

Joint Bodies and the Regularization of Strategic Interaction: A Comparison of the European Union's Strategic Partnerships with Japan and India

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Abstract

In recent years, the European Union's strategic partnerships have undergone a new wave of institutionalization. Relations with both India and Japan are a case in point: after a decade or more of under-institutionalized and situational interaction generally framed by political declarations, a more contractual model of bilateral relations has emerged and with it the proliferation of joint bodies. Such joint bodies and the overall regularization of bilateral contacts play an important but largely overlooked role in sustaining the strategic partnership. This article assesses the rationale and performance of joint institutional frameworks devised for the EU–Japan and EU–India strategic partnerships. Informed by an original conceptual approach, the article assesses the regularization and intensification of strategic interaction in these two partnerships.

Keywords: joint bodies; regularized bilateral strategic interactionism; strategic partnership; European Union; India; Japan

Introduction

Strategic partnerships (SPs) emerged in the practice and scholarship of International Relations (IR) in the mid-1990s with keen political and academic interest in SPs as a form of structured engagement and co-operation – and alternative to alliances – following from the early 2000s. Since then, conceptualizations of the SPs have proliferated in the IR and Foreign Policy Analysis literatures (see, for example, Czechowska et al., 2019b; Ferreira-Pereira and Vieira, 2016; Grevi, 2010; Renard, 2011). Despite agreement that SPs constitute ‘a specific form of bilateral diplomatic engagement’ (Pan and Michalski, 2019, p. 267), there is as yet no universally accepted conceptualization either among academics or in practice. States and international organizations tend to conceive of and instrumentalize SPs according to their own interests and conventions.

Following a functionalist logic, the European Union (EU) stands out among major international players by attaching greater importance to structuring, and thus institutionalizing, its SPs. In the last 10 years, the EU's strategic partnerships framework has undergone a new wave of institutionalization: after a decade of under-institutionalized and situational interaction generally framed by political declarations of intent, the current shift towards a contract-based model of bilateral relations and the proliferation of both framework and sectoral co-operation agreements, including the establishment of joint institutional frameworks (JIFs), mark a qualitatively new stage in the development of EU strategic partnerships. Joint bodies (JBs) and the overall regularization of bilateral contacts are playing an important but largely overlooked role. A similar argument can be made for JIFs generally

with their formalized joint bodies and standardized meeting formats, as well rules, principles and special procedures (Tyushka et al., 2021). Recent research in this field suggests that some JB's develop considerable powers, while others fail to do so, with the degree of institutionalization, delegation of authority and frequency of interaction being arguably responsible for such variance (Dür and Gastinger, 2021, pp. 6–10). This article maps and assesses the rationale and performance of the JIFs in the EU–Japan and EU–India strategic partnerships – two geo-strategically similar SPs but ones that differ in terms of their sustainability.¹ These two JIFs operate in distinct structural-relational contexts: the EU–Japan Economic Partnership Agreement was established in February 2019; negotiations on an EU–India FTA have been stalled since 2013. In analysing the process and effects of the regularization and institutionalization of political interaction in the first (India) and second (Japan) wave EU partnerships, this article draws on the conceptual framework of ‘regularized bilateral strategic interactionism’ (RBSI) (Czechowska et al., 2019a, pp. 140–7). It considers both constitutive features (namely, particular joint bodies, their design and functions) and procedural aspects (namely, standardized meeting formats and frequency), and how these help sustain strategic interaction.

The EU's SPs with Japan and India have attracted substantial scholarly attention (see, for example, Hosoi, 2019; Jain and Sachdeva, 2019; Moritani, 2020; Prado, 2014; Simón and Speck, 2018; Winand et al., 2015) especially as regards trade (see, for example, Kakara, 2020; Mazur, 2016; Wouters et al., 2014; Yoshimatsu, 2020). However, they rarely feature in-depth analyses of the JIFs. Single cases tend to dominate, although some general comparative analyses have been undertaken (for example, Czechowska et al., 2019b; Ferreira-Pereira and Smith, 2021b; Renard, 2011, 2012). These include analyses of institutional arrangements in the EU's SPs with the US, Japan and Canada (Domachowska et al., 2018).

Much of the scholarship and empirical evidence suggest that the relationship between the EU and Japan is a substantial strategic partnership (Berkofsky, 2020; Endo, 2021; Ferreira-Pereira and Smith, 2021b; Hosoi, 2019; Jarzembowski, 2013; Pięta, 2019; Prado, 2014; Simón and Speck, 2018; Yoshimatsu, 2020), whereas the EU–India SP remains a largely symbolic diplomatic and rhetorical exercise (Czechowska, 2019; Islam, 2017; Jain and Sachdeva, 2019; Kavalski, 2021; Khandekar, 2011; Potyrała, 2011; Winand et al., 2015). This is despite the fact that the two SPs have emerged in similar temporal and external (milieu) conditions and have, in recent years, faced the same challenges: for example, stalemate in the Doha Round of World Trade Organization negotiations, China's increasingly assertive geo-economic behaviour, as well as uncertainty and protectionism emanating from the US Trump administration (Kakara, 2020, pp. 4, 16, 21). Both have also emerged as India and Japan have been seeking a permanent seat at the UN Security Council, an aspiration that the EU largely avoids discussing. This article argues that the ability within an SP relationship to overcome, if not avoid, internal crises and to meaningfully address external challenges can depend on the internal dynamics of the partnership, notably differences in the regularization, intensity and institutionalization of strategic interactions.

¹The empirical analysis covers the period from the establishment of each SP (that is, 2001 for the EU–Japan SP and 2004 for the EU–India SP) up until 2021. The dataset on bilateral meetings extends up until 2020 only – and for methodological reasons: with most high-level international events being cancelled, postponed or transferred to an online format owing to the Covid-19 pandemic. For details, see online Supplementary materials S1 and S2.

This article outlines the scope and evolution of the two SPs in question before developing a conceptual framework for studying their JIFs as vehicles for the regularization and intensification of strategic bilateral interaction. Two empirical sections then look into the design, functions and performance of the EU–India and EU–Japan joint bodies.

I. The EU's Strategic Partnerships with Japan and India: An Overview

As Blanco (2016, p. 45) observes, EU security interests, as set out in the European Security Strategy (ESS) in 2003 (European Council, 2003), are closely 'associated with the establishment of strategic partnerships with specific actors'. The rise of non-traditional security threats and global instability encouraged the EU to reinforce its commitment towards 'effective multilateralism' with the simultaneous strengthening of bilateral ties (Renard, 2016, pp. 24, 28). The European Council's 2008 report on implementation of the ESS points to increasing awareness of the shifting polarity of the international system and to the EU's search for a 'negotiating order', including via enhanced strategic co-operation with emerging powers (Smith, 2013, p. 665). The launching of the EU's strategic partnerships with the BRIC countries – Brazil, Russia, India and China – besides upgrading relations with long-term partners, also helped consolidate the image of the EU as a global player and an influential norm entrepreneur. However, with the 2008 financial crisis, the EU entered a decade-long series of internal and external crises that led to increased internal and external pressures on and politicization of EU external relations (see, for example, Ferrara and Kriesi, 2021). Thus, unsurprisingly, the EU's 2016 Global Strategy emphasized 'the need for the organization to invest in its current external partnerships' (Ferreira-Pereira and Smith, 2021a, p. 7) to meet emerging challenges and provide global public goods.

The EU's institutionalized practice of strategic partnerships, thus, emerged in the 2000s following the adoption of the ESS in 2003. The term was in use before then, however. An early reference to 'strategic partnership' was in 1998 with regard to the EU's relationship with the Russian Federation.² Unofficially, the term was occasionally used to describe important special relationships, notably those with the US, Japan and Canada (Pałasz, 2015, p. 4). It was only after the ESS' acknowledgement of the crucial role of partnerships with key international actors that the EU officially forged its ten bilateral SPs with Brazil, Canada, China, India, Japan, Mexico, Russia, South Africa, South Korea and the US, and further SPs with other international organizations (UN, NATO, ASEAN, CELAC, African Union) (Grevi, 2010).

Originally, SPs encompassed a flexible and symbolic rather than binding foreign policy tool: until 2010, all EU SPs were effectively concluded on the basis of a joint declaration or statement following a bilateral summit. The practice of SPs throughout the last decade has shown, however, that the EU has been willing and able to upgrade its strategic relations with some partners through increased institutionalization around political and trade co-operation.

²Russia was both the first international actor to be referred to as a 'strategic partner' by the EU and the first to be officially stripped of this status after Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014.

This can be seen, for example, in the free trade agreements (FTAs) that the EU has signed with three of its current nine strategic partners.³ The EU–South Korea FTA has been in force since 13 December 2015. The EU–Canada Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA), with its deep and comprehensive trade liberalization, is considered a ‘template’ for the EU’s next-generation FTAs, and has been provisionally applied since 21 September 2017. The Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) with Japan entered into force on 1 February 2019. In each case, the FTA was accompanied with all-encompassing political treaties: the EU’s Framework Agreement with South Korea (signed in 2010), the EU’s Strategic Partnership Agreement with Canada (signed in 2016) and the EU’s Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA) with Japan (signed in 2018). In 2018, the EU and Mexico reached an ‘agreement in principle’ on modernizing the trade part of their existing Global Agreement in force since 2000). The new agreement also covers political co-ordination and sectoral co-operation between the EU and Mexico. More recently, in December 2020, the EU reached an ‘agreement in principle’ with China on a Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI). The EU’s talks on an FTA with India and on the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) with the United States are, however, on hold (European Commission, 2021c). Of all the EU’s ‘strategic partners’, South Korea is the only one to have concluded with the EU the so-called ‘holy trinity’ of agreements: a ‘modernized trade and investment agreement, an all-encompassing political agreement, and a framework participation agreement, which would allow partners to participate in EU crisis management operations’ (Pałasz, 2015, p. 6).

This article focuses on the EU’s SPs with India and Japan – a Southern and an Eastern Asian power, and examples respectively of the first and the second waves of EU partnerships and the associated institutionalization of relations. The two states are major regional powers and consolidated democracies. Their strategic ties with the EU both date to the early 2000s and both were explicitly mentioned in the ESS along with four other key states with which the EU, at the time, ‘[had to] look to develop strategic partnerships’ (European Council, 2003). Relations have not evolved at the same pace, however. In 2018, the EU–Japan SP entered a qualitatively new phase with the two parties agreeing to conclude a ‘mega-regional’ FTA (Kakara, 2020). The EU–India SP has not yet experienced such a development. Both SPs remain important for the EU as evidenced in the recently released EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific (European Commission and European External Action Service, 2021). This notes the increasing strategic relevance of the Indo-Pacific in general as well as of the EU’s ‘strong and lasting’ partnerships with key powers in the region in particular, including Japan and India, both of which were in early 2021 among the first states to conclude with the EU, as part of its strategy to boost sustainable links across the globe – the so-called ‘Global Gateway’ – a ‘Connectivity Partnership’.

The EU–Japan Strategic Partnership

The relationship between what is now the EU and Japan dates back to 1959. Since then, it has undergone intensive development in terms of trade and increasing interdependence.

³Brazil is part of an inter-regional EU–Mercosur Association Agreement, negotiations on which were concluded in June 2019. South Africa and the EU are provisionally bound by the Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) signed in June 2016.

However, with the strategic-political dimension of the relationship neglected, political links were generally ‘very weak’ (Prado, 2014, p. 3). Meaningful co-operation beyond trade was only launched relatively recently. In 1991, the EC/EU and Japan signed a *Joint Declaration on Relations between the European Community and its Member States and Japan* which led to diplomatic relations being intensified. However, it was only a decade later, following the adoption of the *Action Plan for EU–Japan Cooperation*, that a new impetus was given to EU–Japan relations (Pięta, 2019, pp. 281–2). The Action Plan expired in 2011, falling short of real co-ordination of the partners’ activities on the international stage. In April 2013, the EU and Japan began, however, to negotiate what would become the EPA. These negotiations followed EU negotiations on FTAs with the other signatories to the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP-11) and with the US on TTIP (Kakara, 2020, p. 16). The process was also indirectly affected by the rise of China’s economic statecraft, the conclusion of the EU–South Korea FTA and the UK’s withdrawal from the EU (‘Brexit’). Eventually, the EU–Japan EPA – ‘the largest free trade agreement in existence’ (Vargö, 2020, p. 2) – was concluded on 17 July 2018 and entered into force on 1 February 2019. In 2019, trade between the parties grew by 7% in goods and by 9.5% in services (European Commission, 2021b). Parallel to the EPA negotiations, the EU and Japan agreed on a Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA) that, in 2018, became their first bilateral framework agreement, thus marking ‘a new epoch in EU–Japan relations’ (Endo, 2021, p. 229). Given that the conclusion of an EU–Japan Framework Partnership Agreement (FPA) is now ‘back on the agenda’, though with certain limits (Berkofsky, 2020, p. 4), the EU–Japan SP is likely to become the EU’s second strategic partnership comprising the ‘holy trinity’ of agreements. Arguably, the EU–Japan SP presents an example of not only a sustainable SP, but also a strategic relationship that has resulted in substantial policy outcomes for both parties.

The EU–India Strategic Partnership

Although India was, too, one of the first states to establish diplomatic relations with the European Economic Community – the Indian ambassador was accredited in 1962 – bilateral interactions for over three decades remained rather infrequent and under-institutionalized and were largely commercial and transactional (Czechowska, 2019, p. 258). A basic framework for political co-operation was only established with the *EU–India Joint Statement on Political Dialogue* of 1993 and the *Cooperation Agreement on Partnership and Development* (CAPD) from 1994. It was not until a first bilateral summit, held in June 2000 in Lisbon, that ‘serious bilateral relationships’ started (Lisbonne-de Vergeron, 2021, p. 215). In 2004, during the EU–India summit in The Hague, the parties decided to upgrade their relationship to that of a strategic partnership; however, the *Political Declaration on the India–EU Strategic Partnership* and the *India–EU Strategic Partnership Joint Action Plan* were signed only in 2005. Negotiations on a Bilateral Trade and Investment Agreement (BTIA) between the EU and India were launched in 2007 but, shortly thereafter, started to lose momentum. They eventually came to a standstill in 2013 (Jain and Sachdeva, 2019, p. 318). The EU is India’s largest trading partner in goods and services as well as its leading investor (Delegation of the European Union to India and Bhutan, 2021) but, despite recent declarations to resume BTIA negotiations and the start of negotiations on a stand-alone investment protection agreement as

well as a separate agreement on geographical indications, no progress has been made. There is also no discernible prospect of an SPA, even though the EU proposed negotiations in 2018 in order to update the 1994 CAPD (European Commission, 2018, p. 14). Overall, little progress has been made in advancing the joint co-operation agenda. Only in 2017, nearly a decade after the adoption of the 2008 Action Plan, did the EU and Indian leaders endorse the *EU–India Agenda for Action-2020*. A new impetus was notionally given to the EU–India SP in 2020 when the current Action Plan – ‘*The EU–India Strategic Partnership: A Roadmap to 2025*’ – was agreed, although the results to date have been limited. Many scholars, thus, still consider the EU–India relationship under-developed. For Kavalski (2021, p. 200), it is ‘neither very strategic, nor really a partnership’, which questions not only the substantiality of this particular SP but also its sustainability.

II. Conceptualizing Joint Bodies and the Regularization of Strategic Interaction

Beyond legal accounts, joint bodies (JBs) generally feature little in the international governance scholarship, principal–agent, and (differentiated) economic integration literatures. IR/FPA-based studies of strategic partnerships usually neglect the joint institutional dimension of analysis not least as the SPs represent an area of strategic diplomacy; that is, a structured bilateral engagement between two or more international actors, where grand bargains and summit-level decision-making appear to be central in driving the partnership. Drawing on the recent advancements in the IR/FPA field as well as a broader institutionalist maxim that ‘institutions matter’, it is clear that, in a strategic partnership, the JIFs and JBs in particular, play a not insignificant role: not only do they provide for the regularization and intensification of bilateral strategic interactions (beyond summits or landmark events), but they also help sustain the practice of strategic partnerships. Consequently, ‘JBs matter’ as well, as put by Gastinger and Dür (2021, p. 615), who furthermore note: ‘while they have never been at the centre of scholarly investigation, it is clear from the literature that they are widespread and take important decisions’.

Regularized Bilateral Strategic Interaction

Along with general expectations of the role of JBs as vehicles of socialization, mutual learning, norm diffusion and routinization of practices (Adler-Nissen, 2009; Kelley, 2004), recent analyses confirm the relevance of the joint bodies’ design and functions as well as the level of contacts between partners for the sustainability of a strategic partnership (Tyushka et al., 2019, pp. 504–12). The agency follows from what Czechowska et al. (2019a, pp. 140–7) regard as ‘regularized bilateral strategic interactionism’ (RBSI), a shaped concept that builds on the state-centric idea of ‘regularized intergovernmentalism’ originally advanced by Krotz and Schild (2012).

As a conceptual framework, the RBSI allows analysis of the dynamism of a structured bilateral engagement. It builds on the assumption that regularized interaction between partners helps them to maintain contact, establish routines and habits (including those of mutual consultation and co-ordination), and build both formal and informal institutions. The *regularization* of interaction between strategic partners occurs chiefly through the establishment of habitual practices of ‘business as usual’, that is the routinization of

practices (Krotz and Schild, 2012, pp. 30–5), the creation of legitimate expectations (Adler-Nissen, 2009, p. 129) and the legitimization of certain courses of action while delegitimizing others (Krotz and Schild, 2012, p. 34). The broadest possible scope of such interaction and its *intensity* are furthermore seen as indicators of the strategic nature that a given bilateral relationship enjoys in that it becomes discernible in ‘everyday partnering’ practices rather than just periodically during the summit meetings when strategic partners confirm their commitments. Accordingly, both the institutionalized forms of regularized interaction and the intensity of contacts are conducive to the development of a culture and structure of a strategic partnership, as well as being responsible for the varying ‘strength’ of JBs (Dür and Gastinger, 2021, pp. 6–10).

Joint Bodies and Standardized Meetings

Institutions are defined here broadly. Following Duffield (2007, pp. 7–8, 12–15), international institutions are relatively stable sets of related norms and rules that can be constitutive, regulative and procedural. Similarly, one can draw a parallel in defining *joint institutions* established under bilateral international agreements, such as strategic partnerships (see Tyushka et al., 2021), where the whole set of diversely designed joint bodies, standardized (though non-institutionalized) meeting formats and special procedures (including decision-making and dispute settlement procedures) would serve distinct SP-constitutive, regulative and procedural functions. As Nadkarni (2010, p. 48) observes, the institutionalization of strategic partnerships manifests itself through the establishment of joint task forces and the creation of formal institutional links at various levels, as well as through generating multiple interactive channels below formal institutionalization. It is, therefore, the broader joint institutional frameworks, rather than the joint bodies – understood as ‘treaty bodies’ (Ulfstein, 2012) – alone, that provide the RBSI’s analytical focus. It is therefore necessary to distinguish between joint bodies, on the one hand, and standardized meetings, on the other, as the main constitutive elements of JIFs. *Joint bodies*, such as joint councils, commissions and committees, working groups and task forces, secretariats and centres of sorts, resemble ‘cooperation institutions that are constituted by partners in order to consult, coordinate or conduct their policies in a given field or several policy areas’ (Czechowska et al., 2019a, p. 145). JBs can be formed either by a legally binding treaty or a political declaration. In terms of the regularization of strategic interaction, both the number of the established joint bodies and their scope of powers are of prime relevance (Beyers, 2005, p. 900). On the powers of JBs, it is necessary to distinguish between non-substantive (consultative, coordinative and supervisory) and substantive – decision-making – powers (executive and law-making authority) whose exercise might even result in the imposition on the partners of new commitments (Ulfstein, 2011, p. 437). In turn, *standardized meetings*, such as summits, forums, dialogues, panels, high-level policy conferences, represent ‘deliberate habitual practices of regular gatherings in order to discuss issues and problems of common concern, as well as – in some cases – to make common decisions’ (Czechowska et al., 2019a, p. 145). Standardized meetings are obviously less formalized forms of interaction that usually facilitate mutual understanding, diffusion of ideas, learning and socialization. The agendas of standardized meetings are less regulated as well, which allows for a much greater flexibility than the interaction via JBs. Moreover, the regularity, intensity and composition of such

standardized meetings vary. So does the extent of elite socialization, understood as a process of interactions between representatives that do not just affect their perceptions, behaviours, practices or preferences (Beyers, 2007, pp. 106–9), but also result in those changes becoming part of their reasoning (Krotz and Schild, 2012, p. 32). The ways and outcomes of elite socialization arguably affect the sustainability of a strategic partnership, not least by, first, improving the partners' compromise-reaching ability, or consensus-building willingness, due to reducing the likelihood of misunderstandings and information deficits (Adler-Nissen, 2009, pp. 129–30); and, second, facilitating awareness of each partner's specific sensitivities (Krotz and Schild, 2012, pp. 31–2). What is more, the 'club-like' atmosphere provides many opportunities for stimulating discussions, and arriving at joint action (Smith, 2000, p. 618). Over time, dedication to the common undertaking and an accumulation of a certain level of trust may lead to the emergence of a particular 'community of thinking or common perception of some problems' (Pomorska, 2011, p. 4).

Contact Frequency and Contact Level Comprehensiveness

In order for bonds to be developed and for elite socialization effects to occur, bilateral interactions need to be relatively *frequent*, thus facilitating almost a permanent dialogue between strategic partners. Herein, this article shares the observation of Dür and Gastinger (2021, p. 7) that the frequency of interactions is 'a softer, yet not less consequential, dimension of JB strength' and, by extension, the sustainability of an SP. Also of crucial relevance is the scope of contact (that is, *contact level comprehensiveness*) as it ensures that partners maintain a continuous and wide-ranging dialogue beyond the highest-level contact. There is little agreement in the field as to what level of contact plays the more important role. For some scholars, the highest governmental echelons represent the most important level in a bilateral dialogue (Krotz and Schild, 2012, p. 20), not least as high-level diplomacy usually communicates issue relevance and policy priorities (Koliev and Lundgren, 2021). For others, a much more crucial role is played by public officials who remain active in their posts longer (Smith, 2000, p. 618). Drawing on Haftel and Thompson's (2006, p. 258–9) study of decision-making within international organizations, Dür and Gastinger (2021, p. 7) posit, for instance, that higher-level contacts tend to 'translate into fewer interactions' whereas lower-level contacts oftentimes 'develop a sense of community with representatives from other states and are thus more compromising', thus helping to transcend narrow interests and facilitate co-operation. Within strategic partnerships, meeting formats should include regularized interactions between the leadership of both partners as well as interactions at the (sub-)ministerial and bureaucratic levels (Nadkarni, 2010, p. 48). Taking into consideration the EU's institutional structure, it appears also reasonable to include, as part of the analysis, interactions at the parliamentary level. Thus, and acknowledging Czechowska et al. (2019a, p. 146), four levels of interaction need to be considered:

- a. *higher-rank executives* – prime ministers, the President of the European Council, the President of the European Commission, ambassadors
- b. *lower-rank executives* – foreign ministers, the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, other ministers and EU Commissioners

- c. *parliamentarians* – chairpersons of parliaments, parliamentary groups and delegations
- d. *officials/specialists* – civil servants, public officials and international functionaries, bureaucrats and experts.

Data Analysis

The data gathered using web content analysis (WebCA)⁴ were scrutinized to determine: (a) the comprehensiveness (multi-layeredness) in bilateral interactions; and (b) prevailing contact levels. The assumption is that the lowest-level contact indicates a more grounded bilateral relationship, not least due to socialization effects (Adler-Nissen, 2009, pp. 123–5), whereas highest-level contacts *alone* might speak of the ‘thinness’ of a given SP. Moreover, meetings at the low-executive level are seen to be better capable of sustaining strategic partnerships as ministerial-level interaction usually involves more specific and tangible agenda items. Finally, parliamentary exchanges, while being vehicles of a broader dialogue, have so far proven only to affect marginally the substantiality and sustainability of SPs.

With a focus on the regularization and intensity of strategic interaction between the EU and India and Japan, the research analyses outcomes of meetings that satisfied two conditions: being formal and bilateral.⁵ The frequency of contact was calculated as an annual average, covering a period since the respective SP’s formalization until the end of 2020.⁶

III. Joint Bodies and the Regularization of the EU–Japan and EU–India Strategic Interactions

When it comes to the *regularization* of interactions, the practice of the EU–Japan SP reveals a much more developed and dynamic joint-institutional arrangement than that of the EU–India SP. The most visible difference is in the pattern of *joint bodies*. While the EU–Japan JB, albeit being relatively new and limited in number, stand out in terms of the substantial scope of their powers, the EU–India JB resemble inverse institutional arrangements and practices, that is, featuring quite a substantial number of – rather powerless – JB.

Joint Bodies in the EU–Japan Strategic Partnership

For the strategic partnership between the EU and Japan, there are four main joint bodies, ten specialised committees and two working groups (see Table 1). The first and the oldest JB is the EU–Japan Joint Customs Cooperation Committee (JCCC), which was established in 2008 by Article 21 of the *Agreement between the European Community and*

⁴The empirical research draws on internet-mediated research (Hewson, 2014) and web content analysis in particular (de Spiegeleire and Chivot, 2014; Herring, 2010). The research involved analysis of the records of official visits and meetings between the strategic partners (EU, Japan, India) posted on official websites of state authorities and public institutions involved in foreign policy. For more details on the websites consulted and the data gathered, see Supplementary materials S1 and S2.

⁵The meeting is considered formal if it has been recorded by at least one partner and communicated in an official way online. The analysis does not include informal institutions and interactions, even though these form part of the RBSI approach. The meeting is considered bilateral when it takes place either as a stand-alone bilateral meeting held during an official visit among partners or as a ‘bilateral talk’ held on the margins of a multilateral event as long as at least one of the partners confirms the fact.

⁶In light of the restrictions resulting from the coronavirus pandemics, the number of meetings for 2020 also includes tele- and video-conferences between partners.

Table 1: EU–Japan Strategic Partnership: Joint Bodies

<i>Joint Bodies</i>	<i>Powers and Functions</i>
EU–Japan Joint Committee (EPA) <i>Committee on Trade in Goods</i> <i>Working Group on Wine;</i> <i>Working Group on Motor Vehicles and Parts</i> <i>Committee on Rules of Origin and Customs-Related Matters</i> <i>Committee on Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures</i> <i>Committee on Technical Barriers to Trade</i> <i>Committee on Trade in Services, Investment Liberalisation and Electronic Commerce</i> <i>Committee on Government Procurement</i> <i>Committee on Intellectual Property</i> <i>Committee on Trade and Sustainable Development</i> <i>Committee on Regulatory Cooperation</i> <i>Committee on Cooperation in the Field of Agriculture</i>	Creation and supervision of subordinate JB's, decision-making, EPA amendments*, policy co-ordination, recommendations, information exchange, dispute settlement*, interpretation of provisions*, adaptation of procedure
EU–Japan Joint Committee (SPA)	Decision-making, policy co-ordination, recommendations, exchange of views, dispute settlement, adaptation of procedures
EU–Japan Joint Customs Cooperation Committee (JCCC)	Policy co-ordination, recommendations, exchange of views, adaptation of procedures
EU–Japan Centre for Industrial Cooperation	Expert support, exchange of experience and know-how

Source: author's own compilation.

Note: * EU–Japan Joint Committee (EPA) only.

the Government of Japan on cooperation and mutual administrative assistance in customs matters. Its purpose is consultation and co-ordination, and it may make recommendations. It adopts its own rules of procedures but has no executive or law-making authority. Over the years the JCCC has discussed, inter alia, the mutual recognition of Authorised Economic Operators and accelerated trade lanes (JCCC, 2015).

A second JB is the Joint Committee (JC (SPA)) established under the EU–Japan SPA in 2018. Its role is to co-ordinate bilateral relations between Japan and the EU. It has formal decision-making powers concerning existing and new areas of co-operation. The JC (SPA) takes its decisions by consensus and to date has met three times. During its first meeting, it adopted the Rules of Procedure and discussed initial priorities for the SPA, notably on 'sustainable connectivity and quality infrastructure'. It also agreed to intensify co-operation on the digital economy, for example concerning privacy and security of data (MOFA, 2019). The second meeting was dedicated to co-operation based on the *Partnership on Sustainable Connectivity and Quality Infrastructure between Japan and the EU* that was signed in 2019 as well as a general exchange of views on regional matters (MOFA, 2020b). The third meeting was devoted to 'bilateral cooperation, including COVID-19 and Indo-Pacific' (MOFA, 2021b). Although it is still too soon to say whether

the JC (SPA)'s agency will translate into a dynamic SP, it can already be seen as the forum for setting EU–Japan priorities (Berkofsky, 2020, p. 2).

A third JB is the Joint Committee for the Economic Partnership Agreement (JC (EPA)). It has more substantial powers and responsibilities than the JC (SPA). These extend beyond consultation and co-ordination to include, in specific instances, the power to adopt decisions amending the EPA and to issue binding interpretations of the Agreement's provisions. The JC (EPA) also enjoys the authority to establish, supervise and dissolve all specialized committees, working groups and other bodies foreseen under the EPA. Furthermore, it has a role in promoting transparency through the publication of information on all issues falling within the scope of the EPA. All decisions and recommendations are made by consensus and are binding. At its first meeting in April 2019, JC (EPA) adopted its rules of procedure and regarding mediation and arbitration (European Commission, 2021a). During its second meeting in February 2021, it adopted a suite of amendments to the EPA: to Annexes 14-A and 14-B, where 28 geographical indicators were added; and to Appendices 2-C-1 and 2-C-2 regarding UN regulations on motor vehicles (MOFA, 2021a). To date, most of the JC (EPA)'s specialized committees have met twice, with the Working Group on Wine even adopting two decisions – on import certificates and contact points (European Commission, 2021a).

The fourth main JB is the EU–Japan Centre for Industrial Cooperation. It was created in 1987 as an affiliate of the Institute for International Studies and Training in Japan. In 2020 it became an independent General Incorporated Foundation. It promotes various forms of industrial, trade and investment co-operation between the EU and Japan through, amongst others, the EU–Japan Business Round Table (BRT), which was launched in 1999 as a platform fostering communication between Japanese and European businesses and industries. The Centre provides business interests a space for interaction and lobbying and has contributed to the development of 'general policies and innovation' in the EU–Japan SP (Prado, 2014, p. 3).

Joint Bodies in the EU–India Strategic Partnership

By contrast, the EU–India SP provides for the establishment of a much larger set of 24 JBs including 21 joint working groups (see Table 2). However, only one – the Joint Customs Cooperation Committee – has decision-making powers. The remainder serve as platforms facilitating dialogue, consultation and co-operation. The EU–India SP also lacks a joint body to coordinate the relationship.

In the hierarchy of EU–India JBs, the EU–India Joint Commission (formerly the Joint Commission on Economic and Commercial Matters) is the most important joint body. Established in 1994, it oversees a range of partnership-related matters, albeit notably not political questions. It sets priorities for the relationship and may create specialized sub-groups. Its authority, however, is strictly limited to consultative, coordinative and supervisory functions. A second JB is the Science and Technology Steering Committee established by the 2002 *EU–India Science and Technology Agreement*. Its main function is to coordinate and supervise bilateral co-operation by recommending Joint RTD projects for sponsorship, indicating priority sectors in which co-operation should be sought, and proposing mutually beneficial and complementary pooling of projects. Decisions of the Steering Committee are made by consensus. The 13th EU–India Joint Science and Technology Steering Committee session was held in February 2021 and deliberated on future

Table 2: EU–India Strategic Partnership: Joint Bodies

<i>Joint bodies</i>	<i>Powers and Functions</i>
Joint Commission (formerly Joint Commission on Economic and Commercial Matters) <i>Sub-Commission on Trade</i> <i>Sub-Commission on Economic Cooperation</i> <i>Sub-Commission on Development Cooperation</i>	Policy recommendations, policy implementation, policy co-ordination
Joint Science and Technology Steering Committee	As Joint Commission <i>plus</i> adaptation of procedures
Joint Customs Cooperation Committee (JCCC)	As Joint Commission <i>plus</i> adaptation of procedures, decision-making
EU–India Energy Panel (with its Working Groups on energy efficiency, renewable energy, energy security and clean coal matters)	Policy consultation
EU–India Innovation Platform	
EU–India Steel Contact Group	
Joint Working Group on Agriculture and Marine Products	
Joint Working Group on Food Processing Industries	
Joint Working Group on Civil Aviation	
Joint Working Group on Consular Issues	
Joint Working Group on Counter-Terrorism	
Joint Working Group on Energy Security	
Joint Working Group on Environment (JWGE)	
Joint Working Group on Industrial Policy	
Joint Working Group on Information & Communication Technologies	
Joint Working Group on Information Society	
Joint Working group on Intensification of Regulatory Cooperation on Goods and Services	
Joint Working Group on Pharmaceuticals and Biotechnology	
Joint Working Group on Resilient Supply Chains	
Joint Working Group on Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) and Technical Barriers to Trade (TBTs)	
Joint Working Group on Space	
Joint Working Group on Urbanisation	
Joint Working Group on Water	
Joint Working Group on Textiles and Clothing	

Source: author's own compilation.

areas of ICT co-operation, in particular cyber-physical-systems (ICPS) (European Commission, 2021d). Third in the hierarchy is the Joint Customs Cooperation Committee (JCCC) established in 2004. It is charged with consulting on, coordinating and supervising customs co-operation and, when required, to adopt appropriate measures. The remaining 21 JB's present loosely institutionalized joint working groups that emerged following EU–India summit decisions or joint action plans. Their agency is also narrow in scope as joint working groups serve as consultative bodies.

Standardized Meetings in the EU–Japan and the EU–India Strategic Partnerships

Beyond the JB's noted in the previous sections, the regularization of the EU–India and EU–Japan strategic interactions is facilitated by non-institutionalized but routinized

practices, such as the holding of *standardized meetings*. These include, in each case, a unique set of meetings in a number of formats: high-level summits, ministerial meetings, meetings of senior officials, sectoral dialogues or parliamentary delegation exchanges. While the EU–India SP is characterized by a greater number and variety of fixed-format standardized meetings, they often lacked regularity. By contrast, the EU and Japan agreed on a lesser number of meeting formats but more carefully routinized such meetings, thus more effectively regularizing their strategic interaction.

The regularization of EU–Japan bilateral interactions began in the early 1970s with the first regular Japan–EU High-level Consultation on economic matters at vice-ministerial level in 1973. Meetings continued in this format until 2008 (MOFA, 2020a). Since 1979, regular meetings have also been held between parliamentarians (Jarzembowski, 2013). At leaders' level, the first EU–Japan Summit took place in 1991. Since then, there have been annual summits except for in 1994, 2013, 2018 and 2020. In addition, the EU and Japan have launched 17 sectoral dialogues.⁷ These were initially planned as annual gatherings, but it has not been possible to maintain such regularity in all cases. It was as part of the wider sectoral dialogue arrangements that the EU–Japan BRT noted above was launched.

The regularization of EU–India bilateral interactions began much later, in the early 1990s. Meetings at ministerial level were launched in 1994 and, by 2020, 26 such meetings had taken place (MEA, 2020). However, there were multiple instances of postponements and cancellations (Khandekar, 2011, p. 5). At the parliamentary level, visits have been taking place since 1981, albeit on a very infrequent basis. The first India–EU Summit was held in 2000, with further summits taking place annually until 2010 (Potyrała, 2011, p. 168). Since then, summits have been held in 2012, 2016, 2017 and 2020. The sixteenth EU–India summit was held online in early May 2021. In 2011, India and the EU instituted foreign policy consultations at the level of secretaries. These became foreign policy and security consultations (FPSC) in 2016. In 2019 the first India–EU Strategic Partnership Review Meeting was held. The EU–India SP also involves 31 dialogue mechanisms covering various sectors (MEA, 2020).⁸ In some policy areas, there are also wider meeting formats that include not only senior officials but also representatives from business, think tanks and non-governmental organizations.⁹ Although most

⁷The EU–Japan sectoral dialogues include: High-Level Industrial, Trade and Economic Dialogue (with six technical working groups dealing with: standards and conformity assessment, automotive, corporate social responsibility, chemicals, environment/climate change and robotics), Policy Dialogue on Education, Culture and Sport, Joint Dialogue with Civil Society, ICT Policy Dialogue, Cyber Dialogue, Space Dialogue, Industrial Dialogue on Railways, High-Level Dialogue on the Environment, High-Level Bilateral Dialogue on Climate Change, Energy Dialogue, Food Safety Dialogue, High-Level Dialogue on Fisheries and Maritime Affairs, Macroeconomic Dialogue, EU–Japan Joint Financial Regulatory Forum and Competition Policy Dialogue.

⁸The EU–India sectoral dialogues include: information society, information and communications technology, cyber-security, maritime security, non-proliferation of weapons and disarmament, financial services regulations, macro-economy, culture, higher education and academic exchange, energy, environment, agriculture, fisheries, food and feed safety, clean development and climate change, science and innovations, pharmaceuticals and biotechnology, statistics, people-to-people contacts, human rights, security, trade and investment relations, education, promotion of languages, intercultural dialogue and multilingualism, civil aviation, migration and mobility, employment and social affairs, two dialogues on counter-terrorism, intellectual property rights, public procurement, smart and sustainable urban development as well as dialogue to share experiences on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and development partnership in third countries.

⁹Examples include: the India–EU Environment Forum, the EU–India Water Forum, the India–EU Urban Forum, the India–EU Forum, the Digital Investment Forum, the Business Leaders Round Table, the India–EU Business Summits and the Civil Leaders Round Table.

dialogues should take place annually, their actual frequency varies greatly, and some of them have not taken place for several years (Winand et al., 2015, p. 193).

Following Burns (2009), ‘structure helps improve communication between partners and ensures follow through on decisions and initiatives’ just as it ‘can also help avoid surprises’ – an essential parameter of any SP. The practice of the EU–Japan SP shows ample evidence of interaction regularization as well as the signs that the JB’s actually act as tools for the efficient implementation of bilateral agreements with the EU and, with it, the reduction of transaction costs. On the other hand, the fluctuating regularization of the EU–India interaction has so far failed either to translate into substantial policy outcomes or to harness the potential of numerous established JB’s for providing impetus for the development of the relationship.

IV. Joint Bodies and the Intensity of the EU–Japan and EU–India Strategic Interactions

As far as the *intensity* of bilateral interactions is concerned, the EU–Japan and EU–India SPs reveal similar patterns, save for the last five years, where a greater intensification of interaction can be observed in the EU–Japan SP (see Figures 1 and 2).¹⁰ In both cases, contacts have been held at all levels, with most occurring at the level of specialists: 38% of formal EU–Japan meetings and 40% of EU–India meetings. Parliamentary exchanges show the lowest level of intensity (13%) in both relationships. As far the political executive-level meetings are concerned, in both cases the share of higher-rank executives’ meetings is smaller than that of lower-rank executives: of the EU–Japan SP meetings, 26% are between lower-rank executives and 23% between higher-rank executives. Such meetings made up 27% and 20%, respectively, of the structured EU–India interactions.

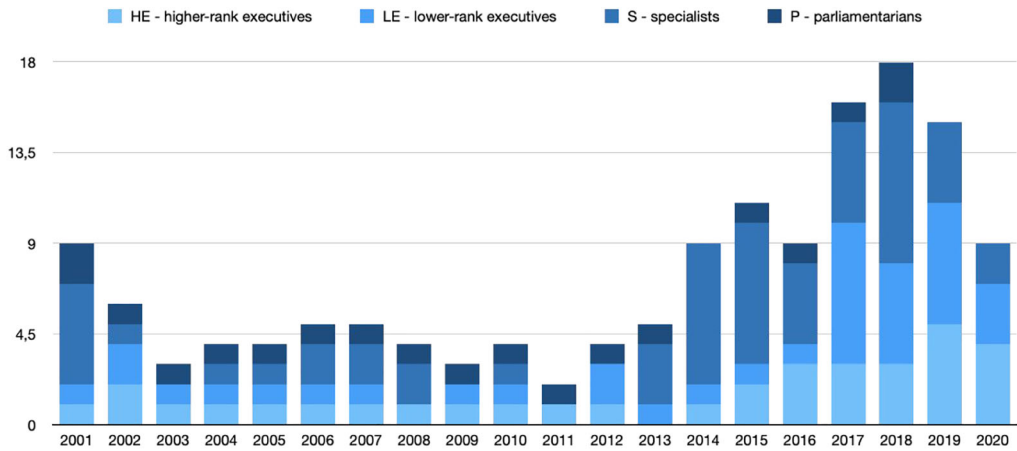
The two SPs are strikingly similar in terms of overall contact intensity when the annual average of bilateral meetings is considered. Over time, however, the dynamics are quite different, with the EU–Japan contacts steadily increasing in their intensity and scope, whereas the EU–India contacts are distributed unevenly and occur with decreasing intensity (see Figures 1 and 2).

EU–Japan Contact Intensity

Between 2001 and 2020, the EU and Japan formally met on average 6.15 times a year. During the latter part of this period, from 2015 to 2019, the average number of meetings was nearly twice as high: 11.60. From 2011 onwards, there has clearly been not only a regularization but also an intensification of bilateral interactions. The gradual increase in the frequency of meetings corresponds with the decision in May 2011 to launch the EPA negotiations and the proactive foreign policy of Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe who returned to office in December 2012. As Endo (2021, p. 238) neatly observes, during his second term, Abe paid ‘unusually frequent visits to European countries, including smaller countries like Portugal and Malta’, along with his official visits to the EU or NATO – all due to his drive to ‘cultivate good relations’ with Europe and, with it, pursue Japan’s national goals of securing a liberal, rules-based international order. Thus, a partial convergence of EU–Japanese foreign policy preferences has been at play. As for the pace

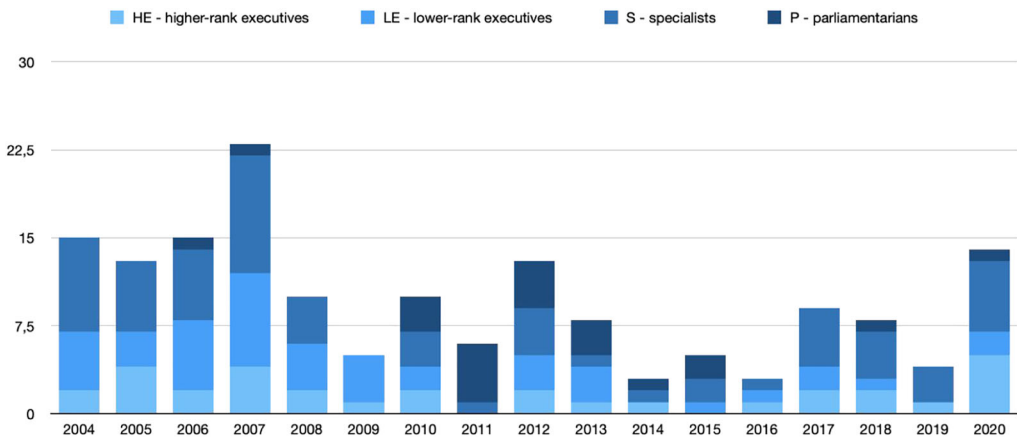
¹⁰Due to the disruption caused by the Covid-19 coronavirus pandemic, the comparison effectively covers 2015–19.

Figure 1: EU–Japan contact intensity, 2001–20. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]



Source: author’s own analysis and compilation; data and information on calculations are available in the *Supplementary materials*.

Figure 2: EU–India contact intensity, 2004–20. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]



Source: author’s own analysis and compilation; data and information on calculations are available in the *Supplementary materials*.

of the EPA negotiations, this increased following Donald Trump’s election as US President and his declaration of the country’s new highly protectionist trade policy agenda (Yoshimatsu, 2020, pp. 433–40). Also intensifying in this period were formal bilateral EU–Japan contacts (see Figure 1) as well as the number of bilateral talks held in the margins of multilateral events. The latter have increased over time, especially in

2018–19, thus reflecting the partners' determination to maintain a permanent dialogue. In 2020, the frequency of meetings returned to the level of 2016. It is too soon to tell whether it was just the direct effect of restrictions due to the Covid-19 pandemic, although the data suggest as much: the biggest drop in meetings frequency was observed in high-level talks previously held on the margins of wider international gatherings of sorts.

EU–India Contact Intensity

The average number of EU–India formal meetings (6.06) annually is comparable to that of EU–Japan strategic interaction. The real difference is observed over time. In the case of the EU–India SP, the trend is sinusoidal and decreasing (see Figure 2). For the years 2015–19, the average number of meetings dropped to 4.00 per annum and is, thus, three times lower than that for EU–Japan meetings. Launched in 2004, the EU–India SP led to an intensification of bilateral interactions, but only for the first few years. Soon the eurozone debt crisis negatively impacted the EU's attractiveness to India for which 'the European project' only appealed at an economic level and was barely understandable as a political process (Kavalski, 2021, p. 203). Thus, since 2009, 'the political and economic climate for both the EU and India became unfavourable' (Jain and Sachdeva, 2019, p. 318). Even the Business Leaders Round Table formula was abandoned after 2007, with no official explanation provided. It was also the period when India, along with Brazil, Russia, China and South Africa, launched their multilateral partnership of emerging economies, namely BRICS. Some observers (for example, Islam, 2017, p. 167) anticipated that the new Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who assumed office in 2014, would revive bilateral contacts. However, his strategic focus has been more on select European capitals than on the EU as a whole. As Lisbonne-de Vergeron (2021, p. 218) notes, the EU has generally been perceived 'unattractive' to India (especially when compared to the US), not least due to Brussels' supposed lack of strategic vision and its culturally and socially 'protectionist' stance. Modi's visits to European states in 2015 conspicuously took place after his first international trips to countries like Brazil, Japan, the US, Australia and Fiji. The intensification of EU–India political interactions has also been affected by the involvement of then-EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Federica Mogherini, in the 2012 proceedings that India initiated against two officers of the Italian navy accused of causing the death of two Indian fishermen (Czechowska, 2019, p. 270). The EU's diplomatic service and the European Parliament became further embroiled, from late 2014, in this dispute (European Parliament, 2015) that, at least until 2016, seriously impacted the EU's willingness to set the date for the next EU–India summit (Jain and Sachdeva, 2019, p. 315). Similar to 2012, the peaks in bilateral contacts observed in 2017 and 2020 can best be explained by the fact that the partners were holding high-level summits, whose preparation was preceded by mutual visits at ministerial level.

The theoretical assumption informing the analysis here is that the frequency of contacts 'foster inter-personal familiarity, trust, and mutual confidence, which might be particularly important in subsequent crisis situations or uncharted issue areas' (Vabulas and Snidal, 2013, p. 199). In recent years, the EU–Japan and the EU–India SPs have faced many external challenges – from China's growing assertiveness and drop in trust to the Trump presidency in the US to the proliferation of illiberalism, populism and the Covid-19 pandemic. The EU was also internally challenged with the refugee, politicization

and disintegration crises. Whereas none of this, including Brexit, changed Japan's general perception of the EU, and thus both Japan's normative alignment as well as prioritization of its economic and strategic partnerships with the EU (Endo, 2021, p. 240), the crises have arguably affected India's perception of the EU, and thus the country's commitment in practice to a strategic partnership. At the same time, as key European states, such as the post-Brexit UK or France, seek to launch their own strategic partnerships with India, the EU–India strategic engagement becomes inevitably relativized (Lisbonne-de Vergeron, 2021, pp. 222–3). The fluctuation of the EU–Indian contact intensity is illustrative of such a volatility in the development and sustainability of the SP.

Conclusion

While sharing geo-strategic parameters, the EU's SPs with India and Japan differ in terms of their substantive policy outputs and sustainability. Analysis of the two SPs reveals similarities as well as differences in terms of the scope and operation of their JIFs. As far as the regularization of their bilateral strategic interactions is concerned, the EU–India SP involves a greater quantity of both weaker JBAs and irregular standardized meetings, whereas the EU–Japan SP relies on a more modest set of stronger JBAs and more regular standardized meetings. There are some early signs that the emerging EU–Japanese JBAs are contributing to the sustainability of the SP. At the same time, analysis of the EU–India SP reveals that the greater quantity of JBAs and standardized meetings appears less well equipped to help sustain the partnership. For nearly two decades, the intensity of contacts between the EU and both Japan and India have followed a largely even pattern, and the distribution of their contact levels is similar. The real difference is visible only in the last five years – when contact frequency in the case of the EU–Japan SP is almost triple that of the EU–India SP. For the sustainability of strategic partnerships, the regularity and intensity of contacts matter.

Acknowledgements

I sincerely thank the symposium editors Andriy Tyushka and David Phinnemore for their valuable comments, edits and suggestions on earlier drafts of this article. I also wish to thank four anonymous reviewers for their engaging criticisms and encouragements. Last but not least, I sincerely thank my colleague Piotr Pięta for his kind co-operation and contribution to data gathering.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of the article.

Data S1. EU–Japan contact intensity, 2001–20: Dataset on bilateral meetings.

Data S2. EU–India contact intensity, 2004–20: Dataset on bilateral meetings.