

Session: Concurrent Session 3-1: An Asian NATO?

Date/Time: April 8, 2026 / 14:40-16:00

Rapporteur: Yuichi Yoshida, the International House of Japan / the Asan institute of Policy Studies

Moderator: Lee Shin-wha, Korea University

Speakers:

Kuik Cheng-Chwee, National University of Malaysia

Lavina Lee, University of Sydney

Julia Macdonald, Asia New Zealand Foundation

Mira Rapp-Hooper, Brookings Institution

Shin Beomchul, Sejong Institute

Tokuchi Hideshi, Research Institute for Peace and Security

Session Sketch:

Dr. Kuik Cheng-Chwee, a professor of International Relations at the National University of Malaysia (UKM), organized his remarks around “three As”: “alliance first,” “alliance allergy,” and then “alliance plus” Speaking from a Southeast Asian and Global South perspective, he argued that many states remain cautious about formal alliances because of domestic sensitivities, historical experience, and structural fears of abandonment or entrapment. For him, the realistic future lies less in rigid alliances than in flexible alignments.

Dr. Lavina Lee, the Director of the Foreign Policy and Defence Program at the United States Studies Centre (USSC) at the University of Sydney, argued that, despite a deteriorating Indo-Pacific security environment and an eroding U.S. hub-and-spokes system, a formal Asian NATO remains difficult because common threat perception is weak, many states fear Chinese retaliation, and trust and political will are insufficient. She therefore called for deeper unilateral cooperation as preparation for a harsher future.

Dr. Julia Macdonald, the Director of Research and Engagement at the Asia New Zealand Foundation and a Research Professor at the University of Denver’s Josef Korbel School of Global and Public Affairs, similarly rejected a NATO model, but emphasized the value of Asia’s “layered security architecture.” Rather than a single pact, she favored a network of alliances, multilaterals, bilateral agreements, and reciprocal access arrangements that can improve interoperability, information-sharing, and strategic trust while remaining more adaptable to regional diversity.

Dr. Mira Rapp-Hooper, a Visiting Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution and a Senior Advisor at the Asia Group, stressed that U.S. allies should not wait for Washington. She located

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the debate within a broader transformation of world order shaped by China’s rise, technological diffusion, and growing U.S. uncertainty over the post-1945 order. Because America is unlikely to build a new treaty framework soon, he advocated an ally-driven, layered system focused on maritime security, North Korea, economic security, AI, and critical supply chains.

Dr. Shin Beomchul, a senior research fellow at the Sejong Institute and was the former Vice Minister of National Defense (2022-2023), explained that the threat in the region is increasing due to North Korea’s nuclear armament and China’s aggressive moves. He pointed out that the existing hub-and-spoke system makes it difficult to respond to today’s integrated threats. Yet he saw severe obstacles to an Asian NATO, including Trump’s skepticism, divergent threat perceptions, cumbersome consensus decision-making, and unresolved Korea-Japan historical politics. Instead he suggested strengthening the hub-and-spokes system, expand reciprocal access agreements (RAA), sign Acquisition and Cost-servicing Agreements (ACSA), and conclude intelligence-sharing agreements such as GSOMIA. Furthermore, he proposed “hybrid” approaches that expand cooperation with other nations based on the US alliance system.

Mr. Tokuchi Hideshi, the President of the Research Institute for Peace and Security (RIPS), argued that “Asian NATO” actually mixes three different ideas: a broad security arrangement, a political alliance, and a military organization. He warned that although regional operational cooperation is growing, it remains under-institutionalized, while the United States itself is now disrupting the rules-based order from within. Accordingly, the political costs of any Asian NATO remain high.

In response to these discussions, Prime Minister Ishiba noted that no one had fully endorsed or rejected an Asian NATO, and asked under what conditions it might become feasible. Citing Ukraine, he argued stronger collective security could deter aggression, and that tightening North Korea–Russia–China ties may require a new framework.

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