



Rapprochement in Times of Crisis: War in Ukraine and the EU-Japan Partnership

By Céline Pajon & Eva Pejsova | 11 May 2022

Key Issues

- Japan felt encouraged to emulate Europe and take exceptional measures: for the first time Tokyo decided to send non-lethal military equipment to a country where combat is raging.
- Concrete prospects for strengthening cooperation open up within the fields of defence technology innovation, as well as hybrid threats, cyber, maritime and space security.
- As European and Japanese firms withdraw from Russia, the importance of ensuring resilient and ethical value chains and reduce dependencies on China and Russia have become key.
- The context of the unfolding war in Ukraine and the shifting security posture in Brussels and Tokyo have injected an important dose of strategic convergence, operational capacity and political willingness into further developing the EU – Japan Strategic Partnership.

The war in Ukraine has shaken the foundations of European security and of the global rules-based order. In many ways, Russia's aggression has been a wake-up call for the EU, adding a sense of urgency to its ongoing transformation to becoming a stronger geopolitical actor, materialised by the recent publication of its Strategic Compass – its first-ever white paper for security and defence. At the same time, the crisis has prompted the world's democracies to come together in search of solutions and accentuated the need to form a united front against the rising tide of revisionist tendencies.

Among those, Japan stood out by the uncharacteristic speed and scale of its response. Tokyo's proactive involvement within the G7 framework, NATO, and the EU in the context of the crisis demonstrates a looming shift

in its foreign policy and security posture under Prime Minister Fumio Kishida's administration. Against the increased tendency by the EU and Japan to forge a more meaningful strategic relationship over the recent years, the current crisis and subsequent boost in security postures of both parties provides yet another common strategic focus and opens an array of concrete opportunities for cooperation.

Common concerns, parallel approaches

The EU and Japan are traditionally cautious players on the international scene. For different reasons, they usually take time to react or take a position on complicated international issues, especially if it involves a crisis or armed conflict. After all, the EU is still a geopolitical player in the making.

Its first [Global Strategy](#) was adopted only in 2016, and Brussels is still learning how to play a role in an increasingly conflictual environment. For its part, Japan has often been in the shadow of the US for diplomatic matters. In addition, both Japan and the EU have to deal with legal and political constraints when it comes to using military tools to act abroad.

Both the EU and Japan have complicated relations with Russia. They depend on Russia for their energy supply, although much more importantly for Europe (40% of its gas is imported from Russia) than for Japan (Russia represents 9% of its liquefied natural gas [LNG] imports, 4% of its oil imports). Russia is a neighbour to the EU and Japan, so both see the importance of keeping channels of communication open. Moreover, under the mandate of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (2012-2020), Japan set up a [proactive engagement policy](#) that aimed to eventually solve the territorial dispute over the South Kuriles/Northern Territories and sign a peace treaty. This explains why, after the annexation of Crimea in 2014, Tokyo adopted only very light sanctions vis-à-vis Moscow. At that time, Japan stood out as having a unique stance on Russia, at the risk of being marginalised within the G7. This time was quite different.

After the start of the invasion of Ukraine by Russian forces, the EU and Japan reacted very quickly. Europeans made ground-breaking decisions – including activating the European Peace Facility (set up in July 2021) to support and equip Ukraine with €500 million worth of arms, including lethal weapons – and a set of tough sanctions vis-à-vis Moscow. Germany broke historical and legal taboos by deciding to increase its military expenditure to more than 2% of its GDP, and send defence equipment to the Ukrainian forces.

European mobilisation resonated with Japan: Tokyo broke with Abe's engagement approach, and immediately condemned the Russian aggression, which “unilaterally changes the status quo by force” – an expression usually used to describe Chinese moves in the South and East China Seas. Demonstrating its solidarity, Tokyo accepted to share part of its LNG stock to support the Europeans, even before the war actually broke out. Japan aligned itself with the G7 countries and [adopted a series of sanctions](#), including the freezing of the Russian

Central Bank's yen reserves, the withdrawal of the most favoured nation status granted to Russia, and suspension of exports of more than 30 goods, including semiconductors, but also used vehicles and spare parts (which account for more than half of Japanese exports to Russia).

Japan felt encouraged to emulate Europe and take exceptional measures: for the first time Tokyo decided to send non-lethal military equipment (helmets, bulletproof vests, generators) to a country where combat is raging. Japan also decided to welcome a number of Ukrainian refugees (around 400 so far). Normally, less than 1% of annual asylum applications are accepted (4,000 in 2021). Finally, the German example is already prompting discussions in Japan about an increase of its military spending and a more ambitious defence posture. With the new National Security Strategy announced to be published by the end of the year, an upgrade in Japan's defence budget and capabilities is likely to be expected.

A more capable Europe, a more worthy partner

Amidst the ongoing crisis at its doorstep, the EU adopted its long-awaited [“Strategic Compass for Security and Defence”](#) on 24 March 2022. In its first white defence paper, the Union pledges to upgrade its security toolbox with a number of concrete initiatives built around four key pillars: the need to enhance its capacity to act, secure its strategic space, invest in defence capabilities and technologies, and deepen its cooperation with partners. Concrete steps include the strengthening of its Rapid Deployment Capacity, setting up a comprehensive Hybrid Toolbox and Cyber Defence policy, expanding its Coordinated Maritime Presences, investing into a Defence Innovation Hub, and multiplying joint exercises with partners. Overall, the document demonstrates Europe's resolve to address the increasingly threatening global security environment, adding muscle to its mostly economic and normative foreign policy.

The impact of this shift on the EU's engagement in and with Asia is manifold. First, a more assertive and militarily capable Europe means a more useful partner to work with. This applies to its relationship

with the United States, as well as many of its Indo-Pacific partners, notably Japan, who repeatedly encouraged the EU's greater security role in the region and globally. Concrete prospects for strengthening cooperation open up within the fields of defence technology innovation, as well as hybrid threats, cyber, maritime, and space security – with more

January 2022, the Union expanded its Coordinated Maritime Presences to the North-Western Indian Ocean, enhancing its naval presence, political commitment, and diplomatic influence in the Indian Ocean. The possibility to include other Maritime Areas of Interest further east may be just a couple of council conclusions away. Together with a

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resources, better capabilities, and consolidated political will on the EU side. Importantly, the situation in Ukraine has significantly narrowed the gap in threat perceptions among the EU, the US, and Japan, enabling meaningful exchanges on possible trilateral cooperation in the Indo-Pacific.

The second notable impact is related to the EU's hardening position vis-à-vis China. The Strategic Compass mentions China explicitly on several occasions as part of its threat assessment, both as a challenger to the global rule-based order and as a growing military power with a nuclear potential and for its "increasingly assertive regional behaviour" that needs to be closely watched. The rapprochement between China and Russia, marked by the joint declaration from 4 February 2022, was labelled a "[revisionist manifesto](#)" by the EU's High Representative Josep Borrell, framing the world through a democracy vs. authoritarianism prism and drawing a thicker line between Brussels and Beijing. The frustration over China's silence with regards to Russia's aggression further adds to the already deteriorating bilateral ties with [no sensible breakthrough in sight](#), as is apparent in the latest EU-China summit on 1 April.

Finally, Europe's rapid response to the war in Ukraine also proves the block is indeed capable of moving beyond rhetoric when necessary. Upon the publication of the EU's Indo-Pacific Strategy in September 2021, many regional partners remained sceptical as to the effective implementation of the announced policies. Yet, as early as in

number of hands-on initiatives already underway as part of the Enhancing Security in and with Asia project, it seems that the EU is finally ready to break with its unfortunate record of overpromising and underdelivering.

A new basis for expanded cooperation

The latest developments provide a new basis to reinforce the EU-Japan partnership. Tokyo's proactive diplomacy has been positively received in Europe. Both the EU and Japan have more capacity, tools, and willingness to act, and thus can enter more ambitious ways to cooperate and coordinate when an international crisis unfolds. Both players are also reassessing their relations with Moscow in light of the horrific events in Ukraine. Russia is thus likely to be qualified as a security challenge in Japan's upcoming National Security Strategy, breaking with its previous engagement stance and aligning with Europe's position. Finally, we see a reconsideration of the China-Russia relations with Beijing concealing its de facto support for Moscow. European countries are likely to be more sympathetic to Japan's concerns vis-à-vis China and consider the interconnectedness between the European and Asian theatres.

This common ground opens the door for expanded cooperation between the EU and Japan, in particular on the necessity to reinforce their own resilience vis-à-vis economic and political coercion, to better counter inappropriate behaviour and to uphold the rules-based order.

Building up resilience:

1. As European and Japanese firms withdraw from Russia, the importance of ensuring resilient and ethical value chains and reduce dependencies on China and Russia have become key. Japan has extensive experience in economic security that the EU can learn from.
2. Enhancing strategic autonomy and resilience of third countries by providing a credible alternative to authoritarian powers can be achieved by selling defence equipment or funding critical infrastructures. Europeans and Japanese can in principle work both in synergy and in complement, concretising their commitments within the framework of the EU-Japan Connectivity Partnership signed in 2019.

Deterring and imposing cost on coercive actions:

1. Build up preventive diplomacy: ensure the channels of communications are kept open or provide honest broker services.
2. Coordinate to set up red lines on the potential “bully” with costs associated and provide a common strategic communication to ensure that these red lines are understood.
3. Set up a safe information-sharing channel to coordinate economic and political sanctions against a coercive actor, or to provide logistic or military support to a like-minded country, including in cyber or space domains.
4. Reinforce measures to fight disinformation and cyberattacks within the framework of the bilateral Digital Partnership.
5. Coordinate humanitarian assistance to like-minded countries, combining Tokyo International Conference on African Development and EU planned activities in Africa.

Reinforcing the rules-based order:

1. The war in Ukraine has become the symbol of a fight between democracies and autocracies. Japan sees the emergence of a global democratic front very favourably, with the EU’s economic and normative power playing a central role.
2. Enhancing coordination to shape international standards and norms in critical domains such as new technology, artificial intelligence, and digital domain (data and infrastructures). The current conflict shows the importance of a safe and stable internet access for the population, media, and combatants.

3. Finally, the paralysis of the UN Security Council revitalised the discussion about the necessity of reform. Japan has long been advocating, with the support of Europeans, a reform that could lead to a permanent seat for Tokyo.

Conclusion

The context of the unfolding war in Ukraine and the shifting security posture in Brussels and Tokyo have injected an important dose of strategic convergence, operational capacity, and political willingness into further developing the EU-Japan Strategic Partnership. Opportunities for cooperation emerge on the bilateral level and trilateral level with the US, as well as within NATO, which is about to adopt its new Strategic Concept, expanding the attention of the alliance to emerging threats and the Indo-Pacific theatre. Diplomatic interactions have already intensified: both Japan’s Prime Minister Fumio Kishida and Foreign Minister Yoshimasa Hayashi, have joined the G7 and NATO emergency meetings on Ukraine in Brussels late March, using the opportunity for bilateral consultations with European leaders. Later in April, a [joint statement](#) by the European Parliament Delegation for relations with Japan and the Japan-EU Interparliamentary League of Friendship of the National Diet condemned in the strongest terms the Russian aggression, reaffirming their shared values and calling for all nations to support de-escalation.

For sure, there are also reasons to consider these overall positive developments with caution, as the situation in Ukraine could also possibly fuel frictions between the EU and Japan. For instance, Japan and European countries may compete to secure sustainable sources of gas and oil. Elements of competition may also arise from the need to secure the US attention and security commitment. If China moves ahead with Taiwan while Russia still has an aggressive attitude in Europe to divert attention and capabilities, the US capacity of action may be overstretched. In order to avoid these risks of tensions, Brussels and Tokyo should seize the current positive momentum to deepen the dialogue, including on the possible contingencies ahead. The 28th EU-Japan summit in Tokyo (12 May 2022) will shed further light on the development of bilateral relations.



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