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N#2022-07

July 4th 2022

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About the author:

A former student of the Ecole Nationale d'Administration, Jean-Yves Colin worked for the French Treasury, where he was Financial Advisor to the French Embassy in Japan (1987-1990). He then joined the Crédit Agricole Group, where he was Deputy Chief Executive Officer of the asset management subsidiary, now known as Amundi, and Director of Compliance for Crédit Agricole S.A. Since leaving the banking group in 2013, Jean-Yves Colin has joined Asia Centre, where he is a member of the Board of Directors and an expert on North Asia.

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The recent NATO meeting in Madrid has generated a lot of commentary on the revival of this organisation after the Russian aggression in Ukraine. Particularly important matters concerned NATO's reaction, whether immediate or in the event of the widening of the conflict, and the future membership of Finland and Sweden, following the conclusion of a Memorandum of Understanding between these two countries and Turkey. On the other hand, two events have received little attention from observers, or at least from audiences in Europe, and France in particular.

The first was unimaginable a few months ago: the presence of Japan and South Korea, invited alongside Australia and New Zealand. If the presence of former members of the British Empire, which fought on the side of the Allies against the Reich of William II and the Nazi Third, is understandable, the presence of Japan and South Korea is more surprising. At the G7 meeting in Bavaria that preceded the Madrid meeting, Japanese Prime Minister Kishida pointed out that, from his point of view, the situation in North Asia, namely the Chinese, North Korean and Russian threats, was inseparable from that in Eastern Europe. Accordingly, he repeated this position in Madrid. President Yoon Suk-yeol naturally emphasised the North Korean issue in his speech to NATO members. The two leaders may doubt that the other NATO members, especially European ones, are as sensitive to the North Korean nuclear risk as they are to the Iranian one. Therefore, from their point of view, reminding them is useful. Aware of NATO's geographical and historical references, they certainly have no intention of making their countries join the organisation. However, they do want to strengthen military ties with NATO and its member countries. Already several European countries, including France, the United Kingdom and Germany, have repeatedly shown their willingness to preserve freedom of maritime movement and security in the Indo-Pacific by sending military ships, or participating in joint exercises. This is a vital issue for these two major North Asian economies.

The participation of Japan and South Korea in the Madrid meeting goes in this direction. Both countries know that their security depends on American protection in terms of men and equipment, and their military forces rely on their own defence budgets and industries. Therefore, having NATO's support is of great value to them. Moreover, they hope that NATO's engagement will also expand their arms and electronics industries.

In doing so, Japan is following the policy initiated by former Prime Minister Abe Shinzo, which was aimed towards China. Nevertheless, the deterioration of Japan-Russia relations since the launch of President Putin's special operation adds a new dimension to it. In the case of Korea, instead, it is more than a change. Former President Moon Jae-in was concerned with striking a certain balance between Washington, the key ally, and Beijing, the main trading partner, while also hoping to act as intermediary in the perspective of re-establishing a dialogue with Pyongyang. His relationship with Abe Shinzo was notoriously bad and had not improved with his successors Suga and Kishida. This tension between neighbours did not facilitate the involvement of other powers in

North Asia. The President Yoon clearly opted for a new balance and a strengthening of the relationship with the United States, as demonstrated by J. Biden's visit to Seoul in May. He also wants to normalise South Korea's relations with Japan by finding a common solution to the recurrent historical tensions between the two states, and make it a political priority.

The second noteworthy event in Madrid was the trilateral meeting between Joe Biden, Kishida Fumio and Yoon Suk-yeol. The last trilateral meeting between the leaders of the US, Japan and South Korea was in September 2017 on the side-lines of the UN General Assembly. A very brief Kishida-Yoon meeting (which lasted a few minutes) took place at the very beginning of the Madrid meeting. The aim of the trilateral was to talk again about North Korea and China, but also to engage in a dialogue on how to resolve the tensions between Tokyo and Seoul. President Yoon said that he was satisfied and even "confident" at the end of the trilateral meeting, and can probably count on a more positive attitude from the current Japanese Prime Minister than from Abe Shinzo. However, one must remain cautious because in South Korea's public opinion, as well as in Japan's political circles and components of the Liberal Democratic Party, sensitivities are strong and easily exasperated.

The involvement of South Korea and Japan, as well as Australia and New Zealand led NATO to discuss not only Russia but also China, whose ambitions, according to the final document of the meeting, "challenge our interests, our security, our values". Pressured by the United States, and in the presence of its Indo-Pacific allies, NATO could not act otherwise but harden its tone towards China. This prompted a swift reaction from Beijing, and moderate European comments, notably from E. Macron, unwilling to engage in a second front, whether diplomatic, or worse military, while the Ukrainian front seems doomed to remain.