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ABSTRACT
The article uses Strategic Narrative Theory to explain how NATO has successfully communicated narratives of “natural partnership” and cooperative security to Japan. Japan strongly perceives NATO to be an embodiment and guarantor of global norms and international law. NATO and Japanese security commentators make a clear and consistent linkage between Russian and Chinese threats to international law respectively, as part of an extended deterrence strategy. We refer to this approach as one of “strategic parallelism.” Less positive dimensions of Japan–NATO relations are also considered: a significant majority of Japanese elite interviewees are critical of NATO’s handling of Russia and believe that this will have implications for the defense of the rule of law in the East and South China Seas. Japan has also reached out diplomatically to Russia, seeking a rapprochement that further undermines joint commitment to strategic parallelism.

Introduction
This contribution to the Special Issue assesses the past achievements, current situation and future potential for both conventional and cooperative security engagement between the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and Japan. Using the framework of strategic narrative theory, we draw extensively on findings from interviews with 30 senior Japanese opinion shapers and decision makers from the military, media, political, and academic domains to assess perceptions of this relationship within Japan. These interviews show that Japan is enthusiastic about its partnership with NATO, with regular mention of the narrative of “natural partnership,” as a result of shared commitment to values such as democracy and human rights. Japan strongly perceives NATO to be an embodiment and guarantor of global norms and international law with regard to freedom of maritime navigation, freedom of overflight, and non-aggression. In their public diplomacy, Prime Minister Abe and senior Japanese security commentators make a clear and consistent linkage between Russian threats to international law on NATO’s Eastern flank, and Chinese threats to international law in the East and South China Seas. Japan and NATO therefore have a shared political interest in robust commitment to international law as part of their extended deterrence strategies. We refer to this concept as one of “strategic parallelism.”

Less positive dimensions of Japan–NATO relations that constitute challenges to strategic parallelism and the prospects for cooperative security are also discussed. In practice, the liberal international order is coming under increased threat, and intriguing Japanese perspectives on this issue come to light through the interviews. For example, a significant majority of Japanese elite interviewees are critical both of NATO and the EU’s general handling of post-Cold War enlargement strategy, and their more specific responses to the Ukraine Crisis. They also believe that this has significant implications for the defense of the rule of law in the East and South China Seas, and therefore for the narrative of natural partnership and strategic parallelism. In practice, Japan itself has also diverged somewhat from this narrative by reaching out politically and economically to Putin’s Russia, and seeking a rapprochement that arguably undermines

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NATO’s approach towards its number one security concern. From a Japanese perspective, it is clear that the US–Japan mutual defense pact remains central to security concerns, and that recent security reforms in Japan have been enacted largely to prove to the US that Japan can be a substantial and reliable partner in the region. This notwithstanding, and finally, partnership with NATO is also viewed as adding value beyond Japan’s strong existing ties with the US. We conclude by identifying maritime cooperation and cyber security as areas of past success and future potential for NATO–Japan cooperative security relations.

Strategic narrative theory and NATO–Japan relations

Roselle, Miskimmon, and O’Loughlin identify three levels at which strategic narratives are constructed – system, identity, and issue – and three elements postulated by strategic narrative theory – formation, projection, and reception. In terms of system, both NATO and Japan face two challenges: firstly, in terms of conventional security, within the familiar “hard” realist security frame, both polities believe that their biggest respective threats come from a resurgent or rising authoritarian regional power, Russia in the case of NATO, and China in the case of Japan. Both NATO and Japan realize that most of their significant allies are democracies, and both have historically strongly perceived themselves to have benefited from the liberal international order. Furthermore, both polities realize that there are new and diverse transnational, non-traditional, multidimensional security threats to the international order. In terms of identity, for all of these reasons, it makes sense to emphasize a liberal-democratic self-identification, to position oneself as a guardian of/stakeholder in the liberal international order, and to seek alliance partnerships with other such states, for whom commitment to these goals also corresponds directly with their hard security goals. There are two issues which are in play here. The first is managing the conventional “hard” security threat that each polity faces from its significant, authoritarian regional other. The second is addressing the range of security challenges and opportunities addressed under the umbrella of cooperative security: counter-terrorism, cyber security, peacebuilding, maritime cooperation, disaster relief, etc.

We can therefore identify two strategic narratives which are in play in the context of NATO–Japan relations. The first of these is the value-oriented public diplomacy of “natural partnership” combined with “strategic parallelism.” The first of these terms is the slogan NATO and Japan have embraced to codify their shared values and security needs. The second is our name for the conceptual-strategic move entailed therein. The second narrative is that of greater cooperation with regard to non-traditional and transnational challenges to security. NATO’s name for this is “cooperative security,” while Japan’s is “proactive contribution to peace.”

The second part of the framework offered by Roselle at al. concerns formation, projection, and reception. NATO has successfully formulated and projected the message of natural partnership and strategic parallelism to Japan. In April 2013, NATO Secretary-General Rasmussen gave a major speech in Tokyo that placed great emphasis on the concept of natural partnership, which Abe received and then mirrored in his landmark speech to the North Atlantic Council in 2014. At the identity level, it is unusual for a message to be projected and received with such success. However, NATO was projecting to a state that already accepted both elements of the narrative, and was looking for ways to express this in its own public diplomacy; the Abe administration itself has a long and rich history of appealing to value-oriented diplomacy, which can be traced back to Abe’s first period in power, 2006–7. It is also the case that Abe has long wanted to revise or renew the Japanese Constitution for two reasons. The first is in order to allow Japan to be a more robust conventional ally of the US in the Asia-Pacific theatre, which is consistent with the natural partners stratégic parallelism narrative. But Abe has also wanted Japan to have the ability to make a more “proactive contribution to peace” by being able to become more substantially involved in a range of international cooperation activities. This long-held desire on Abe’s part chimes quite clearly and neatly with NATO’s attempts since 2010 to promote cooperative security and a range of strategic partnerships in the Asia-Pacific region. Accordingly, the success of NATO’s formulation and projection efforts with regard to Japan should be recognized but not overstated; Japan was ready and waiting to embrace both of these narratives, natural partnership/strategic parallelism and cooperative security, for its own reasons, and indeed had already articulated its own versions of them, as we explain in the following discussion.
More precisely, we can make a distinction between the two strategic narratives and posit that NATO’s formulation and projection attempts were more successful in the case of the natural partners/strategic parallelism narrative. Rasmussen explicitly provided Japan with a narrative hook on which to hang and articulate its shared security concerns with NATO. Here, while Japan was ready to be a receiver of the messaging, having constructed its own explicitly values-based strategic narrative in recent years, NATO clearly demonstrated an ability to formulate and project a narrative to Japan. With regard to the second narrative, within Japan most expert security interviewees (20 of 30) were not in fact familiar with the concept of cooperative security in the explicit sense that it has recently been deployed by NATO. From these responses, we can therefore infer that in the case of cooperative security, it was more Japan’s readiness and commitment to be a receiver of the cooperative security strategic narrative that was doing most of the work, rather than the inherent quality of NATO’s formulation and projection efforts per se.

So far, we have mentioned formulation, projection, and reception of strategic narratives between NATO and Japan. However, one of the performative shortcomings of the natural partners/strategic parallelism narrative is that NATO has been projecting this message to Russia, while Japan is projecting to China. In particular, NATO has failed to appreciate that Japan has a significant amount of sympathy towards Russia, partly borne of its own historical, political, and strategic needs to reach out to that country. There is also the issue of reception by Russia and China. Many Japanese interviewees felt that because NATO has been unable to respond satisfactorily to Putin over the Crimea, this has emboldened China. Furthermore, they believe that NATO’s flawed public diplomacy itself contributed significantly to the Ukraine Crisis in the first place. Other security commentators believe that Japan’s attempts at rapprochement with Russia similarly undermine the credibility of attempts by liberal states to defend the international liberal order. In their different ways, therefore, NATO and Japan have both defected from a robust defense of strategic parallelism, NATO by failing to adequately respond to Russian aggression in the Crimea in Japanese eyes, and Japan by seeking rapprochement with Putin. Both have undermined the projection of a narrative of natural partnership and strategic parallelism, and thereby also the reception of this narrative in Russia and China as a credible deterrent. These claims are discussed and defended in more detail as follows.

**Brief overview of NATO–Japan relations**

Japan is the longest standing of NATO’s “partners across the globe.” Practical cooperation has been developed in a wide range of areas, including peace-support and crisis-management activities, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, cyber defense, defense against terrorism, and non-proliferation, as well as participation in military activities. NATO and Japan signed a joint political declaration in April 2013, during the visit of NATO Secretary-General Rasmussen to Japan, and Japan concluded an Individual Partnership and Cooperation Programme (IPCP) with NATO in May 2014. Japan joined the NATO Interoperability Platform in September 2014, along with 24 other countries, including Australia, South Korea, Mongolia, and New Zealand, the other countries covered in this Special Issue.

Japan also provided significant support for the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and for reconstruction and development efforts in Afghanistan, helping to mobilize international support for Afghanistan’s ongoing development by organizing the Tokyo Conference in July 2012, and itself pledging US$5 billion over a five-year period (2009–13). Japan has supported similar Trust Fund projects in other partner countries; it is supporting an ammunition stockpile-management project in Tajikistan, the destruction of pesticides in Moldova, and the clearance of an ammunition depot in Georgia. It also contributed to a project to clear contaminated land and safely dispose of unexploded ordnance in Azerbaijan. More recently, Japan’s Maritime Self Defence Force has assisted NATO ships with preventing pirate attacks in the Gulf of Aden.

**The recent transformation of Japan’s security and defense policy**

In recent years, Japan has taken a number of significant transformative steps to “normalize” its security and defense policy. These include the strengthening of the Japan–US alliance through the dispatch of Japan’s
Self-Defense Forces (SDF) to contingencies outside of UN command in line with special laws passed in 2001 and 2003, and the development of a missile defence system in 2004. Weapons that might be construed as offensive in character have been acquired. The Japan Defense Agency was upgraded to a full ministry in 2007, and a new National Security Council and National Security Strategy were created in 2013. In 2014, Japan amended and substantially relaxed restraints on weapons exports, and perhaps most important of all, in July 2014 the Cabinet decided to reinterpret Article 9 to permit the exercise of collective self-defense. Legislation to this effect was voted through the Diet in September 2015, and enacted in March 2016.

The nature and desirability of these changes, and the type of security identity Japan ought to cultivate have been fiercely contested. For many analysts of Japanese security, the recent normalization is intended to make Japan a more credible alliance partner to the US, not give it scope to become a revisionist actor. Japan has been greatly concerned about the nature and extent of the US commitment to the Asia-Pacific region in general, and to the US–Japan mutual defense pact in particular, and these moves towards normalization are a direct attempt to mitigate any possibility of abandonment and assuage US concerns that Japan might be free-riding. As the Tokyo Foundation points out, the legislation permits Japan to engage in collective defense with the US in the region, but it still does not allow Japan the same general right of collective defense afforded to nearly all other states, as recognized and understood under international law. Nevertheless, there are critical expert voices. Hughes argues that the recent security reforms mark a “watershed moment in Japan’s development of a radical security trajectory as an alliance and international security partner.” As well as contestation at expert level, there is a substantial gap between security elites and the Japanese general public on the desirability of recent security legislation. All 30 of the senior Japanese security specialists that Bacon interviewed for the project considered it to be self-evident that the recent security legislation was necessary; even though several were prepared to be overtly critical of the Prime Minister and his current administration, they welcomed the legislation. However, when the security legislation was passed in September 2015, an Asahi poll found that 58 percent of the Japanese public oppose the bills, compared to 31 percent who support them.

“Strategic parallelism” and “normative power NATO”

There has been a steady, gradual evolution of NATO–Japan cooperation, and in this context, the Abe administration has consistently referred to shared values. Abe has explicitly linked stability in Eastern and Central Europe to stability in the Asia-Pacific: there is thus a clear strategic overlap between Japan and NATO over security concerns on what NATO thinks of as its Eastern Flank, and what the Japanese government thinks of as part the broader Eurasian “arc of freedom.” An appeal to shared values is the glue which rationalizes and underpins this sense of strategic overlap. The consistent Japanese appeal to a rules-based world order speaks to a deep interest in the protection of norms such as freedom of navigation, overflight and non-aggression, in the context of its struggles with China. We can say, therefore, that in terms of public diplomacy, Japan advances a narrative of strategic parallelism: NATO and Japan share a strategic theatre of concern in the European part of the “arc of freedom” because it is in Japan’s interests to draw parallels between threats to the liberal order there and threats to the international liberal order in the Asia-Pacific theatre in its own backyard. And this political commitment to shared norms in turn forms a key part of Japan’s attempts to pursue a policy of extended deterrence. This notion of a “normative power NATO,” as it were, and of Japan and NATO being “natural partners” therefore ties in directly with Japan’s hard security concerns in its own region. As a result of this explicit move to draw parallels, it therefore matters greatly to Japan that these norms are not weakened or over-ridden on NATO’s Eastern Flank. If commitment to these norms is weakened in Europe, there is the risk that these norms will be weakened or directly threatened in the Asia-Pacific.

“Natural partners,” “arcs of freedom,” and “democratic diamonds”

In May 2014, Prime Minister Abe gave a major speech at NATO Headquarters, responding to an earlier speech in Tokyo by NATO Secretary-General Rasmussen in April 2013, identifying Japan and
NATO as “natural partners.” He argued that “European countries are partners with which we, together with our ally the United States, share common values.”

For Abe, NATO is an alliance that “transcends the Atlantic Ocean to connect the United States and Europe, espousing the principle of an alliance based on values’ … NATO, which shares our fundamental values, is indeed our ‘natural partner.”

In order to justify our claim that strategic parallelism is a clear Japanese public diplomacy narrative, it is helpful to explicitly juxtapose passages from this landmark speech. There is a clear reference to threats on NATO’s Eastern Flank (although Russia is not directly named in this context):

the current situation in Ukraine is the greatest challenge for post-Cold War Europe. We cannot accept changes to the status quo by force or coercion. This is a global issue that also impacts Asia. (author emphasis)

Here the linkage between the two theatres is explicit in the second sentence. And in reference to the Asia-Pacific theatre, in a different section of the speech, similar phrasing is also used:

In the East and South China Sea, there have been frequent attempts to unilaterally change the status quo by force or coercion. (author emphasis)

There have been other landmark attempts to position Japan as a democracy that shares values with American and European partners through the US–Japan alliance and relations with NATO and the EU. In November 2006, during the first Abe administration, then Foreign Minister Aso gave a speech in which he stated that he wanted to develop a “value-oriented diplomacy,” and that this involved placing emphasis on “universal values” such as democracy, freedom, human rights, the rule of law, and the market economy. The two major concepts which Japan has used to promote these values are the “arc of freedom and prosperity” and the “democratic diamond.” Aso was referring to “the successfully budding democracies that line the outer rim of the Eurasian continent, forming an arc,” and noted that Japan wants to “design an ‘arc of freedom and prosperity,’” and that it is imperative to “create just such an arc.”

Aso explicitly stated that members of the arc include Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam, the three Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania), the four Visegrad states (the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia), and the four GUAM states (Georgia, the Ukraine, Azerbaijan, and Moldova), as well as Turkey and Indonesia. We can therefore see that Aso as well as Abe are linking together two strategic theatres, using the concept of democracy promotion: the Asia-Pacific and the former Soviet spaces in Western Eurasia.

Several years after the identification of the arc of freedom, and just before assuming power for a second time, in November 2012 Abe wrote an op-ed on “Asia’s Democratic Security Diamond,” in which he also repeatedly emphasized Japan’s democratic credentials:

Japan’s diplomacy must always be rooted in democracy, the rule of law, and respect for human rights. These universal values have guided Japan’s post-war development. I firmly believe that, in 2013 and beyond, the Asia-Pacific region’s future prosperity should rest on them as well.

Abe also singled out China for particular attention, arguing that the South China Sea was in danger of becoming a “Lake Beijing”:

The ongoing disputes in the East China Sea and the South China Sea mean that Japan’s top foreign-policy priority must be to expand the country’s strategic horizons. Japan is a mature maritime democracy, and its choice of close partners should reflect that fact. I envisage a strategy whereby Australia, India, Japan, and the US state of Hawaii form a diamond to safeguard the maritime commons stretching from the Indian Ocean region to the western Pacific. I am prepared to invest, to the greatest possible extent, Japan’s capabilities in this security diamond. (author emphasis)

It is important to note, as many of the interviewees pointed out, that these terms are no longer in public use. But it is equally important to note that it is commonplace that this way of thinking, and value-oriented diplomacy, continues to strongly and explicitly inform the strategic narrative of the Abe administration. For example, commitment to shared values and to the defense of the liberal international order are clearly articulated in most major Japanese government security documents, for example Japan’s National Security Strategy.
The significance of NATO’s legitimacy to Japan

When interviewees were asked what the top three security challenges facing Japan were, the overwhelmingly most popular answer was “China, North Korea, + 1”: 24 of 30 interviewees gave this answer. In other words, for respondents it was obvious that these were the first two challenges but also that other challenges were somewhat less important, including the hard security threat of Russia. As Interviewee 1 put it, “obviously the biggest threat is the rise of China, how we should deal with this burgeoning Chinese military capability. And also their increasingly assertive behavior in contingencies. In terms of personal threats to our territorial integrity, independence, in terms of very hard international security, China is the main source of concern. Ranking-wise? Maybe China, China, China!”29 This is in keeping with the narrative of strategic parallelism; China is obviously important, and the commitment to democratic values, non-aggression, and freedom of navigation is reflected in this near universal identification of China as number one threat. When asked “to what extent do you consider NATO relevant for addressing your countries security challenges,” 18 of 30 respondents argued that NATO is relevant in some significant way, but 13 of 30 argued that NATO is not relevant as a hard security actor with regard to threats posed by China and North Korea: a representative quote to this effect was given by Interviewee 2, who stated that “when it comes to dealing with the Chinese threat in the East China Sea, not many people think that NATO is relevant.”30 However, 12 of 30 interviewees argued that NATO is an important political protector of global values and norms. As Interviewee 3 put it, “Japan expects cooperation with NATO in protecting basic values, such as freedom, democracy and the rule of law.”31 Interviewee 4 further specified that “Japan should join in with NATO to consolidate important norms on security issues in the international community, and it has to be linked to G7 summits.”32 What was being consistently emphasized here by Japanese commentators is that the normative and political power of NATO is sufficiently significant that it spills over, and does in fact have an impact on “hard power” concerns in the region by buttressing the credibility of Japan’s extended deterrence strategy. NATO might not be expected to act in the region in the material sense of sending warships to fight, but this is not the only way in which NATO can have an impact. In this connection, it is worth noting that the military cohort was in fact most likely to identify NATO’s “normative power” as a (harder) strategic asset in this way, and to suggest that strategic parallelism does have an impact on hard security considerations in the Asia-Pacific. It was the media cohort that was most likely to emphasize what they saw as NATO’s lack of relevant hard power, and least likely to emphasize NATO’s normative power.

Other findings from the interviews were also consistent with the Abe administration’s articulation of shared values and identification of the normative significance of NATO. When asked what they thought was NATO’s main role in international relations, 24 of 30 respondents, a predictable and overwhelming number, identified the collective defense of NATO members as the clear priority. However, the significance of NATO’s political/normative role was also reflected in answers, with nine respondents mentioning this factor (five identifying it as the main role of NATO, four mentioning it as an important subsidiary role). Confirming NATO’s significance as a political/normative actor, 28 of 30 interviewees have a strong sense that NATO is a legitimate international actor, and 25 of 30 respondents felt that this legitimacy of NATO was important to Japan–NATO relations, in keeping again with the notion of the relationship being one of “natural partners.” As Interviewee 233 put it, “NATO is one of the guardians of the liberal international order.” When asked if Japan’s relationship with NATO was primarily political or military, 18 of 30 respondents felt that the relationship was primarily political, while 12 of 30 respondents felt that although the relationship was primarily political, there were significant military as well as political elements to the relationship. Whilst it is not anticipated that NATO would ever act militarily in the Asia-Pacific, it is argued that NATO’s political commitment to freedom of navigation, freedom of overflight, and national self-determination forms an important element of the extended deterrence strategy pursued by Japan and other status quo powers. By being opposed to abuses of freedom of navigation, NATO is thereby also committed to rules that directly protect Japan’s hard security interests in the Asia-Pacific.
Moreover, besides the central relevance of the security treaty with the US, there are also many ways in which cooperative security and strategic partnership with NATO add value. NATO is seen as a significant additional multilateral partner and as a positive model and catalyst for enhancing interoperability. Japan also welcomes the opportunity to be associated with the individual and collective diplomatic and agenda-setting power of European states. Closer and more institutionalized relations with NATO provide additional scope and pretext for intelligence-sharing, cooperation over cyber security, and for weapons sales and purchases, in a more liberalized Japanese arms sales environment. There are also increased possibilities for operational cooperation with regard to the piracy threat in the Horn of Africa, cyber security, and future peacekeeping operations. Japan sees its relations with the US, the G7, NATO, and the EU as central to the maintenance of a values-driven liberal democratic world order committed to the international rule of law.

**Beyond strategic parallelism**

However, there are a number of ways in which this rosy Japanese vision of international relations is under threat. In practice, Japan does not expect NATO to play a direct hard security role in the Asia-Pacific. Furthermore, as we show in the following, there is a strong perception among Japanese security elites that NATO and the wider West mismanaged the post-Cold War enlargement process in general, and the Ukraine Crisis in particular, leading to predictably difficult and conflictual relations with Russia. It has been claimed that the resultant mishandling of the Ukraine Crisis has demonstrated a degree of over-assertiveness, followed by weakness, which could have negative implications for the rule of law in the Asia-Pacific. Several interviewees also noted that there are interesting strategic similarities between the “hybrid warfare” tactics deployed by the Russians in the Ukraine, and the Chinese in the South China Sea.

Damagingly, despite rhetorical commitment to strategic parallelism and the rule of international law, and concern about the security implications of the Ukraine Crisis in the South and East China Seas, Japan has only been a reluctant critic of Russia, and has effectively sought a rapprochement which has undercut the political and economic significance of the sanctions regime against Russia. Moreover, President Trump’s accession to power and apparent neo-isolationist ambivalence towards NATO and the US–Japan alliance, along with his own uneven attempts at rapprochement with Russia, both threaten to significantly weaken the liberal international order.

Reflecting some of these problems and concerns, when asked to evaluate NATO’s ability to perform its role, interviewees responses were ambiguous, and indicative of the Japanese expectations deficit with regard to NATO which was mentioned above; 13 of 30 respondents argued that it was possible to view NATO as “strong,” but 8 of 30 respondents characterized NATO’s ability to perform its role as “weak.” The military cohort, interestingly, were significantly more likely to suggest that NATO is strong. As well as this general ambiguity, 11 of 30 respondents specifically mentioned the fact that NATO has many members, and therefore some important internal disagreements, and that this is a significant source of weakness. This could be seen with regard to what Japanese perceive as the difficulties which were experienced co-ordinating the NATO response to the Ukraine Crisis, with some states willing to be highly critical and punitive and other states markedly less so. This criticism is also relevant to the ongoing disputes about NATO financing, which have intensified with the inauguration of the Trump administration. It is worth noting a broader point here about the essentially intergovernmentalist perspective that Japanese (and Chinese) observers have of both NATO and the EU. Decision outputs are seen as the result of the value preferences of the strongest and strategically most significant states in these organizations, and the Japanese therefore pay great attention to cultivating their relations with these states. Accordingly, in addition to the foundational security relationship with the US, and the recent upgrading of its relationship with NATO, Japan has also intensified its political and defense relations with the UK, France, and the Baltic States.
Criticism of NATO’s enlargement and handling of the Ukraine crisis

Perhaps one of the most interesting and revealing interview findings was that Japanese respondents were highly critical of the way in which NATO handled the Ukraine Crisis but also more generally of how NATO and the EU have handled the entire enlargement and expansion process since the end of the Cold War. Seventeen of 30 interviewees argued that NATO enlargement had been positive for newly admitted member-states, but only 10 of 30 felt able to say that NATO enlargement had been positive for NATO itself. As Interviewee 5 put it, “the expansion of new partnerships went too far, to too many countries, and therefore this became the main threat towards Russia.”

Further, only nine out of 30 respondents felt that NATO enlargement had been a positive development for the NATO “zone of peace.” As Interviewee 6 noted, “After the end of the Cold War, NATO welcomed the Baltic States as new members, without getting permission from Russia. Of course, legally, NATO does not need prior permission from Russia, but Russia felt threatened by the enlargement.”

This is important in the context of the fact that Japan places great significance on value-oriented diplomacy and identities this as the basis for the fact that Japan and NATO are “natural partners.” Japanese experts saw NATO enlargement in Central and Eastern Europe as undermining this vision of the world. In fact, 24 of 30 respondents argued that there was an important negative dimension to NATO’s eastern enlargement, that the diplomatic management of Russia had been flawed, and that this mismanagement had also been an important factor in the emergence of the Ukraine Crisis. As Interviewee 3 noted:

NATO enlargement should have taken into consideration the pace of the democratization process in Russia, as well as the pace of its integration into Europe. I am not against NATO enlargement, but I am talking about the pace at which it should be done, in parallel with the developments inside Russia. That’s the element NATO could have considered better, that’s my personal view.

This sense of the negative impact and diplomatic mismanagement of Russia was strongly prevalent across all four of the interview cohorts. Further, only six of 30 respondents felt that NATO had responded effectively to the Ukraine Crisis, 10 of 30 respondents had neutral, or mixed, or no clear opinions, and 14 of 30 felt that NATO dealt with the crisis ineffectively. While Japanese were critical of the way in which NATO handled post-Cold War relations with Russia and were, to a degree, sympathetic to Russia’s situation, some respondents expressed alarm that Russia had been able to annex the Crimea as a result of the crisis, with NATO ultimately unable to do anything about this (Interviewee 7). Respondents were invited to express an opinion about what impact, if any, NATO’s management of the Ukraine Crisis would have on security in the Asia-Pacific and with regard to Japan. Nearly two-thirds of Japanese respondents felt that NATO’s inadequate response to the Ukraine Crisis would have a negative impact on security in the Asia-Pacific. Thirteen of 30 respondents felt that China would be emboldened by NATO’s response, and four of 30 felt that Russia would be emboldened. With regard to these negative implications for the South China Sea, Interviewee 6 noted that “I think China is observing very carefully what is happening in the Ukraine, and how NATO and the US respond to other issues in Europe.”

Senior Japanese observers therefore feel that the shared narrative of strategic parallelism has been undermined by events in the Crimea.

The Trump presidency and Japan’s “Russia rapprochement”

The accession to power of the Trump administration in the US has also created significant concern. Japan was initially deeply alarmed by Trump’s pronouncements on the campaign trail, questioning the validity of the US–Japan mutual defence treaty, and criticizing Japan for currency manipulation and non-tariff barriers to trade. However, Japan was reassured by the remarks of Defense Secretary Mattis in his visits to Seoul and Tokyo in early February 2017, with Mattis’ comments on this trip considered “almost perfect” from a Japanese point of view (Interviewee 2). Mattis offered a concrete commitment to Article 5 of the mutual defense treaty, and to the interpretation that a
Chinese attack on the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands would constitute an attack on Japan itself. Mattis also described Japan as “a model of cost sharing” and praised the Abe administration for increasing spending on the military. Mattis is seen as a safe pair of hands, but there remains lingering concern about the gap between what senior security officials in his administration are saying and what the President is saying. Overall, it would be accurate to say that there has been a movement from alarm, to reassurance, to cautious optimism among Japanese security commentators (Interviewee 2).

On the Trump administration’s attitude towards NATO, the signals remain mixed. In February 2017, Defence Secretary Mattis delivered an ultimatum to NATO allies, saying they must either honor military spending pledges or face the prospect of America “moderating” its commitment to NATO. Mattis did not explain what he meant by “moderating” support, but he did also express support for the alliance, saying it was a “fundamental bedrock” of US defense policy, and claimed that President Trump had “strong support for NATO.” More recently, following a meeting with current NATO Secretary-General Stoltenberg in Washington in April 2017, and in a change from his statements during the Presidential campaign, President Trump stated that NATO “is no longer obsolete.” However, overall the US messaging on NATO remains highly uneven.

Japan has sought rapprochement with Russia, also undermining the solidarity of the G7 sanctions regime towards Russia by offering very large amounts of economic assistance in the hope of territorial and political concessions, and thereby challenging the narrative of strategic parallelism. Japan has shown that it is prepared to break rank to some degree and seek rapprochement with Russia, despite being committed to and having a genuine stake in collective adherence to strategic parallelism, with regard to addressing the China threat. This is because Abe would ideally like to achieve a grand bargain with Russia, by signing a formal peace treaty and achieving some success in resolving a territorial sovereignty dispute over the southern Kurile Islands (known as the Northern Territories in Japan). This would address one of Japan’s largest existing diplomatic conundrums and also drive a wedge between China and Russia.

NATO–Japan cooperative security

Where do these challenges to strategic parallelism leave us, in terms of prospects for the second narrative of cooperative security, in the context of NATO–Japan relations? NATO’s new strategic concept, adopted at the Lisbon Summit in November 2010, sought to add a new dimension to the role of the alliance, introducing cooperative security (CS) as a new core task in addition to the existing tasks of collective defense and crisis management. CS was intended to consist of three components, including strengthening partnerships, contributing to arms control, non-proliferation and disarmament, and assisting potential new countries to prepare for NATO membership. To operationalize this new core task, NATO acts as a coordinator, involving groups of states or other international organizations with common interests. This is intended to provide frameworks for political dialogue and regional cooperation and increase military interoperability. CS is intended to be an approach to engagement which provides increased collaboration between different actors resulting in information sharing and the harmonization of resources and capabilities.

There was a significant degree of support for these partnerships among Japanese interviewees. When asked whether NATO should have a global role or whether it should focus primarily on Europe and the North-Atlantic area, 16 of 30 respondents felt that NATO’s role should be global, with 10 respondents of the view that NATO should have both a global and regional role, but with priority placed on the regional role. This is a strong endorsement of the fact that NATO is valued as a global and not just a regional actor. Continuing this positive theme, 16 of 30 respondents believe that NATO developing a series of global partnerships in the Asia-Pacific region has had a positive impact on international security. Importantly, 22 of 30 respondents feel that there is little risk of these global partnerships antagonizing China, with only eight of 30 respondents feeling that there is some risk of antagonizing China. Therefore these partnerships are perceived as having had a positive
overall impact without impacting negatively on relations with China, unlike NATO’s handling of enlargement and the Ukraine Crisis, as we saw in the aforementioned.

Outlining where common threats, risks and interests lie is key to efficient cooperation and practical engagement. As stated, China and North Korea are perceived to be the most significant conventional threats to Japan’s security. But in an increasingly complex security environment, threats can also come from non-state entities, making it very hard to define an enemy and develop a clear action plan to counter it. In the context of NATO–Japan relations, this has been true of the Taliban, pirates off the Horn of Africa, and cyber-attackers. NATO offers certain areas for cooperation and proposes activities which reflect mutually agreed objectives. For example, through political consultations, partners can be involved in maritime and cyber security initiatives, responses to terrorism, etc. They can also take part in NATO-led operations and missions, or collaborate on increased interoperability, counter-terrorism, or defense reform and capacity building, as well as on education and training.

Joint maritime operations and cooperative security

In this final part of the discussion, we consider maritime cooperation and cyber security, areas where there has been success and/or future potential with regard to the second strategic narrative of cooperative security partnership. By the mid-2000s, conditions seemed ripe for Japan and NATO to take their partnership to the next level. Although Japan and NATO were clearly substantial cooperative security partners in managing reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan, military interaction was still beyond the horizon. The specific catalyst that allowed the relationship to progress further was provided by a surge in piracy in the Gulf of Aden and in the Indian Ocean. In 2010, there were 132 reported attacks, and in 2011, 200 attacks, and Japan and NATO decided to cooperate with the aim of increasing shared maritime domain awareness, intercepting pirates, and advancing maritime security procedures, thereby adding a new military dimension to their interactions.

In August 2009, NATO initiated Operation Ocean Shield, a counter-piracy initiative that Japan contributed to by dispatching two P-3C maritime patrol aircraft and two destroyers. Also, in July 2009, the Japanese government enacted the Act of Punishment and Countermeasures Against Piracy, which permitted Japanese destroyers to escort any ship; it also negotiated the lease of base facilities in Djibouti to operate its aircraft on a regular and continuous basis. In 2010, Japanese and NATO assets had their first opportunity to intervene together when a Danish NATO warship, working in conjunction with a Japanese helicopter deployed from the destroyer Murasame, intercepted and stopped an attack on a Greek ship. Cooperation continued, and in some aspects of counter-piracy activity, it became crucial. By 2014, Japanese air patrols covered 60 percent of all surveillance flights in the Gulf of Aden. Information gathered by the Japanese was then made accessible to relevant naval forces operating in the area. In September 2014, Japanese and NATO forces conducted their first joint counter-piracy exercise in the Gulf of Aden. A Japanese destroyer and a Danish frigate heading the NATO task group simulated the boarding and securing of commercial ships, and a second joint training exercise followed in November 2014, adding live gunnery fire; these two exercises contributed to the enhancement of interoperability. The joint deployment of naval and air assets allowed Japan and NATO to achieve multiple objectives connected to their own individual maritime strategies. For NATO, enhanced interactions with Japan met three of the four core roles of its maritime strategy. By working together, Japan and NATO were successfully managing crises, enhancing maritime security and promoting cooperative actions by increasing interoperability in the field of counter-piracy. Similarly, for Japan, the joint counter-piracy mission embraced its stated goals of securing sea lanes vital to the Japanese economy, while increasing its interoperability with a key international actor similarly committed to the defence of the maritime order.

Maritime cooperation has therefore consolidated the strategic narrative of cooperative security for both NATO and Japan. However, today maritime challenges are changing. The reduction in piracy has been offset by other transnational challenges, from terrorism to human migration and natural disasters, and crucially by the return of conventional “hard” peer competition, most notably with
Russia and China. In 2014, only one single pirate attack was reported in the Gulf of Aden, and cooperation in the area looked to have been so successful that it had put itself out of business. However, there are two caveats: firstly, both NATO’s maritime strategy and recent statements by senior Japanese naval officials suggest that co-operative security remains a shared goal. The economies of NATO members and of Japan depend profoundly on stable sea lanes, with the result that maritime security will continue to be a top political priority. Secondly, in April 2017, pirates hijacked a Pakistani vessel off the coast of Somalia, the fourth successful pirate attack in the region in 2017. The recent hijackings mark the end of a five-year hiatus in Somali piracy. The reasons behind the resurgence are not yet entirely clear, but perhaps there is a renewed imperative and opportunity for both polities to reinvigorate cooperation in the region in response to this resurgence.

Cyber challenges and cooperative security

A second potential area for enhanced cooperative security partnership is cyber security. Several respondents felt that the conventional distinction between traditional and non-traditional threats is no longer as meaningful as it once was. As Interviewee 8 suggested, “to deal with the traditional challenge from China, cyberspace is becoming more and more important.” In other words, cyber security is now undeniably a hard security concern and an area with significant potential for future cooperation between Japan and NATO, and Japan and individual NATO member countries. As reflected in the interviews, Japan now fully understands the security ramifications of potential cyber threats and, under the Abe administration, has been building its own domestic policy infrastructure and capabilities for defensive cybersecurity. Through the mechanism of the US–Japan alliance, Japan is deliberately and progressively integrating its capabilities and strategy with those of the United States to address cyber threats from China and other actors. Japan’s new seriousness over cybersecurity reflects the new assertiveness in its overall security trajectory and is highly significant due to cyber security’s deep interconnections with so many other dimensions of military activity. It can be argued that Japan has become a nascent “cyber power.” As well as the US, Japan is also involved in significant cyber security dialogues and processes with other states such as the UK and France, and other international organizations such as NATO and the EU. Japan is cooperating extensively with the UK with regard to maintaining cyber security during the forthcoming Olympics, and was a participant observer in “Exercise Cyber Coalition 16,” NATO’s most recent and largest ever cyber security exercise, held in Estonia in November/December 2016. There is recognition of extensive scope for further NATO–Japan cooperation on cyber security in the future with regard to the strategic narrative of cooperative security.

Conclusion

We identified two strategic narratives that have been successfully communicated in the context of NATO–Japan relations. The first of these is “natural partnership” combined with “strategic parallelism.” The second is that of cooperative security. NATO clearly demonstrated an ability to formulate and project the narrative of natural partnership and strategic parallelism to Japan, although it should be acknowledged that Japan had already embraced both elements of the narrative itself. In the case of cooperative security, we suggest that it was more Japan’s readiness and commitment to be a receiver of the narrative that was doing most of the work, rather than the inherent quality of NATO’s formulation and projection efforts per se.

One key shortcoming of the natural partners/strategic parallelism narrative is that NATO projected this message towards Russia, and Japan projected towards China. There is also the issue of reception by Russia and China. NATO and Japan have both defected from a robust defence of strategic parallelism, NATO by failing to adequately respond to Russian aggression in the Crimea, and Japan by seeking rapprochement with Putin. Both thereby undermined the reception of this narrative in Russia and China as credible. Finally, despite the return/development of more pressing hard security concerns in their respective regions, NATO and Japan remain committed to both the
narrative and the practice of cooperative security. We identified several areas of past cooperation and two areas, maritime and cyber, which have provided important opportunities for NATO–Japan cooperation in the past, and could do so again in the future.

Notes

10. *NATO,* “NATO’s Relations with Japan.”
11. Ibid.
18. Abe, “Japan and NATO as Natural Partners.”
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid.
25. Ibid.
27. Ibid.
31. Senior MOFA representative, August 7, 2015.
33. Senior defence thinktank analyst, August 13, 2015.
36. Former Chief of Staff of the Joint Staff Council, JSDF, November 25, 2015.
37. Senior MOFA representative, August 7, 2015.
39. Former Chief of Staff of the Joint Staff Council, JSDF, November 25, 2015.
41. Senior defence thinktank analyst, February 11, 2017.
45. NATO, “Cooperative Security.”
46. Ibid.
47. Ibid.
51. Ibid.
52. Ibid., 46.
53. Ibid.

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