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An Asian NATO: A double-edged phrase

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Summary

- It attracted a lot of public attention when US Deputy Secretary of State Biegun mentioned “the Indo-Pacific region was actually lacking in strong multilateral structures” while Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi critically said “the US is aimed at building a so-called Indo-Pacific ‘new NATO’”.
- NATO was founded in response to the threat posed by the Soviet Union. After the Cold War, its efforts included responses to conflicts, terrorism and counter piracy. Nevertheless, NATO's own history is not always shared with those countries that do not have a direct relationship with NATO. Consequently, NATO's focus, to this day, primarily remains on the threats emanating from the former Soviet Union.
- In the Indo-pacific region, various multilateral frameworks have been formed around ASEAN since its establishment, and they function well to some extent. Deputy Secretary Biegun's remarks such as “lacking in strong multilateral structures” indicate a direct denial of those efforts so far by the countries concerned including ASEAN members and the US under the ASEAN-led architectures the US is in fact participating now.
- The US has established its “Major Non-NATO Ally Status” (MNNA) based on NATO, a designation it has given to 17 countries including Japan. They seem to refer to “Asian NATO” conscious of this system.
- An “Asian NATO” established in the region would probably target China. Therefore, those countries attaching importance to economic relations with China do not welcome the term of “Asian NATO”, which for them, brings military risks and potential loss of economic profits.
- Japan, the US, Australia and India will enhance future cooperation under the “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” vision presupposing support for ASEAN. Convergence in ASEAN-centricity will induce the double-edged phrase of “Asian NATO” to fade away sooner or later.

Introduction: a dispute over “Asian NATO” between the US and China

On 31 August 2020, US Deputy Secretary of State Biegun made remarks at the US-India Strategic Partnership Forum on the future direction of “Quad”¹ and “Quad-Plus”², “It is a reality that the Indo-Pacific

¹ Regarding “Quad”, see following examples: Tomohiko Satake, “The future of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue: possibilities and challenges”, Bhubhindar Singh and Sarah Teo (eds.), *Minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific: The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, Lancang-Mekong Cooperation Mechanism, and ASEAN*, Routledge, 2020; Tanvi Madan, “What you need to know about the ‘Quad’ in charts”, The Brookings Institution, 5 October 2020 [<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/10/05/what-you-need-to-know-about-the-quad-in-charts/>].

² “Quad-Plus”, although not clearly defined, is generally considered as an unofficial term to mean loose multilateral dialogues or meetings involving countries other than “Quad” of Japan, the US, Australia and India. It is an example that New Zealand, South Korea and Vietnam with the “Quad” countries held a video teleconference on the COVID-19 in March 2020. Derek Grossman, “Don’t Get Too Excited, ‘Quad Plus’ Meetings Won’t Cover China”, *The Diplomat*, 9 April 2020

region is actually lacking in strong multilateral structures”, he said. He went on to say “they don’t have anything of the fortitude of NATO or the European Union”, while pointing out “I think we’re going to have to be a little bit careful here in doing that, although I think from an American perspective that would be easy” with regard to formalizing a structure.³ He also emphasized that starting with the Quad, just the four countries, was very important regardless of the result of the US presidential election, and stated, “Even NATO started with relatively modest expectations”, and “The original NATO North Atlantic alliance only had 12 members.” One of the highest-ranked diplomats in the US repeatedly referred to NATO, which forms a major reason it attracted attention in many countries other than the US and India.

Opposing his statement, on 13 October, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi fiercely criticized the US activities at the joint press conference in Malaysia during his visit to Southeast Asian countries. He maintained that the “Indo-Pacific strategy” proposed by the United States, is in essence, aimed at building a so-called Indo-Pacific “new NATO” underpinned by the quadrilateral mechanism involving the United States, Japan, India and Australia. As well as this strategy itself is a huge underlying security risk and if being forced forward, it would not only wind back the clock of history, but also mark the beginning of danger.⁴ This statement seems to be related to the Second Japan-Australia-India-US Foreign Ministers’ Meeting was held in Tokyo on 6 October.⁵

This article will overview those reactions in neighboring countries regarding the so-called “Asian NATO” after briefly touching on the development of NATO and the history of the collective security architectures in Asia so far. Thereafter, this article will consider some of double meaning of this phrase.

NATO’s development with ups and downs

The NATO’s official website has details about its own history.⁶ According to this information, it is often said that NATO was founded in response to the threat posed by the Soviet Union, but it is only partially true. NATO’s creation was part of a broader effort to serve three purposes such as deterring Soviet expansionism, forbidding the revival of nationalist militarism in Europe through a strong North American presence on the continent, and encouraging European political integration. After the Cold War, its efforts have included the responses to the situations in the former Yugoslavia, Bosnia and Kosovo. The taking over of command and coordination of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, and counter piracy off the Horn of Africa.

On the other hand, there are various different views on NATO’s own history, and it is also pointed

[<https://thediplomat.com/2020/04/dont-get-too-excited-quad-plus-meetings-wont-cover-china/>]. See also Jeff M. Smith, “How America is leading the ‘Quad Plus’ Group of 7 countries in fighting the Coronavirus”, The Heritage Foundation, 1 April 2020 [<https://www.heritage.org/global-politics/commentary/how-america-leading-the-quad-plus-group-7-countries-fighting-the>].

³ Stephen Biegun, “Deputy Secretary Biegun Remarks at the U.S.-India Strategic Partnership Forum”, the United States Department of State (the US DOS), 31 August 2020 [<https://www.state.gov/deputy-secretary-biegun-remarks-at-the-u-s-india-strategic-partnership-forum/>].

⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, “Wang Yi: U.S. ‘Indo-Pacific Strategy’ Undermines Peace and Development Prospects in East Asia” [中华人民共和国外交部「王毅：美“印太战略”损害东亚和平与发展前景」], 13 October 2020 [<https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/wjzbzd/t1823539.shtml>].

⁵ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan (MOFA), “Dai 2 kai nichibeigoin gaisho kaigo” [The Second Japan-Australia-India-U.S. Foreign Ministers’ Meeting], 6 October 2020 [https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/press/release/press6_000682.html].

⁶ “A short history of NATO”, North Atlantic Treaty Organization, [https://www.nato.int/cps/us/natohq/declassified_139339.htm].

out that NATO has undergone numerous challenges to this day. First, each NATO member country has different national domestic circumstances. Germany, for example, was restricted by its own national caveats and criticized by other countries during participation in ISAF, while still keep on accepting US tactical nuclear weapons.⁷ While those relations with the US have been complicated after the inauguration of the Trump administration, following the Treaty on Franco-German Cooperation and Integration (Aachen Treaty) signed in January 2019, it was reported that France was preparing to extend its nuclear deterrent to Germany.⁸

In addition, various frictions between the US, and France and Germany, can be seen from the perspective of the multilateral alliance. The French President Macron described NATO as “brain-dead”, causing repercussions just before the NATO Leaders Meeting was held in London in December 2019. These tensions were only heightened by US President Trump’s demand for increased defence spending from NATO members. It is reported they were not in a party mood for NATO’s seventieth birthday.⁹

So, what is the US view of NATO? In March 2019, the US Congressional Research Service released a report on “Assessing NATO’s Value”. The report focused on several key questions regarding NATO’s future including the following: addressing the strategic value of NATO to the US and the leadership role of the US within NATO; examining whether the alliance should adopt a new strategic concept that better reflects views of the security threat posed by Russia and new and emerging threats in the cyber and hybrid warfare domains; developing a NATO strategy toward China, and so forth.¹⁰ Thus, NATO’s history consists of dealing with responses to address a lot of threats, actions and operations, successes, and imminent challenges, which symbolizes its own development with ups and downs.

In spite of this, looking at general public opinion trends in such countries as do not have a direct relationship with NATO, there is no common understanding of NATO’s evolution. As a result, there is a tendency for those that do not follow the modern NATO, to view it through the lense of the purpose of its original establishment - responding to the threats of the former Soviet Union.

Regional architectures of collective security in Asia

As mentioned above, Deputy Secretary Biegun pointed out, “it is a reality that the Indo-Pacific region is actually lacking in strong multilateral structures”, but whether it is “strong” or not, it is a fact that multiple multilateral frameworks have been examined and formed in this region since the end of World War Two.

For example, in 1954, the Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty was signed by eight countries: the US, the UK, France, Australia, New Zealand, Thailand, the Philippines and Pakistan. Based on this, the

⁷ Yoko Iwama, “Reisengo no NATO to touitsu doitsu” [Post-Cold War NATO and unified Germany], *Kiro ni tatsu NATO: beiou doumei no kokusaiseiji* [NATO at a crossroad: international politics of the US-Europe Alliance], the Japan Institute of International Affairs, March 2010, pp. 169–175.

⁸ “France is prepared to extend its nuclear deterrent to Germany”, the Washington Post, 28 February 2019 [<https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2019/02/28/france-is-prepared-extend-its-nuclear-deterrent-germany/>].

⁹ “Troubled Nato not in party mood for 70th birthday”, BBC, 2 December 2019 [<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-50604857>]. Michito Tsuruoka, “Haran no nakatta NATO no 70 shunen shuno kaigo?” [The 70th NATO Summit without any disturbances?], the Sasakawa Peace Foundation, 18 December 2019 [https://www.spf.org/iina/articles/tsuruoka_11.html].

¹⁰ The US Congressional Research Service, “Assessing NATO’s Value”, 28 March 2019, pp. 12–14, 17.

Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) was established. SEATO, however, scarcely built joint operational plans, had neither unified command nor specifically allocated unified forces.¹¹ The US DOS official website explains that the inclusion of Vietnam as a territory under SEATO protection gave the US the legal framework for its continued involvement there as the conflict in Vietnam unfolded.¹² The Treaty is still legally valid, while SEATO as an organization was formally disbanded in 1977. In fact, the US mentions the Treaty as one of the bases of the US relations with Thailand,¹³ and France also emphasizes on its document of commitment to the region that the Treaty is still valid.¹⁴

In 1951, Australia, New Zealand and the US concluded a Security Treaty (ANZUS), and Australia, Malaysia, New Zealand, Singapore and the UK signed the Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA) in 1971 following the UK's withdrawal from East of Suez, under which Australia stations the Australian Defence Force in Royal Malaysian Air Force (RMAF) Base Butterworth.¹⁵

In addition, there are different views on the fact that the US prioritized bilateral relations with Japan, the Philippines and other countries in Asia, while the US established NATO and was active in multilateral frameworks in Europe. Here, a precursory study by Hemmer and Katzenstein on *International Organization* will help to understand those backgrounds.¹⁶ The study indicates that NATO aimed at holding off a massive Soviet offensive while the US expected no large-scale offensive by either the Soviet Union or China in Asia, and the primary problem for the US in Asia was fighting communist insurgencies. It is also pointed out that the US saw their potential European allies as relatively equal members of a shared community, although saw their potential Asian allies as a part of an alien and inferior community.¹⁷ The study clarifies that in particular, the US reaction to SEATO is different from that to NATO in terms of civilization, race, ethnicity, religion and historical memories as well as Asia-firsters in the US were never as influential as their Eastern Establishment rivals identified strongly with Europeans.¹⁸

Various efforts by ASEAN and ASEAN-centric architectures of collective security

It is also necessary to pay attention to various efforts by Southeast Asian countries. The Association of Southeast Asia (ASA) was established by Thailand, the Philippines and the Federation of Malaya in 1961, and encouraged by the Vietnam War, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was

¹¹ Tatsuya Nishida, "An origin of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO): gaps between American and British military strategies in the Asia-Pacific region", *Doshisha American Studies*, No. 50, March 2014, pp. 23–45.

¹² Office of the Historian, the US DOS, "Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), 1954", [<https://history.state.gov/milestones/1953-1960/seato>].

¹³ The US clarifies that the 1954 Manila Pact of the SEATO, the Thanat-Rusk communiqué of 1962 and the 2012 Joint Vision Statement for the Thai-U.S. Defense Alliance constitute the basis of US security commitments to Thailand. The US DOS, "U.S. Relations With Thailand", [<https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-thailand/>].

¹⁴ France explains that the Collective Security Treaty in South-East Asia, known as the "Manila Treaty", signed on 8 September 1954, which remains in force even though its military organization, SEATO, was dissolved in 1977. Ministère de la Défense, *France and Security in the Asia-Pacific*, p. 8.

¹⁵ The Japanese Ministry of Defense (JMOD), ed., *Defense of Japan 2019*, p. 137. See also Tim Huxley, "Developing the Five Power Defence Arrangements", the International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1 June 2017 [<https://www.iiss.org/blogs/analysis/2017/06/fpda>].

¹⁶ Christopher Hemmer and Peter J. Katzenstein, "Why is There No NATO in Asia? Collective Identity, Regionalism, and the Origins of Multilateralism", *International Organization*, Vol. 56, No. 3, Summer 2002, pp. 575–607.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 575, 583–587.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 592–598.

established by Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand in 1967. Now it has 10 member states after participation by Brunei Darussalam in 1984, Vietnam in 1995, Laos and Myanmar in 1997, and Cambodia in 1999.¹⁹ The ASEAN leaders resolved in 2003 that an ASEAN Community shall be established, and after adoption of the ASEAN Charter in 2007, it was declared at the ASEAN Summit 2015 that they launched the ASEAN Community composed of three pillars: the Political-Security Community, the Economic Community and the Socio-Cultural Community.

ASEAN has been actively promoting regional cooperation including the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in 1994, the East Asia Summit (EAS) in 2005 and the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus) in 2010. The ADMM-Plus has 17 member states such as Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, South Korea, Russia and the US in addition to the ASEAN 10 member states, and, conducts practical activities to address security issues in the Indo-Pacific region under the ASEAN Defence Senior Officials' Meeting-Plus (ADSOM-Plus), ADSOM-Plus Working Group and 7 Experts' Working Groups.²⁰ In 2015, the ADMM-Plus reportedly abandoned the adoption of the joint declaration due to China's lobbying activities preventing agreement on the South China Sea issue.²¹ Albeit, then-chair Singapore's initiative led to adoption of the Guidelines for Air Military Encounters (GAME) in 2018,²² which indicates ASEAN has continued its efforts to maintain ASEAN centrality and unity through appropriately managing distance with non-ASEAN member states.²³

Of course, unlike NATO and the European Union, the ASEAN Political and Security Community has not yet reached a stage of establishing a permanent joint force or creating a common operational plan for military activities. In that respect it still has challenges to address as a collective security framework.²⁴ Nevertheless, it is clear that it functions to some extent as a regional architecture. Deputy Secretary Biegun's remarks such as "the Indo-Pacific region is actually lacking in strong multilateral structures" indicate a direct denial of those efforts so far by the countries concerned, including ASEAN and the US under the ASEAN-led architectures; which the US is in fact participating still now, which is unavoidable to be blamed for thoughtlessness.

¹⁹ MOFA, *Nihon to ASEAN [Japan and ASEAN]*, March 2020, p. 1 [<https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/files/000305625.pdf>].

²⁰ JMOD, ed., *Defense of Japan 2020*, pp. 373–375.

²¹ "Minami sina kai: beichuu no tairitsu ga ASEAN kakudai kokubosho kaigi demo...irei no 'kyodo sengen fusaitaku' no uchimaku" [South China Sea: US-China confrontation at the ADMM-Plus...an inside story of the unusual 'joint declaration not adopted?], NewSphere, 5 November 2015 [<https://newsphere.jp/world-report/20151105-3/>]. See also Yeganeh Torbati and Trinna Leong, "ASEAN defense chiefs fail to agree on South China Sea statement", Reuters, 4 November 2015 [<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-asean-malaysia-statement-idUSKCN0ST07G20151104>].

²² JMOD, ed., *Defense of Japan 2019*, pp. 377–378.

²³ Regarding the ASEAN centrality and unity, see Tomotaka Shoji, "ASEAN no 'chushinsei': ikinai-ikigai kankei no shiten kara" [ASEAN 'centrality': from the perspective of inside and outside], *NIDS Security Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 1, October 2014, pp. 105–121.

²⁴ ASEAN continues their efforts to establish the ASEAN Militaries Ready Group on Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (AMRG on HADR) under the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM), which can be seen as an activity for a permanent joint force at the military level. See Yusuke Ishihara, "takokukan anzenhosho architecture niokeru 'synergy' gainen: ASEAN wo chushin toshita HADR kyoryoku wo tegakarini" [A concept of 'synergy' under the multilateral security architectures: indications of HADR cooperation centered on ASEAN], *NIDS Commentary*, No. 47, 24 June 2015.

Recent discussions on an “Asian NATO” in neighboring countries

How have specific countries reacted to the concept of an “Asian NATO”? Let us overview recent news in the US, Australia, India, China, Taiwan and South Korea.

[The US]

In the US, Bloomberg posted an article dubbed “An Asian NATO? The U.S. Has Better Options for Its Allies”. It emphasized importance of the US existing set of relationships with Japan, Australia and India, greater coordination on combating Chinese political warfare, and stronger collective efforts to limit dependencies on Chinese money and markets.²⁵ *Newsweek* bluntly explained that the US failed at establishing SEATO as an Asian NATO, and citing expert opinions, pointed out the necessity to turn to the TPP and to focus on dealing with China-related economic issues while it mentioned SEATO prompting criticism that it was another Western colonial venture replacing the imperial system.²⁶

National Review also emphasizes the necessity to understand the nature of contest with China and explains, “If the Quad is to be a fixture of the free world’s defense against Chinese authoritarianism, it must take the form of a network that suits the nature of this contest, not of the last century’s Cold War”.²⁷

Thus, public opinion has been active that the US should confront China based on the bipartisan support beyond the differences between liberal and conservative. It can be seen, however, that there are not necessarily many positive opinions that existing frameworks including Quad might develop into stronger architectures like NATO.

[Australia]

In 2019, a think tank of Australia released the article of “Why the Quad won’t ever be an Asian NATO”, which showed skeptical views on the Quad’s further development.²⁸ Another think tank points out, “While there are important differences among the four countries on threat perceptions, military capability, strategic priority, capacity to bear the costs of potential retaliation, strategic culture and constitutional imperatives, these differences place limitations on Quadrilateral cooperation, but do not preclude it,” and estimates “[d]espite the COVID-19 shock and the domestic upheavals and distractions it poses, this cooperation will continue to deepen”.²⁹

It also attracts some interests that Australian media reported at their article on Australia's Foreign Minister Payne’s visit to Singapore after the Second Japan-Australia-India-U.S. Foreign Ministers’ Meeting that neither foreign minister’s office nor department would comment on Secretary Pompeo’s comments on

²⁵ “An Asian NATO? The U.S. Has Better Options for Its Allies”, Bloomberg, 24 September 2020 [<https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2020-09-23/an-asian-nato-u-s-has-better-options-for-its-allies-and-china>].

²⁶ “Could Pompeo's Anti-China Alliance Work? SEATO—Asian NATO—Failed Before”, *Newsweek*, 31 July 2020 [<https://www.newsweek.com/mike-pompeo-anti-china-alliance-work-seato-asian-nato-failed-before-1521977>].

²⁷ Jimmy Quinn, “An Asian NATO?” National Review, October 7, 2020 [<https://www.nationalreview.com/2020/10/an-asian-nato/>].

²⁸ Andrew O'Neil and Lucy West, “Why the Quad won’t ever be an Asian NATO”, the Strategist, Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 24 January 2019 [<https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/why-the-quad-wont-ever-be-an-asian-nato/>].

²⁹ Lavina Lee, “Assessing the Quad: Prospects and limitations of quadrilateral cooperation for advancing Australia’s interests”, Lowy Institute, 19 May 2020 [<https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/assessing-quad-prospects-and-limitations-quadrilateral-cooperation-advancing-australia>].

an Asian NATO.³⁰

[India]

Prior to Deputy Secretary Biegun's remarks, an Indian economic newspaper released an article of "Can the Quad rise to be an Asian NATO?" and pointed out the necessity that the US must take the lead for reducing the dependence on China and ASEAN will need to be roped.³¹

On the other hand, External Affairs Minister Jaishankar emphasized in July, that India would never be a part of an alliance,³² and an Indian former diplomat pointed out that India gains nothing from an "Asian NATO".³³

[China]

Hu Bo, Director of the Center for Maritime Strategy Studies at Peking University, contributed to the Global Times, an international issue newspaper affiliated with the Chinese Communist Party's organ "People's Daily" on 9 September. His article concludes, "an 'Asian NATO' will cause considerable strategic pressure and a policy dilemma for China, so we should strengthen our hedging ability and position", after pointing out, "an 'Asian NATO' still has some inherent obstacles".³⁴ As an assumption, he also mentioned three problems: the Indo-Pacific region seeing greater differences in political systems, cultural and religious differences were great than those in Western Europe and the North America; geopolitical integration in the Indo-Pacific was extremely difficult; and the "Quad Strategic Concept" overemphasized the role of Japan, Australia and India, leading to denting the pride and enthusiasm by regional powers like South Korea and Indonesia.

[Taiwan]

The Taipei Times, close to the Democratic Progressive Party, welcomes an Asian NATO citing Deputy Secretary Biegun's remarks on the article as it analyses, "The US' desire to establish an 'Asian NATO' with its partners in the region presents Taiwan with a strategic opportunity that must be grasped".³⁵

Meanwhile, the United Daily News, pro-Chinese Nationalist Party and reportedly intimate with

³⁰ "Marise Payne flies to Singapore to further Quad agenda", the Australian, 8 October 2020 [https://www.theaustralian.com.au/world/marise-payne-flies-to-singapore-to-further-quad-agenda/news-story/5fc77226ce10bb94906aff594d3c52f5].

³¹ J Srinivasan, "Can the Quad rise to be an Asian NATO?" The Hindu Business Online, 16 July 2020 [https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/opinion/can-the-quad-rise-to-be-an-asian-nato/article32103609.ece].

³² "India will never be a part of an alliance system, says External Affairs Minister Jaishankar", the Hindu, 20 July 2020 [https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-has-never-been-part-of-an-alliance-and-will-never-be-jaishankar/article32142128.ece].

³³ MK Bhadrakumar, "India gains nothing from an 'Asian NATO'", Asia Times, 4 September 2020 [https://asiatimes.com/2020/09/india-gains-nothing-from-an-asian-nato/]. The media of Asia Times as online stems from the print newspaper based in Hong Kong, but this article was published after the Law of the People's Republic of China on Safeguarding National Security in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region came into force on 30 June 2020. It is carefully necessary to bear it in mind that the article is in line with those ideas by the Chinese Communist Party and the Chinese Government.

³⁴ Hu Bo, "'Asian NATO' is difficult to achieve, but we must be highly vigilant", Global Times [胡波「“亚洲版北约”难成, 但须高度警惕」《环球时报》], 9 September 2020 [https://opinion.huanqiu.com/article/3zoAKIc4RGc].

³⁵ Yao Chung-yuan, "'Asian NATO' presents opportunity", Taipei Times, 14 September 2020 [https://taipeitimes.com/News/editorials/archives/2020/09/14/2003743368].

China, assumes a critical and skeptical attitude toward an Asian NATO. It reported, “Even if an ‘Asian NATO’ is really established, there is a great question whether it can function or not as a deterrent or preventive measure against the Chinese Communist Party’s military invasion of Taiwan”, “If Taiwan participates in an ‘Asian NATO’, Beijing would definitely determine that external parties had formally intervened in the ‘Taiwan Issue’ and invoke the Anti-Secession Law” and “It fails to deter the CCP from invading Taiwan. On the contrary, it rather facilitates or accelerates an invasion in Taiwan”.³⁶ Although it is still unclear whether this article was, or was not, influenced by China’s covert activities like the United Front Work, it is almost in line with China’s basic views that the US national power has significantly declined and it should be highly alert to an Asian NATO.

[South Korea]

Related to Deputy Secretary Biegun’s remarks, the Hankyoreh a leftist media, nervously responded. At an early stage, it reported the worries about growing demand by the US to join an Asian NATO.³⁷ Then, it posted a column entitled “The Sino-India conflict tells the fabrication of the Asian NATO” where it reported “[The US] proposed the establishment of a multilateral security cooperation organization by Quad-Plus the South Korea also joins in”. Thus, it showed a rushed report that was not true to the facts, although there was no concrete proposal yet.³⁸ It denied the South Korea’s participation in a “phantom of an Asian NATO” at the bottom of the column. While the centre-right Chosun Online reported Biegun’s remarks more factually than Hankyoreh, it emphasized that the South Korea as a member of Quad-Plus would also join in the Quad as if it were an exact equivalent to Japan, the US, Australia and India.³⁹

Korean Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-wha, a public signatory of the Moon Administration, attended a video teleconference hosted by a US nonprofit organization and reportedly said on Quad “[it is] not a good idea”.⁴⁰

The phrase of an “Asian NATO” and its double meaning

As mentioned above, there are many negative opinions and views about the name and the actual situation of an “Asian NATO”. Nonetheless, a senior official of the Department of State uses this phrase, behind which there is a reason the US has formed NATO-based foreign relations with some specific countries and designated an original status for them as well as it is confidence on their successful

³⁶ “World Journal reported: ‘Asian NATO’ imperatively brings new changes for the Indo-Pacific security situation”, United Daily News [「世界日報社論／「亞洲北約」勢在必行 印太安全新變局」『聯合新聞網』], 24 September 2020 [https://udn.com/news/story/6809/4884672].

³⁷ “Beikoku ‘higashi Asia ban NATO’ wo kasokuka: ‘Quad Plus’ heno atsuryoku, kankoku no sentaku wa” [The US accelerates an ‘East-asian NATO’: pressured into ‘Quad Plus’, and what is the South Korea’s choice?], Hankyoreh, 10 September 2020 [http://japan.hani.co.kr/arti/politics/37718.html]. But, Deputy Secretary Biegun didn’t mention “East Asia” at all in his remarks.

³⁸ “Column: chuin funso wa ‘Asian NATO’ no kyokosei wo kataru” [Column: the Sino-India conflict tells the fabrication of the Asian NATO], Hankyoreh, 22 September 2020 [http://japan.hani.co.kr/arti/opinion/37822.html].

³⁹ “Bei kokumu fukuchokan ‘Indo-Pacific kokusai kiko wa Quad de hajimaru’” [The US Deputy Secretary of State, “Indo-Pacific international organization starts from ‘Quad’”], Chosun Online, 2 September 2020 [http://www.chosunonline.com/site/data/html_dir/2020/09/02/2020090280004.html].

⁴⁰ “Kang Kyung-wha gaisho, beikoku no Quad ni ‘yoi idea dewa nai’” [Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-wha on the US’ Quad “not a good idea”], Chosun Online, 26 September 2020 [http://www.chosunonline.com/site/data/html_dir/2020/09/26/2020092680002.html].

experiences with NATO.

Since 1989, the US has given 17 countries, including Japan, “Major Non-NATO Ally Status” (MNNA),⁴¹ which “provides foreign partners with certain benefits in the areas of defense trade and security cooperation under US law”.⁴² These countries in the region include Australia, Japan, South Korea, New Zealand, the Philippines and Thailand. Taiwan, without formal designation as such, is treated as an MNNA. In the so-called Quad-Plus, Vietnam participates in, so it deserves greater attention whether the US will designate it, or not, as an MNNA status for Vietnam soon.

The US seems to refer to an “Asian NATO” as a projection of its own image of NATO bearing the MNNA in mind when it intends to promote multilateral cooperation citing NATO.

It is well known that India has a non-aligned policy up to now, and the US has not actually designated the MNNA status for India. They, however, have concluded several agreements to enhance substantial security cooperation such as General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) in 2002, Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) in 2016, and Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA) in 2018. During Deputy Secretary Biegun’s visit to India for the third annual US-India 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue, he stated “We do not seek to change India’s traditions”.⁴³

On the other hand, many countries have a negative impression of the term “Asian NATO”. This is because considering the fact that NATO’s enemy was the former Soviet Union during the Cold War, an “Asian NATO” established in the region will obviously target China, which causes strong warnings toward China.⁴⁴ In particular, for several countries including many ASEAN members, which attach importance to economic relations with China, participation in an “Asian NATO” brings a risk of confronting China in a militarily inferior position,⁴⁵ and results in considerable loss of profits in economic, trade, technology and infrastructure sectors through China’s estrangement from its Belt and Road Initiative.⁴⁶

In addition, the metaphor of an “Asian NATO” has controversial problems. At first, the more

⁴¹ The US DOS, “Major Non-NATO Ally Status”, 30 January 2020 [<https://www.state.gov/major-non-nato-ally-status/>].

⁴² Its website also emphasizes, “While MNNA status provides military and economic privileges, it does not entail any security commitments to the designated country”.

⁴³ “U.S. says “Quad’ nations ready to work with others for free, open Indo-Pacific”, Reuters, 13 October 2020 [<https://www.reuters.com/article/india-usa/u-s-says-quad-nations-ready-to-work-with-others-for-free-open-indo-pacific-idINKBN26X2AT>].

⁴⁴ In fact, Asia Times stresses a plan of the “Asian NATO” was “stillborn” at the Second Japan-Australia-India-US Foreign Ministers’ Meeting on 6 October. “‘Asian NATO’ plan stillborn at Tokyo Quad meet”, Asia Times, 9 October 2020 [<https://asiatimes.com/2020/10/asian-nato-plan-stillborn-at-tokyo-quad-meet/>].

⁴⁵ There are some countries like Cambodia that positively accepts China’s engagement. Last year, Cambodia reportedly allowed China’s access to the Ream Naval Base in return for construction of port facilities. It is identified that the facilities built by the US and equipped by Australia were demolished as well as land reclamation continues by Chinese companies. “Deal for Naval Outpost in Cambodia Furthers China’s Quest for Military Network”, The Wall Street Journal, 22 July 2019 [<https://www.wsj.com/articles/secret-deal-for-chinese-naval-outpost-in-cambodia-raises-u-s-fears-of-beijings-ambitions-11563732482>]. See also, “Changes Underway at Cambodia’s Ream Naval Base”, 2 October 2020 [<https://amti.csis.org/changes-underway-at-cambodias-ream-naval-base/>].

⁴⁶ For example, it is reported that Laos, seeing Chinese high-speed railway opens by the end of 2021, is put on the brink of default. Reportedly, Laos is set to cede majority control of its electric grid to a Chinese company, as it struggles to stave off a potential debt default. Sebastian Strangio, “Laos Stumbles Under Rising Chinese Debt Burden”, the Diplomat, 7 September 2020 [<https://thediplomat.com/2020/09/laos-stumbles-under-rising-chinese-debt-burden/>]. See also, “EXCLUSIVE-Taking power: Chinese firm to run Laos electric grid amid default warnings”, Reuters, 4 September 2020 [<https://jp.reuters.com/article/china-laos-idUKL8N2FW068>].

frequently the US and other countries refer to an “Asian NATO”, the more political pretexts are provided for China, such as “the US leads the New Cold War” or “China and related countries should take necessary means for self-defense”, in accordance with China’s own criticism against the US as “hegemony” or “Cold War mentality”.⁴⁷ Secondly, it has been pointed out that both China and Russia have a sense of military hostility toward the term “Asian NATO”, and discussion on an “Asian NATO” further stimulates them, justifying military expansion and strengthening of military cohesion.⁴⁸

Thirdly, the utterance of an “Asian NATO” not only directly denies those efforts by ASEAN, but also forms a terrible political risk that undermines ASEAN centrality and unity through intentionally drawing an exact line of demarcation between friends and foes.⁴⁹ In other words, using the term “Asian NATO” leads to entirely ignoring ASEAN’s regional ownership.

Conclusion: the phrase of an “Asian NATO” will fade away as the “Indo-Pacific” concept focuses on convergence in ASEAN-centricity

On 6 October, Secretary of State Pompeo emphasized that his purpose of visiting Japan is to confirm the Indo-Pacific enjoys freedom, openness and rule of law among the foreign ministers of the US, Japan, India and Australia. He also mentioned that it is important for not only four countries but also the whole region including ASEAN to address those issues.⁵⁰

At a public debate in September 2020 before taking office, Prime Minister SUGA clearly pointed out on Asian NATO, “there is a major difference between the situation in Europe where NATO-type alliances are functioning and the current situation in Asia”, and “in particular an Asian NATO seems to have no choice but to become an encircling network against China in the midst of US-China confrontation”.⁵¹ Furthermore, he explained, “The creation of an Asian NATO will possibly draw a line between friends and foes inside this region”, so “it is important for us to strategically promote the Free and Open Indo-Pacific based on the Japan-US alliance as the cornerstone of Japan’s diplomacy” as well as he gave a forecast that it is difficult for ASEAN to participate in the Asian NATO.

⁴⁷ The website of China Central Television (CCTV), a state-run media, reported that Rossiyskaya Gazeta, a newspaper published by the Russian Government, posted a column of “Abandon the hegemonic Cold War mentality; work together to achieve balanced development”. Its quotation also included a British researcher’s comment, “The US launched a new type of the Cold War, aiming at containing China”. “Sino-Russia Sharp View: Abandon the hegemonic Cold War mentality; work together to achieve balanced development”, CCTV News [「中俄锐评 | 摒弃霸权冷战思维 携手实现平衡发展」《央视新闻》], 23 September 2020 [<http://m.news.cctv.com/2020/09/23/ARTIO3hn1FXhLLZpU7poF7Ak200923.shtml>].

⁴⁸ Takako Ueta, “OSCE, a study on risk reduction and security dialogues: framework and practice in the organization for security and co-operation in Europe and its applicability to Asia and the Pacific”, *Social Science Research Institute monograph series*, No. 21, April 2014, p. 51.

⁴⁹ Former Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage also pointed out the similar problems at a recent interview. “Indo-Pacific cooperation can’t be exclusionary: Armitage: Former US senior official opposes ‘with us or against us’ approach”, NIKKEI Asia, 3 October 2020 [<https://asia.nikkei.com/Editor-s-Picks/Interview/Indo-Pacific-cooperation-can-t-be-exclusionary-Armitage>].

⁵⁰ “Pompeo chokan honichi no nerai wa: interview de nani wo katatta ka” [The purpose of Secretary of State Pompeo’s visit to Japan: what he told during the interview], HNK News Web, 6 October 2020 [<https://www3.nhk.or.jp/news/html/20201006/k10012651191000.html>].

⁵¹ “[Sosaisen kokai toronkai shoho] (5) Suga shi ‘Bosaisho wa tatewari ni narunodewa naika’” [Detailed report of the public debate for the Liberal Democratic Party’s presidential election (5): Mr. SUGA “the Ministry for Disaster Prevention seems to descend into bureaucratic sectionalism”], the Sankei Shimbun Web, 12 September 2020 [<https://www.sankei.com/politics/news/200912/plt2009120030-n2.html>].

Thus, Japan and the US have already shared the view of ASEAN's importance, and during the Second Japan-Australia-India-U.S. Foreign Ministers' Meeting, the four Ministers reaffirmed their strong support for ASEAN's unity and centrality, and they also reaffirmed their full support for the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific.⁵²

Besides, at the Japan-Vietnam Summit Meeting on 19 October, Prime Minister SUGA said that the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP), and the Free and Open Indo-Pacific, have much in common, and stated that Japan fully supports the AOIP. Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc stated the support for the AOIP in line with the FOIP.⁵³ Prime Minister SUGA also made a speech of "Building together the future of Indo-Pacific" at the Vietnam-Japan University where he again stressed his strong support for the AOIP after touching on ASEAN centrality and unity.⁵⁴

These facts imply that Japan, the US, Australia and India will support those efforts by the whole region centered on ASEAN, as regional states enhance future cooperation under the FOIP vision, and that the cooperation ultimately leads to convergence in ASEAN-centricity. This cooperation would inevitably foster a sense of solidarity with the FOIP, hence the words of "Indo-Pacific" and "ASEAN" will come to the fore as phrases with a positive political impact. There will no longer be any room for the double-edged phrase of an "Asian NATO" to appear on the stage, and it will fade away sooner or later.

Parallel to these efforts, it is necessary to promote cooperation with quietness in a practical manner among Japan, the US, Australia and India, whether it is called a Quad or something else like AIJUS (the collected acronym of those countries). For example, at the US-India 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue on 27 October, they concluded the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA).⁵⁵ Then-US Secretary of Defense Esper highly appreciated the BECA which enabled them to share greater geospatial information.⁵⁶ Consequently, it is expected that the Quad will also enhance further cooperation in the intelligence domain in the near future, since Japan has already concluded an information security agreement with the US, Australia and India.

Focusing on relations with ASEAN, Japan has already continued cooperation in various fields founded on strong respect for ASEAN. In November 2016, the Japanese Ministry of Defense announced the "Vientiane Vision" as guidelines for Japan-ASEAN defence cooperation, which was welcomed by all ASEAN member states.⁵⁷ In 2019, it was updated to "Vientiane Vision 2.0" where resilience was added to ASEAN centrality and unity.⁵⁸ It deserves paying attention to further deepened Japan-ASEAN defence

⁵² MOFA, "Dai 2 kai nichibeigoin gaisho kaigo".

⁵³ MOFA, "Nichi-Vietnam shuno kaidan" [Japan-Viet Nam Summit Meeting], 19 October 2020 [https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/s_sa/sea1/vn/page1_000888.html].

⁵⁴ MOFA, "Nichitsu daigaku niokeru suga soridaijin speech daimei: 'Tomoni tsukuru Indotaiheiyo no mirai'" [Speech by Prime Minister Suga at the Vietnam-Japan University: building together the future of Indo-Pacific], 19 October 2020 [https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/s_sa/sea1/vn/page3_002894.html].

⁵⁵ "2+2 dialogue: India, US sign crucial agreement on geo-spatial intelligence", the Indian Express, 27 October 2020 [<https://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-us-22-dialogue-beca-pompeo-esper-rajnath-jaishankar-6897216/>].

⁵⁶ The United States Department of Defense, "Esper Praises Results of U.S., Indian Meeting", 27 October 2020 [<https://www.defense.gov/Explore/News/Article/Article/2395589/esper-praises-results-of-us-indian-meeting/>].

⁵⁷ JMOD, "Vientiane Vision: nichi ASEAN boei kyoryoku initiative" [Vientiane Vision: Japan's Defense Cooperation Initiative with ASEAN] [<https://www.mod.go.jp/j/approach/exchange/dialogue/j-asean/vientianevision/index.html>].

⁵⁸ Ibid.

cooperation in addition to development of defence cooperation among Japan, the US, Australia and India, inter alia, exemplified in Australia's participation in the multilateral naval exercise "Malabar 2020" among Japan, the US and India.⁵⁹

The 2020 Japan-Australia Defense Ministers Kishi/Reynolds Joint Statement on Advancing Defence Cooperation on 19 October 2020 has been silent on whether they formed, or not, some sort of consensus on defence cooperation with ASEAN. The Australian Department of Defense declared "Australia's 2020 vision for defence engagement with ASEAN" in February 2020. Therefore, it should be encouraged that it will be closely aligned with the "Vientiane Vision 2.0" at the earliest stage through mutual sharing of views and preparation for joint implementation of projects.⁶⁰

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⁵⁹ Australian Government Department of Defence (AUS DOD) "Australia to participate in Exercise Malabar 2020", 19 October 2020 [<https://www.minister.defence.gov.au/minister/lreynolds/media-releases/australia-participate-exercise-malabar-2020>].

⁶⁰ AUS DOD, "Australia's 2020 vision for defence engagement with ASEAN", 20 February 2020 [<https://www.minister.defence.gov.au/minister/lreynolds/statements/australias-2020-vision-defence-engagement-asean>].