

JANUARY 2025



WRITTEN BY

BERK BÜYÜKARSLAN

EDITED BY

RICCARDO CERNIGLIARO

SUPERVISED BY

VICTORIANO VICENTE BOTELLA BERENGUER

Introduction

The security and defence landscape of the 21st century has been shaped by the rise of multipolarity, regional conflicts, and the increasing convergence of global interests. Within this complex framework, the partnership between the European Union (EU) and Japan has emerged as a significant axis of cooperation that is bridging the gap between two regions that are historically distant in geography but increasingly aligned in strategic outlook. The signing of the Security and Defence Partnership between the EU and Japan represents the culmination of years of collaboration and shared concerns over global security threats.

Historically, EU-Japan relations have been rooted in economic and cultural exchanges (Watanabe, 2013). The 1991 Joint Declaration and the 2001 Action Plan for EU-Japan Cooperation laid the groundwork for this partnership by emphasising mutual values such as democracy, human rights, and the rule of law (Niquet, 2024). Over time, these principles evolved into a more pragmatic approach incorporating security cooperation, particularly in the aftermath of global shocks such as the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the rise of state and non-state threats, albeit lacking a conceptualised security framework (Mykal, 2011).

The pivot toward deeper security collaboration gained traction in the 2010s with the establishment of the EU-Japan Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA) in 2018 (Sekine, 2020). This agreement highlighted the need for a comprehensive approach to security, encompassing areas like cyber defence, maritime security, and counter-terrorism. Simultaneously, Japan's gradual departure from its post-World War II pacifist stance, epitomised by the 2014 reinterpretation of Article 9 of its constitution enabled Tokyo to actively participate in international security frameworks. This shift was further complemented by the EU's Global Strategy, which advocated for greater strategic autonomy and stronger partnerships beyond its immediate neighbourhood.

The formalisation of the EU-Japan Security and Defence Partnership in 2024 marks a new chapter in this evolving relationship. The agreement is notable for its scope, encompassing joint enhanced defence industry collaboration, and coordinated efforts in maintaining a rules-based international order (European External Action Service, 2024a). It also reflects a shared commitment to addressing challenges posed by authoritarian regimes, regional instabilities, and emerging technologies. For the EU, this partnership represents an opportunity to reinforce its Indo-Pacific strategy, while for Japan, it serves as a vital component of its broader security strategy aimed at counterbalancing regional threats.

As this partnership unfolds, it holds the potential to redefine the contours of transregional security cooperation. This paper aims to explore the historical context, key components, and

strategic implications of the EU-Japan Security and Defence Partnership, offering insights into its role in shaping a more secure and stable international order.

1. A Look Beyond the Agreement

The Security and Defence Partnership between the EU and Japan represents a significant progression in their bilateral relations that marks a shift from economic and political collaboration to a deeper engagement in addressing mutual security concerns (Indo-Pacific Defense Forum, 2024). This development highlights the growing recognition of the interdependence between European and Indo-Pacific security landscapes. While the agreement in its essence is rooted in shared values of democracy, international law, and multilateralism, the EU and Japan maintain distinct security frameworks shaped by their respective geopolitical environments and historical trajectories (Arco & Farrés, 2024).

Japan's Security Framework and Concerns

Japan's security policy has undergone a paradigm shift in recent years, moving away from its historic pacifist stance enshrined in Article 9 of its Constitution (Cidale, 2024). The adoption of a revised National Security Strategy in 2022 points out Tokyo's intent to address contemporary threats through enhanced defence capabilities. This includes a planned increase in defence spending to two per cent of GDP by 2027 and the development of counterstrike capabilities, marking a notable departure from previous restrictions (Kawai, 2024).

Japan's participation in multilateral security arrangements such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), a strategic grouping involving Japan, the United States, India, and Australia, demonstrates a more military approach in the Indo-Pacific (The Government of Japan, 2024). QUAD has bolstered Japan's role in regional security by enabling cooperative responses to shared challenges, including maritime security and countering China's assertive policies (Koga, 2023). Furthermore, Japan has sought greater interoperability with NATO, evidenced by joint military exercises and its status as the first Asian country to open a permanent delegation to NATO in 2018 (Galic, 2019; Pejsova, 2023). These initiatives highlight Japan's strategic pivot to align with global security networks and enhance its capacity to contribute to collective defence.

Japan's security concerns are multifaceted and include indirect confrontation with China and North Korea in three key areas:

1. Regional Tensions: Japan's strategic posture is heavily influenced by security threats from

neighbouring states. China's military assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific, specifically in the East and South China Seas, added North Korea's continued missile launches and nuclear ambitions point out the urgency of a robust defence strategy (Ministry of Defense of Japan, 2022). Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine also contributed to the increase in defence spending since 2022, as high-level Japanese diplomats confirm that this issue singlehandedly influenced Japan to increase its military spending (Jochheim, 2023).

2. Cybersecurity Challenges: Japan has faced increasing cyberattacks on critical sectors, with Chinese state-sponsored groups such as MirrorFace targeting its technological and defence infrastructure (Yamaguchi, 2025). These attacks expose vulnerabilities in Japan's cybersecurity framework, as closer relationships with the Western powers increase the rate of attacks by other groups (Rojoeff, 2024).

3. Economic Security: The securitisation of economic assets has emerged as a priority, with foreign acquisitions of key industries, such as the attempted takeover of Seven & I Holdings, being classified as national security risks (The Japan Times, 2025). This reflects Japan's focus on safeguarding economic sovereignty amidst growing competition.

The EU's Security Framework and Concerns

In contrast, the EU's security framework emphasises a collective and multilateral approach, reflecting on its supranational nature and concerns. Guided by its Global Strategy, the EU has sought to enhance strategic autonomy while maintaining its partnership with Japan via trade and security (European External Action Service, 2016, p.41).

The EU's principal security concerns include:

1. Regional Instability: Geopolitical conflicts in Eastern Europe, most notably the ongoing invasion of Ukraine, as well as instability in neighbouring regions such as the Middle East and North Africa, have direct implications for European security, particularly in terms of migration and terrorism (De Waal et al, 2024; Hopper, 2024). Unlike Japan, the EU is directly affected by territorial wars.

2. Cybersecurity Threats: As with Japan, the EU faces significant challenges in safeguarding critical infrastructure from increasingly sophisticated cyberattacks (European External Action Service, 2024a). Cyber resilience has therefore become a key component of its strategic priorities since 2022 (European External Action Service, 2022).

3. Geopolitical Competition: Navigating relations with major powers, especially managing the

economic and strategic implications of ties with China and countering Russia's aggression, remains a focal point of EU security policy (European External Action Service, 2022).

Distinctive Features of the Security and Defence Partnership

Japan's emergence as a critical partner for the EU in defence stems from its geostrategic location and evolving military capabilities (Euronews, 2024). Situated at the nexus of key maritime trade routes in the Indo-Pacific, Japan plays a pivotal role in maintaining the security of global supply chains and deterring regional instability (Hisahiro, 2024). As a technologically advanced nation, Japan offers expertise in cybersecurity, space technology, and advanced defence systems, aligning with the EU's strategic priorities as pointed out in the 'Cyber Issues' section.

Moreover, Japan's proactive stance in addressing global security challenges, and efforts to counter China's assertiveness and uphold freedom of navigation resonate with the EU's commitment to preserving a rules-based international order (Council of the European Union, 2025). The alignment of strategic interests, combined with Japan's deepening ties to NATO and its contributions to regional security dialogues, has made it a valuable partner in strengthening transregional security cooperation.

The EU-Japan Security and Defence Partnership reflects the shared recognition of common threats and the complementary nature of their capabilities. Key elements of this partnership include:

1. **Military and Strategic Collaboration:** The agreement emphasises enhanced military cooperation, including joint exercises and defence technology development, marking a significant step for the EU in extending its security engagements into the Indo-Pacific region (European External Action Service, 2024a, p.3). Both partners emphasise deepening military collaboration to address shared geopolitical challenges and promote a rules-based international order. Both sides recognise the importance of safeguarding sea lines of communication and maintaining secure maritime regions, particularly in light of rising tensions in the Indo-Pacific and Europe (European External Action Service, 2024a, p.1).

Japan's collaboration with the EU builds on frameworks such as the EU's Coordinated Maritime Presences (CMP) initiative, with the Northwest Indian Ocean identified as a focal area for joint action (European External Action Service, 2024b). Concrete military cooperation includes naval exercises, port visits, and capacity-building initiatives aimed at enhancing the maritime security capabilities of third-party states in the Indo-Pacific (Nováký, 2022). The Administrative Arrangement between Japan's Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) and the

EU's Naval Force Atalanta is a practical step toward operational collaboration in areas such as counter-piracy missions (previously declared in EU Naval Force Operation Atalanta, 2023). These joint efforts share the vision of protecting freedom of navigation and upholding international law, particularly the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), marked as the 11th point of the agreement (European External Action Service, 2024a, p. 3).

2. Cybersecurity and Space Defence: In an era where security extends beyond physical boundaries, the EU and Japan have prioritised cooperation in cybersecurity and space defence as essential dimensions of their partnership. The existing Japan-EU Cyber Dialogue has been enhanced to include regular exchanges on threat landscapes, coordination of diplomatic responses to malicious cyber activities, and alignment on cyber capacity-building initiatives (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2024). Through promoting the United Nations framework for responsible state behaviour in cyberspace, both parties aim to set global standards and encourage confidence-building measures, as well as within the ASEAN Regional Forum (European External Action Service, 2024a, p.4, clause 16).

Space security has emerged as another critical area for collaboration. Recognising the growing risks of militarisation and debris in outer space, the partnership seeks to expand the EU-Japan Space Policy Dialogue to include discussions on space defence (European External Action Service, 2024a, p.4, clause 13). Drawing from the framework of the previous Copernicus Cooperation Arrangement signed in January 2023, both parties are committed to jointly promoting norms of responsible behaviour in multilateral forums, such as the United Nations, and supporting initiatives that address the sustainability of space operations (European External Action Service, 2024a, p.4, clause 14). Through these efforts, the EU and Japan aim to secure critical infrastructure in cyberspace and space, thus ensuring their strategic resilience in the face of evolving threats.

3. Regional and Global Stability: The partnership stretches out the importance of the interconnectedness of regional security, with both actors aiming to contribute to a rules-based international order amidst rising global tensions with Russia, China and North Korea. The partnership reflects a broader commitment to fostering regional and global stability, as the agreement explicitly acknowledges the interconnectedness of European and Indo-Pacific security (European External Action Service, 2024a, p.1, clause 2). In the Indo-Pacific, Japan's geographic and strategic importance positions it as a critical partner for the EU in addressing the security challenges posed by China's maritime assertiveness and North Korea's existential threat (Panda et al., 2024). Conversely, both actors are agreeing to cooperate on security and information, whereas other core issues such as Taiwan and real-time missile data sharing remain exclusively within the US-Japan-Republic of Korea (ROK) agreement

(The White House, 2025).

Both actors have also been cooperating on capacity-building initiatives for third countries, focusing on peacekeeping, conflict prevention, and crisis management (Tsuruoka, 2011). The partnership includes contributions to United Nations peacekeeping operations and joint support for mediation efforts (European External Action Service, 2024a, p.5, clause 26). Such initiatives not only aim to enhance regional stability but also reinforce the principles of multilateralism and collective security. Lastly, engaging in joint exercises, promoting disarmament, and addressing hybrid threats such as foreign information manipulation are other topics where the EU and Japan aim to strengthen their collective ability to manage crises and uphold international norms (European External Action Service, 2024a, p. 4-5 clause 17-23).

3. Political Implications of the EU-Japan Security and Defence Partnership

The signing of the EU-Japan Security and Defence Partnership underlines a growing recognition of the interconnected nature of European and Indo-Pacific security landscapes. This partnership, while based on shared values of democracy and multilateralism, introduces new political dynamics and challenges that both sides must navigate carefully. By formalising their commitment to collective security, the EU and Japan are advancing their roles as global actors in maintaining a rules-based international order.

One of the most evident political benefits of this partnership lies in its potential to strengthen multilateralism (Pejsova, 2024). For Japan, closer collaboration with the EU enhances its ability to address security challenges in the Indo-Pacific, a region increasingly shaped by competition with China (Panda et al., 2024). For the EU, the partnership symbolises a strategic extension of its influence into the Indo-Pacific, reinforcing its vision of global stability through cooperation and ensuring safe free trade routes (Roy, 2024). The partnership also aligns with the EU's broader ambition of achieving strategic autonomy which can allow the EU to diversify its security partnerships beyond NATO and signal its readiness to engage with Asia as a credible actor amidst the US-China rivalry in the region (Figiaconi, 2023).

Economic and technological synergies further amplify the political value of the partnership. Both the EU and Japan share vulnerabilities in areas such as supply chains for semiconductors and rare earth minerals, critical components for their defence and technology sectors (Cernicky et al., 2024). This cooperation offers an opportunity to address these vulnerabilities collectively and leverage their shared expertise to bolster resilience. Joint projects in defence technology, cybersecurity, and space exploration also have the

potential to enhance their global competitiveness and security readiness (Roy, 2024).

However, the partnership is not without its challenges. The distinct geopolitical contexts of the EU and Japan create diverging security priorities that may complicate efforts to craft a unified strategy (O'Shea, 2024). While the EU remains primarily focused on regional issues such as the invasion of Ukraine and Israel's war in the Middle East, Japan's concerns centre on countering Chinese assertiveness and North Korea's provocations (Käppeli et al., 2025; Schöttli, 2024). Although these concerns are becoming increasingly blurred, aligning priorities into a cohesive security agenda will require significant diplomatic coordination.

Another pressing issue is the influence of the United States on both actors' security policies. The EU and Japan rely heavily on the US for military support and strategic alignment (Karnitschnig, 2023; Schöttli, 2024). Yet, the unpredictability of US foreign policy, particularly under the second Trump administration, poses a significant challenge. During Trump's first term, his isolationist tendencies led to the scrapping of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) but left the general Indo-Pacific relatively untouched (Solís, 2019). As Trump pushes for military spending for NATO members, the renewed presidency could force the EU and Japan to recalibrate their security strategies, placing greater emphasis on self-reliance and diversifying their partnerships to mitigate potential risks (Posaner et al., 2025; Takada, 2025). While Japan is set to increase its yearly spending on the military, within the EU, only Poland can realistically reach Trump's push for five per cent spending (Posaner et al., 2025).

On a geopolitical scale, closer EU-Japan ties may provoke pushback from China and Russia, both of whom view such alignments as part of a broader containment strategy (Sabanadze et al., 2024). Navigating these tensions without escalating conflicts or jeopardising economic relationships with these major powers will demand a strategic balance of assertiveness and pragmatism. For instance, the EU's stance against China differs significantly from Japan's approach, as the strategy mainly focuses on co-existing with EU values, while continuing the strategic rivalry (China Briefing, 2024). As for Japan, a containment policy under greater US assistance has been the primary objective (Rozman, 2024). A similar situation is also the case in Taiwan since Japanese officials see China's Taiwan policy as a potential line of full-scale conflict in the near future (Takei, 2024).

On the other hand, the full-scale invasion of Ukraine has also brought the EU and Japan together. Russia's actions have amplified the EU's focus on military preparedness and highlighted the need for robust alliances to deter aggression (Maksak, 2024). For Japan, the parallels between Russia's invasion of Ukraine and China's posture in the Indo-Pacific are a stark reminder of the importance of maintaining strong deterrence capabilities (Sabanadze et al., 2024). The war has also accelerated efforts by both actors to strengthen their

economic security, with a focus on diversifying energy sources and reducing dependency on authoritarian states (Cahill et al., 2024; LaBelle, 2024).

Conclusion

The EU-Japan Security and Defence Partnership represents a landmark development in international relations, symbolising the convergence of two regions committed to safeguarding a rules-based global order. Rooted in shared values of democracy, human rights, and multilateralism, this partnership addresses pressing challenges in military collaboration, cybersecurity, space defence, and regional stability. By aligning their strategies to counter unilateral attempts to alter the status quo, the EU and Japan have laid the groundwork for a comprehensive security framework that extends beyond their immediate spheres of influence.

The second Trump administration could also reshape the dynamics of this partnership. Japan is set to accelerate its defence spending and deepen ties with European powers to mitigate the risks of an isolationist US foreign policy. Similarly, the EU may adopt a more assertive foreign policy, developing its military capabilities and expanding its engagements in the Indo-Pacific to compensate for any potential decline in US support for European security. These shifts could drive the EU and Japan closer together, fostering deeper collaboration to address shared challenges. However, to what extent the member states can collectively sustain the required percentage remains unclear.

This paper analysed the core objective of both actors and what points are to be realised under the EU-Japan Security and Defence Partnership. While regional stability and cooperation remain at the highest level, other domains such as space and cybersecurity are also becoming increasingly important. While the future of Ukraine is still the top priority for EU officials, the Indo-Pacific region can demonstrate new opportunities since rising tensions in the Indo-Pacific highlight the urgency of joint action.

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