Europe and Japan: Toward a “Trans-Eurasian” Partnership?

by Luis Simón

An appeal to a “shared interest” in a liberal and rules-based international order has become the driving premise in security conversations between Japanese and European officials — whether in an EU, NATO, or bilateral context. This appeal is often followed by references to the importance of “global rule-making,” on issues ranging from cybersecurity to the fight against terrorist and criminal organizations to global environmental regulation.

Insofar as they share fundamental values and views on international order, it is logical that Europeans and Japanese work together to tackle “global” and “transnational” security challenges. The problem is that their security dialogue seems to be stuck at an abstract level. This may be because European and Japanese leaders continue to see their international role primarily through the lens of diplomacy, “normative” power, and multilateral cooperation, rendering global and transnational challenges a sort of comfort-zone for both. An emphasis on the “global” often has the effect of detaching security discussions from their geopolitical context. A “transnational” focus evokes the idea that security challenges are shared, thereby downplaying anything that smacks of old-fashioned interstate competition.

However, Chinese assertiveness in the East and South China Seas and Russia’s attempts to recreate a sphere of influence in Eastern Europe are a reminder that inter-state competition is alive and kicking. In fact, Japan and Europe have recently taken steps to counter what they perceive as strategic threats to regional order. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has initiated a debate on constitutional reform aimed at allowing Japan to enter into collective self-defense arrangements, increased the country’s defense budget, and strengthened its bilateral alliance with the United States. For Europeans, Russia’s annexation of Crimea and ongoing meddling in Eastern Ukraine has spurred renewed interest in defense and deterrence in an “Eastern Flank” context.

The reemergence of strategic challenges at their doorstep has awakened European and Japanese leaders to the

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realities of international politics. Yet there seems to be a disconnect in their minds between the “regional” and the “global.” The former is a space where geopolitical and strategic competition is perceived as increasingly relevant. The latter is approached through a grammar of rules, norms, and multilateralism. But these are artificial separations. The maintenance of a liberal and rules-based international order requires a “global” geopolitical and military balance favorable to liberal democracies. Of particular importance is the preservation of a balance of power in the so-called “Eurasian rimland,” specifically in East Asia, Europe, the Middle East, and South Asia. The security of Europe and East Asia cannot be separated from “middle spaces” such as the Indian Ocean, Central Asia, and (to a lesser extent) the Arctic, which straddle the Euro-Mediterranean Basin and the Asia-Pacific.

It is hard to overstate the importance of the Indian Ocean in Europe-Japan relations. Over 90 percent of the trade between Europe and East Asia is sea-borne and it is largely conducted through that ocean. The Indian Ocean connects Europe and Japan to East Africa’s mineral riches and to the Indian sub-continent, an important source of cheap labor and manufactured products. Given demographic projections, East Africa and the Indian sub-continent offer considerable potential as investment and export markets in the medium and long term for both Japan and Europe.

Critically, the Indian Ocean is also the gateway to the Persian Gulf, which constitutes the main source of oil for Europe and Japan, as well as an important source of gas. The increasing dependence of countries like China, India, Japan, and South Korea on Persian Gulf energy indicates that the economic development and stability of East Asia is increasingly tied to the Middle East. Thus, Europe and Japan share two fundamental geostrategic objectives: the security of the Indian Ocean Sea Lanes of Communication and the existence of a balance of power on the Indian Ocean “rimland,” particularly in the Persian Gulf. The fight against piracy in the Gulf of Aden constitutes an important step for Europe-Japan cooperation in an Indian Ocean context and could be complemented with similar efforts in the area of the Strait of Malacca. However, such cooperation should be extended into other areas such as intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance, joint surface and subsurface patrols, naval exercises, and training. 

Current efforts to reinvigorate the notion of a Eurasian “silk road” in Central Asia could conceivably lead to a revalorization of the continental connection between Europe and Asia. However, Central Asia’s importance as a trade conduit between Asia and Europe pales in comparison to that of the Indian Ocean. Measured against trade via the Indian Ocean, continental routes remain both more expensive and riskier, as they transit multiple countries in geopolitically unstable areas in South Asia, the Middle East, and Central Asia itself. Having said that, both Europe and Japan are interested in Central Asia’s energy and mineral riches. For Europeans, gas imports from the Caspian Basin promise to offset their excessive dependence on Russia. Tokyo, for its part, is aware that the Central Asian republics are interested in reducing their export dependency on China and Russia. Although Central Asia supplies a very small percentage of Japanese gas imports, the prospect of liquefied natural gas imports from Turkmenistan is particularly interesting for Tokyo. In addition to energy, Japan sees Central Asia as an opportunity to reduce its dependence on China for rare earths. If Europe and Japan are to fully exploit the energy and mineral potential of Central Asia, they must help uphold a favorable balance of power in the region. This is particularly important as NATO forces wind down their presence in Afghanistan, and Russia and China consolidate their influence across Central Asia. The specter of Russian political hegemony, Chinese economic dominance, or some form of Sino-Russian condominium would cut the Central Asian republics off from the global economic system. In order to prevent this from happening, Europe and Japan must continue to work alongside the United States, India, and like-minded partners to help underpin the autonomy of Afghanistan and the Central Asian republics, and promote political and economic cooperation among them.

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7 See Jon B. Alterman, “The Asia Pivot,” Middle East Notes and Comment (January 2013), Center for Strategic and International Studies.


10 Author’s interview at the Japanese foreign ministry in Tokyo, November 2014.

Finally, the Arctic is another region where Europe and Japan have much in common. It is estimated that the Arctic region holds some 20 percent of the world’s gas reserves and around 25 percent of its oil reserves. As such, Europe and Japan see the development of the “High North” as another opportunity to reduce their energy dependence on Russia and the Persian Gulf. Beyond energy, as the polar ice caps continue to melt, the Arctic Ocean promises to facilitate communication between Europe and Northeast Asia by cutting the shipping time from Hamburg to Shanghai by some 6,400 kilometers.

As China, Japan, and South Korea reach northwards, and Russia, the United States, Canada, and northern Europeans consolidate their positions in the Arctic, the “High North” is likely to become an increasingly crowded and contested geopolitical space. Europeans and Japanese must therefore work alongside their North American partners to ensure regional stability and a favorable regional balance of power — critical preconditions for the adequate integration of the Arctic as an energy and communications hub in a rules-based international liberal order.

The “middle spaces” — the Indian Ocean, Central Asia, and the Arctic — should be placed at the center of the security dialogue between Japan and Europe. These regions harbor considerable energy and economic potential, and constitute the main inter-Eurasian conduits. As such, they offer the keys to the prosperity and security of Europe and East Asia, but also to the preservation of a rules-based international liberal order. Ultimately, the effective integration of the “middle spaces” into a rules-based international liberal order depends upon political stability and the preservation of a favorable balance of power. This requires proactive engagement on the part of Europe, Japan, and like-minded allies.


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