

Cyberattack on Japan Could be Regarded as an “Armed Attack”

Top American and Japanese officials said 19 APR that a cyberattack on Japan could be regarded as an “armed attack” requiring a response by the United States under a joint security treaty binding the two allies. “The United States and Japan affirmed that international law applies in cyberspace and that a cyberattack could, in certain circumstances, constitute an armed attack under Article 5 of the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty,” said U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo during a news conference in Washington, D.C. Pompeo had met with his Japanese counterpart, Foreign Minister Taro Kono, along with U.S. acting Defense Secretary Patrick Shanahan and Japan Defense Minister Takeshi Iwaya, as part of the U.S.-Japan 2+2 Ministerial Meeting. “We stressed the need to work together to protect classified information, maintain technological superiority, and preserve our shared defense and economic advantages from theft and exploitation,” Pompeo said.

The United States is obligated under Article 5 to help Japan defend its territories in the case of an armed attack. The issue of mutual defense has been in the forefront in recent years as China and Japan routinely clash over sovereignty of the Senkaku Islands, a group of uninhabited isles in the East China Sea west of Okinawa. In 2013, China announced it was instituting an air defense identification zone over part of the East China Sea, including the Diaoyu Islands, which is China’s name for the Senkakus. Japan and the United States have ignored the designation.

Japanese officials had been recently pressing the United States to broaden the scope of Article 5 to include cyberattacks, according to Japanese media reports earlier this year. Iwaya told reporters that the inclusion of cyberattacks was “significant from the perspective of deterrence.” “Not just China, but different countries are pursuing superiority in technologies that back up the capability in new domains such as space and cyber and electromagnetic spectrum,” Iwaya said. “So, during this 2+2 meeting, we agreed that it is quite important to cooperate in the crossdomain capability building. And this alignment in our direction will be the foundation of our alliance going forward, specifically in the cyberspace.”

The officials said they had not yet begun discussing a possible increase in how much money Japan spends to support U.S. military personnel stationed in the country. Shanahan said the discussions had instead focused on how the two nations could “operationalize” their forces. “The defense minister talked about some of the basic building blocks, but our multiple conversations – and this isn’t the first conversation – is how do we really develop capability in the cyber and space domain, because it’s an area where we’re not limited by geography. And the capabilities industrially and militarily are very complementary.”