

# Europe's Strategic Approaches – A View from Japan

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## INTRODUCTION

Asia seems to be in a transitional period. Claiming what it sees as its historical rights to most of the South China Sea encircled by the “nine-dash line,” China unilaterally changed the status quo by reclaiming land and installing military bases in zones under dispute. Chinese assertiveness is of concern to many states in the region and has intensified tensions between China and littoral states that have also claimed sovereign rights over the shoals and reefs in the South China Sea.<sup>1</sup> In the East China Sea, China has repeatedly intruded into Japan's alleged territorial or contiguous waters near the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, which have been administered by Japan since the United States (US) returned them to Japan in 1972. Responding to Chinese assertiveness, Japan announced its Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy (FOIP), which emphasised the importance of the rules-based order and its willingness to contribute to the economic prosperity of the region.

Recognising the challenges posed by China, European states have begun to join the debate. In 2018, France announced “France's Indo-Pacific Strategy,” a modified version of “France and Security in the Asia-Pacific”, announced in 2014. Germany and the Netherlands also issued their Indo-Pacific policies in 2020, followed by the announcement of the EU's strategy in 2021. The UK also shifted its attention to Asia, in part to offset the impact of Brexit. It announced a Japan-UK Joint Declaration for Security Cooperation in 2017 and showed its support for a

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1. For instance, military standoffs between Vietnam and China over maritime resources increased in frequency; Vietnamese fishing boats often collided with Chinese Coast Guard boats. Tensions between Malaysia and China over oil exploration in regional waters also added to escalating tensions in the region. Similarly, Indonesia has experienced tensions with China over its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) around the country's Natuna Archipelago.

“rules-based international system” in the Indo-Pacific region.<sup>2</sup> This declaration heralded deepening security cooperation between the two states. The most symbolic event indicating deepening ties was the UK’s dispatch of its aircraft carrier HMS *Queen Elizabeth* to Japan through the South China Sea. These moves were remarkable given their hitherto reserved attitudes towards maritime security in Asia.

This article analyses how Japan perceives this European turn to the region. First, it overviews increased European engagement with the Indo-Pacific region. Second, it studies the deepening security ties between Japan and European states. Third, it analyses how Japan has perceived European states as actors in the region by delving into its policies and statements by its politicians. Fourth, it probes for any differences or similarities between Japan and its European counterparts in their approaches towards the regional order. In conclusion, it argues that Japan welcomes the European engagement in the region and that any differences in approaches will be no obstacle to cooperation between them. The paper concludes with policy implications for future cooperation between Japan and European states.

## INCREASED EUROPEAN ENGAGEMENT IN THE REGION

Since the 2000s, China has been increasingly assertive in the maritime domain. Despite growing concerns among regional states about China’s attempts to change the status quo by force or coercion, Europe did not take China’s challenge seriously at an early stage. Instead, most European states were eager to deepen economic ties with China to spur their economies. For instance, when China established the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), Europe hailed this Chinese economic initiative. The UK and Germany joined the AIIB as initial members. Other European states, including France and the Netherlands, followed suit despite US opposition. Japan and the US did not join the institution, while they agreed to offer the necessary assistance, including know-how. They considered that the Chinese initiative was strategic and political in nature and that the AIIB overlapped with the Asian Development Bank, in which Japan has held the presidential position since its inception in 1966. Likewise, Europe’s response was slow and ambiguous in 2016 when an international tribunal issued an epoch-making ruling that denied the Chinese claim on its historic rights to most of the South China Sea. The EU refrained from pressing China to accept the decision and instead urged the swift signing of an agreement

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2. UK Government. 2017. Japan-UK Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation. ([https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/641155/Japan-UK\\_Joint\\_Declaration\\_on\\_Security\\_Cooperation.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/641155/Japan-UK_Joint_Declaration_on_Security_Cooperation.pdf)).

on a Code of Conduct between China and ASEAN.<sup>3</sup> In particular, some states such as Hungary and Greece made it difficult for the EU to speak with one voice.<sup>4</sup> These states hoped to boost their economies by deepening relationships with China. Europe's slow and lukewarm response contrasted with Japan's prompt and definite announcement in Japanese, English and Chinese, which expressed strong support for the ruling. The Japanese government urged China to accept the decision, stating that "Japan strongly expects that the parties' compliance with this award will eventually lead to the peaceful settlement of disputes in the South China Sea."<sup>5</sup>

European attitudes, however, visibly shifted in the late 2010s. The EU as well as major European states began to increase their engagement with the Indo-Pacific region. France is one of the most active European states that stepped up its involvement in the region. France has overseas territorial extensions across the Indo-Pacific, such as Mayotte, Reunion, New Caledonia, and French Polynesia, as well as 7,000 soldiers and ships stationed in bases in the region. It also has a large Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) across the region. France is therefore more concerned with the fate of the regional security order and the protection of its sovereignty. The 2018 Indo-Pacific Strategy announced by President Emmanuel Macron at a naval base in Garden Island, Sydney, illustrated its growing concern regarding the security outlook in the Indo-Pacific region. In the strategy, France announced that as a full-fledged Indo-Pacific state, it would commit to maintaining the rules-based order to "ensure freedom of navigation and overflight, in full compliance with UNCLOS".<sup>6</sup> Likewise, French Minister of the Armed Forces Florence Parly promised that French vessels would "sail more than twice a year in the South China Sea" to preserve "free and open access to maritime lines of communication."<sup>7</sup> These statements accompanied a growing military presence. In addition to occasional patrols by its vessels through the South China Sea, France sent a nuclear-powered

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3. European Council. 2016. Declaration by the High Representative on behalf of the EU on the Award rendered in the Arbitration between the Republic of the Philippines and the People's Republic of China. (<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2016/07/15/south-china-sea-arbitration/>).

4. Reuters. 15 July 2016. EU's statement on the South China Sea reflects divisions. (<https://www.reuters.com/article/southchinasea-ruling-eu-idUSL8N1A130Y>).

5. Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan. 12 July 2016. Arbitration between the Republic of the Philippines and the People's Republic of China regarding the South China Sea. ([https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/press4e\\_001204.html](https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/press4e_001204.html)).

6. Government of France. 2018. France's Indo-Pacific Strategy. ([https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/en\\_a4\\_indopacifique\\_v2\\_rvb\\_cle432726.pdf](https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/en_a4_indopacifique_v2_rvb_cle432726.pdf)), p. 2.

7. Discours de Florence Parly. 1 June 2019. Ministre des Armées\_Allocation au Shangri-La Dialogue. ([https://www.defense.gouv.fr/salle-de-presse/discours/discours-de-florence-parly/discours-de-florence-parly-ministre-des-armees\\_allocation-au-shangri-la-dialogue](https://www.defense.gouv.fr/salle-de-presse/discours/discours-de-florence-parly/discours-de-florence-parly-ministre-des-armees_allocation-au-shangri-la-dialogue)).

submarine to the South China Sea in 2019 to reaffirm the freedom of navigation and the prevalence of international law. The La Pérouse joint naval exercises conducted in April 2021 with the four Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) partners (Japan, the US, Australia and India) was also symbolic.

Similarly, the UK has deepened its involvement in the Indo-Pacific region. As early as 2015, the UK had identified the erosion of the rules-based international order as one of the security threats to be addressed.<sup>8</sup> In response, it began strengthening its diplomatic language, arguing for the importance of the freedom of navigation.<sup>9</sup> It conducted a freedom of navigation operation (FONOP) in the South China Sea in 2018.<sup>10</sup> In August 2021, the UK dispatched HMS *Queen Elizabeth*, the new and most powerful warship in its fleet, joined by a Dutch frigate and a US destroyer, to the region to demonstrate its commitment to regional stability.<sup>11</sup> The strike group sailed through waters that included the contested South China Sea and participated in joint exercises with warships from Canada and Japan before docking in Japan. The visit was one of the most significant maritime dispatches for the UK since the 1982 Falklands War. The strike group's commander, Steve Moorhouse, said that the visit "embodie[d] (Britain's) tilt to the Indo-Pacific, [and] mark[ed] a return to the UK's enduring presence in the region."<sup>12</sup> The UK also decided to deploy warships in the Indo-Pacific permanently,<sup>13</sup> a decision that sent a strong message to China that the UK will not tolerate China's unilateral actions.

Although not as enthusiastically as the UK and France, Germany and the Netherlands joined the chorus amid the Covid-19 pandemic. Even before the pandemic, the European states had become increasingly concerned with growing Chinese assertiveness and behaviour that ran counter to liberal values such

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8. UK Government. 2015. National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review. (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-security-strategy-and-strategic-defence-and-security-review-2015>).

9. Liu Jin. 2020. Evolution, Drivers and Implications of the UK's South China Sea Policy. ([https://www.ciiis.org.cn/english/ESEARCHPROJECTS/Articles/202007/t20200715\\_3594.html](https://www.ciiis.org.cn/english/ESEARCHPROJECTS/Articles/202007/t20200715_3594.html)).

10. The Royal Navy's HMS *Albion*, a 22,000-ton amphibious transport dock, conducted a freedom of navigation operation (FONOP) in 2018 by sailing through the disputed Paracel Islands' territorial waters claimed by China. Ian Storey. 3 February 2020. Britain, Brexit, and the South China Sea Disputes. The National Bureau of Asian Research. (<https://www.nbr.org/publication/britain-brexit-and-the-south-china-sea-disputes/>).

11. UK Government. 2021. UK Carrier Strike Group flagship HMS Queen Elizabeth to Arrive in Japan. (<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-carrier-strike-group-flagship-hms-queen-elizabeth-to-arrive-in-japan>).

12. Mainichi Shimbun. 8 September 2021. (<https://mainichi.jp/english/articles/20210908/p2g/00m/0in/017000c>).

13. UK Government. 2021. Op. cit.

as democracy, freedom and human rights. China's failure to disclose information about the virus and its subsequent mask diplomacy, which took advantage of its position as a supplier of medical items, worsened the European perception of China. Although Germany had been eager to pursue deeper economic ties with China, in September 2020, the German government announced the "Guidelines on the Indo-Pacific, Germany-Europe-Asia: Shaping the 21st century together". In the Guidelines, the government used the term "Indo-Pacific" for the very first time.<sup>14</sup> Germany also dispatched a frigate to the region in August 2021 to demonstrate solidarity with like-minded partners in Asia such as Japan. Likewise, the Netherlands published its Indo-Pacific policy, entitled "Indo-Pacific: Guidelines for strengthening Dutch and EU cooperation with partners in Asia", in November 2020.<sup>15</sup>

The EU also stepped up its engagement. Labelling China a "systemic rival,"<sup>16</sup> the EU published a preliminary document, entitled the "EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific", in April 2021 followed by the Joint Communication on the EU's Indo-Pacific Strategy in September 2021. By highlighting the importance of democracy, the rule of law, the rules-based international order, and freedom of navigation, the document indicated the EU's willingness to increase its member states' naval presence in the region to protect the freedom of navigation as well as multilateral engagements with ASEAN.

## DEEPENING INSTITUTIONALISATION BETWEEN JAPAN AND EUROPEAN STATES

No substantial security cooperation between Japan and the European states had existed up to the 2000s. However, under the second Shinzo Abe government, which advocated the "proactive contributor to peace" thesis, Japan began strengthening its relationship with European states such as France, Germany and the UK.<sup>17</sup> As a gambit, in 2014, Japan started a 2+2 meeting (Foreign and Defence Ministers'

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14. Frédéric Grare. 16 October 2020. Germany's New Approach to the Indo-Pacific. *Internationale Politik Quarterly*, No. 4. (<https://ip-quarterly.com/en/germanys-new-approach-indo-pacific>).

15. Government of the Netherlands. 2020. Indo-Pacific: Guidelines for strengthening Dutch and EU cooperation with partners in Asia. (<https://www.government.nl/documents/publications/2020/11/13/indo-pacific-guidelines>).

16. European Commission and HR/VP Contribution to the European Council. 12 March 2019. EU-China: A Strategic Outlook. (<https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/communication-eu-china-a-strategic-outlook.pdf>).

17. Michito Tsuruoka. 29 September 2021. (Kenkyu report) Abe gaiko ni okeru yoroppa. shuryuka ha jitsugen shitanoka [Research report: Europe in Abe diplomacy: Has Europe become mainstream diplomacy?]. Japan Institute of International Affairs. (<https://www.jiia.or.jp/column/post-11.html#footnote>).

meeting) with France, the first European state to hold such a meeting with Japan. In the same year, Japan concluded a strategic partnership with the UK, followed by the first 2+2 meeting in 2015. Coincidentally, a series of events that occurred in 2016 encouraged Japan and its European counterparts to deepen their security relations. First, the UK's decision to leave the EU in 2016 pushed the country to look to Asia as a partner. Second, whereas the international tribunal denied the Chinese claim to its alleged historic rights to the South China Sea, China dismissed the ruling. Third, the Abe government announced its vision of the FOIP, demonstrating Japan's readiness to engage in the regional order. In the wake of these events, in August 2017, the UK and Japan announced a Japan-UK Joint Declaration, confirming their intention to deepen security and economic relationships between the two states. In addition to the start of joint training with these states, Japan also concluded an Acquisition and Cross Servicing Agreement with the UK and France in 2017 and 2018 respectively, with the aim of smoothing defence cooperation. In 2021, Japan also started a 2+2 meeting with Germany. Maritime security and China's assertiveness henceforth became one of the issues to be discussed in 2+2 meetings between the partner states.

At a multilateral level, the relationship between Japan and the EU also deepened. In 2018, Japan concluded an EU-Japan Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA), in which Japan and the EU declared that both sides "share[d] fundamental values such as democracy, the rule of law, human rights and freedom, and principles."<sup>18</sup> Their growing ties culminated in the EU's first-time invitation to Japan's Foreign Minister Toshimitsu Motegi to attend the EU's Foreign Affairs Council online in January 2021. In the meeting, Motegi explained Japan's FOIP and pointed out the challenges facing maritime security in the East and South China Seas and fundamental principles, including democracy and human rights. Motegi also raised debt issues associated with infrastructure development among regional states.<sup>19</sup> In the same year, Motegi visited Poland, Slovenia and Bosnia-Herzegovina and had meetings with six Eastern European states to solicit their support for the "free and open international order based on the rule of law".<sup>20</sup> As the 17+1 framework between China and 17 Central and Eastern European states shows, these states had been

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18. Ministry of Defence, Japan. 2021. Defence Minister Kishi's Attendance at the European Parliament (virtual format). (<https://www.mod.go.jp/en/article/2021/06/76a1995c77df2f3d7a9838af79427eea64520c56.html>).

19. Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan. 25 January 2021. Foreign Minister Motegi's Attendance at the EU Foreign Affairs Council (virtual format). ([https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/press1e\\_000168.html](https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/press1e_000168.html)).

20. Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan. 7 May 2021. Foreign Minister Motegi Visits Poland: The 7th "V4 plus Japan" Foreign Ministers' Meeting. ([https://www.mofa.go.jp/erp/c\\_see/page4e\\_001127.html](https://www.mofa.go.jp/erp/c_see/page4e_001127.html)).

attracted by the prospect of Chinese financial assistance and investment, and had thus blocked EU statements critical of China. Motegi therefore visited these states to convince them of the importance of the rule of law so that the coming EU strategy would not become a product of compromise.

## **JAPAN'S PERCEPTION OF EUROPE: A PARTNER IN ASIA**

The evolution of the security relationship in the 2010s between Japan and the EU and some European states was remarkable. During the Cold War period, both sides had never explored the option to establish a substantial security tie partly because due to geographical distance, no urgent need to develop a security relationship existed. Moreover, insurmountable obstacles had existed on the Japanese side. Even the existence of the Japanese Self-Defence Forces had been controversial, with the opposition parties opposing it as unconstitutional. Throughout the Cold War period, Japan instead devoted most of its resources to developing and deepening economic relationships with Asia and the US.

However, as early as the 2000s, Japan began eying Europe as a partner for its global diplomacy. For instance, since the publication of the 2006 Diplomatic Bluebook, the Japanese government has emphasised the importance of European states as Japan's partners sharing fundamental values such as human rights and freedom and democracy. The "Arc of Freedom and Prosperity" thesis announced by Foreign Minister Taro Aso in 2006 also highlighted the importance of liberal values such as human rights and democracy, and showed Japan's willingness to pursue values-based diplomacy. The following year, Prime Minister Abe proposed the Quad consisting of the US, Japan, India and Australia and argued for unity among these democracies. Japan's emphasis on the liberal values was driven by its desire to play a role as a major democracy and strengthen ties with European states and the changing security outlook including China's research activities within Japan's EEZ.<sup>21</sup> However, Japan's values-based diplomacy quietly disappeared without gaining much momentum, even domestically, and Abe, a cheerleader of the Quad, stepped down due to health reasons.

When Abe returned to the centre of the political stage in December 2012, he sought to pursue a more active involvement in international affairs for Japan by expanding its security roles. Concerned that the South China Sea was set to become

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21. Kaijo Hoancho. 2004. Kaijo Hoan report 2004. (<https://www.kaiho.mlit.go.jp/info/books/report2004/honpen/hp02010700.html>).

“Lake Beijing,” Abe emphasised the importance of cooperation among democracies and invited “Britain and France to stage a comeback in terms of participating in strengthening Asia’s security”. He also welcomed “their renewed presence” in Asia.<sup>22</sup> Japan’s search for a closer relationship with Europe was also illustrated by the 2013 National Security Strategy (NSS), adopted as a guideline for Japan’s security policy. Recognising the EU’s international influence as a normative power, the NSS stated:

“[The] EU has the influence to formulate international public opinions [and] the capacity to develop norms in major international frameworks and a large economy....[European countries] are partners for Japan which together take a leading role in ensuring the peace, stability and prosperity of the international community....At a time when the power balance of the international community is changing, in order to establish an international order based on universal values and rules, to effectively address global challenges and to accomplish Japan’s initiatives for a peaceful and prosperous international community, Japan will further strengthen its relations with Europe, including cooperation with the European Union (EU), the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE)”.<sup>23</sup>

Thus, Japan turned its eyes towards Europe as a partner in promoting its values-based diplomacy and ensuring the rules-based order in the region.

The factors driving Japan’s call for closer ties with European states lay not only in the EU’s increasing influence in international affairs as a unitary actor; it also lay in the fact that Japan faced an intensifying Chinese challenge in the East China Sea, including continuous intrusions by Chinese Coast Guard vessels into the territorial and contiguous waters off the Senkaku Islands. Japan also took China’s assertiveness and coercion in the South China Sea seriously. Since the Japanese government nationalised the Senkaku Islands previously owned by a Japanese individual in 2012, Chinese intrusions have dramatically increased. Although the Japanese government does not admit the existence of territorial disputes between the two states, China’s claim gives an impression that both states are in dispute over the islands. Japan’s position as a claimant made the country’s promotion of the FOIP, which emphasised the rule of law and economic prosperity, sound strategic, and even selfish.

22. Shinzo Abe, 27 December 2012. Asia’s Democratic Security Diamond. (<https://www.project-syndicate.org/onpoint/a-strategic-alliance-for-japan-and-india-by-shinzo-abe?language=english&barrier=accesspaylog>).

23. Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet. 2013. National Security Strategy. December 2013. ([http://japan.kantei.go.jp/96\\_abe/documents/2013/\\_icsFiles/afieldfile/2013/12/17/NSS.pdf](http://japan.kantei.go.jp/96_abe/documents/2013/_icsFiles/afieldfile/2013/12/17/NSS.pdf)).



Moreover, Japan has a historical legacy with China, which surfaces occasionally. For instance, whenever Japanese prime ministers worship at the Yasukuni Shrine, China brings up the issue without fail by arguing that such a visit nullifies Japan's past apologies, and even indicates Japan's return to militarism. By strategically referring to Japan's imperialist past, China thus censures Japan's behaviour and tries to label the country as a troublemaker in the region.<sup>24</sup>

Japan's fluctuating relationship with China thus makes Japan's support for the rules-based order and its criticism of China for ignoring international law appear strategic. In fact, articles published in the mid-2010s argued that the factor driving Japan to increase its involvement in South China Sea issues was its desire to defend its sovereignty over the Senkaku Islands.<sup>25</sup> Although this linkage is not groundless, the defence of the Senkaku Islands was not the sole reason for Japan's proactiveness. As the FOIP and capacity-building support of the regional states by the Japan Coast Guard indicate, Japan has been more concerned with China's assertiveness, which it sees as aiming to change the status quo by force.<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, the complicated picture of Japan's position as a stakeholder and a key US ally creates an impression that Japan's engagement is driven by sheer self-interest. Therefore, active involvement by the EU and major European states and close coordination between both sides are desirable since their engagement with the region in sustaining the rules-based order not only operates as pressure on China but also makes Japan's argument more legitimate.

Japan's readiness to work with European states was characterised by its positive response to deepening defence relationships with the European states. Foreign Minister Motegi's statements in relation to the 2021 EU Strategy also demonstrates the country's eagerness to align with them. Motegi welcomed the EU document, which announced its "strong intentions for engagement in the Indo-Pacific."<sup>27</sup> He stated that Japan and the EU had reached a common understanding in principle,

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24. Yee-Kuang Heng. 2018. Smart Power and Japan's Trouble-Shooting Approach to Southeast Asia. Mary McCarthy, ed. Routledge Handbook of Japanese Foreign Policy. Routledge.

25. James Manicom. 2010. Japan's Ocean Policy: Still the Reactive State? *Pacific Affairs* Vol. 83. No. 2; Michelle LeBaron. 2014. *Bridging Troubled Waters: Conflict Resolution from the Heart*. Jossey-Bass; Paul Midford. 2015. Japan's Approach to Maritime Security in the South China Sea. *Asian Survey* Vol. 55. No. 3. 525-547.

26. Kyoko Hatakeyama. 2019. A Middle Power's Roles in Shaping East Asian Security Order: Analysis of Japan's Engagement from a Normative Perspective. *Australian Journal of Politics and History*. Vol. 65. No. 3. pp. 466-481.

27. Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan. 20 April 2021. Press Conference by Foreign Minister Motegi Toshimitsu. ([https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/kaiken/kaiken6e\\_000032.html](https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/kaiken/kaiken6e_000032.html)).

even though minor differences in their perceptions of China existed.<sup>28</sup> He also commended the EU Strategy, which referred to Japan as a partner country for cooperation, because it “resonates with Japan’s views and efforts for a ‘Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP).’”<sup>29</sup> Defence Minister Nobuo Kishi also expressed Japan’s appreciation of the EU’s increased involvement in the Indo-Pacific region. By referring to similarities in the challenges posed by Russia and China in Europe and Asia respectively, he stressed that Europe and Japan “must align the strategic benefits and stand up together to face the challenges on a united front” and “fight against authoritarianism.”<sup>30</sup> Japan thus hailed the involvement by some European states and the EU.

Japan’s expanding military ties with some European states are one of the achievements pursued by Japan in the post-Cold War period. During that period, Japan attempted to increase its security role within the limits of its Constitution, which restricts its use of force beyond self-defence. By doing so, Japan hoped to take its place among an international group of like-minded states.<sup>31</sup> A series of efforts resulted in its enlarged security roles under UN auspices as well as the alliance with the US, and also deepened security ties with Australia. Admittedly, China’s assertiveness accelerated Japan’s search for deeper military cooperation with like-minded states, including European states.

## DIFFERENCES OR SIMILARITIES? A MIDDLE APPROACH OF EACH STATE

Despite the closer links detailed above, different degrees of concern and approaches exist among actors. Germany and the Netherlands argue that their interests lie in promoting economic links and the safety of sea lanes, and supporting the EU’s role in promoting a multilateral system with ASEAN as the centre.<sup>32</sup> By emphasising

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28. 204th National Diet of Japan. 12 May 2021. House of Representatives. Foreign committee. No. 12.

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

30. Ministry of Defence, Japan. 2021. Defence Minister Kishi’s Attendance at the European Parliament (virtual format). (<https://www.mod.go.jp/en/article/2021/06/76a1995c77df2f3d7a9838af79427eea64520c56.html#1>).

31. Kyoko Hatakeyama. 2021. *Japan’s Evolving Security Policy: Militarisation within a Pacifist Tradition*. Routledge.

32. Lucas Alonso Butcher. 17 August 2021. *Assessing the EU’s Indo-Pacific Strategy*. (<https://eias.org/op-ed/assessing-the-eus-indo-pacific-strategy/>).

multilateralism, they maintain a distance from competition between the US and China.

For instance, despite the announcement of the Indo-Pacific Guidelines, Germany has been keen to deepen its economic relations with China. In fact, Germany had been hesitant to use the term “Indo-Pacific”, which it perceives as having the connotation of an anti-China grouping, because China has been the largest trading partner for the country since 2016.<sup>33</sup> As a result, while highlighting the importance of the rule of law, Germany’s focus has been to ensure the safety of the sea lanes. Its emphasis on advancing its economic interests was also well illustrated by the announcement of the EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment in December 2020, amid concerns over China’s growing influence in EU politics, its human rights abuses in Xinjiang and its cracking down on Hong Kong’s democracy. The agreement aimed to provide European and Chinese companies with better access to each other’s markets. Despite US opposition, German Chancellor Angela Merkel secured a deal before she stepped down as president of the Council of the EU.<sup>34</sup> Germany’s emphasis on economic ties with China was also illustrated by German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas’s statement that denied the country’s intention to decouple from China. Rather, Maas showed the country’s willingness to maintain close coordination and communication with China.<sup>35</sup> Despite dispatching a frigate to the Indo-Pacific and conducting joint exercises with Japan at Japan’s request in 2021,<sup>36</sup> the frigate also planned to visit Shanghai before entering the South China Sea to dilute any symbolic significance of its dispatch regarding the rules-based order during its voyage.<sup>37</sup> Meanwhile, France and the UK have been keen to increase their military presence in the region and play a significant role in ensuring the rules-based order. Both states are eager to participate in joint trainings with regional states and impress their military presence by dispatching vessels to the region.

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33. Destatis. The People’s Republic of China is Again Germany’s Main Trading Partner. (<https://www.destatis.de/EN/Themes/Economy/Foreign-Trade/trading-partners.html>).

34. Toshiya Nakamura. 2021. Doitsu no indo taiheiyo senryaku [Germany’s Indo-Pacific Strategy]. Kokusai Anzenhosho, Vol.48. No.4. p. 13.

35. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China. 21 April 2021. State Councillor Wang Yi and German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas Hold a Video Consultation. ([https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/zxxx\\_662805/t1870759.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1870759.shtml)).

36. Ministry of Defence, Japan. 13 April 2021. Japan-Germany Foreign and Defence Ministers’ Meeting (“2+2”). (<https://www.mod.go.jp/en/article/2021/04/aa9ac5d279ca488488a60a5983f0320dfe9d99cd.html>).

37. Ibid. However, the proposed visit by the German frigate was rejected by the Chinese government. (<https://www.jiji.com/jc/article?k=2021091501216&g=int>).

Europe's turn to the Indo-Pacific therefore does not mean a complete alignment with Japan or the US. The European Indo-Pacific strategies are characterised as inclusive, thus leaving room for cooperation with China provided the latter respects rules and norms.<sup>38</sup> While emphasising the rules-based order, the Europeans focus on fostering a multilateral, multipolar, rules-based order.<sup>39</sup> The pursuit of "multifaceted engagement with China" stressed in the 2021 EU strategy<sup>40</sup> indicated its desire to ensure the rules-based order while engaging with China.

Such an approach to a middle way is not incompatible, albeit not identical, with Japan's. Japan has outspokenly criticised China's intrusions and its attempts to change the status quo by force. It has also strengthened the security relationships with like-minded states by reviving the Quad 2.0 in 2017. Furthermore, at the 2021 summit meeting with US President Joe Biden, Japan's Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga referred to Taiwan's peace and stability to show their strong concerns about developments in Taiwan. Notably, this was only the second time that the two countries referred to Taiwan's stability after 1969.

Yet, given its proximity and the two countries' economic interdependence, Japan wishes to maintain a positive relationship with China. In fact, China has been Japan's largest trading partner since 2007. In 2020, China accounted for 22 per cent of Japan's total exports while the US, its second-largest partner, accounted for 18 per cent. China also accounted for 25 per cent of Japan's total imports, with the US accounting for 11 per cent.<sup>41</sup> Given its close economic relationship with China, Japan does not want to risk damaging its economy by confronting China. That is, while Japan champions a rules-based order, it hopes to preserve a good relationship with China. This desire is aptly illustrated by its failure to impose sanctions on China for its human rights abuses in Xinjiang. Japan justified its inaction by stressing the need to promote a dialogue with China while the EU and other G7 states did otherwise.

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38. Veerle Nouwens and Garima Mohan. 24 June 2021. Europe Eyes the Indo-Pacific, but Now it's Time to Act. (<https://warontherocks.com/2021/06/europe-eyes-the-indo-pacific-but-now-its-time-to-act/>); Rahul Roy-Chaudhury. 2021. Understanding the UK's "tilt" towards the Indo-Pacific. (<https://www.iiss.org/blogs/analysis/2021/04/uk-indo-pacific-tilt>).

39. Céline Pajon. 2021. The EU-Japan Partnership in the Indo-Pacific: Opportunities and Challenges. ([http://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/wps/portal/riecano\\_en/contenido?WCM\\_GLOBAL\\_CONTEXT=elcano/elcano\\_in/zonas\\_in/europe/ari31-2021-pajon-the-eu-japan-partnership-in-the-indo-pacific-opportunities-and-challenges](http://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/wps/portal/riecano_en/contenido?WCM_GLOBAL_CONTEXT=elcano/elcano_in/zonas_in/europe/ari31-2021-pajon-the-eu-japan-partnership-in-the-indo-pacific-opportunities-and-challenges)).

40. European Union. 16 September 2021. Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council. The EU strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific. ([https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/jointcommunication\\_2021\\_24\\_1\\_en.pdf](https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/jointcommunication_2021_24_1_en.pdf)).

41. JETRO. 2021. Sekai to nihon no boueki toukei shiryō [Statistic and Data regarding Japan's trade in the world]. ([https://www.jetro.go.jp/ext\\_images/world/gtir/2021/shiryō.pdf](https://www.jetro.go.jp/ext_images/world/gtir/2021/shiryō.pdf)).

This “separation of politics from the economy” is not a new approach but rather a traditional one, which was also adopted at the time of the 1989 Tiananmen Square incident. Abe’s visit to China in 2018 also illustrates the continuity of this policy. During that visit, the two countries concluded 52 memorandums of cooperation to boost their economic ties. Abe also attended the Forum on Third Country Business Cooperation to promote Japan-China cooperation in infrastructure development programmes in such countries. Although eventually unsuccessful, Abe was eager to invite Chinese President Xi Jinping to visit Japan as a state guest.

Japan has been more confrontational and critical of China than its European counterparts because it has faced direct Chinese challenges. Yet both Japan and some European states have strongly supported the rule of law, human rights and democracy, and increased military cooperation between them to counterbalance the growing Chinese military presence in the region. Meanwhile, they have tried to preserve good relationships with China, albeit minor differences in their approaches existed. Both similarities and differences have existed in their middle approach.

## **CONCLUSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS: TOWARDS CLOSER COOPERATION?**

This article demonstrated that Japan has welcomed European engagement as well as its commitment to sustaining the rules-based order in the region. Japan has eyed the European states as partners in promoting liberal values such as democracy, freedom and human rights since the 2000s. Yet, these states were keen to strengthen their economic relationships with China despite the latter continuing to change the status quo by force and coercion in the South China Sea. While geographical distance enabled Europe to remain aloof from the security challenges occurring in Asia, China’s growing assertiveness and its behaviour that ran counter to liberal values concerned some European states, encouraging them to step up their involvement in the region. This Asian turn was welcomed by Japan, leading to deepening defence relationships between them.

Japan’s European counterparts are neither allies, nor do they have direct stakes in the East and South China Seas. Europe’s security situation is therefore different from that of Japan. Yet this does not necessarily present an obstacle to promoting security cooperation between these states. Though not identical, both Japan and the European states have taken a middle way approach in part because they do not want to relinquish economic benefits they derive from China. Whereas Japan cannot concede on the Senkaku issue, it does not wish for a total confrontation with China. This desire is illustrated by its traditional policy of “separation of politics

from the economy,” which makes a contrast with its unequivocal criticism of China’s unilateral actions. Since Japan hopes to avoid being entrapped by competition between the US and China, it expects the European states to advocate the rules-based order by becoming vocal and showing their presence in Asia. Their involvement will not only dilute an element of a binary confrontation between the US and China but also strengthen Japan’s middle approach by making Japan’s argument sound more legitimate. Given deepening economic interdependence among states, a middle approach to China rather than all-out confrontation is realistic.

How, then, can Japan and the European states promote cooperation to ensure peace and effectively navigate the region? In a survey conducted in ASEAN, 61.2 per cent of respondents chose Japan as the most-trusted power to do “the right thing,” with the EU accounting for 38.7 per cent as the second-most-trusted power.<sup>42</sup> As regards the US-China competition, both the EU and Japan ranked as most favoured strategic partners for ASEAN.<sup>43</sup> Such trust should enable both Japan and the EU to navigate the discussion and consolidate their views about a desirable regional security order. Meanwhile, ASEAN has faced difficulties in choosing between security and economy and refused to take sides between the US and China.<sup>44</sup> Japan and European states are also less keen to confront China squarely. This puts these states in a strong position for initiating a third way to sustain the rules-based regional order.

First, taking advantage of their economic strength, Japan and European states need to provide alternatives to ASEAN, a major stakeholder. While ASEAN is concerned with China’s assertiveness in the maritime domain, it is also attracted by Chinese money to promote their economies. The EU, the largest investor in the world<sup>45</sup>, and Japan should cooperate in providing economic assistance and investment to ASEAN so as to prevent ASEAN from overly depending on China and

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42. Yusof Ishak Institute. 2020. The State of Southeast Asia 2020 Survey Report. ([https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/pdfs/TheStateofSEASurveyReport\\_2020.pdf](https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/pdfs/TheStateofSEASurveyReport_2020.pdf)).

43. Yusof Ishak Institute. 2021. The State of Southeast Asia 2021 Survey Report. (<https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/The-State-of-SEA-2021-v2.pdf>).

44. Prime Minister’s Office, Singapore. 2019. PM Lee Hsien Loong Gave the Keynote Address at the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) Shangri-La Dialogue Opening Dinner on 31 May 2019 at the Shangri-La Hotel Singapore. (<https://www.pmo.gov.sg/Newsroom/PM-Lee-Hsien-Loong-at-the-IISS-Shangri-La-Dialogue-2019>).

45. See, European Union. 16 September 2021. Questions and Answers: EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific. ([https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/QANDA\\_21\\_4709](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/QANDA_21_4709)); TheGlobalEconomy.com. Percent of world FDI - Country rankings. ([https://www.theglobaleconomy.com/rankings/share\\_world\\_fdi/](https://www.theglobaleconomy.com/rankings/share_world_fdi/)). The UK, Germany, France, Italy and Spain accounted for more than 40 per cent of the world’s Foreign Direct Investment as of 2018.

falling into Chinese debt traps. For instance, by using the framework of the Japan-EU Connectivity Partnership concluded in 2019, both could provide high-quality infrastructure to ASEAN states. Capacity-building support would also constitute adequate assistance since enhancing ASEAN's law enforcement capability will deter China from conducting activities that do not comply with international law or conventions such as UNCLOS, and thus ensure the rules-based order.

Second, as stated in the EU document adopted in September 2021, establishing a reliable and resilient supply chain is indispensable. This move coincides with the Supply Chain Resilience Initiative launched by Japan, Australia and India, which was established in response to the supply chain disruptions that occurred during the Covid-19 pandemic. The initiative aimed to diversify the supply chains of strategic materials such as semiconductors and rare earth, which had previously been overly dependent on China. The US is also keen to diversify its supply chain. Cooperation among these states on advanced technologies would facilitate restructuring the supply chains and prevent China from using its economic muscle as leverage.

Third, Japan and the EU need to continuously articulate the importance of maintaining the rules-based order and denounce China's non-compliance with international law. Both Japan and the EU are so trusted as powers by Asian states that they can present a persuasive argument and thus shape and strengthen the current norms underpinning international law. Even if the effectiveness of such narratives is not visible, it is vital to continue arguing for the rule of law so that narratives will not be distorted and shaped by a bigger voice.

Fourth, Japan and European states such as France and the UK can contribute to sustaining the sea lines of communication and the freedom of navigation by advertising their military presence. Although Japan's scope for military action beyond self-defence is limited, both sides can contribute to sustaining the rules-based order by increasing their military presence and thus sending a message to China that they will not tolerate unilateral attempts to change the status quo by force.

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