

Summary: The relationship between the transatlantic partners and Japan has been internationally considered as being of paramount importance in the past. Now, however, the relationship between the transatlantic community and Japan has lost precedence due to a greater focus on a rising India and China. The G7/8 has made way for the G20.

In this brief, the author argues that there should be an attempt to reverse this trend. The reality is that the transatlantic community and Japan have yet to fulfill their true potential for cooperation, be it in trade, climate change, or foreign policy. This under-developed link between the transatlantic community and Japan is a huge loss in terms of making the world safer and more stable. To create this synergy, there is a need for greater strategic European engagement in Asia, an active Europe-Japan relationship, and more U.S.-Europe dialogue and cooperation on wider Asian issues. This brief argues that the fundamental goal should be the establishment of a relationship where Europe, North America, and Japan “use” each other to advance their own interests in Asia and beyond.

Linking Japan and the Transatlantic Community in the Age of Asia’s Rise

by Michito Tsuruoka¹

An anachronistic vision?

The link between Japan and the transatlantic community is an issue both old and new. During the Cold War, it was from time to time a strategic imperative to link the two against the communist bloc. Nations in the transatlantic community—North America and Western Europe—were the core of the Western camp, and Japan was Washington’s key ally on the Pacific front. It was, therefore, not surprising that the Williamsburg G7 Summit in 1983 concluded that the security of those nations was “indivisible” in the context of the deployment of and negotiations with Moscow on the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces (INF). While the transatlantic community is wider than its G7 members, the G7 framework that dates back to the mid 1970s has in many ways been the most visible expression of the link between the transatlantic community and Japan. Now the age of G7/8 seems to have gone and what appears to be replacing it is a world of G20. As such, it may appear that talk of linking Japan and the transatlantic community—a group of old industrial democracies—is anachronistic.

This brief argues the contrary. In today’s world, where security, political, and economic challenges are becoming truly global in nature and the center of gravity

of world power is shifting to the East, there is a strong case—stronger than in the past—to be made for linking the transatlantic community and Japan.

Unfortunately, the reality remains that the transatlantic community and Japan have yet to fulfill their true potential for cooperation, be it in trade and the economy, climate change, or foreign policy and security. The under-developed nature of the link between the transatlantic community and Japan is a huge loss in terms of making the world safer and more stable. To make a synergy between the transatlantic community and Japan possible, there is a need for greater strategic European engagement in Asia, an active Europe-Japan relationship, and more U.S.-Europe dialogue and cooperation on wider Asian issues. Focusing on these elements, this brief argues that the fundamental goal should be the establishment of a relationship where Europe, North America, and Japan “use” each other to advance their own interests in Asia and beyond.

The main aim of this policy brief is to explore a new approach through which a concrete partnership could be established. It is not begging for more attention or a greater role for Japan. As a result of what appears to have been a general lack of

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leadership and successive unstable and short-lived governments in the past several years, Japan has missed a number of opportunities to play a bigger role in the world and belittled itself. However, thinking again about and using Japan should not be conceived as an altruistic hand of help to the declining country. Rather, it is firmly in the interest of other countries, not least those of the transatlantic community.

Why still Japan?

Many may question why we should revisit the transatlantic relationship with Japan now. As a result of the growing attention given to China and India, Japan's presence is often overlooked in the international arena. Unlike China and India, or Japan itself until the early 1990s, today's Japan is not a rising power. It may even be a declining power, at least in relative terms. However, it needs to be remembered that Japan remains the second largest economy in the world, and that it is steadily increasing its role in international security in addition to its traditional prowess in trade and economy.

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It is also crucial that Japan, not least from a perspective of the transatlantic community, which is a community of values, is one—and by far the largest—of only a handful of advanced and mature democracies in the world sharing fundamental values outside the transatlantic (Euroatlantic) region. This makes Japan

a natural partner for the transatlantic community. Ironically, Japan is such a natural partner for both North America and Europe that it is too often taken for granted, and as a result, gets less attention than it should. It is human instinct that more attention is paid to those countries who cause harm than to those who do not pose a threat.

However, it is undeniable that in a world where emerging major powers such as China and India are expected to play an ever more significant role, and whose inclusion has become indispensable to an effective global regime, cooperation only between the transatlantic community and Japan has less impact than it once did. That, however, by no means indicates that cooperation among established developed countries has become less important. If a like-minded core group of states that share values cannot cooperate effectively, who can be optimistic about establishing effective global governance among a larger number of more diverse countries?

The need for strategic European engagement in Asia

In spite of its growing weight as an international actor, and its stated ambition of becoming a global strategic player, the European Union has so far not been wholly successful in establishing its political profile in Asia. In foreign policy and security, some major EU countries, most notably the United Kingdom and France for respective historical reasons, possess a more visible and concrete profile than the EU as a whole in the region. But beyond a specific context or area (such as the Portuguese role regarding East Timor), it is now impractical for individual European nations, even the largest, to try to exert more influence in Asia independent of the EU.

The EU's failure to establish its political profile in Asia is in part due to a perception problem. The way the EU is perceived by outsiders is not always the same as what the EU actually is and does. Since EU foreign policy is still a work in progress and its shape and structure keep changing rapidly, it is not easy for outsiders to understand the actual state of these developments. In short, establishing and consolidating a new recognition in Asia that the EU is a serious international player beyond trade and economic affairs will take more time. The level of awareness of the EU as an international actor varies among Asian countries: Japan being one of the countries in Asia (or even in the whole world) where awareness levels are lowest.

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But the problem is not just one of perception. The most fundamental problem with European engagement in Asia is that its strategic stake in the region remains undefined. The EU does not seem to have a clear idea of what role it wants and is prepared to play in Asia. Many in Asia do not think that Europe has significant strategic interests beyond trade and economics. This belief was reinforced by the discussion on lifting the EU arms embargo on China several years ago. To those who opposed the EU's move to lift the embargo, controversy over the issue left the impression that the EU prioritized commercial gains at the expense of security considerations.

Some Europeans too argue that Europe does not have any vital strategic interests in Asia, and therefore does not need to pay particular attention to Asian security issues. They think the region is too far away from Europe to have any direct impact on European interests in any significant way. But this notion is becoming obsolete. The terrorist attacks in the United States on September 11, 2001, demonstrated that security threats and challenges can come from thousands of miles away from the remotest areas of the world. Europeans cannot be indifferent to such problems as the potential of state-failure in Afghanistan and North Korea's missile and nuclear development. Piracy activities off the coast of Somalia are threatening the vital sea-lane linking Asia and Europe, on which the European economy relies. In broader terms, the fact that the distribution of global power is shifting toward the East means that Asia's strategic landscape is going to have a more direct impact on Europe's interests. The 2008 French White Paper on defense and national security is arguably the clearest expression of such recognition to date. But it is still just a beginning. Intellectual recognition is a good first step, but it needs to be translated into actual policy responses, which have yet to come.

Europe now needs ever more urgently to define what role it is willing and prepared to play in Asia. This should be based on a clear idea of what strategic stakes Europe has in the region. In other words, it is about clarifying what to achieve or defend, in what way, and why. For instance, two major strategic interests for Europe vis-à-vis Asia are managing the rise of China by helping the country to become a more responsible international player and protecting the sea-lane between Europe and Asia. Once the goals are defined, concrete means to achieve them will have to be contemplated.

The EU's anti-piracy naval operation off the coast of Somalia (EU NAVFOR) has proven highly effective, not only in protecting commercial ships and the sea-lane, but also in raising the

EU's profile as a credible and capable strategic actor in the eyes of Asians. EU officials have so far been busy emphasizing the significance of the EU Aceh Monitoring Mission (AMM), a small monitoring mission deployed following a peace deal brokered by Finland. The mission was successful in achieving what it was mandated to do. EU officials argue that it has changed perceptions of the EU in Indonesia and among local people, but the impact was, at best, limited. EU NAVFOR is in a different category. It will have a much bigger impact on Asian perceptions of the EU's role in international security. Tokyo was not aware that the EU could conduct a naval operation. But it came to "discover" the EU's presence there when it decided to send its military vessels as part of international anti-piracy effort. This is likely to have an impact on Japan's perception of the EU as a capable security actor.

"Using" each other

The lack of clarity in Europe's engagement in Asia is one thing. But at the same time, another problem lies with the fact that Asian expectations of European engagement in the region are as yet undefined. Asians do not have a clear idea of what role they want the Europeans to play in the region. Some, especially in China, hope that the EU will become a viable counterweight to the United States, but this is not a view that is widely shared in the region as a whole. Others in Asia, not least Japanese and Americans, would argue that the only expectation of Europe is that it should "do no harm." This is a view primarily derived from bad experience with the issue of lifting the EU arms embargo on China, to which there was vehement opposition. At the very least, there needs to be a recognition that this kind of negative and minimalist view still lingers.

In the meantime, however, the EU already has a huge presence in Asia in terms of trade and investment, and is trying to expand its reach through various bilateral trade agreements, and other more comprehensive agreements, including free trade agreements (FTAs), with a number of countries in the region. In today's world, it is naive to assume that such frameworks will not have any spill-over effect into politics and other fields, especially considering the fact that Brussels frequently tries to insert a number of non-economic clauses in ostensibly economic agreements. It has already used such agreements to expand its influence beyond trade and economic issues in other regions, most notably in Africa and the Mediterranean. The EU may try the same in Asia as well.

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Asia, including Japan, therefore needs first to understand the real impact of what the EU is doing (and trying to do). They then have to think more strategically about what role they expect Europe to play in the region. To take a less diplomatic term, what is needed is to consider how Europe can be “used” in Asia. Europe is an actor that could be beneficial to other regional players if “used” wisely—but if left ignored or “used” unwisely, Europe could become an unwelcome or even irritating factor as was seen in the case of the proposed lifting of the arms embargo on China.

“Using” Europe in Asia is also a new challenge for the United States. Until now, the United States has not thought that Europe mattered in Asia. That judgment might have been legitimate in the past. But following a long period after the independence of European colonies in Asia and the resultant loss of European influence and interest in the region, Europe’s presence in Asia is on the rise again, especially in terms of trade and investment. The fact that the EU is China’s largest trade partner is just one example of this. For good or bad, the issue of lifting the arms embargo on China was a wake-up call to the Americans which led to the realization that Europe’s role in Asia can no longer be ignored, not only in the realm of trade and economy, but also increasingly in that of regional security.

Given that Europe’s presence in Asia is already a fact of life, the region—Japanese, other Asians, and Americans alike—now needs to contemplate how to use Europe’s economic and political power to contribute to regional prosperity, stability, and security in Asia. As was argued above, it is primarily up to the Europeans to think about what role Europe should play in Asia. But other actors cannot be indifferent to Europe’s choice. Areas in which Europe can be “used” do not need to be limited to regional issues. Global or functional challenges, from counter-terrorism, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, intellectual property rights, human rights, and climate change also offer opportunities for others to “use” Europe. It should also be mentioned that for Japan and other Asian nations, Europe can bring added value as a new type of partner, different from the United States. To be recognized by Asians as a new and effective partner in addition to the United States, Europe needs to demonstrate those areas where it can deliver what the United States cannot.

At the same time, Europe needs to consider how it can “use” Japan, other Asian countries and the United States for its own interest in dealing with Asian and wider issues. It is now fashionable to call for more inclusion, especially that of emerging powers like China and India, in addressing global challenges, exemplified by the increasing

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role and expectations of the G20 over those of the G7/8. The role of Japan often gets overlooked as a result. But simply getting a larger number of states on the table cannot be a panacea.

It is also unrealistic to expect China, for example, to provide the solution for matters ranging from the global financial crisis and climate change to the situation in Afghanistan. In order to construct a new, more inclusive system of global governance, more cooperation between like-minded countries will be needed than ever before.

While it might sound anachronistic or politically incorrect, it must be recognized anew that there are still a number of issues, from international peace operations to intellectual property rights, that can only be tackled effectively, at least in the short term, by advanced democracies with common values, interests and responsibilities. In multilateral peace operations, whether led by NATO or the EU, participation requires a certain level of interoperability and a modern military capability is needed. Japan is actually one of only several countries in the world outside the transatlantic community that is capable of conducting sophisticated military operations. While being a latecomer to international peace support operations and still under a heavy set of constitutional and other restrictions, Japan has been conducting a refueling operation under the Operation Enduring Freedom-Maritime Interdiction Operation (OEF-MIO) in the Indian Ocean for nearly eight years. It has also sent P-3C patrol aircrafts to the Gulf of Aden in addition to its military vessels (Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force: JMSDF) operating there in the context of the international anti-piracy operation. It is evident that there is more room for future cooperation between Japan and the transatlantic community in international peace operations. In

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this regard, NATO, as the most visible expression of the transatlantic relationship, is in a good position to steer these developments.

On the economic side, protecting intellectual property rights is a good example of an area where advanced economies need to cooperate more vis-à-vis emerging economies and other developing countries. In broader terms, when it comes to dealing with the rise of China, for example, it is easy to understand the value of synergy between Europe, North America, and Japan. It cannot be persuasively argued that Europe, the United States or Japan has a better chance of influencing China independently than in cooperation with each other.

In today's world, there is too much loose talk about partnerships and international cooperation. But going beyond rhetoric is not always easy. To use and to be used is arguably the only enduring basis for any partnership to be of value. For the link between the transatlantic community and Japan to be workable and durable, such a pattern of mutual benefit needs to be established.

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