

Kishida's Visit to Washington and East Asia's 21st-Century Geopolitical Minilaterals

by Giulio Pugliese

Japanese Prime Minister Kishida Fumio's successful visit to Washington between 9 and 11 April testified to a deepening of the US-Japan alliance and important strategic shifts across the First Island Chain, which includes archipelagos stretching from the Kurils up in Northeast Asia down to the Japanese archipelago, Taiwan, the Philippines, all the way south to the Malay peninsula in Southeast Asia.

This is part and parcel of a shift in favour of a "Strategy of Denial", as per the thinking of then US Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Strategy and Force Development Elbridge Colby, a key policymaker under the Trump administration.¹ According to Colby, the US would double its efforts at balancing China, enlist US allies and partners across the First Island Chain to

buttress deterrence capabilities towards the People's Republic – including in Taiwan – and avoid a potentially domino-like process of subordination to Beijing. These efforts revolve around Japan's ability to shoulder more security responsibilities, a strengthened and more seamless US-Japan alliance – including joint operational planning over a Taiwan crisis scenario and the restructuring of portions of the US military planning to Japan – and a set of geopolitical minilaterals, within which the US-Japan alliance plays a key role.

US-Japan(-Philippines) cooperation in the security domain

Japan's three strategic documents from December 2022 and the joint statements by Japan and the US in 2023 suggest that the transpacific allies are indeed working in lockstep in the security domain, with deterrence and coercive diplomacy vis-à-vis China high in policymakers' minds. According to

¹ Elbridge A. Colby, *The Strategy of Denial. American Defense in an Age of Great Power Conflict*, New Haven/London, Yale University Press, 2021.

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these documents, Japan is about to shoulder more security responsibilities as it militarises and embraces offensive strike capabilities. In the process, Japan would ease US fatigue and work side-by-side to buttress its military and diplomatic projection – an aspect emphasised by Kishida in his speech to a joint session of the US Congress. Interestingly, Kishida's visit coincided with a trilateral Japan-Philippines-US summit, which attested to the strategic outreaches of both Washington and Tokyo to interlock the US hub-and-spokes system across the First Island Chain.

Japan's minilateral diplomacy aimed at purposeful multi-layered security ententes, often on an *ad hoc* basis, has worked in concert with the US government's regional efforts. The aim has been to balance China militarily, counter its regional and global diplomatic and economic influence, and do so "by taking full advantage of comprehensive national power, including diplomatic, defence, economic, technological, and intelligence/information capabilities", as per Japan's 2022 National Security Strategy.²

² The English language version of the strategy translates *jōhō* merely as "intelligence", but it is a broader concept that encompasses (and can be translated as) "information". In fact, the Japanese government has been particularly apt at leveraging information and intelligence to shape its strategic environment. Cfr. Japan Ministry of Defence, *Kokka anzen hoshō senryaku* [National Security Strategy], December 2022, p. 4, <https://www.cas.go.jp/jp/siryou/221216anzenhoshou/nss-j.pdf>. For the English language version see: *National Security Strategy of Japan*, December 2022, p. 3, https://www.mofa.go.jp/fp/nsp/page1we_000081.html.

This whole-of-government grand strategy walked side-by-side with the US concept of an "integrated deterrence" that leveraged allies' capabilities, including basing rights and access for the aforementioned strategic objectives. The force posture and – to all effects – military doctrine changes in Japan have gone hand in hand with increases of US basing rights in both Japan and the Philippines and through enhanced bilateral military cooperation with Manila.

Developments in the Taiwan Strait and the creation of the MLR

While underplayed by government actors, especially so now that US-China relations have (to some extent) stabilised and public reassurances are gaining more traction, the Taiwan-specific aspects of these strategic changes are worthy of note.

From a geopolitical standpoint, Japan and the US benefit from the preservation of the status quo across the Taiwan Strait because it bottles up China's advancement into the seas within the First Island Chain and facilitates the tracking of Chinese military assets venturing beyond it, including intercontinental ballistic missiles, ships and submarines. In fact, as mentioned, the Japanese government has been discreetly overhauling its security regime, military doctrine and force posture to preserve a modicum of military balance of power, even just asymmetrically, to deter Chinese aggression.

In parallel, the US government has been providing Taiwan with weapons,

training and ways to bolster resilience along its newfound emphasis on asymmetric deterrence across the First Island Chain, while eliciting coalition-building with and among third parties, including NATO allies.

Japan's interlinkage of its own security with Taiwan's is evident in US-Japan alliance developments in 2023. On 11 January 2023, the Japan-US "2+2" meeting of foreign and defence ministers was held in Washington during which both governments announced that "the 12th Marine Regiment w[ould] be reorganized into the 12th Marine Littoral Regiment by 2025", a move aimed at "strengthen[ing] alliance deterrence and response capabilities by positioning more versatile, resilient, and mobile forces with increased intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance, anti-ship, and transportation capabilities".³ This initiative dovetailed with the expansion of the US-Philippines Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement to allow for four new US bases in key spots across the First Island Chain, thus increasing from five to nine, with more possibly in store to allow for rotational deployments.

Effectively, the Marine Littoral Regiment (MLR), made up of ca. 1,800-2,000 servicemen, will split into smaller teams of 50-100 soldiers to allow for intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) of Chinese activities across the East and South China Seas by deploying unmanned

surface, underwater and aerial vehicles. Hence, in a contingency, these US amphibious teams in Japanese and the Philippines' territory may distribute maritime operations (that is, disperse lethal forces) through anti-ship missiles and low-altitude defence systems, all while theoretically hopping from island to island every 48 to 72 hours to avoid Chinese attacks, while continuing to conduct ISR and fight. These so-called "stand-in forces", which will have to rely on Japanese military and/or civilian facilities (and, potentially, on Japan's direct military involvement), may well disrupt a Chinese blockade or amphibious landing on Taiwan and facilitate logistical support to the self-governed island. Finally, and in connection to that, a Japan-Philippines Reciprocal Access Agreement, which is currently under negotiation, would strengthen the Tokyo-Manila security side of the newly born trilateral.

Enlisting the Republic of Korea

Aside from the US-Japan alliance preparations for a Taiwan contingency and coordination with the Philippines, minilateral alignments have gone through the enlisting of the Republic of Korea (RoK), better known as South Korea. The advent of the conservative Yoon Suk-Yeol presidency translated into a stronger RoK alignment with the US and its goals. In fact, an Indo-Pacific Strategy was announced in December 2022. Yoon Suk-Yeol specifically assigned its development to the North America Affairs Bureau of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, suggesting a desire to align with Washington. Aided by his forceful character as a former prosecutor, Yoon single-handedly

³ US and Japan, *Joint Statement of the Security Consultative e Committee ("2+2")*, 11 January 2023, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/100444894.pdf>.

abandoned his predecessor Moon Jae-in's engagement policy towards the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), aka North Korea, and aligned more fully with the United States on the China and Russia dossiers, so much so that it "indirectly" supplied more artillery shells to Ukraine than all European countries combined. Yoon's decision to tilt on one side of the conflict in Ukraine was not a foregone policy choice given the influence and leverage that Russia and China may exert over their North Korean neighbour, which constitutes Seoul's main foreign and security policy preoccupation. These developments cemented the idea of a progressive rift among competitive blocs, following Russia's 2022 war of aggression in Ukraine.

More importantly, and through active US intercession under the Biden administration, the South Korean government took the initiative in perhaps the hardest foreign policy call: reprising dialogue with Japan. This had soured over a negative spiral of disputes over the legacy of past colonial occupation and economic retaliation, especially in 2019. Kishida's mellower public persona and more conciliatory political background compared to his immediate predecessors in Japan's Prime Minister's Office, the late Abe Shinzō in particular, partly smoothed the road. But there were no meaningful concessions from the Japanese government's side, not least because of Kishida's unpopularity and, crucially, the weight of nationalists within his own Liberal Democratic Party (LDP).

Still, the stabilisation of Japan-RoK relations – two major US allies –

ushered the way for the landmark trilateral US-Japan-RoK cooperation, as evidenced by the Camp David summit of 18 August 2023.⁴ There too, minilateral cooperation expanded horizontally to include the diplomatic, educational and technological fields. But the key "integrated deterrence" outcomes were in security, through expanded intelligence sharing, missile defence and strengthened cybersecurity coordination. More importantly, the three documents released at the summit aimed at regularising security consultations, routinising trilateral meetings, both at the summit and working level, and diversifying and expanding their remit beyond North Korea to include food security, economic security and, importantly, China.

The potential benefits of minilateralism

Through these arrangements, first and foremost, the US government aimed at an institutionalisation of US-RoK-Japan cooperation, thus inter-locking the region's most powerful, prosperous and technologically advanced US allies. It did so with an eye on binding South Korea and Japan into cooperation into the future, as successive governments in either country may not be as sympathetic to their counterpart across the sea as the current ones (especially Yoon's). The routinisation of trilateral

⁴ Japan, RoK and US, *The Spirit of Camp David: Joint Statement of Japan, the Republic of Korea, and the United States*, 18 August 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/08/18/the-spirit-of-camp-david-joint-statement-of-japan-the-republic-of-korea-and-the-united-states>.

cooperation and coordination also aimed at damage limitation in the event of a potential Trump comeback, who would prioritise his own interests at the expense of trilateral coordination.

Second, in the context of the RoK-Japan-US minilateral, regularised avenues for dialogue were deepened at multiple levels: from Director General level up to summit meetings, which will be held at least once a year.

Third and in connection to the above, the scope of trilateral cooperation expanded notably across agencies, given the multi-layered nature of the challenges and opportunities faced by the three countries. The inauguration of a Japan-US-RoK Indo-Pacific Dialogue and of a Trilateral Framework on scientific cooperation, including defence technology, testified to this logic, not unlike other minilaterals that the Biden administration promptly revitalised or gave birth to, such as the Quad with Australia, India and Japan, or AUKUS with Australia and the UK (soon to include, perhaps, Japan and Canada in one of their two pillars of cooperation). Japan-US-RoK cooperation, however, promised to go deeper with new dialogues or plans on common or coordinative frameworks aimed at combating North Korea's cyber activities, stifling disinformation and promoting humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HA/DR), as well as government financing across the Indo-Pacific (starting with the Pacific Islands), maritime, space and economic security, including the establishment of an early warning system on potential disruptions to supply chains.

Fourth, the most publicised development has been the strengthening of intelligence sharing, notably by allowing for a trilateral real-time system that linked the three countries radars tracking and evaluating missiles flying from North Korea, with potential implications also in a Taiwan contingency scenario. This may also well apply to the Philippines – although Manila was likely not as appealing as Seoul's capacity in this regard. Notably, reporting has suggested that Japan was quietly beefing up military and intelligence assistance to the self-governing island, if not directly, by triangulation through the United States, and potentially with some help from South Korea as well.⁵

Looking ahead to November 2024 and beyond

While momentum has been clear, some of these mechanisms may be put to the test – especially the pledge to consult – by regional dynamics, as North Korea's bellicose behaviour toward its neighbour has been accompanied by DPRK leader Kim Jong-un's overtures towards Japan. Moreover, the Japanese government is still watchful about domestic political developments in South Korea, such as the progressive parties' electoral resounding win in the recent legislative elections (that is, a non-confidence vote against Yoon) and the South Korean Supreme Court's decision to uphold lower courts'

⁵ Kathrin Hille and Demetri Sevastopulo, "US to Link up with Taiwan and Japan Drone Fleets to Share Real-Time Data", in *Financial Times*, 8 June 2023, <https://www.ft.com/content/bde0db76-a7f8-4ecd-b5d5-03de0b5a8659>.

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orders for compensation by Japanese industries' responsible for wartime labour. Also for this reason, Tokyo is unlikely to allow South Korea into the G7 framework on a more regular basis, which is arguably also one of Washington's desiderata to buttress the rostrum of "like-minded partners". Similar hesitancies have been likely at play vis-à-vis Manila, where former President Rodrigo Duterte's daughter – the current Vice-President – may swift the pendulum away from this alignment of planets carefully engineered by the Biden administration.

Developments in US politics may affect the process too. With a second Trump presidency, the Japanese government would be again fearful of a reprise of US concessions to, and US summit diplomacy with, North Korea. This same logic may apply to the US-Japan-Philippines minilateral and other ententes that have been cajoled or blessed by Washington, such as NATO's outreach towards the Asia-Pacific, especially Japan, South Korea and Australia. A Trump redux may break apart NATO, but he might also rethink the merits of his mercenary and transactional tactics in the context of coercive diplomatic leverage towards China.

Thus, the bigger test of the "resilience" of minilateral alignments is the possible resurface of a disruptive and unilateral Trump presidency, whose transactional logic would thrive on US leverage at a bilateral level, and, perhaps, the incognita of China's staying power and of US-China strategic rivalry at large. As events unfold, the First Island Chain is and will be the place to watch

to understand the geopolitics of US-China competition.

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