



THE EU AND JAPAN: TIME FOR A STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP

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Despite for years leaving much to be desired, the strategic relationship between Japan and the EU has recently witnessed a significant boost. With the signing of tandem economic and strategic partnership agreements at the end of 2018, relations between the great civilian powers at each of Eurasia's poles appear on the cusp of major change.

After years of Japan's regional and global strategy being shaped around economic and soft power diplomacy, changes to Japan's regional security environment prompted a significant re-think. In light of – amongst other things – China's economic and military resurgence, throughout the 21st century, Japan has set about developing a more comprehensive and substantive global strategy. Whilst this new strategic approach was many years in the making, the publication of Japan's first ever National Security Strategy (NSS) in December 2013 can be understood as the manifestation of Japan's strategic renaissance. The first three "strategic approaches that Japan should take for its national security" listed within the NSS are: strengthening and expanding Japan's security capacities; strengthening the Japan-US alliance; and strengthening diplomacy and security cooperation with Japan's partners in the international community. In the years following the NSS's publication, the Japanese government has been proactively attempting to advance these aims.

Within the study of Japanese security and foreign policy, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's apparent obsession with constitutional revision and military 'normalisation' has dominated the debate. As such, the proactive measures taken by the Japanese government to establish and deepen strategic partnerships with allies across the world have been overlooked. In recent years, not only has Shinzo Abe undertaken a rigorous diplomatic agenda – visiting one quarter of the world's countries in the first 20 months following his 2012 re-election – but Japan

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has also established and deepened strategic relations with a wide variety of global partners. After years of negotiations, in mid-2018, the European Union was officially added to this list of “strategic partners”.

The simultaneous signing of the Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA) and the Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) between Japan and the EU in July 2018 represented a sea-change in this historically underdeveloped relationship. Furthermore, aspects of the SPA – with its focus on security policy cooperation – tie in neatly with Tokyo’s strategic narrative.

Alongside aligning with Japan’s strategic agenda, there has been significant clamour hailing the importance of these tandem agreements from within Brussels. In addition to setting a platform for increased trade and investment between these two great economic powers, much onus was put on the role these agreements play in reinforcing the normative foundations of the rules-based liberal international order. This point, raised by the President of the EU Commission Jean-Claude Juncker at the EPA/SPA signing ceremony in Tokyo, lies at the core of the EU’s prevailing strategic narrative, laid out in the 2016 *Global Strategy for the European Union’s Foreign and Security Policy* (EUGS).

Despite being at times vague and laden with EU jargon, the EUGS sets out the EU’s current strategic objectives. Alongside demonstrating a more pragmatic and proactive tilt than previous EU security strategies, protecting the increasingly fragile looking global order emerges as central theme in the EUGS. In acknowledgement that Europe’s interests are best served in an international system based on norms, rules and multilateralism, the EU is actively searching out strategic alliances which may act to bolster said order.

In light of the SPA’s focus on both security cooperation and the promotion of shared values (the rule of law, democracy, human rights, etc.), it appears as if this agreement conformed neatly to the overriding strategic objectives of either signatory. With the SPA yet to formally enter into force however, it remains yet to be seen how much of what is formulated in the SPA can be realized and achieved on the ground. Against the backdrop of both Japan and the EU’s ambitious strategic agendas it is imperative to have a realistic understanding of the tangible implications of this nascent strategic partnership.

Judging by official governmental publications discussing the SPA, it is evident that both Japan and the EU are heavily invested in this agreement. Whilst both signatories view this agreement as part of a broader strategic agenda, there is a discrepancy as regards the desired outcomes of both Japan and the EU. As discussed, the EU’s strategic agenda focuses predominantly around more abstract, normative concepts such as supporting the liberal international order – a fact reflected in European analysis of the SPA. Whilst quantifying the strength of this order represents a significant challenge, it is widely understood that the signing of economic and strategic partnership agreements between these two liberal giants functions as a clear statement in its favour. The deepening of the EU and Japan’s strategic partnership certainly helps further the European aim of adding ballast to the fragile looking liberal international order. Whether this will be enough however, remains to be seen.

While Japan has also professed its commitment to this same, multilateral global order, embroiled in its strategic agenda are more tangible, hard security ambitions. With the primary policy objective of the NSS is the “strengthening of Japan’s capabilities and role” in the field of security, it is worthwhile assessing how this will be reflected in the Japan-EU strategic



partnership. Through the planned increase in security cooperation posited in the SPA, it is fair to suggest that the Abe administration is astutely looking to utilise the SPA to increase Japan's role in global security, feeding into Abe's ambitions of military normalisation. This objective may be undermined however by the EU's limitations in the field of hard security. Despite the EUGS proposing a more proactive security agenda for the EU, the main hard security actors in Europe remain the individual member states, with the EU only involved in very few, predominantly peacekeeping, operations. This being the case, Japan's ambition to further legitimise its global security role through deepening its strategic partnership with the EU is unlikely to be realised any time soon.

In a fast changing global environment in which the normative framework upon which the EU and Japan rely is under significant threat, the rationale and objectives of their strategic alliance is unquestionable. Whilst working towards numerous common objectives, Japan and the EU are also hoping to use this partnership to advance their own strategic agendas. These pursuits, however, stand to be limited in their success. With the scope of this budding partnership being dictated by the domestic constraints of either signatory, both Japan and the EU would benefit from taking stock of these limitations, refocusing instead on working towards more collaborative, attainable strategic ends.