

JAPAN IN THE ASIA-PACIFIC REGION AND ITS STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP WITH NATO

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Abstract

This study analyzes Japan’s geopolitical position in the Asia-Pacific region and evaluates its diversified partnerships. Japan has a strategically important geopolitical position in the Asia-Pacific region. It is a maritime power, a democratic state with a highly developed industry and economy, and, from a security perspective, part of the United States-led security framework. Japan is traditionally restricted by its pacifist constitution, it is currently adopting a more proactive security policy based on the concept of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP), which emphasizes regional stability, interconnectedness, and the rule of law. Strengthening defense capabilities and security partnerships is part of this transformation. Europe and the Asia-Pacific region are increasingly interconnected, taking into account the systemic challenges posed by an increasingly powerful China, tensions on the Korean Peninsula, and exertions by the Russian Federation. Therefore, Japan is making considerable efforts to expand its strategic partnerships. Close cooperation and closer ties with NATO are also growing in importance.

Keywords: *Asia-Pacific region, Free and Open Indo-Pacific, Alliance commitments, NATO-Japan relationship*

Introduction

Japan occupies a key geopolitical position in the Asia-Pacific region. The country is a maritime power, a democratic state with a developed industrial economy, and due to its geopolitical importance part of the U.S. security framework, like other Asia-Pacific countries. Japan’s geopolitical environment requires it to balance among major geopolitical players such as China, the Russian Federation, and North Korea.

Due to the geopolitical changes in the Asia-Pacific region in the last decade, Japan is redefining its security identity and emerging as a proactive security actor in the region. Although the alliance between the United States and Japan continues to form the basis of Japan's regional security strategy, the country is also strengthening its alliance and partnership relations, not only as a global partner of NATO (Szenes & Siposné Kecskeméthy, 2019: 125) but also at the regional level, in the Indo-Pacific region. Japan cooperates with Southeast Asian countries, invests in defense cooperation, capacity building, and soft power initiatives. The objective of building multi-level relationships, including the area of defense, economy, and diplomacy, is to strengthen Japan's regional position.

Traditionally, Japan is constrained by its pacifist constitution. The limits on the use of lethal force stem from its constitution and a traditionally restrained strategic culture. After World War II, the new Japanese constitution was drafted under the guidance of the United States. Its Article 9 reinforced Japan's pacifist approach by stating that "*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.*" and that "*land, sea and air forces, as well as other war potential, will never be maintained*" (The Constitution of Japan, 1947). The necessity and practical extent of Article 9 have been debated in Japan since its enactment, particularly following the establishment of the Japan Self-Defense Forces in 1954 (Siposné Kecskeméthy, 2014: 39). Arguments for the amendment or repeal of said article revolve around the changing security environment in which Japan's current policy of self-defense may be inadequate. In addition, those in favor of enabling collective defense efforts and strengthening Japan's military capabilities, highlight how the current Constitution limits the extent of the country's military cooperation (Siposné Kecskeméthy, 2014: 39).

Multilateral security and regional connectivity: Free and Open Indo-Pacific

Although there have been no constitutional amendments to Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution, the policy changes reflected Japan's adaptation to challenges both within domestic and international politics. In 2013, a new National Security Strategy was created where Japan's passive stance regarding peace and security changed towards "proactive pacifism" (Jain, 2025). Additional changes in Japan's approach to security policy relate to Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, who introduced the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) concept in 2016 as a strategic vision. This established approach continued under Prime Minister Fumio Kishida (Ozawa, 2022).

In Japan's strategic thinking, Russia's aggression against Ukraine was a turning point (O'Shea & Maslow, 2024). As a result, Japan is pursuing a proactively oriented security policy that emphasizes regional stability, connectivity, and the rule of law. This policy is implemented under a new vision for a free and open Indo-Pacific

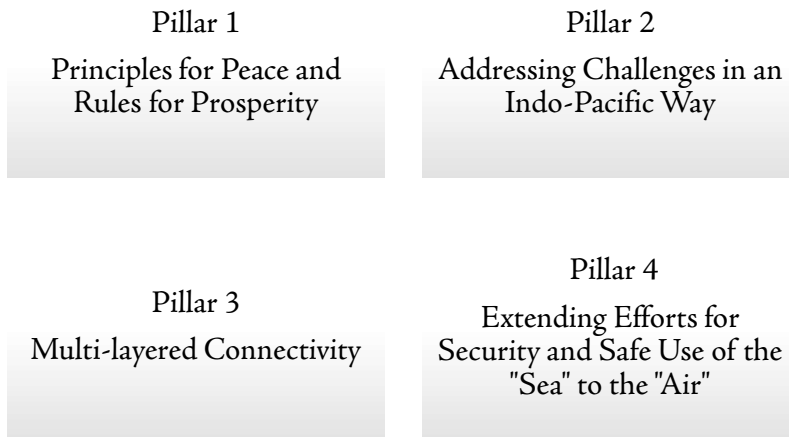
region (The Future of the Indo-Pacific, 2023). On 20 March 2023, Fumio Kishida visited India and delivered a speech launching Japan's new FOIP plan for the Indo-Pacific, which formalized Japan's strategic shift toward multilateral security and regional connectivity (Kishida, 2023). The FOIP is a framework concept for the regional strategies of countries in the Asia-Pacific region that share similar ideas and values (Nandy & Das, 2025).

The Free and Open Indo-Pacific concept has four pillars (see: Figure 1). The core principles of FOIP are as follows: on one hand it is defending freedom and the rule of law, on the other hand respecting diversity, inclusiveness and openness (New Plan, 2023). Among other things, it emphasizes respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, rejects unilateral changes to the status quo, and underlines the peaceful resolution of disputes.

The first pillar, which is the basis of the plan, addresses the fundamental principles of peace and the rules of prosperity. Japan seeks to promote a rules-based international order, strengthen deterrence, and build coalitions of partner states to counterbalance growing regional power asymmetries, particularly with regard to China (Lee, 2022). Japan condemned Russia's aggression against Ukraine, opposing any unilateral changes to the status quo by force anywhere in the world (Kishida, 2023; America Times News Service, 2023). The second pillar addresses challenges in the Indo-Pacific region. The cooperation focuses on responding to climate and environmental change, strengthening food and energy security, improving global health care, focusing on and improving disaster prevention and response capabilities, supporting the prevention of cybercrime, building cyber security capacities, and ensuring cyber security (New Plan, 2023: 3; The Future of the Indo-Pacific, 2023: 6, 8). The third pillar of FOIP focuses on multi-layered connectivity, enhancing human, knowledge and digital connectivity, the core elements of regional cooperation. The fourth pillar expands multi-domain security efforts, ranging from maritime to air domains, and supports the safe and secure use of maritime and airspace. Under this pillar, Japan plans to enhance cooperation with the United States, Australia, Republic of Korea, India, Philippines, Canada, and Europe. It aims to expand networks among countries that share a common vision in the Middle East, Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean (New Plan, 2023: 4).

As Prime Minister Kishida stated in New Delhi, "Japan will collaborate closely with India and contribute to the stability in the South Asian region" and also emphasized that "India is an indispensable partner" of Japan (The Future of the Indo-Pacific 2023: 6, 12).

Figure 1: The four pillars of “Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP)”



Own editing, data source: New Plan, 2023, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/100484990.pdf>, last accessed on 20.01.2026.

The FOIP emphasizes multilateralism, capacity building, and infrastructure development, areas where Japan’s technological and financial strength can counterbalance China’s growing influence in the region.

Broadening strategic partnership

The foundation of Japan’s security strategy remains the alliance between the United States and Japan, but in this context, Japan is making major efforts to expand its strategic partnerships. Security challenges, risks and threats in Europe and Asia-Pacific are closely interlinked, which is why Japan’s close cooperation and deepening ties with NATO are becoming increasingly important (Siposné Kecskeméthy, 2022: 181; Siposné Kecskeméthy, 2025: 253). Japan also faces serious security challenges and threats in the region, such as China’s growing regional influence, increased military activity, its deepening strategic partnership with the Russian Federation, unresolved territorial and island disputes, natural gas and oil reserves in the South China Sea, tensions on the Korean Peninsula, and North Korea’s nuclear ambitions. NATO’s growing involvement could further destabilize the Asia-Pacific region (Yuichi, 2024; Siposné Kecskeméthy, 2022: 164, 166). NATO is signaling a more global approach, but its resource limitations, traditional responsibilities, and fundamental defense commitments under the Washington Treaty in the Euro-Atlantic area mean that it must be very careful when expanding its involvement in the region.

These partnerships are vital for supporting NATO's cooperative security as well as its 360-degree approach to emerging security challenges (Siposné Kecskeméthy & Sipos, 2024). As Japan faces challenges, the country has to consider how to guarantee its own security. However, Japan's pacifistic constitution and regional sensitivities limit military cooperation with NATO. In parallel, there is no established consensus on the approach to the partnership with Japan, as some European NATO member states prefer focusing on Euro-Atlantic defense rather than expanding too much into Asia. In this security environment, Japan must find the right and delicate balance in terms of the extent to which it cooperates with NATO and maintains stable relationship with its neighbors (especially China and South Korea).

NATO-Japan partnership

Among the global partners of NATO, Japan has a prominent and important role within the Asia-Pacific Four countries (in official NATO documents the region is referred to as Asia-Pacific, and the Alliance's four most important partners – Australia, New Zealand, Japan, South Korea – are termed the Asia-Pacific Four countries, APA4). Japan and NATO had little interaction during the Cold War, even though they shared fundamental democratic values and faced the Soviet Union as a common threat. During the Cold War NATO had no substantial relationship with non-members, as there was no reason to seek external help in achieving its core mission of defending the member states' territory, protecting its population, and safeguarding democratic values. At the end of the Cold War the diplomatic relations were limited between NATO and non-member states (Siposné Kecskeméthy, 2014: 33).

Japan is NATO's longest-standing global partner, previously referred to as one of the 'Partners Across the Globe' (PAG). Thus, the partnership reflects deepening political, operational, and strategic ties. The NATO–Japan partnership officially began on 2 July 1990 with the first NATO–Japan conference. Initial contacts in the early 1990s gradually evolved into regular high-level meetings and structured political dialogue on shared security interests. Japan's role was particularly significant after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, which changed the global security environment and shed light on the international nature of emerging threats. Japan was one of the major supporters of the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission in Afghanistan and contributed to security and development initiatives, such as reconstruction and development projects (Ozawa, 2022; Siposné Kecskeméthy, 2014: 33–34; Joint Political Declaration, 2013; Siposné Kecskeméthy 2022: 180). Financial support has been provided for several human security projects. These were as follows: Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR), Disbandment of Illegal Armed Groups (DIAG) as well as support for the police force. The NATO–Japan relationship in Afghanistan was multifaceted, and included practical

cooperation, political dialogue, operational support, defense equipment and industrial partnership, enhanced interoperability, and the development of multilateral approaches to emerging security challenges as well (Tsuruoka, 2013; Siposné Kecskeméthy, 2014: 34).

On 4 May 2006, Japanese Foreign Minister Taro Aso addressed the North Atlantic Council for the first time in NATO's history (see: Table 1), signaling Japan's intention to strengthen and deepen strategic ties with the Alliance (Japan–NATO relations, 2022; Sipos Kecskeméthy 2022: 177).

In January 2007, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe addressed the Council, highlighted security challenges in the Asia-Pacific region, and expressed his country's interest in building a stronger partnership with NATO, including political and operational cooperation. Japan has also supported NATO beyond the Asia-Pacific region. It provided financial assistance for post-conflict recovery in the Balkans following NATO-led stabilization operations, demonstrating a commitment to global security and reconstruction efforts.

On June 25, 2010, NATO and Japan signed a Security Agreement that allowed the exchange of classified information. This was followed by a series of high-level meetings that further strengthened the partnership and promoted closer political and operational cooperation.

On April 13, 2013, Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe signed a Joint Political Declaration. A new phase in relations between NATO and Japan began (Siposné Kecskeméthy 2022: 177). The declaration provided a framework for further developing the relationship between NATO and Japan, the shared values such as individual freedom, democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. The document highlighted the principles of cooperation between NATO and Japan. It emphasized “the shared strategic interest in promoting global peace, stability and prosperity, and in fostering a rules-based international order that promotes peaceful resolution of disputes” (Joint Political Declaration, 2013, Siposné Kecskeméthy 2022: 180).

The document listed the following areas of possible cooperation, among others, emerging security challenges, cyber security and defense-related cooperation (joint training, information-sharing, crisis-response coordination), disaster relief, counter-terrorism, disarmament (small arms and light weapons), non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and their means of delivery, and maritime security (counter piracy operations, joint naval exercises). The declaration also formalized Japan's commitment to NATO by designating its Ambassador to the Kingdom of Belgium as the Representative of the Government of Japan to NATO, establishing a permanent diplomatic channel for continued engagement. Although Japan's commitment was already stated in the 2013 declaration, the North Atlantic Council adopted the relevant decision on May 24, 2018 (Joint Declaration, 2013; Siposné Kecskeméthy, 2022: 177).

In May 2014, Japan’s Individual Partnership and Cooperation Programme (IPCP) was finalized with the aim to strengthen high-level dialogue and promote defense cooperation and exchanges. The priority areas were as follows: cyber defense, maritime security, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, disarmament, arms control, non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and their means of delivery, defense science and technology, Women, peace and security, public diplomacy activities and other defense and security cooperation in the areas of mutual interest between Japan and NATO (Individual Partnership and Cooperation Programme, 2014). This was followed by Japan participating in Interoperability Platform (IP) under the framework of the Partnership Interoperability Initiative (PII) established by NATO in 2014 (Siposné Kecskeméthy 2022: 180).

Table 1: NATO-Japan relationship (2006-2025)

Year	Event	Significance
May 4, 2006	Prime Minister of Japan speech at the NAC	Taro Aso Japanese Foreign Minister addressed the North Atlantic Council
January 2007	High-Level Visit	Abe Shinzo Japanese Prime Minister addressed the North Atlantic Council
March 7, 2007	Tailored Cooperation Package – Japan	Signature of Tailored Cooperation Package with Japan
June 25, 2010	Security Agreement	NATO-Japan Security Agreement
April 13, 2013	Joint Political Declaration	Signature of Joint Political Declaration (Abe Shinzo-Anders Fogh Rasmussen)
May 6, 2014	Individual Partnership and Cooperation Programme (IPCP)	Japan becomes the first Asian partner to sign a formal cooperation with NATO
July 2017	High-Level Visit	PM Abe Shinzo Visits NATO Headquarters
July 2018	Mission of Japan to NATO	Establishment of Mission of Japan to NATO based at the Japan embassy in Belgium
June 14, 2021	Enhancement of cooperation with Asia-Pacific partners (Australia, Japan, New Zealand, Korea)	Brussels Summit communiqué (enhancement of cooperation with Asia-Pacific Four-APA4 - countries)
April 6-7, 2022	Japan attends foreign ministers’ meeting	Joshimasa Hayashi, Japanese foreign minister first time attends the NATO Foreign Ministers’ meeting
June 29-30, 2022	Japan attends NATO Summit (Madrid)	PM Fumio Kishida participates in a NATO Summit for the first time
2023	Individually Tailored Partnership Programme (ITPP)	NATO and Japan adopt a new, more detailed framework for cooperation on cyber, emerging technology, space and resilience
July 11-12, 2023	APA4 countries attend NATO Vilnius Summit	Japan participates in a NATO Summit for the second time
2023-2024	Talks on NATO Liaison Office in Tokyo	Proposal to establish NATO’s first office in Asia

July 9-11, 2024	APA4 countries attend NATO Washington Summit	Japan participates in a NATO Summit for the third time
January 15, 2025	Independent Mission of Japan to NATO	Japan's NATO mission was inaugurated
June 24-25, 2025	APA4 countries attend NATO Summit (The Hague)	Japan participates in a NATO Summit for the fourth time
2025 (current)	Ongoing strategic coordination	Japan continues to strengthen defence dialogue, technology exchange, and joint planning with NATO Allies

Own editing, data source: Siposné Kecskeméthy, 2022: 177.

Russia's attack on Ukraine on February 24, 2022 forged an unprecedented unity not only among allies but also among Asia-Pacific partners. In response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine and authoritarian assertiveness, Japan supported NATO's approach to defending the "rule-based international order". The NATO 2030 report made it clear that NATO must adapt to a much more complex strategic environment characterized by geopolitical rivalry, confrontation with the Russian Federation, the rise of China, and numerous transnational threats and risks (NATO 2030 Report, 2020: 12; Siposné Kecskeméthy, 2021: 119). The Asia-Pacific region is strategically significant for a number of reasons, including military developments in the emerging China, the Taiwan issue, the presence of the Russian Federation, countries with nuclear weapons in the region (North Korea, India, China, Pakistan), natural gas and oil reserves in the South China Sea, territorial claims, island disputes, among others. These pose serious security challenges, risks, and threats in the region.

The 2022 Strategic Concept is marking NATO's shift toward global engagement. China's aspirations and coercive policies were also addressed, as they pose a systemic challenge to the interests, security, and values of the Alliance, undermining the international legal order in outer space, the oceans, and cyberspace (NATO 2022 Strategic Concept, Siposné Kecskeméthy & Sipos, 2022: 164).

At the 2022 Madrid Summit, for the first time in NATO's history, the APA4 countries were invited to attend the summit (Madrid Summit Declaration, 2022; Siposné Kecskeméthy & Sipos, 2022: 166). Following this turning point, the APA4 countries also attended the Vilnius, the Washington, and The Hague Summits. The Alliance's current relations with global partners in the Asia-Pacific region are the result of a long process and their strategic importance within the region is crucial.

Japan supported the opening of the first NATO Liaison Office (NLO Tokyo) in the Asia-Pacific region to help the dialogue with Asia-Pacific partners and serve as a center for information sharing and practical cooperation. China and Russia strongly opposed NATO's presence in the region. Emmanuel Macron, while referring to Article 6 of the Washington Treaty defining its geographical boundaries, stated that France did not support NATO's presence in the Pacific region. He further highlighted that the Alliance was founded to guarantee the security of the

North Atlantic area (Lau & Kayali, 2023; Siposné Kecskeméthy & Sipos, 2023: 400–401). While one of the most important topics of the Washington Summit was cooperation with the Asia-Pacific partners, the NLO Tokyo was not established (Siposné Kecskeméthy & Sipos, 2024: 306). On January 15, 2025, the Mission of Japan to NATO was inaugurated as an independent mission from the Embassy of Japan in Belgium. Emphasizing the importance of global partners, including Japan, the NATO Secretary General met with Asia-Pacific partners at the 2025 Hague Summit (Siposné Kecskeméthy & Sipos, 2025: 253).

The security environments of Europe and the Asia-Pacific region are becoming increasingly interconnected, particularly in light of China's, North Korea's, and Iran's support for Russia that have driven Japan to deepen ties with Western security partners. This interdependence is further reinforced through defense-industrial and technological cooperation. In this context, political coordination between NATO and Japan on global security issues is necessary and inevitable. Japan can play a key role in bridging security concerns between Europe and Asia.

Conclusion

Japan's geopolitical position presents opportunities and limitations in the Asia-Pacific region. On the one hand, it is actively shaping the Asia-Pacific area strategic environment, strengthening its defense capabilities, and diversifying its alliance system. On the other hand, it has proposed the vision of a free and open Indo-Pacific. Prime Minister Fumio Kishida's 2023 speech on the launching of Japan's new, Free and Open Indo-Pacific plan was the milestone that officially marked Japan's strategic shift toward multilateral security and regional connectivity (The Future of the Indo-Pacific, 2023). The country's security policy seeks to safeguard its national interests and contribute to regional stability, which requires a careful balance between internal politics, external threats, alliance commitments and strategic competition. The Free and Open Indo-Pacific plan has four pillars (see: Figure 1). The core principles are safeguarding freedom and the rule of law, respecting sovereignty and territorial integrity, and underlining the peaceful resolution of disputes (New Plan, 2023). The first pillar concerns the fundamental principles of peace and the rules of prosperity, while the second pillar addresses challenges in the Indo-Pacific region. The third pillar underlines multi-layered human, knowledge and digital connectivity, and the fourth pillar extends multi-domain security efforts, of the safe and secure usage of maritime and air space.

Despite the fact that the alliance between the United States and Japan is of utmost importance, Japan is widening its regional and international cooperation. Security challenges, risks and threats in Europe and Asia-Pacific are closely intertwined, and therefore Japan's close cooperation and deepening ties with NATO (see: Table 1) are becoming increasingly important (Siposné Kecskeméthy, 2022:

181; Siposné Kecskeméthy, 2025: 253). NATO had no significant ties with non-allied countries located on the other continents, focusing mostly on the Euro-Atlantic area and on the European continent. There was no intention to seek external support for its core mission, most importantly for deterrence. The key principle and task of the organization since its establishment has been defending the member states' territory, protecting its population, and safeguarding democratic values. At the end of the Cold War the diplomatic relations between NATO and other, non-member states were limited. This was also the case in NATO-Japan relations (Siposné Kecskeméthy, 2014: 33).

Japan is NATO's longest-standing partner in the Asia-Pacific region. The Alliance's partnership policy with partners across the globe resonates with Japan's strategic vision, and fundamental democratic values. Both are committed to the maintenance of peace and stability, freedom, democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. The relationship between NATO and Japan is multi-layered, reflecting the deepening of political, operational, and strategic ties. Its geostrategic position and active role in the Asia-Pacific region in addressing global security threats such as cyber-attacks, terrorism, and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction can further reinforce the strategic importance of this partnership. This means that the relationship between NATO and Japan is becoming even more important in shaping international security during the following years.

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