

Enhancing the EU Partnership with Japan: A Fundamental Actor in the Indo-Pacific Region

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The European Union (EU) has recently increased its focus on the Indo-Pacific region due to its commercial and military importance. The Joint Communication of the European Commission and the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, issued in September 2021, is significant proof of the EU's interest in this part of the world and presents the EU strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific. This cooperation, as illustrated by the Communication, takes various forms, including completing trade agreements or resuming trade negotiations with several states in the area (including Australia, New Zealand, Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines), reinforcing the EU's support in fields such as the healthcare system and fisheries management, and enhancing naval deployment by EU Member States (MS) to protect sea lines of communication and freedom of navigation (European Commission & High Representative, 2021).

However, the presence of obstacles, both past and recent, has thwarted the EU from establishing a stronger presence in the area. Past obstacles include China and Russia's aggressive policy in the Pacific and their closer military cooperation over these last few years, as shown by the first joint naval patrols carried out by Chinese and Russian naval units in October 2021 following the joint strategic air patrols over the East China Sea, which had been organised since 2019 (Global Times, 2021). Recently, the failed deal for the sale of French Barracuda submarines to the Australian Navy, along with the establishment of the AUKUS security partnership between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States (US), demonstrate, according to the President of the European Council Charles Michel, the need for a common EU approach in regions of strategic interest such as the Indo-Pacific area (Emmott, 2021).

A potential partner for a more effective EU strategy is Japan. Japan has been a US ally in the region since the end of the Second World War and has also faced China's expansionist policy in the Pacific and the threat of the North Korean nuclear and missile programmes over the last decades. Article 9 of Japan's Constitution constrains its defence policy, prohibiting the acquisition of military forces and establishing the Self-Defence Forces (SDF) for the sole protection of its inherent right to self-defence (Onuorah, 2020). The SDF's powers were expanded in 2014 by a Resolution of the Government, led by Shinzo Abe, and by subsequent legislation approved by the National Diet in 2015, allowing deployment to assist other countries, including logistical support, securing sea lanes, and participating in United Nations humanitarian missions, in contexts presenting an existential threat to Japan's security (Kallender-Umezu, 2015).

The EU has recognised Japan as an important partner, being the longest established free market democracy in the region and sharing many values with the EU (Council of the European Union, 2012). In the last few years, the relations between the EU and Japan have strengthened and expanded their fields of action, with the signature of three agreements between 2018 and 2019: the Economic Partnership Agreement, the Strategic Partnership Agreement, and the Partnership on Sustainable Connectivity and Quality Infrastructure. In the meantime, the increasing importance of China, a traditional opponent of Japan in the area and a systemic rival of the EU, as labelled by the EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, have further enhanced the dialogue between Brussels and Tokyo in regard to foreign and security challenges (Niquet, 2021).

Japan's Defence Minister Nobuo Kishi's speech in June 2021 to the Subcommittee of the European Parliament on Security and Defence is noteworthy. The Minister affirmed that he expected a "continuance and expansion of a tangible military presence" presence of the EU MS in the Indo-Pacific region to face Chinese expansionism in the Pacific (Kishi, 2021). He also remarked upon the importance of the area for the EU, as around 40% of the external trade of the EU MS passes through the East and South China Seas. Regarding this region, he also criticised a Chinese law, implemented in February 2021, which allows the Chinese coast guard to use weapons against any foreign vessel which is considered as illegally entering the waters. This law is the cause for various territorial disputes between Beijing and its neighbours, including Japan (Kaneko, 2021). The common concerns of Japan and the EU for the Chinese policy in the Pacific were already expressed in the Joint Statement of May 2021, where Presidents Michel and von der Leyen and the then-Prime Minister of Japan Yoshihide Suga reaffirmed the importance of respecting international law and the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), in particular, and maintaining freedom of navigation and overflight in the area (Michel, Suga & von der Leyen, 2021).

Thus, a major common opponent in the area, such as China, can strengthen the partnership between the EU and Japan. Having invested \$49.1 billion in 2020 for its military expenditures, the Asian archipelago ranks ninth in global spending for defence. It is also among the top twelve importers of military systems, 97% of which are supplied by the US (Harper, 2021). Japan thus represents a prospective ally for the EU in the region and a potential market for its military industry. This prospective collaboration is also due to the Economic Partnership Agreement, which entered into force in 2019 and created a free trade area between the EU and Japan, one of the most important in the world. Enhanced cooperation between Brussels and Tokyo, with a focus on military and strategic autonomy, could allow the EU and its MS to reinforce their political and military weight in an important region for the economy and the geopolitical relations of the contemporary world.

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