

Guest Editorial

The Japan-EU Relationship: A True Strategic Partner Based on Mutual Trust

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Japan-EU relations have evolved remarkably in the past few decades and are more robust than ever before. The relationship is no longer based purely on trade and investment; it has expanded greatly over the past couple of decades. Communication, including at the highest levels, is now more frequent than ever, and our consultations and cooperation has broadened to include political, security, and social dimensions. Above all, the cooperation is firmly based on our unwavering shared commitment to fundamental values, namely democracy, human rights and the rule of law.

Through a long history of successful cooperation across a wide range of fields, solid trust has been fostered between Japan and Europe. Last January, Mr Kishida, Foreign Minister of Japan, emphasized the solid relationship between Japan and Europe based on their mutual trust by stating:

A country regarded as important by another country may not be important any more tomorrow if the economic situation or the security environment surrounding them changes. However, a country regarded as reliable by another country will not lose that status overnight. This is because winning another country's trust takes time, and concrete actions as well as words are required.

Japan and the EU, as two of the world's most influential actors, have taken great strides to working more closely together and realizing the true potential of their partnership. I believe that the relations between Japan and the EU have matured to the stage where we can proudly refer to each other as true strategic partners based on mutual trust.

Given the growing economic links between Japan and the EU (for the EU, Japan is the 2nd largest investor, and 6th largest trading partner), the growing threats to international security, and the growing interest in the yet un-tapped potential between Japan and the EU, it is only natural for both Japan and the EU to seek a better cooperation framework. At the Japan-EU summit in May 2011, in

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order to further strengthen the overall Japan-EU relations, leaders agreed to start the negotiating process for the Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA) and the Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA/FTA). In April 2013, the negotiation for both the SPA and the EPA started, and ever since then, both Japan and the EU are working together tirelessly to conclude these two comprehensive agreements.

Both the SPA and the EPA, once concluded, will serve as the fundamental and legally binding foundation of Japan-EU future relations. The EPA will contribute to boosting economic growth, creating employment and strengthening business competitiveness in both Japan and the EU. The SPA sketches out our entire relationship, establishing common ground to promote substantial cooperation in a wide variety of areas. I would also like to emphasize that the impact of the agreements will not be limited to Japan and the EU. The EPA will contribute to the stable growth of the world economy as well as to global rule-making and standard setting in international trade and investment. The SPA will enable Japan and the EU to work more closely, strengthening our commitment to achieve peace, stability and prosperity in our respective regions and the world.

Currently the negotiations of the EPA and the SPA are in an advanced and final phase. Since the first negotiations started in April 2013, robust efforts on both sides have narrowed many of the gaps, and there has been a remarkable achievement. At the Japan EU-Summit last year in May, leaders reaffirmed their commitment to finalizing the negotiations, and the negotiations have accelerated to this day. This commitment was further strengthened by Prime Minister Abe and the European Commission President Juncker in a bilateral meeting in Turkey at the end of last year.

The conclusion of the agreements will be an important achievement, but that does not mean that we can finally sit back and relax. The SPA and the EPA will nourish our relations, but we must keep working together in order to tackle the problems we both face today.

The world is seeing new dynamics resulting in divergent views on what should be the guiding principles in the international arena. The nature of the threat is gradually evolving and challenges to the universal values, such as rule of law, are becoming a reality.

Although the security environments are different in Europe and Asia, and there is a large geographic distance, in a more globalized and interlinked world, each of these two regions is affected by, and can affect, developments beyond the traditionally perceived borders. Against this backdrop, Japan and the EU face the same challenges and share the same aspirations and responsibilities and will therefore need to strengthen their cooperation to address common global challenges.

Some of the common grounds for us to work together on are, in fact, already in place. For example, regarding the situation in Ukraine, Japan maintains its position that the sovereignty and territorial integrity shall be respected and that any attempt to change the status quo by force or coercion cannot be tolerated. Attaching importance to promoting G7 solidarity, Japan, one of the few countries in Asia, has joined in imposing sanctions against Russia. In addition, Japan has been steadily implementing economic assistance to Ukraine up to USD 1.8 billion.

As far as the situation in the Middle East is concerned, the destabilization of Syria in particular has created a major international challenge, generating more than 11 million refugees. Japan has been devoting its efforts to providing assistance to these people, including the provision of food, water and education, and the stabilization of areas liberated from terrorism. Japan has provided more than USD 1.2 billion to Syrian and Iraqi refugees and their surrounding countries, and this year Japan will provide additional aid worth USD 350 million for the stabilization of Syria and Iraq.

Furthermore, in the field of security, Japan and the EU are already cooperating in the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). For example, Japan is working with the EU mission in the Republic of Mali, the Republic of Niger and in Ukraine. The Japanese Self Defence Force and the EU NAVFOR have conducted a series of joint counter-piracy exercises to strengthen cooperation in the Gulf of Aden. Moreover, Japan and the EU now hold dialogues on cyber issues, counter-terrorism and Outer-Space issues, to name just a few examples.

After the joint counter-piracy exercise involving the Japanese SDF and the EU NAVFOR in the Gulf of Aden, the Admiral of the EU Naval Force commented: 'Although the EU and Japan are geographically far apart, we are very much global partners, sharing common values of democracy, maritime trade and freedom of navigation.' I believe this comment, delivered after a successful Japan-EU collaboration, gives us a good insight into why we should prioritize and advance future cooperation.

As I mentioned, the world today is heavily interwoven, and in one way or another, what is happening in one place will have an impact on the rest of the world.

This is also true about Europe and Asia. In the area of economic activity, for example, statistics shows that around 40% of the world trade is shipped through Asia, and if freedom of navigation were to be disrupted, it will have a serious effect on the world economy and the European economy will not be free from such an impact.

In the area of security, for example, we are in the strategic environment where, in terms of capability, the long-ranged ballistic missile launched from the Far East can reach every major city of Europe.

When the fundamental values that are at the heart of our strategic partnership are challenged, we need to stand together and speak with one voice.

In this respect, we welcome that the EU in recent years has stepped up its constructive engagement in and with Asian countries. We regard it especially important that the EU is attentive to the situation in Asia and also be vocal in its position; a strong advocate of diplomatic and peaceful conflict resolution according to the international law, without any threat of the use of force.

This year, Japan has been given numerous opportunities to show our commitment to peace and stability in the international community. Japan will serve two years as a non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council. This is Japan's 11th time as a non-permanent member and the highest number in the history of the Security Council. Japan will also hold the presidency of the G7, hosting the Summit in May this year at Ise-Shima in Japan. The Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD) will also be held in Kenya this summer, bringing together leaders from African countries to promote high-level policy dialogue between African leaders and development partners. Japan will also chair the Japan-China-Republic of Korea Trilateral Summit Meeting, aiming to strengthen political dialogue among the three countries. We will make every use of these valuable opportunities to show that Japan is ready and can play a significant role in the international community to promote peace, prosperity and stability. Prime Minister Abe said in his New Year's Reflection that this year would be a year in which Japan truly shines on the world's centre stage.

As Ambassador to the European Union, I have no doubt that Japan will play a central role in shaping the international order this year. At the same time, I also strongly believe that Japan will only be able to fulfil such a great responsibility together with our strategic partner, the EU. This will be an exciting year for Japan, but will also be a great opportunity for both Japan and the EU to prove that together we can make a difference and that we are true Strategic Partners.

Over the years, the EU has changed, especially since the Lisbon Treaty came into force. Japan of course has changed as well, and the world around us is also changing. Naturally, the Japan-EU relationship has also evolved through the years, and the conclusion of the SPA and the EPA will open a new chapter and surely bring new positive changes to the nature of our cooperation. I myself find it very fortunate to be here in Brussels to witness the changes that Japan and the EU are about to go through. After years of negotiations, we are now stepping into a new phase of our partnership. As much as Japan sees and counts on the EU as a strategic

partner and supporter of the international order based on our fundamental values, I hope that the EU will strengthen its engagement in Asia as well.

This year is the year for us to prove our evolution, and I could not have asked for a better timing to come here.