

POLICY BRIEF

Going 'strategic': the EU-Japan SPA five years on

The EU-Japan Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA) signed in 2018 is often portrayed as a milestone in the bilateral relationship. Five years after its conclusion, it is time to look at the progress in pushing forward this partnership to a next, more strategically significant, level. This policy brief focuses on the 'Peace and Security' priority cluster in the SPA, tracing the drivers behind the current EU-Japan political-security rapprochement and the key accomplishments achieved under the SPA framework. While structural developments largely explain the dawn of a 'golden era'¹ in EU-Japan relations, this paper argues that the current positive momentum has also been enabled by the changing nature of security threats and the increasingly blurred dividing line between traditional and non-traditional security challenges.

The drivers of the SPA

While Japan and the EU have referred to each other as 'strategic partners'² since the early 2000s, the bilateral partnership has been almost exclusively framed in terms of trade and economic cooperation. Indeed, throughout the first decade, Brussels invested considerable

1 Jean de Ruyt, "The golden era of EU-Japan relations dawns," POLITICO, 13 February 2023, <https://www.politico.eu/article/european-union-indo-pacific-the-golden-era-of-eu-japan-relations-dawns/>

2 See, for instance, the "European Security Strategy," 2003; and the speech by EU Foreign policy representative Javier Solana 'The common foreign and security policy – The EU's strategic partnership with Japan,' speech at Keio University, Tokyo, 24 April 2006.

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Issue 2024/09
March 2024

energy in building a stable political relationship with Beijing, while Tokyo's efforts were concentrated on fostering its vital security alliance with Washington. Much has changed over the past two decades, both at the systemic level and in terms of the two partners' assessments of each other's strategic value.

Among the systemic drivers, the shifting balance of power in the Indo-Pacific, manifested in China's rise and intensified US-China rivalry since the Trump administration, has provided the main impetus for strengthening security ties between the EU and Japan. The shift in the EU's position on China has been key in this respect. This started with the classification of China as a "systemic rival" in the 2019 document *EU-China: A Strategic Outlook*. As "diversification and de-risking" have become prominent in the EU's thinking on its relationship with Beijing, Japan has come to be seen as an even more "reliable" partner that shares "a genuine bond" with the Union from a security perspective.³

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and China's continuing support for Russia has further negatively affected the PRC's image in Europe, raising awareness and anxiety about Beijing's authoritarian regime. Japan's condemnation of Russia's war and active support for Ukraine under the Kishida Fumio administration had the effect of somewhat narrowing the 'geographical' gap between Europe and Asia, reinforcing the shared understanding between Brussels and Tokyo of the indivisibility of security.

In terms of internal drivers, Japan's growing security cooperation with global partners is indicative of what some have defined as a "decentring" trend⁴ in Japanese security policy, i.e. reducing the centrality of the US. The ambitious security and defence upgrade announced in 2022 strategic documents of the Kishida administration reflects the need for Japan to enhance linkages with other democratic players, both bilaterally and in multilateral settings. In the case of the EU, cooperation with like-minded extra-regional countries such as Japan can be traced back to Brussels's quest for greater strategic

autonomy. The 2021 *EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific* is built on the premise of cooperation with partners on a wider range of issue areas, ranging from security and defence to trade and global governance.

The final equally important enabler has been the changing nature of security challenges altogether. The rise of so-called 'hybrid threats' and 'grey zone' tactics has become the defining feature of today's geostrategic environment. As economic, technological and diplomatic relations are subject to security considerations, they can only be addressed in a truly comprehensive fashion in cooperation with like-minded partners. Japan and the EU have a longstanding record of addressing non-traditional security challenges, ranging from environmental issues to development to conflict prevention. In many ways, there is a growing duplication of areas of EU-Japan cooperation and Japan's evolving partnership with NATO. This concerns primarily 'new domains,' such as cyber, space and disinformation, but also some of the more established areas, including maritime security. This overlap can actually be beneficial for Japan's relations with both partners, as Tokyo's deepening ties with Brussels can stimulate its collaboration with NATO in some domains and *vice versa*. Given their combined economic and diplomatic weight and technological advancement, the focus on issues such as economic security, cyber security and lawfare constitutes an ideal ground for cooperation.

Operationalising the SPA

Driven by an increasing alignment of their strategic objectives and considerations, Brussels and Tokyo have made a significant effort to translate the Strategic Partnership into practice. To ensure continuity and institutional backing, a dedicated 'support facility' was set up by the European Union in 2019. It aims to contribute to the implementation of the SPA by raising awareness of projects, facilitating the involvement of various stakeholders and harmonising necessary legislative and policy approaches.⁵ Fur-

3 Consilium (2023b). Press remarks by President Charles Michel following the EU-Japan summit, 13 July, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/07/13/press-remarks-by-president-charles-michel-following-the-eu-japan-summit/>

4 Paul Midford and Wilhelm Vosse, eds., (2021). *New Directions in Japan's Security: Non-US Centric Evolution*. Routledge.

5 EU-Japan SPA Support Facility website <https://www.eujapanspa.jp>

thermore, a 'Joint Committee of the EU-Japan SPA' has been meeting on an annual basis at the level of the Director-Generals of the respective diplomatic missions to discuss the progress of the various initiatives and other issues arising, keeping the agreement constantly evolving and alive.⁶

In the 'peace and security' cluster, most noticeable progress can be observed in the fields of maritime security and cybersecurity, both identified as priorities in the early stages of the bilateral cooperation. Additional areas have emerged since, particularly economic security, which currently ranks highest on both partners' agendas, and cooperation on defence technology transfers, which has been rising in importance since Russia's aggression in Ukraine.

Maritime security has always been a key common security interest for both the EU and Japan, and it features prominently in the SPA. However, concrete cooperation has been lagging behind official discourse. On the EU's publication of its *Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific* in September 2021, several Member States, including France, Germany, the Netherlands and Italy, deployed naval assets to the Indo-Pacific, conducting exercises with the Japanese Maritime Self-Defence Forces (JMSDF).⁷ Although symbolic, the presence of European navies in the region has had a reassuring effect on partners like Japan, which interpret it as a sign of sustained interest. Joint naval exercises also multiplied with the EU's anti-piracy mission EUNAVFOR Atalanta. Since the eruption of piracy in the Gulf of Aden in 2009, the JMSDF has engaged in over 20 naval exercises with the EU, culminating in the signing of an 'Administrative Arrangement' between JMSDF and EUNAVFOR Atalanta on 15 March 2023.⁸ This agreement established a common framework for communication and coordination in future operations. The EU's updated 2023 *Maritime Security Strategy* promises to continue cooperating

with Japan in the form of joint exercises and port calls, and considers the possibility of expanding its 'Coordinated Maritime Presences' in maritime areas of interest further east, including possibly in the South China Sea.⁹

The emergence of hybrid threats in the form of disruptions, malign activities occurring in cyberspace and attacks on critical digital infrastructure have been a grave concern for both Japan and the EU. In 2021, the two partners agreed to deepen cooperation on platform regulation and industrial research followed by a week-long series of joint cybersecurity training.¹⁰ The importance the two partners give to cooperation in the digital domain is seen in the decision to conclude an 'EU-Japan Digital Partnership' at a summit in 2022, which combines elements of cyber and economic security. Under the Digital Partnership, Brussels and Tokyo agree to join forces in areas such as digital connectivity, cybersecurity, artificial intelligence (AI), 5G technologies, quantum computing and the semiconductor supply chain. During the first meeting of the Japan-EU Digital Partnership Council in July 2023, the parties signed a 'Memorandum on Cooperation on Semiconductors,' in which they agreed to join forces in research and development, establishing an early warning mechanism of critical disruptions in the semiconductor supply chain, and cooperating on advanced skills for the semiconductor industry.¹¹

The need to boost cooperation in defence technology between Japan and the EU has become more apparent in the context of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Japan's ambitious plan to increase its defence budget relies partly on boosting its defence exports. A noticeable exception in the European context has been the 'Global Combat Air Programme' (GCAP) led by Japan (Mitsubishi), the UK (BAE Systems) and Italy (Leonardo) and agreed in December 2022, which aims to develop a new

6 Reports of the Joint Committee meetings can be accessed at https://www.mofa.go.jp/erp/ep/page22e_000707.html

7 Pejsova, Eva, "The EU's Naval Presence in the Indo-Pacific", HCSS Report, March 2023 <https://hcss.nl/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/03-Eva-Pejsova-European-naval-role-in-the-Indo-Pacific.pdf>

8 Statement by VAdm Saito Akira, Commander in Chief of the JSDF, during the visit of the EU NAVFOR ATALANTA Commander to Yokosuka on 16 March 2023, <https://www.mod.go.jp/msdf/sf/english/news/2023/03/0323-01.html>

9 Pejsova, Eva "The EU's Maritime Ambitions in the Indo-Pacific," The Diplomat, 14 March 2023 <https://thediplomat.com/2023/03/the-eus-maritime-ambitions-in-the-indo-pacific/>

10 <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/news/international-cooperation-eu-japan-and-us-joint-cybersecurity-training>

11 <https://www.meti.go.jp/press/2023/07/20230704002/20230704002-1.pdf>

generation of stealth fighter jets that should replace the JASDF fleet by 2035.¹² Japan also has bilateral agreements on transfers of defence technology and equipment with France, Germany and Italy. In this context, Tokyo's growing rapprochement with NATO can provide additional impetus for strengthening technological defence cooperation with European countries.

Concluding remarks

The changing nature of security threats manifested in cyberattacks, the spread of disinformation and the use of economic coercion is blurring the dividing line between war and peace, and increasingly aligning with the comprehensive conceptualisation of security that has long been promoted by both the EU and Japan. Despite the geographical distance, the two partners are now closer than ever in their shared understanding of the challenges that the world is currently facing, and the kinds of responses required to address them. This, in turn, creates more opportunities for the EU and Japan to build on and strengthen the SPA in the years to come.

12 <https://www.baesystems.com/en-ja/product/global-combat-air-programme>

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Co-funded by
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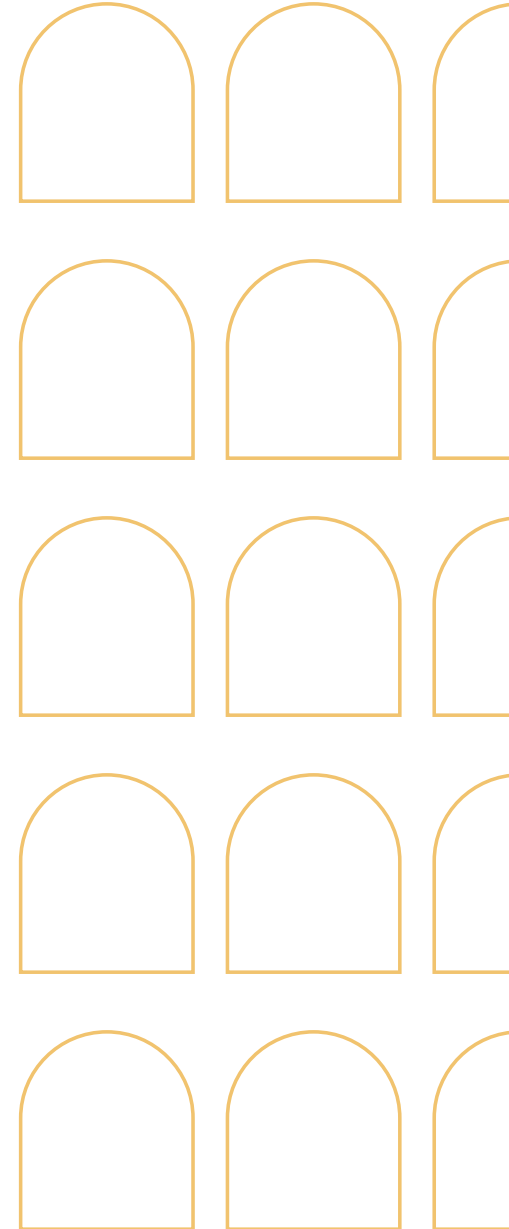
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Editorial matter and selection © Eva Pejsova, Elena Atanassova-Cornelis, 2024

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Published by
European University Institute (EUI)
Via dei Roccettini 9, I-50014
San Domenico di Fiesole (FI)
Italy



doi:10.2870/287104
ISBN:978-92-9466-530-0
ISSN:2467-4540
QM-AX-24-009-EN-N