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Japanese Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba is a proponent of a collective defence system in Asia to counter China. Its appeal is not so clear for Southeast Asia, say RSIS' Benjamin Ho and SMU's William A Callahan.



Japan's new Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba speaks during a press conference at the prime minister's office in Tokyo, Japan on Oct 1, 2024. (Photo: Yuichi Yamozaki/Pool via Reuters)

Shigeru Ishiba, who became Japan's new prime minister on Tuesday (Oct 1), surprised many with his proposal of an Asian NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) in a commentary penned for the Hudson Institute in September.

In his words, "Ukraine today is Asia tomorrow". Mr Ishiba drew parallels between the actions of China to those of Russia, as well as between Taiwan and Ukraine. In his view, the "absence of a collective self-defence system like NATO in Asia means that wars are likely to break out because there is no obligation for mutual defence".

Would an Asian NATO help to safeguard and preserve the peace and stability of the region, or would it result in escalating tensions?

WHY ASIAN NATO IS GOOD FOR JAPAN

It is not difficult to see why an Asian NATO appeals to Japan – it would serve Japanese defence requirements well.

The Japanese Constitution, particularly Article 9, permits only the use of minimum necessary force to defend the territory and population of Japan, and not others. Its military after World War II is known as the Self-Defense Forces. In the event of conflict in the region, Japan cannot be involved unless its own territory and citizens are under risk of being attacked.

The only other instance Japan can resort to military force to defend others is if its ally - the United States - was being attacked. Given that this is very unlikely, Tokyo's hands are essentially tied by its own Constitution - which was written by the United States no less.

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Japan has effectively no ability to act preemptively, including possessing a first-strike capability if it feels it is being threatened.

Having an Asian NATO arrangement, however, would allow the Japanese greater leeway to be involved in other Asian geopolitical hotspots without contravening its own Constitution. In short, Tokyo could be in greater control of its own destiny without being overly dependent on Washington's agenda or priorities.

HOW NATO WORKS IN EUROPE

Of course, any assessment of an Asian NATO needs to appreciate how NATO works in Europe.

NATO's emergence in 1949 marked the beginning of the Cold War, which was a dramatic change from how the US and the Soviet Union cooperated to defeat Nazi Germany in World War II. NATO's first secretary-general Hastings Ismay famously said that NATO was created to "keep the Soviet Union out, the Americans in, and the Germans down".

As part of Washington's containment policy, NATO worked not just to defend its member countries, but also to check the spread of communism.

Not everyone was convinced. Then French president Charles de Gaulle wanted more autonomy from the US, and withdrew France from NATO's unified military command in 1966. While Paris returned to NATO in 2009, current French President Emmanuel Macron envisions a European military that is independent of the US.

At the end of the Cold War with the democratic revolutions in Eastern Europe in 1989 and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, many people felt that NATO's anti-communist mission was redundant.

Curiously, NATO was able to reinvent itself to promote democracy and security even in the absence of an overwhelming Soviet threat, including military operations in the Balkans, the Middle East, South Asia and Africa.

Even so, there are still many doubters in Europe, who wonder whether the US can be trusted to live up to its NATO commitments – especially if Donald Trump becomes president again after the US election in November. The United Kingdom, which is an island nation like Japan, remains the most enthusiastic supporter of NATO.

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WHAT ABOUT SOUTHEAST ASIA?

Mr Ishiba's view of an Asian NATO has already been rejected by Washington. It is also unlikely to find strong support in Southeast Asia.

For one, this will bring back memories of the ill-fated Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), an eight-member collective defence pact that was designed in 1955 to curb the spread of communism in Southeast Asia (though Thailand and the Philippines were the only Southeast Asia states represented then). Advocated by then US vice president Richard Nixon to be an Asian equivalent, the organisation failed to take off and unlike NATO, did not have any standing military force.

SEATO's response protocol in the event of communism to present a "common danger" to the member states was vague and ineffective, and largely only served to legitimise a large-scale US military intervention during the Vietnam War. It was officially dissolved in 1977 after member states lost interest and withdrew.

Furthermore, in the absence of clear American enthusiasm and support, it is difficult to envisage any military alliance to take off in a meaningful way, let alone efficacious in safeguarding regional security.

Many Southeast Asia countries continue to perceive Japan favourably. It is the most trusted to "do the right thing" as a major power, as evidenced in multiple iterations of the State of Southeast Asia survey by the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute. But while many would probably not mind a stronger Japanese military presence in defence relations, it is highly doubtful that any would want to be part of a military alliance that obliges them to defend Japanese interests if called upon to.

In addition, Mr Ishiba's primary justification for an Asian NATO is the threat of China, but there are differing interpretations and views of China across Southeast Asian countries. For instance, Muslim-majority countries like Malaysia and Indonesia have witnessed a swing of support towards China away from the US given the latter's support of Israel. While Tokyo's

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concerns of an aggressive China are not without support, how best to counter Beijing is less clear-cut.

Europe's past doesn't necessarily tell us much about Asia's future. Countries in the region will continue to hedge their bets and seek the best deal for themselves.

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