Unlocking Asia's Defense Potential: From Minilateral Ties to an 'Asian NATO'?

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On September 25, 2024, just six days before his inauguration, Japanese Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba published an essay through the Hudson Institute, advocating for the creation of an "Asian NATO." His reasoning is clear: as he writes, "Ukraine today is Asia tomorrow." Ishiba explains that, since Ukraine was not a NATO member, Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty — which mandates collective defence — did not apply, leaving NATO with no obligation to defend it. Furthermore, he notes that the UN Security Council

has been rendered ineffective due to Russia's veto power. Ishiba warns of similar scenarios in the future if Russia or China were to become involved in conflicts in Asia, stressing that the absence of a NATO-like structure leaves the region vulnerable.

The question now is which partners Ishiba envisions for this security framework. Unlike Europe, Asia already has various minilateral and multilateral mechanisms in place. Ishiba specifically mentions several dialogues and alliances that could serve as the foundation for an "Asian NATO." These include the QUAD, which has elevated cooperation between the United States, Japan, Australia, and India, and AUKUS, a trilateral security partnership between Australia, the UK, and the U.S. established in 2021. Additionally, security cooperation between the U.S., Japan, and South Korea has been strengthened.

Another key element of the "Asian NATO" concept is the potential introduction of nuclear weapons into the region. This proposal faced criticism from ASEAN members, who are signatories of the Southeast Asian Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone Treaty. These countries, likely essential for such an organisation, expressed strong opposition. As a result, Ishiba avoided using the term "Asian NATO" during his visit to ASEAN on October 10, 2024.

This highlights just one of many challenges facing the idea of an "Asian NATO," and some critics have already dismissed it as unrealistic.