In an August 2020 interview, former Defense Minister Kono Taro stated Japan’s interest in joining “Five Eyes,” an intelligence-sharing relationship between Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United States, and the United Kingdom. Though Japan enjoys high levels of cooperation with Five Eyes countries, the argument for Japan to formally become the “sixth eye” has strengthened in the face of China’s growing military and cyber capabilities.

In the nineteenth issue of the Debating Japan newsletter series, the CSIS Japan Chair invited Dr. Jagannath Panda, Research Fellow and Centre Coordinator for East Asia at the Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, and Mr. Ankit Panda, Stanton Senior Fellow in the Nuclear Policy Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, to share their perspectives on whether Japan is truly ready to become a formal member of Five Eyes.
Prime Minister Suga assumed leadership during a period of extraordinary international vulnerability and geopolitical tensions. Heralded as a “continuity” leader, Suga’s focus on defense posturing—one of former prime minister Shinzo Abe’s defining legacies—has only increased. Under Suga, Japan’s addition as the “Sixth Eye” in “Five Eyes”—an intelligence-sharing alliance including the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand—has gained further traction. With intelligence sharing being centrally dependent upon mutual trust and strategic understanding, Tokyo’s inclusion in the Five Eyes boils down to six main considerations.

First, Japan’s inclusion in the alliance creates a consensus to embrace security multilateralism alongside its active economic multilateralism efforts. Under Abe, Japan’s restricted multilateral security endeavors underwent an enormous transformation with a heightened focus on “collective self-defense” and “Proactive contribution to peace.” Japan’s leadership in multilateral trading platforms like the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), the establishment of the Expanded Partnership of Quality Infrastructure (EPQI), and engagement in trilateral and quadrilateral groupings with India, Australia, and the United States, are evidence of its emerging multilateral security and economic nexus.

Second, Japan as a “Sixth Eye” is a logical progression, considering the already existing intelligence-sharing apparatus that Japan has with Australia, France, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Japan’s increasing security concerns vis-à-vis China and its threat perception from North Korea have made the political class more attuned to the global alliance structure in search of security. In this, Tokyo’s strategic perceptions are aligned (if not converging entirely) with those of the Five Eyes countries. Moreover, the recent Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA) with Australia has further strengthened the Japan-Australia security and military partnership that is

The Five Eyes intelligence-sharing partnership is the oldest in the world, tracing its origins back to an Anglo-American accord from 1943. Apart from the addition of Canada, Australia, and New Zealand shortly thereafter, the group’s membership has remained static.

During the Cold War, the propensity of these states to share intelligence—far more liberally than Moscow did with its Warsaw Pact partners—yielded significant dividends. Gathering, analysis, and even counterintelligence benefited.

Today, as competition intensifies in the Indo-Pacific, Japan seeks to join the group. Former Japanese defense minister Taro Kono boldly alluded to the notion of “Six Eyes,” suggesting in no uncertain terms that Tokyo ought to ascend as a formal member of the decades-old group.

It isn’t clear that the time is right for “Six Eyes” to manifest, even as the apparent benefits of Japanese participation—including geographic proximity to China—are clear. Tokyo’s bona fides as an ally and partner to the Five Eyes states, responsible international stakeholder, and positive force in global affairs are not in question. Rather, the time is not right for Japan’s formal membership.

Even as the Five Eyes grouping has found sustained relevance in the post-Cold War era and certainly in the information age, there are growing concerns about counterintelligence and information security within the five extant members. New Zealand, by some measures the weakest link, faces a stark counterintelligence challenge from China, raising uncomfortable questions about its continuing Five Eyes status.

Intelligence-sharing networks can only be as effective as their most vulnerable nodes. While Tokyo has made sustained efforts to improve its own counterintelligence and information security practices in recent decades, work is ongoing. Recent efforts to expand counterintelligence practices should be welcomed in this regard. By contrast, more must be
very much China-centric. Tokyo’s formal inclusion would enable a much-needed geo-intelligence network in the Indo-Pacific.

Third, although Japan’s current intelligence mechanisms are relatively new, it is quickly incorporating stronger domestic security measures. Tokyo recently implemented a state secrecy law in 2013, which was widely protested amidst an unfavorable public opinion of secretive intelligence activities. Despite this Act, access to most information in Japan is easy, with the process of classifying information based on sensitivity levels still being largely lax. Should Tokyo decide to actively push for a Five Eyes inclusion, it must assure the Five Eyes members that its addition will not expand risks by implementing a tougher legal framework with stricter protections and a robust counter-intelligence setup.

Nevertheless, Tokyo has displayed a remarkable shift in its national security strategy, as seen in its 2020 defense white paper that projects it as a proactive regional leader ready to defend its national interests. Not only has Japan revamped its intelligence capabilities, but it also shows a willingness (amidst debates) to acquire first-strike capabilities, with the question of security enhancement becoming an increasingly accepted part of public discourse. Tokyo has also broadened the scope of its state secrets act, demonstrating its interest in expanding its security partnerships to include intelligence sharing beyond the United States.

Fourth, the growing diplomatic and political strife between China and the Indo-Pacific countries have left China “alert” toward the potential consequences of an expanded Five Eyes network. Here, the Five Eyes must aim at capitalizing on its unique intelligence-sharing apparatus. Edward Snowden’s 2013 intelligence spill uncovered that the alliance had additional intelligence-sharing levels: Nine Eyes and 14 Eyes. Israel, Singapore, Japan, and South Korea have all been informal partners within these frameworks. Japan’s elevation to the Five Eyes level has major potential for the region’s security outlook.

Fifth, Japan’s addition to the Five Eyes as the first East Asian, non-English speaking country—and possibly in a Five Eyes+1 trial format—would not only add to the network’s capabilities but also boost former prime minister Abe’s “collective self-defense” outlook. It would pave the way for deeper engagement in

The principles of information sharing that have undergirded the Five Eyes grouping for decades are remarkable. The 1955 UKUSA Agreement, for instance, underscores that signals intelligence—“raw” and “end product”—is to be shared “continuously, currently and without request.” This effective firehose of sensitive intelligence has been viable and sustainable in part due to decades of cultural and bureaucratic synergies between the five constituent states.

By setting up formal membership as the most meaningful benchmark of Tokyo’s integration with Five Eyes, Japan may find itself disappointed. Instead, there is tremendous scope for Tokyo continuing to partner with its ally the United States and the four remaining non-ally Five Eyes states on intelligence-sharing and coordination.

Tokyo may not find itself as the sixth “Eye” soon, but that does not mean it cannot enjoy status akin to “Five Eyes-plus.” In practice, this would not manifest in a meaningful designation that would allow for seamless intelligence sharing as is expected within Five Eyes; but it would set Tokyo on a path to greater intelligence-sharing with these states, enhancing Japanese security in the process.

A model for this sort of cooperation may be the relationship that exists between the Five Eyes and certain European states, most of whom are members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). For instance, in the area of signals and electronic intelligence, Five Eyes states have close cooperative relationships with intelligence agencies in the Netherlands, Norway, France, and Denmark. Another rung of cooperation exists with states including Belgium, Italy, Germany, Spain, and Sweden.

From the perspective of the Five Eyes states, Tokyo’s formal accession as a sixth “eye” would open an uncomfortable can of worms with other allies and partners. For instance, other states may find cause to seek formal membership as well, presenting diplomatic dilemmas that may manifest in splits within the Five Eyes states themselves. Tokyo, instead, could become the first peg of an Indo-Pacific-oriented informal cooperative network led by Five Eyes—a status that it already de facto enjoys.
multilateral frameworks such as the United Kingdom’s Democratic-10 (D-10), the Quad 2.0, and the emerging “Quad Plus” narrative. As security becomes a priority for Japan amid heightened tensions in the East China Sea, Suga must focus on improving Japan’s ability to protect its intelligence and classified data.

Sixth, Japan has plenty to offer to the Five Eyes. It is skilled in specialized intelligence gathering and sharing, particularly signals intelligence (SIGINT) obtained from radio stations and data shared electronically. Japan also has one of the world’s most vast intelligence-gathering frameworks, built in the post-war period to stay alert, keeping in view of its insignificant military presence. Its historical focus on China and North Korea—which have been further enhanced in recent times with the recognition of China and North Korea as Tokyo’s biggest security threats—only makes Japan’s bid stronger.

The intelligence advantages that Tokyo can bring to the table are clear. However, for being accepted to the rather elite alliance, Japan must convince the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada that its domestic counter-intelligence measures and new legislations can sufficiently protect state secrets while adding substance to the Five Eyes grouping. This will require not only a bolstering of its domestic laws and technological apparatus but also a sophisticated diplomatic approach.

The status quo best protects the interests of the Five Eyes states and, while it may not be the ideal outcome for Tokyo, it is optimal under the current environment and effectively mitigates the risks that may come with formal expansion. On China and North Korea, Japan has intelligence competencies that would be immensely valuable; in turn, the Five Eyes can plan for controlled, but fluid intelligence sharing with Tokyo where suitable.

The good news is that Tokyo’s energetic diplomacy has yielded results in recent years— with partial assistance from China, which has done much to heighten threat perceptions among the Five Eyes states. In the United Kingdom, perspectives on intelligence sharing with Japan have quickly accelerated. Japan-Australia cooperation, too, is rapidly growing.

The most important principle that should guide intelligence sharing is pragmatism and solidarity. Japan’s legitimate security concerns and position as a democratic bulwark in Northeast Asia should motivate intelligence sharing where and when it makes sense. Fixating on Tokyo’s formal status privileges symbolic matters over a gradual process of convergence that best suits current realities.
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Panda was previously an adjunct senior fellow in the Defense Posture Project at the Federation of American Scientists (FAS) and a member of the 2019 FAS International Study Group on North Korea Policy. He has consulted for the United Nations in New York and Geneva on nonproliferation and disarmament matters, and has testified on security topics related to South Korea and Japan before the congressionally chartered U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission.

Panda was a Korea Society Kim Koo Fellow, a German Marshall Fund Young Strategist, an International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) Shangri-La Dialogue Young Leader, and a Carnegie Council on Ethics in International Affairs New Leader. He has worked at the Council on Foreign Relations and the Liechtenstein Institute on Self-Determination at the Princeton School of Public and International Affairs.

A widely published writer, Panda’s work has appeared in the New York Times, the Washington Post, Foreign Affairs, Foreign Policy, the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, the Diplomat, the Atlantic, the New Republic, the South China Morning Post, War on the Rocks, Politico, and the National Interest. Panda has also published in scholarly journals, including Survival, the Washington Quarterly, and India Review, and has contributed to the IISS Asia-Pacific Regional Security Assessment and Strategic Survey. He is editor-at-large at the Diplomat, where he hosts the Asia Geopolitics podcast, and a contributing editor at War on the Rocks.

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