



By: Tomorrow's Affairs Staff

Japan and NATO rapprochement - geography is irrelevant when interests overlap



The forthcoming NATO summit in Lithuania in July will bring together participants and guests, which was hard to imagine just a few years ago.

Finland will be a full member, perhaps even Sweden, whose candidacy still awaits the consent of Turkey and Hungary, possible after the Turkish elections on Sunday.

The two Scandinavian countries were far from NATO membership until a year and a half ago, sticking to their traditional military neutrality. The Russian aggression against Ukraine changed their doctrine overnight.

Although it has not yet been confirmed, Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida could be an important guest at the summit in the Lithuanian capital, Vilnius.

As the first Japanese leader at the Alliance's highest level meeting, he attended last year's NATO summit in Madrid. But his last year's honoured guest and partner role could be even more significant and formal this year.

Tokyo – NATO's hub in East Asia

NATO will soon open its liaison office in Tokyo, the first in Asia. At the same time, NATO and Japan are expected to complete work on a new cooperation agreement by the July summit.

The future NATO office in Japan is nothing unusual regarding the Alliance's cooperation with external partners. There are offices in many places: the UN, the OSCE in Vienna, Georgia, Moldova, Kuwait, and other countries.

But this is a step further in the institutionalisation of the relationship between NATO and Japan, whose partnership has a history of several decades.

The Japanese Self-Defence Forces have cooperated with the armies of NATO members in some international peacekeeping missions, for example, in the Golan Heights and Afghanistan.

Over the years, their institutional cooperation has also increased, from the agreement on information sharing in 2010, the agreement on the Individual Partnership and Cooperation Programme in 2014, and the establishment of the Japanese mission at the NATO headquarters in 2018.

Japan will not join NATO, but...

The natural "evolution" of the relationship between NATO and Japan is now accelerating, under the influence of increased security challenges in the Pacific, particularly since Russia's aggression against Ukraine.

"Ukraine today may be East Asia tomorrow", said Prime Minister Kishida last year in Singapore, leaving no doubt regarding the direction and speed of his government's security and political projections and future decisions.

Japan will not become a NATO member simply because of the Alliance's geographical limitations since its establishment.

However, none of the parties need this to recognise the overlap of their security interests and to work together to protect them.

Japan wants to play a more prominent role in ensuring international peace and global security affairs, being a natural ally of the US and other NATO partners. Japan's economic strength and political influence in the Pacific region make this country the pivot of such an alliance.

In the military sense, NATO has a powerful partner in Japan: a modern, organised and well-financed armed force with the ninth-largest budget, larger than all but the 4 largest NATO members.

Japan will soon reach the NATO guideline of 2% of GDP for defence, which many members of the Alliance are still far from meeting.

NATO has a lot to gain by strengthening ties

with Japan. First of all, economic and political authority over several countries in the region with which it has a security partnership, including India, the Philippines, and Vietnam.

Japan wants to deepen cooperation further through the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, where it is a key partner of the US, India, and Australia.

Japan needs NATO as a superior security alliance, regardless of the formal status of mutual relations.

Two-way bridge

This is a question of mutual reliance, like a two-way bridge, towards regions to which they do not physically belong - Japan towards Europe, and Atlantic partners towards the Pacific and East Asia.

“Something happening in East Europe is not only confined to the issue in East Europe, and that affects directly the situation here in the Pacific. That’s why a cooperation between us in East Asia and NATO is becoming increasingly important”, said Japanese Foreign Minister Yoshimasa Hayashi on the eve of the G7 meeting, which will be held in Hiroshima next week.

Japan's motives for rapidly strengthening ties with NATO are reminiscent of the motives of Sweden and Finland, whose turn towards NATO has been a direct consequence of Russia's aggression against Ukraine.

The security environment of Japan, but also other partners in East Asia, such as South Korea, is traditionally very complex.

With China's increasing military involvement in the region and the growing presence of its air and naval forces near Japan, a rapprochement between Japan and NATO is a logical consequence.

An even more direct motive comes from increased Russian military activity in the Pacific, particularly joint exercises with

Chinese forces, which at the time of Russian aggression against Ukraine must be viewed as a threat for which an answer must be sought that is above the current level.

That framework is NATO. It is logical, even simple. It is a consequence of aligning the interests of Japan and the most influential members of the Alliance in East Asia.