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The Emerging Security Nexus between Japan and Europe

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The weakest link of the Cold War-era 'Trilateral' (United States–Europe–Japan) partnership, the one between Japan and Europe, has become even weaker recently, reflecting the shift of gravity in the global economy. An economically stagnating Japan has become introverted. Europe, mesmerized by the rise of China, has shifted its attention away from Japan. Yet this should not make either side fail to see the strategic nexus emerging anew between Japan and Europe, NATO in particular. Of the many issues that the May 2012 NATO Summit in Chicago will address, for example, at least two—ballistic missile defence (BMD) and tactical nuclear weapons—connect Japan and NATO, if in a medium-term rather than short-term perspective. The two sides should further strengthen their dialogue on strategic issues in order to understand each other's perspective and explore the ways to deepen mutual cooperation on these issues.

Transfer of Ballistic Missile Defence Technology

The question of BMD would create a direct link between the US–Japan alliance and NATO should the United States' Phased Adaptive Approach for European BMD be implemented as proposed. This stems from the fact that a next-generation interceptor, the SM-3 Block II A, which the United States proposes to deploy in Europe in Phase 3 of the Phased Adaptive Approach, is being co-developed by the United States and Japan. Transfer of the co-developed interceptors to third parties such as European NATO members, should it become necessary, would require the Japanese government's prior consent. Tokyo's announced criteria for consent are that such a transfer would contribute to international peace and stability, and that the third parties would prevent any further transfer of the interceptor.

How to promote BMD programmes in Europe is primarily a matter to be decided within NATO. But it is politically important for Tokyo to be kept informed and, as necessary, consulted about NATO debates and the US/NATO–Russia talks on possible NATO–Russia missile defence cooperation.

Russia's Tactical Nuclear Weapons and the Strategic Balance in Asia

Russia's tactical, or non-strategic, nuclear weapons are another matter of mutual concern for Japan and NATO, although their concerns are different in acuteness. Most Russian tactical nuclear weapons, the unknown number of which is roughly estimated to range between 2,000 and 5,500, are assumed to be deployed or stored in the European parts of Russia, posing potential threats to many NATO members. The 200 US nuclear gravity bombs that are stored in five European NATO member countries have also become a subject of public debate within NATO from the viewpoint of nuclear disarmament.

By contrast, the question of Russian tactical nuclear weapons per se has attracted little political attention in Japan. Relying entirely on US deterrence strategy in countering threats of nuclear weapons, Japan's interest has been focused on the credibility of the United States' extended nuclear deterrence and the overall strategic balance between the two nuclear superpowers. Japan is more concerned about North Korea's nuclear weapons and missile development and the growth of China's military power, including nuclear forces.

China compounds prospects for reductions of Russian tactical nuclear weapons. On the one hand, reductions of Russian tactical nuclear weapons that are deployed or stored in Asia would not be attainable without taking into account the strategic balance, including China. On the other hand, it is unlikely that China will engage in nuclear arms reduction talks until the two nuclear superpowers have further reduced their nuclear stockpiles below the level of the new START.

There is no doubt that reductions of Russian tactical nuclear weapons would be essential for deeper cuts in US and Russian nuclear arsenals. Japan should therefore support an initiative by the United States and NATO to engage Russia in negotiations with the aim of reducing tactical nuclear weapons in the European theatre, as long as the negotiations would not entail the increase of Russian nuclear weapons east of the Urals. The shift of Russian tactical nuclear weapons to Asia would add to, if politically rather than militarily, security concerns in Asian countries and make already difficult nuclear disarmament in the region more difficult.

Promising Proposals from the Munich Security Conference

However, the Strategic Concept adopted at NATO's Lisbon Summit in 2010, which sought Moscow's agreement to relocate its tactical nuclear weapons 'away from the territory of NATO members', fell short of what Japan had expected from NATO: a global perspective from which to address the issue of nuclear weapons. Against this backdrop, it is encouraging that both of the two proposals made at the last Munich Security Conference on tactical nuclear weapons underlined the importance of avoiding the relocation to the east of the Urals of the Russian weapons that are now deployed or stored in Europe.

The first of these proposals was made by the Global Zero NATO–Russia Commission, which is co-chaired by former US ambassador Richard Burt, retired Russian Colonel General Victor Esin, former German ambassador Wolfgang Ischinger and the British Member of Parliament Sir Malcolm Rifkind. The Global Zero NATO–Russia Commission operates under the umbrella of Global Zero, an international movement for the elimination of nuclear weapons. It stressed in its proposal to remove US and Russian tactical nuclear weapons from European combat bases that Russian weapons should be relocated to the national storage facilities west of the Urals that were marked on the map shown at the conference.

The second proposal was made by the Working Group on Nonstrategic Nuclear Weapons of the Euro-Atlantic Security Initiative (EASI). The Working Group, chaired by former US ambassador Steven Pifer, also emphasized that the relocation of non-strategic nuclear warheads 'should be to sites deeper in Russia but west of the Urals to avoid raising concern in China, Japan, and other Asian states'. The EASI is a project of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and is co-chaired by Ischinger, former Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov and former US Senator Sam Nunn.

These proposals, however, remain to be adopted as NATO's official position. It is strongly hoped that the forthcoming NATO Summit in Chicago will make it clear that any future arrangements concerning US and Russian tactical nuclear weapons in Europe should not add to security concerns in Asia.

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