

Is an Asian NATO on the horizon?

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Japan is the longest-standing of NATO's "partners across the globe". The cooperation was improved also by Japan Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen. In the future, Japan should have "its own NATO".

source: NATO photos

The recent execution of two Japanese citizens by the extremist group of the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) intensified the internal debate about foreign and security policy in Japan. Although joining the coalition forces fighting against ISIS is the most unlikely option for the Abe administration, the murders led Japan to focus on the Middle East also militarily, not only from the perspective of mercantile realism.

On 1st of February 2015, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe expressed his utmost anger over the Muslim extremists who beheaded two Japanese citizens and pledged Japan never give in to acts of terrorism. One important fact indicated in his statement was to expand 'humanitarian assistance' to the Middle Eastern areas that face the threat of ISIS, which is likely to be Egypt and Jordan as mentioned in the Abe's visits to both countries just before the hostage situations occurred.

Regardless of humanitarian perspective, number of Japanese oil tankers and freighters pass through the Red Sea and political instabilities of both countries would immediately cause a jump in hull insurances for those ships.

Not just security

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And, there is another 'mercantile' thought on the Abe's statement. He brought representatives of around 30 Japanese firms, mostly 'giants' of construction industry such as Shimizu Corporation and Taisei Corporation, to the visit to Egypt and one of the major topics with Egyptian president El-Sisi was Egypt-Japan economic cooperation e.g. ongoing development project of new Suez Canal.

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However, the intern discussion about future of Japanese foreign and security policy has started earlier. Some are asking: "How could the world of 2014 be so chaotic?" Many of us might have been wondering why there are still so many problems in the world like the Ukrainian civil war, the rise of ISIS, Ebola pandemic, piracy in Gulf of Aden and so forth.

All those issues are ongoing at the same time, and sometimes even at the same places. While the United Nations is losing its influences, the so-called 'Alliances' have been increasing its presence in international politics. They decide and act faster relatively to the U.N. or other institutions.

But, the Asia-Pacific region, where is now an economic powerhouse of the world, does not possess any forms of the alliances. Until last year, when Japan became the first advocator calling for formation of the alliance named 'Asian NATO'. What could it use from NATO and how useful could this new NATO be?

Is "Asian NATO" welcome?

Indeed, authoritarian states in the Asia-Pacific region such as China and Russia will be cautious against the formation of Asian NATO under the leadership of the existing Western great powers.

The reason why the region is in need of NATO-like organization is that there is no forcible 'arbitrator' to conflicts among the Asia-Pacific states. The United States, decades-long hegemon of the Asia-Pacific region, had been reluctant to arbitrate the regional conflicts historically which their own interests does not exist. For instance, the U.S. completely stayed away from South East Asian issues after the defeat in Vietnam for rest of 1970's, and they let the Khmer Rouge, extreme radical communist party, to take power in Cambodia in 1975.

The U.S. was aware of the danger of the Khmer Rouge through the Mayaguez incident happened in the same year, in which the U.S. cargo ship was captured by the communist Cambodian military and the U.S. civilians on-board were taken as hostages by the Khmer Rouge. In three years while the Khmer was in power, millions of Cambodians were massacred and it was ended by the Vietnamese military intervention against the Khmer in 1978 instead of the reluctant U.S.

Also, another reason is that economic interdependence among the Asia-Pacific states in the 21st century is relatively higher than any other regions in the world. Thus, one conflict in the region has potential to lead the regional economy in jeopardy.

Background and Need of Asian NATO

Regarding Asian NATO, Japan became the first advocator to call for formation of the alliance named 'Asian NATO' in July 2014. Shigeru Ishiba, the LDP (Liberal Democratic Party of Japan) Secretary General at the time, clearly indicated its role as 'containment of militarily emerging China'. I am personally skeptical about his view of China as 'taken-as-granted' enemy of Japan or Asian NATO, but however the alliance needs allies.

Let us take a look into the possibility of implementation of NATO policies (such as obligatory collective defence among member states and its new role as an arbitrator to international conflicts in the post-Cold War period) to the new concept of multilateral security framework in the Asia-Pacific region called 'Asian NATO'. Hans Morgenthau's five requirements to formation of 'Alliances' manifests fundamentals all alliances must obtain. To that extent, implementation of NATO policies to Asian NATO can take place.

With regard to the relationship between Asian NATO and the U.S., the U.S. would be willing to create such alliance in terms of promoting more defense cooperation in the Asia-Pacific. Influences of the 'arrogant' Bush doctrine are still remained in global scale, the U.S. as an 'invader'. Thus, although Asian NATO would be led by the U.S., the world would recognize Asian NATO as another multilateral cooperation in security sectors. (The U.S. would gain more influences over the Asia-Pacific without sacrificing anything). And, moreover, Japan is willing to increase influences over the Asia-Pacific besides the U.S. due to emerging nationalism inside Japan and tenacity of the LDP to turn Japan back to 'Normal country' where possess conventional military forces.

Besides China-Japan confrontation, with regard to promotion of the U.S.-Japan military cooperation, there has been alternation of generations in both sides, the U.S. and Japan. The so-called 'Pearl Harbour' generations were retired and now, new generations are to promote more and deeper cooperation in defence sectors. In fact, the U.S. only gave positive comments on building aircraft carrier-like warship of Japan's MSDF. Such tendency or notion of the 'new thinking' can be seen in Australia-Japan security cooperation as well.

On 1st of November 2014, Japanese warship was allowed to participate in the 100th anniversary of departure of the 1st convoy of Australian troops to Europe during the WW1 in Albany, Australia. And, moreover, during the multinational military exercise KAKADU 2014 in October 2014, Japanese naval officers were also allowed to attend for the first time the memorial service in Darwin, Australia where was severely bombed by Japanese during the WW2.

ASEAN's role is insufficient

On the other hand, ASEAN (Association of South East Asian Nations) pledged to establish its own law enforcement by 2015 to settle maritime disputes in the region, but it seems less realistic now they will achieve the objective. Although ASEAN Charter is well written to call for cooperation among its members and some of friendship treaties strengthened their ties, the truth is that there are so many discords among its members e.g. pros and cons in ASEAN's China policies.

Moreover, as none of the great powers has full membership of ASEAN, even if the association forms joint military force, due to fiscal reasons and lack of military capabilities, they might not be able to fulfil duties. To sum up, ASEAN is merely an entity of minor powers.

Conceptual Structure of Asian NATO

Thus, in my sense, the collective leadership of the U.S., Japan, and Australia should be eligible for Asian NATO. The three countries shared the same conception of 'Democracy' as common value, and has been related in closer economic & security ties. To take an example of European NATO, the North Atlantic Council is its decision-making institute and to implement military actions as NATO, rule of unanimous is applied.

This structure is likely to be effective for Asian NATO as well. The three leading powers based on the common value of 'Democracy' themselves are 'ideological factor' of Asian NATO, and the North Atlantic Council-style decision-making institute guarantees fair distribution of powers among members.

For its member states, some countries must be enthusiastic to join Asian NATO such as Vietnam and the Philippines. The both countries facing fiscal problems and dispute conflicts with China, joining Asian NATO would reduce their burdens for sure. While there are some enthusiasts, those countries where located in politically 'sensitive' zones or in-between great powers like South Korea, Mongolia, Singapore, and Nepal must be given 'observers' status of Asian NATO like as Eastern Partnership members of NATO e.g. Belarus, Ukraine.

Foreign missions of Asian NATO

Finally, as an independent organization in the region, Asian NATO must provide some security works for countries in trouble. In the context of 'Pacific Air Policing' (PAP), which is actually a copycat of European NATO's Baltic Air Policing, countries where does not possess effective air defence capabilities shall be given rights to ask the Asian NATO for routinized detachments of fighter jets to cover its airspaces. For example, routines of fighter jets of Australia, Japan and the U.S. Air Forces could be sent to the Philippines and ensure air covers over disputed the Spratly islands instead of the Philippine Air Force. The creation of 'Equilibrium' will lead the both actors, China and the Philippines to settle the dispute conflict

And, another possibility is joint anti-piracy military operations with the SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organization), anti-terrorism alliance centred in Central Asia led by China and Russia, in Malacca Strait. Indeed, authoritarian states in the Asia-Pacific region such as China and Russia will be cautious against the formation of Asian NATO under the leadership of the existing Western great powers. In order to promote regional cooperation and avoid the security dilemma, Asian NATO and the China/Russia-led SCO cooperate to assure safe passage of Malacca strait in South East Asia where 60% of natural resources from the Middle East to the Asia-Pacific bypasses and piracy acts are on rise recently. This is the first step to understand each other and promote cooperation in further details.

Surprisingly, most of European NATO's missions like mentioned above are applicable for Asian NATO. Although Asian NATO might be less influential compared to NATO due to lack of member states and fiscal problems, they will be a pioneer of security cooperation among the Asia-Pacific states.

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