

POLICY BRIEF

April 18, 2019

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The Coming of Ages of the EU Strategic Thinking on Asia Part 2: Understanding Each Other Challenges: Towards a New Partnership with Japan

Valérie Niquet

For both Japan and the European Union, deepening their partnership in an increasingly unstable world has become an essential element, if not yet a priority. Since he came to power in 2012, Prime Minister Abe and his cabinet understand the importance of expanding cooperation opportunities for Japan beyond the scope of traditional alliances in order to implement the concept of proactive contribution to peace. This is also a priority for the European Union, that, like its most prominent member States, understands that the EU's Asia policy cannot be summed up to its relations with China.

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Common points between the EU and Japan

The European Union and Japan have many fundamental elements in common, representatives of the liberal order that emerged after the second world war. These elements comprise an attachment to the market economy and the principles of good governance. The European Union, like Japan, is committed to an open international system based on shared democratic values. For Tokyo as for Brussels, the rule of law should be the basis for an international order that opposes the use of force and coercion to change the status quo as was the case in Crimea, or the East and South China Sea.

Europe, like the United States, follows a posture of neutrality on issues of sovereignty but condemns the use of force, or threat to use force to solve territorial issues and, concerning the South China Sea, supports the prompt signature of a binding code of conduct by all parties involved, including China. This position was expressed in the joint communique of the European Union, released after the judgment of the International Hague Court of Arbitration in 2016, based on the rules of UNCLOS, which rejected all Chinese claims based on dubious "historic rights" in the South China Sea. Despite its moderation, the EU communique did recognize the validity of the

judgment and denounced the use of force and coercion to change the status quo.

On this issue, the primary challenge for the European Union and Japan concerns the sustainability of the law of the sea system and universally accepted standards, including the principle of freedom of navigation, as expressed in UNCLOS and other multilateral fora.

Between the EU and Japan, a shared vision of threats

The European Union and Japan are two soft powers that share analysis and pay the same level of attention to “soft security” risks that pose a threat to stability beyond their immediate surroundings. These risks concern the environment, energy supply, and climate change issues that have a direct impact on the planet but also have direct and more immediate consequences in some particularly affected regions of the world.

These “new risks” that Japan and the European Union are facing are related to the concept of “human security,” particularly in Africa where the prospects for cooperation between the European Union and Japan are significant. Tokyo emphasizes the notion of quality development as a stabilizing factor in areas that pose a direct threat, through terrorism and massive migration movements, to the European Union.

For instance, Japan’s ODA and initiatives in the framework of the TICAD can contribute to the development and social stabilization of countries like Mali or Niger where European States like France are also engaged in hard security counter-terrorism operations.

The EU and Japan also pay attention to Cyber threats, including Influence and Information

Warfare Strategies. Those “hybrid” or “gray” risks, more difficult to deter, impose a necessary common reflexion between like-minded countries.

The EU and Japan also share the same analysis on combating the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and arms control, with specific stress on small arms and light weapons that cause significant damages in Africa.

On hard security issues like North Korea, The European Union, which is potentially under the threat of North Korean ICBM strikes, and Japan have limited capacity to act, and there is a risk of marginalization.¹ However, both Japan and the EU play a major role in the implementation of sanctions on the North Korean regime.

An inevitable “ménage à trois”: The importance of third parties

However, despite these common interests and shared analysis of threats, for both Japan and the EU, there are other more critical partners, be it in a positive or a negative sense.

In terms of economic interests, Japan is the EU’s 6th trading partner while China is the second EU trading partner behind the United States. Trade with the PRC amounts to 645 billion dollars, with a deficit of 198 billion US dollars while trade with Japan is 144 billion dollars with a deficit of 8 billion US dollars.

However, the entry into force of the EU Japan Economic Partnership Agreement in February 2019, can contribute to positive evolution. The agreement proposes to lift tariff barriers in many sectors including agriculture, pharmaceuticals and chemicals, and the service sector.

¹ Jérôme Legrand, *EU-Japan Cooperation on Global and Regional Security, a Litmus test for the EU’s role as a Global Power*, Policy Document for External relations, June 2018.

Public offerings in large Japanese cities will also be opened to European companies bid. For Europe, exports in some sectors might increase rapidly, like for dairy products where an increase of more than 200% is foreseen.

As an answer to both China and the United States, the Japan-EU free trade agreement declares that its objective is also to shape global trade following rules based on high standards and values, as well as to reject protectionism.

At the strategic level, both the EU and Japan are worried by the unpredictability of the United States under the new presidency. The decision of the United States to leave the TPP, the threat of trade wars targeting not only China but also US allies has contributed to these uncertainties regarding the sustainability of the United States partnership. However, Japan's priority remains the preservation of the alliance, vital for its security. Moreover, anti-US feelings in Japan and the EU cannot be the only cement of a strategic rapprochement between the two weaker members of the strategic triangle.

As far as relations with China are concerned, the European Union has long been perceived in Tokyo to be too moderate and primarily motivated by economic interests. However, the slowdown of the Chinese economy, which has adverse effects including for countries like Germany, changes the situation and the European Union is less fascinated by the prospects offered by the Chinese economic superpower.

On the contrary, Brussels has adopted new rules on investments in sensitive sectors, and China has been described as a "systemic rival" in the most recent publication of the European Commission.² At the same time, China's strategy of penetration in high-tech sectors is openly debated even though no common decision has been adopted yet.

For its part, Japan has been moving towards a rapprochement with Beijing, taking advantage of the fact that – confronted by the United States – the PRC is today more favorable to appeasement with other partners, in a united front strategy to balance American power. On trade issues, Japanese companies, which constitute a strong lobby also tend to be in favor of a rapprochement with China.

On Russia, the European Union, and more particularly the East European "new" Member States and the Baltic States, favor a strategy of greater firmness that does not entirely correspond to the broader interests of Japan. Indeed, if Tokyo fully applies the sanctions against Russia, the assessment of the Russian threat is not the same as that of the European Union. Moreover, Tokyo has its agenda, concerning the Northern territories, a possible Peace treaty and the necessity to weaken a potential China-Russia alliance.

As for the concept of "free and open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP) proposed by Japan, many European Member States are reluctant to commit and do not see what role the EU could play across such a vast region, taking the risk of antagonizing China.

France is the only European country to have direct sovereignty interests in both oceans and to have the military means to ensure a regular presence there. President Macron reaffirmed this in his speech in Australia delivered at the naval base of Garden Island in May 2018, which placed France at the heart of the Indo-Pacific axis against the risks of hegemonism. However, despite the EU reluctance to commit, the awareness of the need to develop a common policy towards Asia has increased, fueled by China's unveiled ambitions and disruptive strategies.

² <https://www.neweurope.eu/article/brussels-officially-labels-china-a-systemic-rival/>

A positive evolution in favor of greater engagement in strategic matters in Europe and Japan

In Japan, since Prime Minister Abe came back to power in 2012, essential evolutions have taken place in favor of a more “proactive contribution to peace.” Since 2014, new rules facilitate military technology transfer and cooperation. In 2015 and 2016, a series of new defense laws made possible the development of new capacities for the SDF (Self Defense Forces), including the right of collective self-defense. In December 2018, new defense guidelines lifted more limitations and opened the way to increased cooperation, in many fields, including capacity building and information sharing.

In 2018, for the first time, the helicopter carrier Izumo participated to a patrol in the South China Sea and, in 2019, for the first time also, the French Aircraft carrier group Charles de Gaulle should cross the South China Sea on its way to Japan.

As for the EU, the new Global Strategy adopted in 2016 emphasizes security and defense as critical priorities.³ The French proposal of a “European army” remains largely utopian, and Nato remains the core of European defense. However, mainly due to a more reticent posture of the United States under Donald Trump, things are also evolving in that field towards more autonomy. In 2018, the EU Council declared that the EU needed to increase security cooperation in and with Asia.⁴

Towards closer coordination and cooperation: the new “EU-Japan Strategic Partnership Agreement.”

The EU-Japan Strategic Partnership Agreement signed in July 2018 in Tokyo, after five years of negotiations, reflects these evolutions both in Europe and in Japan.⁵ It is the first agreement of this type between Japan and the EU and represents an essential evolution for both partners. The objective is to develop bilateral cooperation and increase consultation coordination between the two like-minded parties in international organizations and multilateral fora.

At the bilateral level, the areas of cooperation cover information sharing and intelligence, capacity building in third countries, including in military medicine, as well as research and development and industrial cooperation in the field of defense.⁶

In order to implement the agreement, a joint committee has been established to coordinate the partnership and give strategic direction to the cooperation.

Conclusion

Japan and the European Union have long been perceived, and have perceived themselves as lacking in strategic affairs, confiding their security interests to better-armed partners, foremost among them the United States.

Rising risks, in Asia as in Europe, threats to the value system defended by both Japan and the European Union, the uncertainties that weigh on the American alliance system - even if in this matter extreme pessimism is not appropriate - have led to developments unimaginable a few

3 http://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/top_stories/pdf/eugs_review_web.pdf

4 <http://www.consilium.europa.eu> The EU is a member of the Asean Regional Forum (ARF).

5 The same agreement was signed with the Republic of Korea in 2014.

6 «EU-Japan Strategic Partnership Agreement,» External action Service, 01-02-2019.

years ago. In Tokyo, while the relationship with Washington remains paramount, other partnerships are also highlighted. The European Union aspires to greater autonomy and seems prepared to go beyond a mere normative discourse in the face of the very actual threats it faces. In this context, NATO can also serve as a bridge between the two extremes of the Euro-Asian continent, complemented by the bilateral initiatives of the most active member states with an increasingly significant Japanese actor in the field of global security.