



A PILLAR OF STABILITY IN AN UNSTABLE WORLD

Strengthening EU-Japan security cooperation in the Indo-Pacific

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Abstract

The rising centrality of the Indo-Pacific is self-evident. What remains to be defined is the potential role the EU could play, notably as a security actor. Given capacity constraints, the EU's objectives in the region should focus on credibility and on safeguarding shared interests – for example securing sea lines of communication, an objective also shared by Japan.

Hard power remains the preferred language in the Indo-Pacific region. Australia unceremoniously dumping the French contract over US nuclear technology in the AUKUS affair, as well as India's reluctance to take a position against Russia, a major provider of defence equipment, over its full-blown invasion of Ukraine demonstrate that being able to speak the language of power in a credible and reliable way takes precedence.

While the EU will unlikely become a defence security provider à la the United States, it is now clear that it must evolve its global stance. The adoption of the EU Indo-Pacific Strategy and cross-references to it in the EU's Strategic Compass represent an important milestone for bolstering its security and defence posture. The EU would do well to support its efforts to be a more credible security and defence actor in the Indo-Pacific by upgrading relations with its strategic partners, Japan in primis. Further operational, capabilities development, and industrial cooperation with Japan must be considered and reinforced by triangulation with other strategic partners in the region.

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Recommendations

To reinforce its credibility as security provider, the EU should enhance security and defence cooperation with Japan by:

1. Building momentum towards the conclusion of an **EU-Japan Framework Participation Agreement (FPA)** for CSDP missions and operations and demonstrate its added value **operationally** through:
 - a. Seeking *ad hoc* **Japanese participation in civilian CSDP missions and operations** with one-off third country Participation Agreements bolstered by a Security of Information Agreement
 - b. Involving Japan in the EU's second regional capacity-building **Critical Maritime Routes Situational Awareness Initiative (CRIMARIO II)**, spanning from the Gulf of Aden to Southeast Asia
 - c. Extending the **Coordinated Maritime Presences** concept to the Indo-Pacific and opening participation up to Japan, to be complemented by increased coordination in a number of areas, such as ship-rider arrangements (including outside of the Indo-Pacific), joint port calls, officer exchanges, table-top exercises, joint search and rescue and disaster relief operations *in situ* and by continuing joint naval exercises, such as those carried out between Operation Atalanta and the Japan Maritime Self-Defence Force, including with other like-minded partner, for example India

2. Demonstrating the added value of **capabilities development and industrial cooperation** through:
 - a. Extending an invitation for **Japanese observer status and/or participation in PESCO projects** to signal the EU's political ambition to be a relevant security provider
 - b. Encouraging **EU-Japanese defence technological and industrial bases cooperation** through the increased integration of their respective value chains, to be achieved through the conclusion of a **Defence Equipment and Technology Transfer Agreement** between the EU – potentially represented by the EDA as is standard practice with EDA third country Administrative Agreements – and Japan
 - c. Prioritising the establishment of a **military advisor post in the EU Delegation to Japan** as a single-entry point for both operational cooperation as well as the nomination of a military advisor to facilitate navigation of the Japanese and European Defence Technological and Industrial Bases

Indo-Pacific sailing ahead

Less than two years ago, security in the Indo-Pacific was perceived as a niche topic in the Brussels policymaking community¹. Driven by long-term structural trends, as well as singular events, security in the Indo-Pacific has quickly gained traction as a topic of general interest. What remains to be defined is the role the EU can and should play in the region.

The long-awaited [EU Strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific](#) was released on 16 September 2021. Although the Australia-United Kingdom-United States ([AUKUS](#)) security partnership stole the show one day prior to its publication, there is consensus around the importance of an EU Strategy for the Indo-Pacific to bolster the EU's traditional trade and development toolkit with enhanced cooperation. While the EU is sharpening its foreign policy tools, ensuring supply chain resilience – around 40 % of the EU's foreign trade passes through the South China Sea – is a priority objective in the region.

China's rise has been the fulcrum of the Indo-Pacific's rise. In an [essay for Foreign Affairs](#), the hawkish penholder behind the Trump Administration's 2018 National Defense Strategy, Elbridge Colby, describes China's search for regional hegemony in the Indo-Pacific as a stepping stone to global superpower status. And the US under Biden, in continuity with the Trump Administration, has acted accordingly by bringing evermore power to bear in the region, in part by refocusing attention from elsewhere, such as Afghanistan².

Besides standalone Chinese activities, the EU and its partners are also concerned with increased cooperation between China and Russia. Sino-Russian relations have been reinforced in [several areas](#), including maritime security cooperation exemplified by [joint naval exercises with Iran](#) in 2021, as well as in the [Tsugaru and Osumi Straits](#). Russia is also reinforcing its military posture [around its border with Japan](#). While a remote possibility, the ongoing war in Ukraine may well divert pressure and attention away from the Indo-Pacific and China, and [potentially reinforce Sino-Russian cooperation](#).

But the EU should not take its eyes off the region and, instead, seek ways of strengthening its position in the Indo-Pacific to bolster its relevance as an actor that can and should contribute to regional stability. In this regard, Japanese and Australian alignment with the EU and US' responses to Russia's invasion of Ukraine provides hope for more sustained coordination in foreign, security, and defence policy.

¹ 'When oceans collide: Which strategy for Europe in the wider Indo-Pacific?', Prime talk with the participation of EEAS Asia MD Gunnar Wiegand and Ambassador of India to the EU H.E. Gaitri Kumar, CEPS IdeasLab, 6 March 2020.

² With a single stroke of the pen, the Biden Administration's Interim National Security Strategic Guidance document speaks of ending the war in Afghanistan and bolstering the US' posture in the Indo-Pacific.

The EU Strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific

The **key deliverable of the EU Strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific is the message that the EU, in close cooperation with its Member States, is thinking comprehensively about the region.** While it may be perceived as underwhelming considering the multipolar competition, interests, and geographic scope at play, it is an important stepping stone towards enhancing its credentials as a convening power and reinforcing its Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) with a vision, shared amongst EU Member States, for a rules-based regional order rooted in multilateral and inclusive cooperation.

The Strategy's **core tenets are to bolster multilateral and inclusive cooperation, as well as level the regional economic playing field.** These principles steer the EU's engagement in seven priority areas: sustainable and inclusive prosperity, the green transition, ocean governance, digital governance and partnerships, connectivity, security and defence, and human security. Importantly, the EU has included security as a priority area, stating the importance of *'secure sea lines of communication, capacity-building and enhanced naval presence in the Indo-Pacific in accordance with [...] UNCLOS'*.

The Strategy also focuses on non-traditional security challenges, such as climate change, public health, the development/security nexus, natural disasters, drug trafficking and financing for terrorism, and enhancing the coherence and coordination of the EU's ongoing regional engagement.

The reference to the EU's security interests in the Indo-Pacific is a continuation of an ongoing process of upgrading the EU's CFSP and Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), most recently through the adoption of a [Strategic Compass for Security and Defence](#), a roadmap for beefing up the EU's security and defence capabilities. It is important to underline that this transformation is not only [supported within the EU](#) but is also responding to a call by regional partners ([such as India, Japan and Australia](#) amongst others) on stepping up the EU's engagement in the region. Some partners do indeed see a limitation of their possible actions by the bilateral conundrum of the US-China diatribe, finding themselves restricted by their own bilateral relations with their Indo-Pacific partners.

In the context of the Strategic Compass, the EU reflects on how to upgrade its image as a global security actor. The four baskets considered in the security and defence roadmap are acting more quickly and nimbly in crisis management situations, a more holistic and resilient approach to security, investments in defence capabilities development, and stronger partnerships. Although the Strategic Compass lays out a common EU threat assessment, the threat assessment's focus on the EU's neighbourhood and Russia (despite sharper language on China) demonstrates that strengthening the EU's security and defence capabilities is (realistically) geographically limited. However, the Strategic Compass represents a fundamental stepping stone towards the building of the EU as a global security actor, which is instrumental for enhancing the EU's engagement in Indo-Pacific security cooperation.

With the EU reflecting on the need to upgrade its stance to become a more relevant security actor, the Strategic Compass should provide further impetus for rethinking EU's security and defence cooperation with its strategic partners. The AUKUS case showed France – and signalled to the EU – the importance of being perceived as a reliable security partner and the cost of exclusion for not living up to expectations. India's consistent abstention on UN votes condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine (60-70 % of Indian [defence equipment originates from Russia](#)), accompanied by [uninterrupted defence purchases](#) from Russia throughout this time, is strategically more weighty for New Delhi than its growing political relations with the EU. By contrast, Japan has been aligning its position much closer to the one taken by the other members of the G7. All of this demonstrates that the EU's convening power when it comes to security and defence is not as strong as might be expected and its credibility must be boosted.

EU-Japan relations in the Indo-Pacific context

The EU has four strategic partners in the region: China, India, Japan and ASEAN. While the EU is nurturing increasingly rich political and security relations with all of them but China, it is with Japan that increased defence cooperation looks most promising.

A [strategic partner since 2018](#) and a hub of intertwining partnerships in the Indo-Pacific³, Japan plays a key role in the region and beyond. Japan's [Free and Open Indo-Pacific \(FOIP\) Strategy](#) promotes freedom of navigation⁴, the rule of law, free trade, regional economic prosperity through improved connectivity and economic agreements, and [a commitment to regional peace and security](#). The EU and Japan also recognise the need to avail themselves of their (limited) military means to avoid the insecurity and instability that would result from an attack against Taiwan's self-rule or further deterioration of security in the East and South China Seas⁵. Moreover, as Russia's invasion of Ukraine has increased the fear in Taipei about the possibility of a [Chinese intervention in Taiwan](#), the EU and Japan should better reflect on how they could jointly increase the costs for China in the case of such an event.

The EU and Japan both have a stake in ensuring that a rules-based regional order persists in the Indo-Pacific and they aim to strengthen their cooperation to sustain their efforts to chart a multilateral and inclusive alternative to growing Sino-American antagonism. They have recognised this need on paper with a [Strategic Partnership Agreement \(SPA\)](#) covering crisis management, arms control, maritime security and issues of human security, among others – and have begun to put their words into action.

³ Japan is a member of ASEAN+3, the US-led Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership and the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership, among others.

⁴ Problematic to this vision is Japan's own claims to an exclusive economic zone extending 200 nautical miles from Okinotori, uninhabitable rocks considered an island by Japan.

⁵ The EU's competences in foreign, security and defence policy are of an intergovernmental nature, while Japan's historical constitutional constraints on the use of force has limited its investments in self-defence capabilities.

Parallel to their individual actions, they have gradually ramped up security and defence cooperation, recognising that their visions for the Indo-Pacific are stronger if enacted together. Acknowledging this trend, the Strategic Compass lists Japan as a priority partner together with the US, Norway, Canada and the UK.

Opportunities for enhanced security and defence cooperation

With NATO's reputation for out-of-area crisis management and counter-terrorism operations badly hit by the outcome in Afghanistan, India's preference to use [the Quad](#) for non-security purposes and the US' increasing hard security presence in the region to contest China's territorial claims in the South China Sea, Japan and the EU should further operationalise their security and defence cooperation.

There is clearly space to strengthen cooperation in security and defence without fully subscribing to the US' hard security posture. **Stepping up security cooperation with the EU should not be read as an alternative to arrangements with the United States, but rather as streamlining the cooperation with EU Member States that, through the Strategic Compass, have indicated their willingness to act both more and better together.**

Moreover, in consideration of [increasingly rich](#) bilateral security relations between France and Japan, enhancing security cooperation with the EU would not have an impact on bilateral security cooperation between Japan and individual EU Member States. On the contrary, it would strengthen them by adding another avenue of cooperation. In turn, strengthening security cooperation with key partners would reinforce the EU's credibility as a security provider.

The EU [favourably views](#) the conclusion of a Framework Partnership Agreement (FPA) with Japan to allow for Japanese participation in CSDP missions⁶. In particular, the EU would welcome Japanese contributions to civilian CSDP missions providing capacity-building police and judicial expertise⁷.

However, it appears that there is currently a [lack of high-level political attention](#) to conclude an FPA in Japan⁸. This is in part due to historical reliance on the US as security guarantor, questions about the constitutional limits preventing such an agreement, and recognition that most EU countries struggle to meet their capabilities requirements. But it also reflects the perception that formalising current cooperation provides little added value to Japan's FOIP Strategy and

⁶ According to Ambassador Sofie From-Emmesberger, Chair of the EU Political and Security Committee (PSC), in a Centre for European Policy Studies webinar held on 10 September 2021.

⁷ Ambassador Sofie From-Emmesberger, *Ibid.*

⁸ According to Michito Tsuruoka, Associate Professor at the Faculty of Policy Management, Keio University and Eva Pejsova, Senior Japan Fellow at the Centre for Security, Diplomacy and Strategy (CSDS) of the Brussels School of Governance in a Centre for European Policy Studies webinar held on 10 September 2021.

does not serve its wider security interests. In this sense, **momentum towards an FPA with Japan might be generated by further cooperation on the ground – or on the water.**

In a cross-reference to the Indo-Pacific Strategy, the Strategic Compass indeed identifies the promotion of ‘an open and rules-based regional security architecture, including secure sea lines of communication, capacity-building and enhanced naval presence in the Indo-Pacific’.

Proactively involving Japan in the second [Critical Maritime Routes situational awareness initiative \(CRIMARIO II\)](#), an EU-funded maritime capacity-building initiative that will eventually span from the Gulf of Aden to the South Pacific **jibes well with both partners’ preference for a multilateral and inclusive Indo-Pacific and demonstrates the EU’s added value. In the absence of an FPA, the EU will follow through on its commitment to extend the Coordinated Maritime Presences (CMP) concept to the Indo-Pacific (in the [north western Indian Ocean](#) for now), as stipulated by the EU’s Indo-Pacific Strategy, and should allow for the expansion of its geographical scope. **With an invitation for Japan to participate, this would lay the groundwork for Japanese participation in CSDP missions through *ad hoc* agreements.** The success of such a CMP venture into the Indo-Pacific also depends on linking the civilian Common information sharing environment (CISE) with the military-oriented Maritime Surveillance (MARSUR) network and expanding its geographic range of influence.**

Japanese involvement could be complemented operationally through ship-rider arrangements (including outside of the Indo-Pacific), joint port calls, officer exchanges, table-top exercises, and joint search and rescue and disaster relief operations *in situ*. These efforts would be supported by **Reciprocal Access Agreements** – such as the [one between Japan and Australia](#) – with key EU Member States.

Such an Agreement is currently being negotiated between France and Japan, but these could be multi-lateralised with other EU naval powers, such as the Netherlands, Italy, and Spain. **These ways forward should be inclusive and triangulated with India and other like-minded partners in the Indo-Pacific.** An example of such, though largely symbolic, may be the inclusion of India alongside Japan in future [Operation Atalanta](#) joint naval exercises.

Coming back to common interests, cooperation serves both the EU and Japan’s strategic objective of safeguarding freedom of navigation in key trade routes in the Indo-Pacific, such as the Malacca and Bab al-Mandab Straits, hedging against the security risks of resource depletion, and maintaining the viability of marine and submarine lines of communication. The allusion to freedom of navigation is also related to enhancing the interoperability of EU and Japanese maritime forces to more effectively combat piracy and illicit trafficking across the Indo-Pacific which, in turn, serves to finance terrorist activities.

Japan has provided Official Development Assistance support to EU missions in Afghanistan and Iraq, conducted 23 joint maritime operations with the EU⁹, including two multifaceted [joint exercises](#) involving Operation Atalanta and the Japan Maritime Self-Defence Force in the Gulf of Aden in May and October 2021. Japan has also provided [financial and technical assistance](#) to EUCAP Sahel.

The focus of maritime cooperation has been the protection of naval vessels, anti-piracy operations, and illicit fishing and trafficking surveillance. These efforts have been complemented by [joint maritime exercises](#) between Japan and France, Germany, and the Netherlands (as well as the [post-Brexit UK](#)) in the East and South China Seas. Both partners also attribute importance to maritime security cooperation, information sharing and capacity building activities with regional partners such as ASEAN, Australia, the United States, and New Zealand. This includes coordinating activities to build peacekeeper capacities in Vietnam¹⁰.

Coordination on EU-Japan initiatives occurs within the framework of the SPA Joint Committee. In accordance with the FPA, the EU and Japan reflected [during their third annual meeting](#) on 26 February 2022 on progress and prospective cooperation in areas of ‘maritime security and the fight against piracy, disaster risk management, outer space and cybersecurity’. This coordination would be complemented by further coordination on security matters within multilateral forums, such as the United Nations and the [ASEAN Regional Forum](#).

Another opening for cooperation **might be to extend an invitation to Japan to [observe and/or participate in PESCO projects](#) as soon as possible**, considering that the time horizon for capabilities development can be up to 20 years. Inviting Japan to join the US, Canada and Norway as a third country participant would be a significant political signal of the EU’s intentions to become a more important security provider.

Yet, Japan must express interest too, and would do well to discuss the possibility before the 2025 deadline to allow for Japanese entities to apply for financing from the European Defence Fund in compliance with the [conditions put forth by the EDF’s Regulation](#). Indeed, if political will is lacking to involve Japan as a third country in PESCO, EU-Japan security and defence cooperation might yet benefit from the integration of the Japanese defence technological industrial base in EU armaments value chains.

Further cooperation between the EU and Japanese defence technological and industrial bases should be pursued without additional delays. Not only might this provide additional expertise

⁹ According to Ambassador Yasushi Masaki, Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of Japan to the European Union, at the Centre for European Policy Studies webinar held on 10 September 2021.

¹⁰ According to Ambassador Sofie From-Emmesberger, Chair of the EU Political and Security Committee (PSC), at the Centre for European Policy Studies webinar held on 10 September 2021..

and access to better technology, but it has the potential of producing desirable spillover effects, such as the conclusion of an FPA or engaging in more joint operations.

Because the Japanese armaments industry currently operates in near autarky – receiving only 2 % of the EU’s arms exports to South, Southeast and East Asia since 2015¹¹ and exporting a total of a mere USD 5 million in arms since 2008¹² – there is room for improvement and the possibility to exploit industrial synergies.

Current bilateral Defense Equipment and Technology Transfer Agreements between Japan and France (December 2016), Germany (July 2017), and Italy (April 2019) prove that there is political will in Japan to tap into and benefit from European value chains. **Opening Japan’s defence technological industrial base to EU companies – including by better communicating how companies could invest – would serve to strengthen interdependencies, diversify investment and give innovative impulse to the Japanese and European armaments markets.** On the EU side, it is the responsibility of those Member States to encourage other Member States – and Japan – that PESCO and EDF participation can prove beneficial. This may culminate in a Defense Equipment and Technology Transfer Agreement between the European Defence Agency (EDA), as is standard practice with third country Administrative Agreements, and Japan.

Finally, while being granted official ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meeting Plus observer status seems to be [on ice](#), **the EU should give priority to reciprocating the Japanese Mission to the EU’s decision to nominate a military attaché to Brussels by nominating an EU military advisor in Tokyo**¹³. Such an official would act as single-entry point for both operational cooperation, as well as to facilitate the reciprocal navigation of the Japanese and European Defence Technological and Industrial Bases.

With these initiatives, the EU would be better able to demonstrate its commitment to security and defence cooperation with Japan, as well as the added value of such cooperation, laying the groundwork for further security and defence arrangements, including the hoped for but as of yet elusive Framework Participation Agreement.

¹¹ Source: Own calculations based on data generated by the COARM Arms Exports Online Database of Arms Transfers, available here: <https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/easgap/sense/app/75fd8e6e-68ac-42dd-a078-f616633118bb/sheet/ccf79d7b-1f25-4976-bad8-da886dba3654/state/analysis>. The countries of reference are: Afghanistan, Australia, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Brunei, Cambodia, China, East Timor, Fiji, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Japan, Laos, Macao, Malaysia, Maldives, Mongolia, Nepal, New Zealand, Pakistan, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Philippines, Singapore, Solomon Islands, South Korea, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, Thailand, Tonga and Vietnam.

¹² Source: Data generated by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute’s Arms Transfer Database, available here: <https://www.sipri.org/databases/armstransfers>.

¹³ The EU should follow through on its commitment to nominate a military advisor to the EU Delegation in India as well.

Conclusions

With the adoption of its Indo-Pacific Strategy the EU has acknowledged the growing centrality of the Indo-Pacific and moved towards adopting a greater role as a security actor. With the EU reflecting on the need to upgrade its global stance, including through the Strategic Compass, recent developments provide a solid impetus for rethinking the EU's defence cooperation with its strategic partners.

The lesson the EU should learn from the AUKUS affair and from India's reluctance to go against its major defence provider, Russia, is the importance of being perceived as a reliable security partner – and the cost of not living up to expectations.

Given its capacity constraints, the EU's objectives in the region should focus on credibility and safeguarding shared interests (including, for example, securing sea lines of communication) by ramping up security and defence cooperation in the areas identified.

To enhance its credibility as a security provider, the EU should enhance security cooperation with like-minded partners, with Japan being a prime candidate. Stepping up security cooperation with the EU should not be read as an alternative to arrangements with the United States, but rather as streamlining and adding value to bilateral cooperation with EU Member States. In consideration of increasingly intense bilateral security relations between France and Japan, and the Defense Equipment and Technology Transfer Agreements signed with France, Germany and Italy, enhancing security cooperation with the EU would keep up the strength of the bilateral cooperation, while adding additional tools and leverage.

There are many avenues for fostering security cooperation between the EU and Japan, ranging from expanding operational cooperation to enhancing the integration of the European and Japanese defence technological and industrial bases, as well as establishing a military advisor post in the EU's Delegation to Japan.

For the EU and Japan to better safeguard their security interests in the Indo-Pacific and reinforce their credibility as partners working towards a multilateral and inclusive Indo-Pacific, they must step up their security and defence cooperation, lest they both get stuck within the gravitational poles of the growing Sino-American rivalry and lose any margin for truly independent manoeuvre.