

FRS – Japan Program

Japan and the European Union: a significant emerging partnership with limits



Tsuyoshi Goroku is a lecturer in International Relations at Nishogakusha University (Tokyo). He studied Political Science and International Relations at both Keio University and Sciences Po Paris, obtained his MA and completed the PhD course at Keio University. His research interests are in European security, US-European relations and History of International relations. He is also a member of the research group “Europe in Turbulence” at the Japan Institute of International

Question 1: In 2018, Japan signed a Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA) with the EU. What triggered that decision?

The global situation has changed significantly. Japan is now facing various threats and challenges to the liberal international order, which constitutes the basis of its long-term security and prosperity.

For Tokyo, the U.S.-Japan alliance remains the cornerstone of its security and prosperity. However, there is a need to diversify partnerships not only in Asia but also with like-minded democracies in Europe. Europe, as a values-based and normative power, plays an important role in that sense. Japan does share with the EU the trust in a values-based international order, the rule of law, and the rejection of the use of force and coercion.

The election of Donald Trump in the United States and the challenges he poses to the U.S. allies and partners, also

triggered closer relations and cooperation with partners that share concerns and interests with Japan.

At the same time, the EU’s position regarding strategic affairs has changed in recent years. There is an increased necessity to gradually build a more coherent common strategic posture in order to answer the challenges posed by the emerging global players that do not share the same values, and to consolidate partnership with countries that have the same analysis in Asia.

In Tokyo’s perspective, both Japan and the EU are perceived as essential and positive actors in the defense of the liberal international order that best serves their fundamental interests. Their partnership has evolved out of the necessity to confront increasing tensions and difficulties. And both parties face similar constraints on their ability to adjust to a more difficult security environment. In other words, there is an increasing convergence of strategic interests

between Japan and the EU. Thus, they are currently enhancing their dialogue and exchanges. Japan's Prime Minister Abe had a long exchange with the new President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, after her election.

“In Tokyo’s perspective, both Japan and the EU are perceived as essential and positive actors in the defense of the liberal international order that best serves their fundamental interests.”

Question 2: As viewed from Japan, can the European Union and its member states play a significant role in the security domain?

Some Japanese experts are skeptical on the EU's role in the security field. Indeed, “hard security” has been and still is the prerogative of its member states in spite of increased awareness of the need to consolidate a common security policy. However, from Japan's perspective, the role of the EU is significant on many issues. On non-proliferation and freedom of navigation, Japan and the EU do share the same position. On Iran, Japan, the EU as well as its member states have the same doubts about Washington's decision to withdraw from the 2015 “Iran nuclear deal” (JCPOA), and are concerned about its negative impact on the non-proliferation regime and the future of arms control.

Regarding the principle of freedom of navigation, Japan welcomed the support by major European states to the South China Sea Arbitration in 2016, while paying attention to the reticence of some other EU member states to antagonize the PRC. Japan is uneasy on the format “17+1”, initiated by the PRC in relation with Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects.

However, at the EU level, that format also received some backlash, increasing the convergence of analysis between Tokyo and Brussels.

On many issues, and for good reasons, Japan still considers the EU as a “soft security power”, with minimal ability – and willingness – to act beyond its own traditional sphere of interest. Significantly, among EU member states, including the UK, only France has published its own “Indo-Pacific Strategy”. France is also the only member state that in the context of Brexit has reasserted its willingness to carry out freedom of navigation type operations in the South China Sea, with lukewarm response from its European partners.

In addition, Japan and France established a maritime security dialogue, which complements existing formats at the EU level without challenging the preeminent role of the United States. Japan also signed an Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA) with France and the UK bilaterally, allowing the exchange of equipment and supplies between Japan's Self-Defense Forces and the French and British militaries.

At the same time, Japan is trying to enhance cooperation with the EU in stabilization measures through development and aid, maritime security and capacity-building across the Indo-Pacific, particularly in some African and South East Asian countries. Both Japan and the EU consider South East Asia as a major partner. In terms of capacity-building in the region, closer coordination could be established among Japan, the EU, Australia and the United States.

Question 3: As a specialist in European security, do you see a convergence between the EU and Japan regarding Russia?

Japan and the EU should improve their coordination on how to respond to Russia. Better coordination would help Japan and the EU fill the gap in perception concerning the Russian threat.

In spite of many contacts between Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and President Vladimir Putin, Japan is now less optimistic regarding the possible settlement of territorial issues and the achievement of a peace treaty. However, for Japan, the most pressing security challenges come from North Korea and China. In that context, given the growing cooperation, including at the military level, between Russia and China, one of the priorities for Tokyo seems to weaken the Sino-Russian strategic partnership. We should not overestimate China-Russian relations, but we should not underestimate them either. Thus, it is time for both Japan and Europe to assess jointly the future development of these relations.

Certainly, Japan's perception and position *vis-à-vis* Russia diverges from the position of some Nordic or Eastern European EU member states. However, in spite of these differences, Japan has always aligned its sanctions on Russia with those imposed by the EU and other Western powers. Japan, as a member of the G7, also continues to provide economic and political assistance to Ukraine. At the same time, Japan sees itself as more active in trying to bridge the gap and improve the relations between Ukraine and Russia. This position is close to President Macron's recent ambitious move to support a renewed dialogue between Kiev and Moscow, in the framework of the Normandy format.

Question 4: Africa plays a major role in the EU's security agenda. Do you see a complementarity between Japan and the EU on African security and stabilization?

Capacity-building plays a very important role in stabilization strategies in Africa. It is easier for Japan to promote it, in line with its traditional status of aid donor. Also Japan continues to emphasize the importance of good governance, quality infrastructure and transparency. All these values are shared by the EU, and facilitate cooperation between the two actors in these fields.

At the same time, Japan's role in Africa can be seen as complementary to the harder security role played by France, an EU member state, which is vital for the stabilization of the region. Japan plays a role in PKO training, using the Self-Defense Forces (SDF) experience and its base in Djibouti. Thus, Japan can also coordinate this type of training projects with the EU.

The roadmap for France-Japan relations and the "2 plus 2" dialogue has a significant component related to the stability of the African continent. In the context of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP), Japan also supports the Asia-African corridor with India, opening the way to third party cooperation based on shared objectives and values. In that sense, Africa is indeed one of the major place for cooperation enabling to give consistency to the Japan-EU Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA).

"At the same time, Japan's role in Africa can be seen as complementary to the harder security role played by France, an EU member state, which is vital for the stabilization of the region."

Question 5: In relations with the EU on security, what level is the most significant and effective for Japan – the multilateral framework of interaction of bilateral relations with major member states?

As I mentioned before, from Japanese perspective, in matters of security, significant EU member states, particularly France and the UK, do play a significant role.

Certainly, the UK is now promoting the idea of a “Global Britain” in anticipation of Brexit, and is trying to be an important player in the Indo-Pacific. However, we are still not sure what the impact of Brexit on the UK posture in this region will be. On the other hand, France is the only EU member state that can engage in the Indo-Pacific and that contributes to regional security and stability. Traditionally, in Japan, the UK has been considered as a more important partner, partly because of the historical background. However, after Brexit, Japan needs to refocus on the Continent without damaging its historical ties with the UK.

Transnational risks such as terrorism, climate change and trade issues should be dealt with at the Japan-EU level. Moreover, as a stronghold of effective multilateralism, the EU also plays a leading role in preserving the liberal international order that serves Japan’s interests.

In recent years, as a way to balance China’s BRI and formats like the “17+1” initiative, Japan has also paid more attention to Central and Eastern Europe. The potential division within the EU and the lack of consensus among its member states on such issues as freedom of navigation is a source of concern for Japan. Thus Japan want to address these issues by building new cooperation program. The

EU and its member states seem to become more realistic on the various challenges posed by China. The EU endorses the concept of FOIP. All major challenges to the liberal international order mentioned above should be a catalyst for further cooperation and enhanced dialogue in the framework of the 2018 Strategic Partnership Agreement.

January 2020