



Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida with Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez before their bilateral meeting at the Nato summit in Madrid on June 29. With the Japanese media providing extensive coverage of the first-ever attendance of a Japanese PM at a Nato summit, Mr Kishida was able to showcase his commitment to wider defence issues and to project Japan's desire to be a proactive partner among the cohort of like-minded nations. PHOTO: EPA-EFE

# Japan, Nato and the East-West alliance

Russia's invasion of Ukraine was a watershed moment for Japan and a spur towards closer ties between the Atlantic alliance and the so-called AP4 group of Pacific-based partners

**Tosh Minohara**

For The Straits Times

Food and energy prices continue to rise, the economy is stagnant while real wages have barely budged. And yet the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) coalition expanded its majority in Sunday's Upper House election at the expense of the liberal opposition parties in Japan.

While sympathy votes following the killing of former prime minister Shinzo Abe might have slightly tilted the balance in some constituencies, the effect was not pronounced.

The bigger underlying reason for the shift in sentiments – Russia.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine on Feb 24 was a watershed moment for Japan, driving home for Japanese voters a heightened sense of vulnerability. As national security surges in public awareness and importance, opposition parties who cling on to their pacifist position are losing their appeal.

A poll taken after the Russian invasion showed a record high 64 per cent of voters believe Japan should strengthen its defensive capabilities. The Asahi Shimbun poll released in May showed only 10 per cent opposed to bolstering Japan's defence.

Many college students as well as business people that I have interacted with believe that global affairs will become much more tumultuous as the challengers to the current American-led world order attempt to reshape the status quo to better reflect their own national interests.

When I asked a large freshmen class about the importance of national security both before and after the invasion of Ukraine, nearly all the students replied that the war had a tremendous impact on them as they witnessed first-hand the importance of defending one's country.

The realities of Ukraine pushed national security issues to the forefront of the election debates. This seldom happens in Japan and perhaps this shift in public opinion will lead to a deeper change in attitude towards national security, one that is grounded more in a realistic appraisal of the world as it is, than the world as it should be, grounded in ideals.

Prime Minister Fumio Kishida

clearly understood that the winds had shifted among the Japanese electorate. Despite hailing from the dovish Kochikai faction of the LDP with his electoral district in Hiroshima, he has announced the doubling of Japan's defence budget – albeit over a span of five years.

It should not be overlooked that there was also a domestic component to Mr Kishida's presence at the Nato summit in Madrid last month. With the Japanese media providing extensive coverage of the first-ever attendance of a Japanese prime minister at a Nato summit, Mr Kishida was able to showcase his commitment to wider defence issues and to project Japan's desire to be a proactive partner among the cohort of like-minded nations. It sets Japan apart from other Asian nations such as India, Indonesia and Vietnam, all of whom for various reasons have been less forthcoming in joining the West in their condemnation of Russia.

The summit yielded a number of outcomes, including progress in membership bids by Sweden and Finland and the deployment of more troops to Nato's eastern flank.

## NATO LOOKS EAST

But how relevant was the Nato summit in the context of Asia?

I'd like to highlight three main areas. First, the summit showed that Nato is increasingly shifting its attention towards Asia. And this has to do with the recognition that China poses the most formidable geostrategic threat to the West. The 2022 Nato strategic concept explicitly acknowledges this. The participation of Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand at the Madrid summit epitomises the new posture by Nato. Despite the "North Atlantic" in its name, the alliance's extension of its focus in the direction of the Pacific is likely to continue.

Second, Japan's approach to Nato signifies a further strengthening of its defence ties with Europe. Japan has traditionally looked towards the United States as its primary military partner, and while this is not apt to change in the foreseeable future, nevertheless Japan will be able to forge another defence linkage that is not only inclusive of the US, but also opens up greater areas of cooperation

with 31 other like-minded nations.

Moreover, it should not be forgotten that Nato is also a nuclear alliance, among which five nations – Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, Italy and Turkey – are permitted to equip their aircraft with American nuclear weapons to strike their intended target in times of war. There is an ongoing political debate in Japan about the possibility of entering into such a nuclear "sharing" agreement with the US. Closer ties with Nato could be a way for Tokyo to learn more about the complexities involved in such a framework if it decides to pursue this path of extended deterrence.

Third, with the United Nations Security Council hobbled by veto-wielding Russia and China as permanent members and the Quad being a rather malleable construct that does not deal exclusively with security issues, what remains in Asia is the traditional hub-and-spoke bilateral security arrangement with the US as the anchor. Dealing with an antagonistic China and an aggressive Russia will require stronger and more coordinated efforts with like-minded partners

**If one of the goals of Nato inviting Asian allies was to showcase a united coalition in opposing Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the so-called AP4 – Nato's four Asia-Pacific partners – were driven by similar motivations, but with China in mind. The AP4 went to Europe in order to send a clear message to Beijing that Nato also has vested interests in maintaining peace and security in Asia. The two sides – with the US as the linchpin – have now linked. A strengthening of defence ties along this arc of US alliances connecting Asia and Europe over time can offer a formidable bulwark against adversarial powers.**

such as those in Nato to counter their attempts at altering the status quo. Similarly, greater defence cooperation involving Japan, South Korea and Australia is not only logical but a necessity.

The weak link in the building of this network is Japan-South Korea relations, but Mr Kishida meeting for the first time in person South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol at the Nato summit shows how this forum can help in re-establishing trust. To be sure, there is still plenty of resentment and mistrust on both sides, but the rising threat posed by China can act as a push factor for both Tokyo and Seoul to mend ties and strengthen defence cooperation.

## A GLOBAL BULWARK

If one of the goals of Nato inviting Asian allies was to showcase a united coalition in opposing Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the so-called AP4 – Nato's four Asia-Pacific partners – were driven by similar motivations, but with China in mind. The AP4 went to Europe in order to send a clear message to Beijing that Nato also has vested interests in maintaining peace and security in Asia. The two sides, with the US as the linchpin, have now linked. A strengthening of defence ties along this arc of US alliances connecting Asia and Europe over time can offer a formidable bulwark against adversarial powers.

Asia lacks a Nato-like security alliance. Neither the Quad (US, Australia, India, Japan) nor Aukus (Australia, the United Kingdom and the US) fulfil this role. The old South-east Asia Treaty Organisation (Seato) did not survive and it will require tremendous effort to create an Asian Nato from scratch. Perhaps the solution is to build upon Nato so that it can evolve into a true global security alliance. It could even retain the acronym, Nato, while evolving into a Nuclear Alliance Treaty Organisation.

As East meets West in a tight embrace to ensure the survival of democracies, Nato will have to redefine itself. It may require a further large external shock for Nato to metamorphosise completely, but we cannot rule out the possibility of this shock.

History shows us how a war over Poland later engulfed most of Europe, only to become a global war with the entry of an aggrieved and aggressive Asian power.

stopinion@sp.com.sg

• Dr Tosh Minohara is chairman of the Research Institute of Indo-Pacific Affairs (RIIPA) and professor at the Graduate School of Law and Politics, Kobe University.

## Red state-blue state divide in the fight over truth

In the absence of significant US federal action on disinformation, state officials are introducing a flurry of Bills targeted at the sources of disinformation and the platforms that propagate them.

**Steven Lee Myers and Cecilia Kang**

To fight disinformation, California lawmakers are advancing a Bill that would force social media companies to divulge their process for removing false, hateful or extremist material from their platforms. Texas lawmakers, by contrast, want to ban the largest of the companies – Facebook, Twitter and YouTube – from removing posts because of political points of view.

In Washington, the state attorney-general persuaded a court to fine a non-profit and its lawyer US\$28,000 (S\$39,250) for filing a baseless legal challenge to the 2020 governor's race. In Alabama, lawmakers want to allow people to seek financial damages from social media platforms that shut down their accounts for having posted false content.

In the absence of significant action on disinformation at the federal level, officials in state after state are taking aim at the sources of disinformation and the platforms that propagate them – only they are doing so from starkly divergent ideological positions. In this deeply polarised era, even the fight for truth breaks along partisan lines. The result has been a cacophony of state Bills and legal manoeuvres that could reinforce information bubbles in a nation increasingly divided over a variety of issues – including abortion, guns, the environment – and along geographic lines.

The midterm elections in November are driving much of the activity on the state level. In red states, the focus has been on protecting conservative voices on social media, including those spreading baseless claims of widespread electoral fraud. In blue states, lawmakers have tried to force the same companies to do more to stop the spread of conspiracy theories and other harmful information about a broad range of topics, including voting rights and Covid-19. "We should not stand by and just throw up our hands and say that this is an impossible beast that is just going to take over our democracy,"

Washington Governor Jay Inslee, a Democrat, said in an interview. Calling disinformation a "nuclear weapon" threatening the country's democratic foundations, he supports legislation that would make it a crime to spread lies about elections. He praised the US\$28,000 fine levied against the advocacy group that challenged the integrity of the state's vote in 2020. "We ought to be creatively looking for potential ways to reduce its impact," he said, referring to disinformation.

The biggest hurdle to new regulations – regardless of the party pushing them – is the First Amendment. Lobbyists for the social media companies say that, while they seek to moderate content, the government should not be in the business of dictating how that is done.

Concerns over free speech defeated a Bill in deeply blue Washington that would have made it a misdemeanour, punishable by up to a year in jail, for candidates or elected officials "to spread lies about free and fair elections when it has the likelihood to stoke violence". Mr Inslee supported the legislation, citing the Supreme Court's 1969 ruling in *Brandenburg v Ohio*. That ruling allowed states to punish speech calling for violence or criminal acts when "such advocacy is directed to inciting or producing imminent lawless action and is likely to incite or produce such action".

The scope of the problem of disinformation, and of the power of the tech companies, has begun to chip away at the notion that free speech is politically untouchable. The new law in Texas has already reached the Supreme Court, which blocked the law from taking effect in May, though it sent the case back to a federal appeals court for further consideration. Governor

Greg Abbott, a Republican, signed the legislation last year, prompted in part by the decisions by Facebook and Twitter to shut down the accounts of former president Donald Trump after the Jan 6, 2021 violence on Capitol Hill. The court's ruling signalled that it could revisit one core issue: whether social media platforms, like newspapers, retain a high degree of editorial freedom. "It is not at all obvious how our existing precedents, which predate the age of the Internet, should apply to large social media companies," Justice Samuel Alito wrote in a dissent to the court's emergency ruling suspending the law's enforcement.

A federal judge last month blocked a similar law in Florida that would have fined social media companies as much as US\$250,000 a day if they blocked political candidates from their platforms, which have become essential tools of modern campaigning. Other states with Republican-controlled legislatures have proposed similar measures, including Alabama, Mississippi, South Carolina, West Virginia, Ohio, Indiana, Iowa and Alaska.

Much of the activity on the state level today has been animated by the fraudulent assertion that Mr Trump, and not President Joe Biden, won the 2020 presidential election. TechNet, an internet company lobbying group, has fought local proposals in dozens of states. The industry's executives argue that variations in state legislation create a confusing patchwork of rules for companies and consumers. Instead, companies have highlighted their own enforcement of disinformation and other harmful content. "These decisions are made as consistently as possible," said Mr David Edmonson, the group's vice-president for state policy and government relations.

For many politicians the issue has become a powerful cudgel against opponents, with each side accusing the other of spreading lies, and both groups criticising the social media giants. Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, a Republican, has raised campaign funds off his vow to press ahead with his fight against what he has called the "authoritarian companies" that have sought to mute conservative voices.

In blue states, Democrats have focused more directly on the harm disinformation inflicts on society, including through false claims about elections or Covid-19 and through racist or antisemitic material that has motivated violent attacks like the massacre at a supermarket in Buffalo, New York, in May.

Connecticut plans to spend nearly US\$2 million on marketing to share factual information about voting and to create a position for an expert to root out misinformation narratives about voting before they go viral. A similar effort to create a disinformation board at the Department of Homeland Security provoked a political fury before its work was suspended in May pending an internal review. In California, the state Senate is moving forward with legislation that would require social media companies to disclose their policies regarding hate speech, disinformation, extremism, harassment and foreign political interference.

It seems unlikely that the flurry of legislative activity will have a significant effect before this fall's elections; social media companies will have no single response acceptable to both sides when accusations of disinformation inevitably arise.

"Any election cycle brings intense new content challenges for platforms, but the November midterms seem likely to be particularly explosive," said Mr Matt Perault, a director of the Centre on Technology Policy at the University of North Carolina. "With abortion, guns, democratic participation at the forefront of voters' minds, platforms will face intense challenges in moderating speech. It's likely that neither side will be satisfied by the decisions platforms make." NYTIMES