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# Japanese-European Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific: Spurred by Global Challenges and Threats

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## Background

In August 2016, Prime Minister Abe announced Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy (FOIP) in a speech and by 2019, the three pillars of 1) promotion and establishment of the rule of law, freedom of navigation, free trade, 2) pursuit of economic prosperity, and 3) commitment for peace and stability, have been established as a method of realising the FOIP.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, European countries and the EU also have developed strategies for the Indo-Pacific. The EU launched Connecting Europe and Asia in 2018, and furthermore published the EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific in September 2021.<sup>2</sup>

The growing international importance of the Indo-Pacific has led to increased cooperation between Japan and the EU. First, the Japan-EU Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) and Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA) entered into force in 2019, deepening economic ties. The EU-Japan Partnership on Sustainable Connectivity and Quality Infrastructure was also signed in the same year, and when the EU issued its Indo-Pacific Strategy in September 2021, the Japanese government expressed its welcome in the Japanese Foreign Minister's Statement.<sup>3</sup> It stated that Japan's FOIP and the EU's Indo-Pacific strategy would develop together, as Japan was mentioned as a partner in various fields in the EU's Indo-Pacific strategy.

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<sup>1</sup> "Free and Open Indo-Pacific Basic Thinking Material," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, March 3, 2022, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/000430632.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> "Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council: The EU strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific," European Commission, September 16, 2021, [https://ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/jointcommunication\\_2021\\_24\\_1\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/jointcommunication_2021_24_1_en.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> "Joint Communication on the EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific (Statement by Foreign Minister MOTEGI Toshimitsu)," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, September 16, 2021, [https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/press6e\\_000331.html](https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/press6e_000331.html).

## Japan-EU Cooperation and the China Factor

There are important similarities between Japan's FOIP and the EU's Indo-Pacific strategy. Both aim to build an open, inclusive, and rules-based regional order. Tokyo changed its FOIP from strategy to vision around 2017-2018. The reason for this was to position the FOIP as a vision shared with regional countries rather than a strategy for Japan, thereby lowering the hurdle for participation by Indo-Pacific countries. The EU also has developed an inclusive strategy for all partners wishing to cooperate with the EU based on "shared principles, values or mutual interest"<sup>4</sup> when developing its Indo-Pacific strategy. The strategy, published in September, also lists sustainable and inclusive prosperity with regional countries as the first item on its agenda. In other words, Japan and the EU are open to any and all countries that share their values.

However, it is also often pointed out that the Indo-Pacific policy of the EU and Japan has been designed with the rise of China in mind. China launched its One Belt One Road and Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank around 2015-2016 and began to make its assertiveness more prominent in the South China Sea and elsewhere. These China factors may, in some respects, have facilitated the development of EU-Japan cooperation in the Indo-Pacific over the same period. On the other hand, with regard to the attitude towards China, the EU and Japan have a slightly different approach, as can be seen in the economic sanctions. That cause can be found in the following differences in the development of Japanese and European Indo-Pacific policies.

It is often pointed out that Japan's current FOIP has developed under the implicit geopolitical objective of responding to the rise of China.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, as a neighbouring country, Japan needs to pursue strategic stability in Japan-China relations. Therefore, since around 2018, there has been an improvement in Sino-Japanese relations, and there have even been mentions among the Heads of State that relations have returned to the normal track.<sup>6</sup> The change in Japan's FOIP from strategy to vision may also have been driven by the need to avoid being perceived as a strategy towards China and to assert that it is a more expansive regional economic cooperation policy.

The EU's Indo-Pacific policy, on the other hand, also has developed in the context of deteriorating relations with China. It goes without saying that since the global financial crisis of 2008, relations between Europe and China had been relatively favourable. Therefore, European involvement in Asia took the form of a vast regional policy of economic cooperation in East Asia, including China, and through cooperation with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries. However, with China's assertiveness becoming more pronounced, Europe began to rethink its relations with China. Connecting Europe and Asia is clearly a counter to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and it is clear from the expression "Systemic Rival" in the 2019 EU-China Strategic outlook that the EU's stance towards China has become stricter.<sup>7</sup> The EU's stance has been becoming increasingly normative and geopolitical, as evidenced by the inclusion of security and defense in the EU's Indo-Pacific policy.

In essence, Japan's FOIP covers geopolitical thinking with broad regional economic cooperation, whereas the EU's Indo-Pacific policy is a broad regional economic cooperation with an increasingly geopolitical perspective added to it. While both Europe and Japan have in common that they have developed their Indo-Pacific policies

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<sup>4</sup> "Council conclusions on an EU Strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific," Council of the European Union, April 16, 2021, <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-7914-2021-INIT/en/pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> Mie Oba, "Indo-Pacific: from Japan's Perspective," *The Journal of International Security (Japan)* 46, no. 3 (2018): 12-32; Yoshihide Soeya, "Japan's Indo-Pacific Diplomacy and Europe," *Japan-EU relationship: Recommendation on SPA*, ed. Rabea Brauer et al., (Tokyo: Konrad-Adenauer Stiftung Japan, October 1, 2020): 15-24, <https://www.kas.de/documents/287213/8235283/Japan-EU+relationship+Recommendations+on+SPA.pdf/7be1eac3-9d4b-b93e-d72c-feed1b217984?version=1.0&t=1601879072036>.

<sup>6</sup> "Japan-China Summit Meeting," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, September 12, 2018, [https://www.mofa.go.jp/a\\_o/c\\_m1/cn/page4e\\_000901.html](https://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/c_m1/cn/page4e_000901.html).

<sup>7</sup> "EU-China – A Strategic Outlook," European Commission, March 12, 2019, <https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/communication-eu-china-a-strategic-outlook.pdf>.

around the norm of liberal democracy, the direction of development of their policies has developed from opposite directions. This directional misalignment may be due to geography. Japan is a neighbour of China, and the response to a regional threat must be a top priority. On the other hand, for Europe, China remains neither a threat nor a priority. Briefly, “for Japan, the Indo-Pacific is innate, but for Europe, the degree of involvement in the region might still be a matter of choice.”<sup>8</sup>

## Russian Invasion of Ukraine and Beyond

2021 was a milestone year for the EU in terms of its Indo-Pacific strategy. However, since the end of that year, Russia increased its forces on the Ukrainian border, demanding Ukraine's non-accession to NATO and a return to pre-1997 NATO deployments. It is not surprising that NATO rejected such unrealistic demands backed by such force. Under these circumstances, the Russian government irrationally decided to launch a military invasion of Ukraine, which began in February 2022. Europe is currently in the midst of its biggest crisis since World War II.

In this situation, EU High Representative Josep Borrell's press remark in January, just before the Russian invasion, after meeting with Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba, was very impressive. His perception was as follows: the Biden administration came to power in the US in 2021 and President Biden visited Europe in the summer of that year. As seen in the US-Russia talks in Geneva in June 2021, Biden and Putin were in talks to build a stable and predictable relationship, since the US's main concern at the time was China.<sup>9</sup>

However, “now, everything is different,”<sup>10</sup> according to Borrell. He added that the response to Ukraine was important, stating that “The security of Europe and the security in Ukraine - because Ukraine is part of Europe - is something that first and foremost affects Ukrainians, and Europeans.”<sup>11</sup> This was the perception in January 2022, when Russia began making threats of force, and it is likely to have become even more so after February 24, when the invasion began.

Indeed, European countries are focusing on dealing with Russia, and that is what they should be doing. European countries have provided weapons to Ukraine, and even Germany has announced a considerable increase in defense spending. Sweden and Finland, which are neutral by their definition, have begun discussions publicly about joining NATO. Furthermore, Turkey and Greece have begun to work towards amending their relations. Russia started a war to try to prevent Ukraine from joining NATO, but this objective has backfired. Certainly, the situation and outlook in Europe have all changed.

Will the EU's Indo-Pacific strategy change as a result? At first glance, it seems quite reasonable to believe that the EU has no time for involvement in the Indo-Pacific now that the Russian threat has moved beyond Ukraine and become a threat to Europe as a whole. This is certainly true: the EU and most of its member states are NATO members, and countries must focus on the defence of Europe. However, a free and open, rules-based Indo-Pacific is relatively more important than ever before in the face of the Russian invasion, a matter that has shaken the international order, and the EU's role there appears to be rather intensified.

The meeting of foreign ministers of EU Member States and Indo-Pacific countries, named Forum for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, took place on February 22, just before the Russian invasion, and was symbolic. It

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<sup>8</sup> Ryosuke Tanaka, “Prospects for Japanese-European Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific,” *Europe's Indo-Pacific embrace: Global partnership for regional resilience*, ed. James Bowen, Perth USAsia Centre and Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, September 2021, 28, <https://perthusasia.edu.au/our-work/perthusasia-kas-europe-indopacific-report-2021.aspx>.

<sup>9</sup> “Ukraine: Press remarks by High Representative Josep Borrell at the press conference after meeting the Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba,” European External Action Service, January 5, 2022, [https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/109427/ukraine-press-remarks-high-representative-josep-borrell-press-conference-after-meeting\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/109427/ukraine-press-remarks-high-representative-josep-borrell-press-conference-after-meeting_en).

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

was the first time that this meeting had taken place, bringing together foreign ministers from the 27 EU Member States and some 30 Indo-Pacific countries. The meeting set out to continue to increase cooperation between the EU and Indo-Pacific countries on security and defence, connectivity and digital, and global challenges.<sup>12</sup> On this occasion, *Nikkei* reports that French Foreign Minister Le Drian, who holds the Presidency, noted that "if we want to defend European values, we must also deal jointly with our Indo-Pacific partners," while High Representative Borell stated that "the Indo-Pacific is our future."<sup>13</sup>

Russia-China relations will change significantly in the future. In terms of national power, China already overtook Russia a long time ago. Nevertheless, it was pointed out that China, as a rising superpower, tends to consider Russia as an existing superpower. However, since the annexation of Crimea in 2014, a closer proximity between Russia and China has been observed. Furthermore, Russia, which is isolated by its recent invasion of Ukraine, has no choice but to move even closer to China. In that case, the initiative in Russia-China relations will gradually shift to China. Although China and Russia are not allies, there will be more occasions when they will keep pace with each other in their foreign policy as anti-liberal democracy camps. There will be more occasions in the future when Sino-Russian relations will become a serious challenge to the rules-based Indo-Pacific.<sup>14</sup> It is clear that the importance of cooperation between the EU, the UK, and Japan also will become proportionally more important in order to meet this Russia-China challenge.

## Next Steps

In this turbulent world, what kind of cooperation can and should Japan and Europe, as guardians of liberal democracy, provide in the context of security? Put simply, it is preparation for crisis. The following efforts should be made by Europe and Japan to prepare for possible future crises in the Indo-Pacific.

The first is to facilitate the formation of a common understanding between Japan and Europe on current international affairs through the G7 which includes Japan, the US, UK, Canada, Germany, France, and Italy, plus the EU. The G7 summit in June 2021 included statements on human rights issues in China and the Taiwan issue, both of these statements were a major change.<sup>15</sup> The trend seems to have been shaped by the US-Japan summit in April 2021 and the EU-Japan summit in May in the same year.<sup>16</sup> In this way, first of all, a common understanding makes sure that the perceptions of the US, the EU, and Japan are aligned at the document level is fundamental in security, as well.

In this regard, Japan's request to Europe would be to keep in step with the US as much as possible. The Biden administration, which took office in January 2021, has been working to repair the rifts between the US and Europe that had emerged under the Trump administration. On the Indo-Pacific, however, the joint leaders of Australia, the UK, and the US announced the establishment of AUKUS in September 2021, which provoked a fierce backlash from the EU, particularly France. This US-European difference in the Indo-Pacific is likely due to

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<sup>12</sup> "Factsheet on the main announcements and areas of enhanced cooperation," Ministerial Forum for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, February 22, 2022, <https://presidence-francaise.consilium.europa.eu/media/cepbd4t1/main-announcements-and-areas-of-enhanced-cooperation-en.pdf>.

<sup>13</sup> "インド太平洋外相が初会合 対中で連携強化 (First meeting of EU and Indo-Pacific foreign ministers: Strengthening cooperation to deal with China)," *Nikkei*, February 24, 2022, <https://www.nikkei.com/article/DGXZQOGR22AM50S2A220C2000000/>; "Ministerial Forum for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, Paris: joint press conference by Jean-Yves Le Drian and Josep Borrell Fontelles," European Commission, February 22, 2022, <https://audiovisual.ec.europa.eu/en/video/I-218805>.

<sup>14</sup> Janka Oertel, "Games changer: How China is rewriting global rules and Russia is playing along," February 23, 2022, European Council on Foreign Relations, <https://ecfr.eu/article/games-changer-how-china-is-rewriting-global-rules-and-russia-is-playing-along/>.

<sup>15</sup> "Carbis Bay G7 Summit Communiqué: Our Shared Agenda for Global Action to Build Back Better," G7 UK 2021, June 13, 2021, <https://www.g7uk.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Carbis-Bay-G7-Summit-Communique-PDF-430KB-25-pages-3.pdf>.

<sup>16</sup> "Japan-US Summit Meeting," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, April 16, 2021, [https://www.mofa.go.jp/page4e\\_001123.html](https://www.mofa.go.jp/page4e_001123.html); "The 27th Japan-EU Summit," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, May 27, 2021, [https://www.mofa.go.jp/erp/ep/page4e\\_001135.html](https://www.mofa.go.jp/erp/ep/page4e_001135.html).

the differing degrees of urgency each feels towards the Chinese threat. For its part, Japan welcomes both the EU's Indo-Pacific strategy and AUKUS.<sup>17</sup> What this means, of course, is that it understands the differences in attitude between the US and Europe but would like to see a more concerted US-European involvement in the Indo-Pacific.

Second, in the event of a crisis in the Indo-Pacific, Japan and Europe need to keep pace with economic sanctions against the country or countries that caused the crisis. While Japan, the US, and Europe are largely in step with regard to financial sanctions against Russia for its aggression in Ukraine, there are concerns about the so-called boomerang effect of sanctions on things that directly affect people's lives, such as energy, and these three players are not in step on energy yet.<sup>18</sup> If a similar crisis were to occur in the Indo-Pacific and economic sanctions were to be imposed on the country that caused the crisis, efforts would be required to ensure that Japan, the US, and Europe are in step with each other on sanctions.

But if the sanctions target is China, the world's second-largest GDP country, would this be possible? Keeping pace between Japan (with China as its neighbour and the largest trading partner), Europe (which must continue to give top priority to dealing with Russia), and the US (which must be vigilant in both Europe and the Indo-Pacific), will require more than extraordinary effort. The US Indo-Pacific Economic Framework, Europe's Connectivity Strategy, and Japan's FOIP should work together to strengthen supply chains resilience, which means building a system that can withstand the backlash when economic sanctions are imposed.

Third, there is a greater need for Europe and Japan to increase their defense spending and capabilities respectively. So far, since 2014, NATO members in Europe have set a target of 2% of GDP for defense spending by 2024, and an increasing number of NATO countries have come close to this target. Moreover, even countries that have had little intention of reaching that target, such as Germany, will increase their defense spending in the coming years. On the other hand, in Japan, too, there are discussions of a considerable increase in defense spending in order to cope with the security environment, which is becoming more and more severe.<sup>19</sup> In any case, there is no doubt that the direction of increasing defense spending and strengthening defense policy in both Japan and Europe is now an irreversible trend.

The strengthening of the defense policies of both Europe and Japan in terms of hard power has two aspects. One is to assist the US military in burden-sharing. Already, it can be said that the quasi-war situation on NATO's eastern flank has begun with the Russian invasion of Ukraine. If a similar crisis occurs in the Indo-Pacific, as described above, the US military would likewise be forced to intensify its military deployment in the Indo-Pacific. In order to reduce the burden on the US military, which will have to deploy a two-front operation, there is a clear need for Japan and Europe to increase their own defense capabilities.

Another aspect is the military involvement of European countries in the Indo-Pacific. Naturally, due in part to the tyranny of distance, it is almost clear that most Japanese do not expect European countries to fight alongside Japan and the US in the Indo-Pacific. However, even if they do not reach that level, the presence of European countries in the Indo-Pacific would be significant enough in terms of making international alignment visible. To support this, it is important to ensure the continuity of European involvement in the Indo-Pacific by developing a framework and system for continuing joint exercises and other activities, for example, through the conclusion of a Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA), which are under negotiation between Japan-UK and France

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<sup>17</sup> "Press Conference by Foreign Minister MOTEGI Toshimitsu," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, September 21, 2021, [https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/kaiken/kaiken25c\\_000038.html](https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/kaiken/kaiken25c_000038.html).

<sup>18</sup> Patricia Cohen and Stanley Reed, "Why the Toughest Sanctions on Russia Are the Hardest for Europe to Wield," *The New York Times*, February 25, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/25/business/economy/russia-europe-sanctions-gas-oil.html>.

<sup>19</sup> Jesse Johnson, "Japan's LDP vows sharp defense budget hike, but public focus elsewhere," *The Japan Times*, October 18, 2021, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2021/10/18/national/politics-diplomacy/ldp-defense-budget-hike/>.

is also expected to commence negotiation with Japan.<sup>20</sup>

## Conclusion

The Indo-Pacific policies of Europe and Japan have much in common, including an emphasis on openness, inclusiveness, connectivity, and a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific. Furthermore, China's foreign policy in recent years has brought Europe and Japan closer to cooperation in the Indo-Pacific. Nevertheless, the fact that the Indo-Pacific has been an innate focus for Japan, while it has been selective focus for Europe in previous years, has led to differences in some actual Japanese and European policies towards China, such as in their stance towards sanctions. Also, there are concerns that Russia's invasion of Ukraine may reduce the momentum of Europe's Indo-Pacific policy.

It is true that, from a purely military perspective, it is quite natural for Europe to focus on the defense of Europe when it is in crisis. To sum up, however, the importance of cooperation between Europe and Japan in the Indo-Pacific will increase in the future. The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 is, locally, a crisis for Europe, but in the bigger picture, it is the beginning of a world crisis. And the Indo-Pacific will be influenced by Sino-Russian relations in which Russia is in decline and China has the upper hand. In these circumstances, it is needless to say that cooperation between Europe and Japan, as the liberal democratic camp, will become even more critically important.

Already, for Europe, the Indo-Pacific seems to be moving from a selective phase to an innate phase. In particular, France's leadership has been more conspicuous in 2022. While planning to strengthen its own military readiness in the Indo-Pacific, France is leading the EU's Indo-Pacific strategy during its Presidency and is also the core of the Army and Air Force of NATO's response forces (NRF) this year. The UK is the core of the NRF Navy and has made plans to deploy assets in the Middle East and Indo-Pacific in 2023. Tokyo would expect a proactive UK stance in AUKUS and cooperation with the EU in the Indo-Pacific, fully understanding that European defense is a top priority for the UK also. Japan will continue to pursue wider cooperation with European countries in the Indo-Pacific, which will become ever more important.

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<sup>20</sup> "Commencement of negotiations on the Japan-UK Reciprocal Access Agreement," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, September 28, 2021, [https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/press4e\\_003044.html](https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/press4e_003044.html); "Japan, France Vow to Enhance Defense Cooperation at 2-Plus-2 Talks," *Jiji Press*, January 21, 2022, <https://sp.m.jiji.com/english/show/17467>.