

The EU & Japan: Partners for Stability in the Indo-Pacific?



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The European Union and Japan have never been closer. Although they have always been like-minded partners, sharing the values of democracy, rule of law and human rights, their bilateral relations have almost exclusively focused on trade and economic issues, neglecting the potential of closer political and security cooperation.

However, the last two years saw an important shift. The signing of the EU–Japan Strategic Partnership Agreement in June 2018 signaled the willingness to deepen consultations and cooperation on global security issues. The EU–Japan Economic Partnership Agreement, in force since February 2019, created the world's greatest free trade zone, connecting almost a third of the global market. Finally, on the occasion of the visit of Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to Brussels at the end of September 2019, the EU and Japan signed a “Partnership for Sustainable Connectivity” to promote “free, open, rules-based, fair, non-discriminatory and predictable regional and international trade”, outlining a concrete roadmap for functional cooperation in the domain.

These upward developments are not only a sign of a maturing relationship; they are a result of a growing number of shared security concerns. First, the current Washington policy of putting “America first” has led to the realization by many of its traditional allies, including Europe and Japan, of the need to bolster their own security profiles to defend their interests. The expanding influence of China in Europe and its neighborhood, accelerated in the context of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), has made the EU more aware and more concerned about Beijing's global strategic ambitions. Finally, the negative impacts of the strategic rivalry between China and the United States and the polarizing effect it has on the broader Indo-Pacific region is another reason for like-minded countries to defend more proactively the current multilateral rules-based order.

What role can the EU and Japan play in this changing strategic environment? This paper first analyzes the emerging security dynamic within the Indo-Pacific, defined by a new type of great power politics, and the dangers it poses for regional stability. It further highlights the type of foreign policy action that could ease down these tensions, broadly defined by the concept of “middle-power diplomacy”. Finally, it suggests some concrete areas for the EU and Japan to deepen their cooperation beyond connectivity, in the field of maritime security and security in Africa.

The Indo-Pacific: a New Playing Field

Ever since Japan first officially presented its vision for a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” (FOIP) in 2016, the concept has become a synonym for the changing strategic dynamic in the region.

Geographically, the Indo-Pacific underscores the natural confluence of the Indian and Pacific Oceans, shifting the regional strategic balance westwards. It reflects the emergence of new security actors and policies, including China's BRI, the growing role of India as a regional player, the diplomatic rapprochement between Japan and India, and the increasing relevance of Europe.

Functionally, it focuses on boosting trade and connectivity to generate growth, prosperity and cooperation, noting also the importance of the African continent to Asian countries for trade and natural resources. Finally, the concept is loaded with ideology, emphasizing values and principles that should underpin it, such as freedom of navigation, free trade, and rule of law.

Although Japan's original idea was to promote an inclusive and cooperative regional architecture, it has been widely interpreted by China as an attempt to control its rise. Indeed, there is little doubt that the FOIP concept has been formulated in response to China's growing strategic influence across the region. Since its launch in 2015, large-scale investments in strategic infrastructure (ports, telecommunications, energy) along its BRI in the Indian Ocean, Africa and Europe have enabled Beijing to exert pressure on governments to achieve political goals. Culminating debt-traps have become a growing concern for the international community.

After Washington formulated its own “Indo-Pacific Strategy” in 2016, the region has become a theatre for a rising great power rivalry between the US and China. The decision of the US, Japan, India and Australia to revive the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue in 2017 is a sign of democratic powers stepping up in defense of the current rules-based order. Albeit it is only an informal consultation mechanism, it further added to the growing divide and tensions between the *status quo* powers and Beijing.

Theatre of Power Politics

Discussions about the regional strategic dynamic quickly shift to a broader debate on the emergence of a new world order, dominated by a new type of great power relations. In a recent opinion piece published in the *New York Times*, a group of distinguished former

world leaders warn of the grave impact of a US–China trade war on the global economy and stability, and the risk of recession it poses for developed countries (<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/11/opinion/china-trade.html>). Using the example of the Cold War, they raised concerns about the divisive character of the dispute, forcing many nations to choose between the two powers. While the current trade tensions have indeed accelerated this trend, polarization of the Indo-Pacific started even before, dividing countries along the competing spheres of influence through investments, historical linkages and ideological proximities. Many small and middle-sized countries in Southeast and South Asia feel the growing pressure to choose their strategic camps.

The impact of the current tensions is not limited to trade and security. The competition takes place on all fronts – including in research and technology – with implications for the broad spectrum of human and economic activities. It shifts attention away from everyday functional security issues, such as transnational crime, environmental or human security issues, which need to be addressed through cooperative efforts. Finally, it undermines the achievements and the potential of existing multilateral structures in the region – whether the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) or the Indian Ocean Rim Association – to provide some form of regional governance.

Time for “Middle-Power Diplomacy”

The US-China rivalry tends to define the Indo-Pacific in binary terms and limits the field of possibilities for other important regional actors – Japan, India, ASEAN, South Korea or even the EU. All these players maintain strong economic ties with China and close security relationships with the US, and all try to navigate the growing tide of power politics to protect their interests. But they also need to step up their efforts collectively to contain the risks stemming from the escalating competition. Importantly, some key global issues, such as climate change, technological progress, or much needed institutional reforms (such as the WTO) can only be addressed through effective international cooperation, with the participation of both the US and China.

This is where the concept of “middle-power diplomacy” offers some useful guidance. The term “middle powers” was widely used in the Cold War context to refer to countries that are neither great powers nor small powers that would simply suffer the hegemony imposed by others. They are usually stable, prosperous democracies that do not have substantial military capabilities to be strategic game

changers on their own, but can still exert influence on the international scene through economic and diplomatic means.

“Middle-power diplomacy” describes a specific form of foreign policy: one that seeks multilateral solutions, peaceful settlement of disputes, adherence to international norms and preservation of a rules-based global order as an essential prerequisite for global stability. In other terms, it is the “good citizen” behavior that could stabilize the global order through influence in international institutions and promote principles of preventive diplomacy and crisis management, but also human security and environmental issues.

At times when many countries find themselves caught “in the middle” of the US–China great power rivalry, joining forces in addressing these challenges and bearing a collective responsibility to protect the global order may be a way forward.

What Role for the EU?

The EU has been most overlooked in the Indo-Pacific debate. In Asia, Europe has traditionally been viewed as a distant player with little influence over regional security. This was partly due to its geographical distance, but mostly to its limited security toolbox and a profile of a solely economic power.

The EU decided not to adopt its own “Indo-Pacific” strategy for the region and keeps referring to the Indian Ocean, Asia and the Pacific separately. This is partly due to the EU’s heavy strategic baggage implicitly contained in the term. In the minds of many diplomats in Brussels, the Indo-Pacific remains connected to the US strategy for the region, which openly points fingers at China and Russia as main enemies. Although the EU may share most concerns *vis-à-vis* the regional threat environment, it does not share the same strategic culture. Its “strategies”, often criticized for being too vague and too weak, do not refer to specific actors. Rather, they refer to the type of behaviors and values it opposes and the kind of norms it wants to promote.

That does not mean it has not followed regional developments closely. As a global trading power, it has legitimate interests in security and stability in Asia. Also, the EU has legal responsibilities *vis-à-vis* its Asian partners stemming from its membership of the ARF and its accession to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in 2012. Finally, as a normative superpower, the EU has a strategic interest in promoting norms and principles that underpin the current rules-based order, including respect for international law and its institutions.

Over the past years, especially since its accession to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, the EU has been most vocal about its interest in playing a more proactive role in regional security. Although it may not be considered a “middle power” as such, its policy has always been to support the cooperative multilateral security architecture and preventive diplomatic measures to ease regional conflicts. Finally, it has been using its technical expertise and experience to build the capacity of regional countries in addressing various non-traditional, functional security issues – from transnational crime to border management and environmental issues.

EU–Japan Cooperation: From Connectivity to Security

The current strengthening of EU–Japan ties beyond economic cooperation is most timely. Both Japan and the EU are atypical security actors, with political constraints limiting their capacity to project power through military means. However, together they represent a third of the global market and weigh significantly in world affairs through their economic and diplomatic leverage. They share the same vision of building a stable and prosperous Indo-Pacific based on multilateral cooperation and the rule of law. Finally, they possess significant human and technological resources and expertise to address the many outlying non-traditional security issues, as well as global challenges related to climate change, research and innovation, and environmental governance.

Among the functional areas ripe for closer EU–Japan cooperation, connectivity has been the most logical starting point. Promoting physical, people-to-people and institutional connectivity is the backbone of the FOIP’s economic agenda, linking up to Tokyo’s tradition of infrastructure investments in Southeast and South Asia.

The EU published its “Connectivity strategy” (“Connecting Europe and Asia - Building Blocks for an EU Strategy”, Sept. 19, 2018, accessible at https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/joint_communication_-_connecting_europe_and_asia_-_building_blocks_for_an_eu_strategy_2018-09-19.pdf) partly as a response to China’s BRI, to underscore the rules and principles that should govern all connectivity projects in the region – namely, economic, social and environmental sustainability, transparency and the rule of law. The recent conclusion of the EU–Japan Partnership for Sustainable Connectivity, promoting high-quality infrastructure and free, fair, open and rules-based trade and investments is a logical step in a common direction and certainly most welcome. That said,

connectivity can only flourish in a safe and stable environment. Even the most environmentally friendly and efficient seaport, built according to the highest quality standards, will not prosper if it is located in a country torn by domestic conflicts or in waters affected by geopolitical tensions. Joining forces to address the various sources of instability across the Indo-Pacific is therefore essential to ensure sustainable growth and prosperity in the region.

Maritime Security

Maritime security presents a vast array of opportunities for cooperation for both partners. The outbreak of piracy (whether in Southeast Asia at the end of 1990s or in the Western Indian Ocean since 2008) is one issue that has managed to bring the international community together and steer an unprecedented level of cooperation.

However, there are many other issues that need to be addressed through concerted efforts. Unsustainable exploitation of marine natural resources, environmental destruction and proliferation of seaborne criminal activities (illegal fishing, drug smuggling and people trafficking) are lasting security challenges that keep undermining the economy and stability in Southeast and South Asia and Africa. Moreover, the region crucially lacks effective cooperative institutional frameworks for multilateral governance.

While Japan has contributed most to enhancing maritime safety and security in Southeast Asia, providing navigation systems, countering piracy, building law enforcement capacity and enhancing port security, the EU has been most active in similar activities in Africa. Building capacity for maritime law enforcement has been a key component of its comprehensive approach to countering piracy in the Horn of Africa as well as in the Gulf of Guinea. Projects such as EEOFISH have been targeting illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing, and developing sustainable fisheries and viable blue economies in East Africa and the Indian Ocean (bilaterally and through the Indian Ocean Commission), crucial for sustainable growth and stability in the region. (In 2018, the EU provided 28 million euros to promote sustainable fisheries in the region under the EEOFISH program.) Finally, the EU has been investing most in enhancing shipping safety in the Indian Ocean and Africa through its Critical Maritime Routes programs, providing technological tools for better Maritime Domain Awareness, capacity-building and training for regional law enforcement agencies and setting up regional information-fusion and information-sharing centers (<https://www.crimario.eu/en/the-project/rationale-objectives/>). If the EU and Japan aim to improve connectivity at sea, they also need to promote

multilateral cooperation and institutional mechanisms in the Indian Ocean region. The Indian Ocean Rim Association is one such structure, dealing with maritime safety and the development of blue economies in the region. Although neither Japan nor the EU are members, they could consider gaining observer status to support their activities. However, much can be done through bilateral channels as well, in cooperation with individual regional countries.

Security in Africa

Another immediate concern for the EU and Japan to consider with regard to connectivity is security in Africa. East African countries border the Indian Ocean and are implicitly concerned by the Indo-Pacific concept and its future connectivity architecture. Yet many of them still struggle with economic, social and environmental challenges, organized crime, weak domestic institutions and sustainable governance.

East Africa has become known as the “Heroin Coast”, with up to 40 tons of the drug smuggled a year due to ineffective border controls (<https://www.unodc.org/easternafrika/en/illicit-drugs/drug-trafficking-patterns.html>). Wildlife trafficking, fueled by the increasing demand from Asia, has become one of the world’s most profitable organized crimes (https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/Studies/TOC_East_Africa_2013.pdf). Finally, illegal charcoal trade from Somalia to the UAE and Oman is another important destabilizing factor in the region, generating revenue for the local terrorist group Al-Shabaab, with links across the East African coast. (According to the UN Monitoring Group on Somalia report, illegal charcoal tax generates revenue of \$7.5 million per year: <https://undocs.org/S/2018/1002>). Due to its historical presence, European nations maintain active diplomatic and economic relations with countries across the African continent. The EU also deploys vast resources to provide development, security and stability in the region, as it is the first to be concerned by potential economic, climate or conflict-driven emigration. At present, the EU maintains eight civilian and military Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) missions and operations in Africa, including its counter-piracy naval operation ATALANTA off the Horn of Africa, military training missions in Somalia and Mali, civilian capacity building missions in Somalia, Mali and Niger, and a border assistance mission in Libya (<https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/430/military-and-civilian-missions-and-operations>).

The newly established bilateral Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA) between the EU and Japan is a promising framework for enhancing political and security relations. However, it still needs to

be completed with concrete initiatives of a practical nature. One useful tool for deepening security cooperation with the EU is the so-called Framework Participation Agreement (FPA), which allows third parties to take part in the EU’s CSDP missions for crisis prevention and management. Two Asian countries – South Korea and Vietnam – have signed the FPA so far. If Japan could consider such an agreement with the EU, it would gain not only a foothold in African security but also a closer operational experience with the EU as a security partner, which could be of use in other parts of the Indo-Pacific.

Conclusion

The EU and Japan have come a long way in fostering their economic and political ties. The emergence of the “Indo-Pacific” as a newly defined geostrategic space constitutes a common playing field and opens a vast array of opportunities also for closer security cooperation.

For the longest time, the EU was not considered by Japan as a useful security partner because of its low military profile, geographical distance and seemingly little to offer in dealing with Tokyo’s immediate security concerns, such as the military rise of China or the North Korean threat. But times have changed, the EU has become a more proactive security player, China’s strategic influence has become a matter of global concern, and Japan has stepped up its foreign and security policy beyond East Asia.

Both partners have much to offer to make the Indo-Pacific free, open, inclusive and prosperous. What the region needs today is not necessarily more military power, but more common sense, cooperation, development and sustainable management of resources. It needs more responsible and resourceful “good citizens” to take care of the global commons and to act in concert to contain the dangerous game of power politics currently at play – a role that Japan and the EU could well exert together. **JS**

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