costs).

But with the United States turning its interest from the Atlantic to the Pacific, security requirements in the Mediterranean Sea will become more important to Europe’s navies. And there will be no re-balance without the rest of Asia. If other states in the region such as Australia and Singapore do not buy into the brand of partnership or leadership that the United States is selling, the rebalance could die a very quick death, leaving its allies alone with a perceived hegemonic maritime advancement of China, ending US hegemonic stability in the West Pacific.

In principle it would be possible to establish new multilateral structures and institutions in the Asia-Pacific region to create more transparency, to promote confidence-building and to help solve such disputes, such as the one concerning the Senkaku Islands. Although there is little hope for a resolution of the dispute in the near future, Tokyo and Beijing should work toward establishing new bilateral communication mechanisms. Clearly, a high-level political agreement is required before ministerial or military-to-military talks can begin. It will not be easy to restart a substantial dialogue because we have seen a general erosion of bilateral relations and a lack of trust. And the disappearance of back-channel diplomacy can be seen as a symptom of that. In the end, there should be a separate communication mechanism involving several layers that include law enforcement agencies, militaries and foreign ministries (as was attempted in negotiations after the 2010 boat collision).

A permanent working-level security dialogue forum – at the ambassador level, including military representatives – is another approach, proposed by Prof. Takako Ueta in Tokyo. It would be similar to security dialogues of the Organization for Secu-

rity and Co-operation in Europe and could also include a mechanism for compliance observation of international norms. Later, it could be integrated as an organ into the East Asian Summit or the ASEAN Regional Forum. Such a mechanism could also lessen the burdens of the United States, ensuring security through deterrence on the one hand, and reducing risks on the other. The desire of China and Japan to avoid a military conflict and their bilateral economic relationship offer the incentive and common ground to engage in substantial dialogue.

Remembering Leon Panetta's words, a rebalance to Asia joined by NATO's European members is a critical task of the alliance in the future decades. Active cooperation with its major non-NATO ally Japan is an essential part of that. But to make the East Asian Pacific more stable means also to start a new Sino-Japanese dialogue in the near future and to establish workable risk-reduction mechanisms. At the same time, there is a need to counterbalance China's growing military capabilities through integrating and institutionalizing measures. The Asia-Pacific region is still in a very early phase when it comes to multilateral security and defense cooperation; the countries in the region can profit from NATO experience on how to conduct multilateral planning and operations.

The Senkaku dispute is only a symptom of the much bigger problem of how to communicate effectively with Beijing and how China could become a responsible stakeholder in international affairs. One might argue that there is reason for some optimism because the islets in the East China Sea may be a priority of Chinese foreign policy, whereas a peaceful environment for sustainable economic development will remain the priority of Chinese policy in general. But from a Chinese point of view, the military build-up is a necessity because of its rapid economic development, which has given it many interests to protect. NATO-Japan cooperation, therefore, must maintain a careful balance of reassur-

ing both allies and partners in helping to support a rules-based approach – and freedom of navigation in the West Pacific is also in the interest of the European Union.

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SWP
Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik
German Institute for International and Security Affairs

Ludwigkirchplatz 3-4
10719 Berlin
Telephone +49 30 880 07-0
Fax +49 30 880 07-100
www.swp-berlin.org
swp@swp-berlin.org

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