

EU-Japan partnership: a vision for the future

Interview with Ambassador Yasushi Masaki



Since 1984, Ambassador of Japan to the EU Yasushi Masaki has been serving his nation in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. He has held many positions throughout his career, including roles at Japan's embassies in France and Iran, and has worked in Tokyo in the fields of international law, as well as economic and security affairs. Most recently, he was assistant minister and director-general of the European Affairs Bureau (2017-2020). In October 2020, he was posted to the Mission of Japan to the European Union.

Question 1: For Japan, what is the main significance and added value of the Japan-EU strategic partnership?

Looking back in history, Japan and Europe have had nearly 500 years of exchanges. In the last century, the international community experienced the two world wars. From the bitter experience of wars, both Japan and Europe have made pledges to peace based on their reflection of these wars and, as a result, have undertaken numerous efforts to shape the current international order by promoting peace and stability. Today, Japan and Europe continue to share common values such as democracy, human rights, freedom, rule-of law, free trade and so on.

Based on shared histories and common values, Japan and the EU signed the Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) and the Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA) in 2018, after more than five years of negotiations. Since that time, there has been a common perception between Japan and the EU that the world faces serious challenges that threaten the free and rules-based international order that is based on multilateralism, which the international

society had pursued for a long time after World War II. Since Japan and the EU share the aforementioned values and principles, both sides believe in the strong need to set the basis for maintaining and expanding a free and open international order. As a result, Japan-EU relations were raised to a higher level as a strategic partnership. It is also notable that the SPA was the first international political commitment to govern Japan-EU relations in general.

The SPA gives Japan and the EU the concrete framework to further strengthen dialogue and cooperation in a wide range of fields. Some of these fields are security and defense, development, transportation, space, industrial policy, innovation, ICT, environment, climate change, energy, cyber, etc. Both agreements could set good examples for the world and show that Japan and the EU are determined to promote international peace and prosperity based on shared fundamental values and with the aim of maintaining the international order. Needless to say, there are also plenty of remarkable positive outcomes in our economic relations thanks to the EPA.

Question 2: The EU published in September 2022 its own Indo-Pacific Strategy. What role could the EU play in security matters in a region – the Indo-Pacific – where hard military tensions are on the rise?

Since 2016, Japan has advocated the concept of a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” (FOIP). FOIP aims to establish an international order in the region based on the core principles of rule of law, free trade, and freedom of navigation, which are indispensable for peace and prosperity in the region and globally.

Why do we need to focus on the Indo-Pacific region? The Indo-Pacific region is home to 60% of the world’s population and gross domestic product (GDP). It is also said to be a growth engine that contributes to two-thirds of global economic growth. However, the current Indo-Pacific region faces various challenges from piracy, terrorism, and the spread of weapons of mass destruction to natural disasters and illegal fisheries and more. All this amid an increasingly intimidating security climate that is being created by unilateral actions and attempts to change the *status quo* by a certain nation.

On this point, China unilaterally attempts to do this as it becomes more and more prominent. In the East China Sea, they repeatedly encroach upon the waters surrounding the Senkaku Islands, an inherent territory of Japan. In the South China Sea, the country militarizes the reclaimed terrain. In terms of economy and development, they are trying to reduce the independence of developing countries by exerting great influence through unfair and ambiguous development finance and investment that is outside of the framework of international rules. It is not acceptable to seek such a modification of the *status quo* through unilateral attempts of this kind.

Since the 1960s, as Japan’s economic power and international status increased, our development assistance has been provided through Japanese ODA, including in Asian countries such as China. In this regard, Japan welcomes the peaceful development of these countries, but we are seriously concerned with any unilateral attempts to alter the *status quo* by China. It is natural for Japan to deepen its cooperation with like-minded countries and organizations like the EU that share its fundamental values. I believe it also gives other countries in the region the courage to raise their voices.

Approximately 40% of EU foreign trade passes through the South China Sea and so, the security of the Indo-Pacific directly affects the interests of EU countries too. Therefore, the peace and stability of the region is naturally also important for the EU. In that sense, it is

necessary for Japan and the EU to unite and raise their voices together against those actions that threaten the rules-based international order. It is very encouraging that the EU established a common position on the Indo-Pacific in September 2021, following the initiatives of France, Germany and the Netherlands. I look forward to the upcoming Ministerial Meeting on the Indo-Pacific that will be held in February under the auspices of France, the current holder of the EU Council Presidency during the first half of 2022, and I hope that it will lead to further cooperation among like-minded countries.

Now, what kind of specific involvement does Japan expect from the EU in the Indo-Pacific region? One possibility would be to enhance connectivity between Asia and Europe. In 2019, Japan and the EU signed a document entitled “The Partnership on Sustainable Connectivity and Quality Infrastructure”. Based on this partnership, Japan and the EU have been promoting cooperation in order to enhance connectivity and to ensure synergies with partner countries. If we work together on enhancing connectivity in the region, it will contribute to ensuring sustainability there, which will lead to prosperity and stability in the long term. Japan will pursue cooperation based on international rules together with the EU.

In this regard, Japan welcomes the EU’s Global Gateway announced in December 2021 and looks forward to making joint concrete projects with transparency, openness, and sustainability in various areas.

Japan and the EU can also further cooperate in the area of security. Japan, the EU and its member states have already realized cooperation notably in the field of maritime security. In October 2021, a Japan-EU joint naval exercise was carried out in the Gulf of Aden with the cooperation of Oman for the first time. Until today, Japan and the EU have held 25 similar joint exercises. Japan has also held several joint exercises with individual EU member states such as Germany, France, and the Netherlands. We would like to see a stronger EU presence in the region by pursuing more concrete cooperation together.

Besides the bilateral cooperation between Japan and the EU, it is also important to cooperate with other partners in the region that share the same values such as ASEAN countries as well as Australia, India, and the U.S., which, together with Japan, make up QUAD. QUAD is one of the initiatives set up to facilitate cooperation with like-minded countries in the region in order to ensure the maintenance of shared values. In fact, the QUAD alliance welcomes the efforts of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP). As Japan has long-standing experience and knowledge of cooperation with ASEAN countries, Japan can act as a “bridge” for the EU to engage in the ASEAN region as well. It also enhances the contributions toward ensuring the stability and prosperity of the region.

Currently, the EU is drafting its “Strategic Compass”, which aims to establish the foundations of a shared vision for EU security and defense among EU member states. I understand that the Strategic Compass will include a guideline for various security situations and in which the issues of the Indo-Pacific region will also be touched upon. With the aim of further enhancing our cooperation in the future, Japan pays close attention to the EU’s discussion on the Strategic Compass and hopes that it will contribute to strengthening the Japan-EU partnership in the future.

Question 3: What field of cooperation do you envision as the most promising for the future of the Japan-EU strategic partnership?

In order to further strengthen their strategic partnership in the future, Japan and the EU should work together to address not only regional issues but also global ones. Our

cooperation should not be limited to the topics listed in the EU-Japan SPA. For example, it should now include a coordinated response to the COVID-19 pandemic, which will likely continue this year, through ensuring the fair distribution of vaccines around the world, support for developing countries and establishing a resilient supply chain.

Staying on the topic of global issues, there was significant progress made on cooperation on climate change between Japan and the EU in 2021, particularly with the launch of “The Green Alliance” at the Japan-EU summit. It is the first cooperation framework for Japan and the EU that prioritizes the green agenda. I sincerely welcome this development. From now on, Japan and the EU will strengthen their cooperation on the energy transition, environmental protection, regulatory and business cooperation, research and development, sustainable finance, facilitating the green transition with third countries, and also on ensuring the global integrity and stability of climate action. We aim to realize climate-neutral, biodiversity-friendly, resource-recycling economies in order to achieve green growth and net-zero greenhouse gas emissions in 2050.

It was not a coincidence that Japan and the EU launched the Green Alliance. If we look at both parties’ policies related to tackling climate change, we can recognize the synergies already in play. Japan launched its “Green Growth Strategy” in 2020 to achieve carbon neutrality by 2050. The strategy intends the realization of environment and climate-friendly changes in the industrial structure and economic society in Japan through the promotion of companies’ innovation. It covers 14 industrial fields related to energy, transportation, manufacturing, home and office and outlines the measures to be taken for future efforts based on analyses of the current situation. Last November, Prime Minister Kishida attended COP26 and declared that Japan aims to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions by 46% by fiscal year 2030 from its fiscal year 2013 levels, setting an ambitious target which is aligned with the long-term goal of net-zero by 2050. Furthermore, he stressed that Japan will continue strenuous efforts in its challenge to meet the lofty goal of cutting its emissions by 50%. PM Kishida also declared additional assistance of 10 billion USD in the coming five years and the doubling of adaptation finance.

In the EU, the European Commission has also proposed a package of legislative measures including CBAM in July 2021 and discussions are underway among its member states and at the European Parliament in order to materialize the EU’s green policy. We are keenly interested in the EU’s policies as they may influence countries outside of the EU. Japan and the EU are steadily advancing their respective policies in order to achieve common goals. There are cooperation projects and information sharing initiatives between Japanese and European private companies, and I hope that these cooperation relationships will be strengthened in the future.

In addition, digital transformation is also one of the prioritized topics between Japan and the EU. It is essential to promote safe and secure cross-border data circulation in the digital field through enhanced security and privacy. For this purpose, Japan promotes “Data Free Flow with Trust” (DFFT), which aims to facilitate safe and secure cross-border data flows. We collaborate to promote global standards and comprehensive, including regulatory, approaches for digital policies and technologies, notably on secure 5G, beyond 5G, AI, cybersecurity and related policies. The EU’s joint communication on the Indo-Pacific also mentions the Union’s interest in concluding a digital partnership with Japan that will cover a wide range of areas. We should cooperate to materialize Data Free Flow with Trust (DFFT) mentioned in the Japan-EU EPA, and Japan would like to launch an official negotiation on free flow of data with the EU as soon as possible.

Geographically, Japan and Europe are certainly distant, but we know that globalization shortens our physical distance. It also reminds us of our long history of exchanges and friendship for 500 years. The Japan-EU EPA and SPA already exist as foundations for current Japan-EU relations. In the current world, both Japan and the EU are main players in the international economy and we also have a big role in international disputes including free trade. All the global issues and important regional ones need our coordination and our initiatives to ensure the peace and stability of the world. From now on, we should work together even more to encourage and champion these values in the international community.

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