



# European Engagement in the Maritime Security in Indo-Pacific

## A Japanese Perspective

Yuki Tatsumi, Stimson Center

February 2022





# European Engagement in the Maritime Security in Indo-Pacific

A Japanese Perspective

**Author:**

Yuki Tatsumi, Stimson Center

**Editors:**

Paul van Hoof and Tim Sweijjs

**Cover photo source:**

[U.S. Navy](#)

February 2022

HCSS has received funding within the PROGRESS research framework agreement and has commissioned the author to draft this paper. Responsibility for the contents and for the opinions expressed, rests solely with the authors and does not constitute, nor should it be construed as, an endorsement by the Netherlands Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Defense.

© *The Hague* Centre for Strategic Studies. All rights reserved. No part of this report may be reproduced and/or published in any form by print, photo print, microfilm or any other means without prior written permission from HCSS. All images are subject to the licenses of their respective owners.

On November 29 2021, Japanese prime minister Fumio Kishida had a phone meeting with Charles Michel, President of the European Council. During the meeting, Kishida welcomed the European Union (EU)'s Joint Communication on EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific released on September 16, 2021 in which the EU articulated its intention to strengthen its collective efforts to engage in the Indo-Pacific region “to build partnerships that reinforce the rules-based international order, address global challenges.”<sup>1</sup> The two leaders agreed on continuing the cooperation to realize a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific.”<sup>2</sup>

## Japan facing increasing pressure from China in East China Sea

Japan has been at odds with China and Taiwan over the territorial claims over Senkaku Islands since 1971. Up until the 2000s, Japan-China tensions over the dispute had been contained to sporadic incidents of Chinese fishing vessels entering waters around the Senkakus or Japanese conservative activists attempting to land on one of the Senkaku Islands to claim Japanese sovereignty over the islands. But China's pressure began to intensify in 2008 when the Chinese government began to send its government vessels — coastguard as well as maritime research ships — not only near East China Sea but also into Japan's territorial waters. In particular, the 2010 incident of Chinese fishing vessels colliding into Japan Coast Guard's vessels attracted national attention in Japan.

Since then, China's activities around Senkaku Islands and broader East China Sea only grew more aggressive and more frequent. As it tries to cope with such an increasingly aggressive China in the Senkaku Islands and broader East China Sea, Japan has been trying to regionalize the issue. It argues that what is really stake in the East and South China Seas is whether the international community can rally around to uphold international values and norms that have long been the foundation of post-World War II international order, such as freedom of navigation, rule of law, and commitment to peaceful resolution of disputes.

## Strategic importance of “free and open Indo-Pacific” for Japan

Japan is an island nation that depends on imports for the vast majority of its supply of natural resources, food and other commodities. For example, 99.7% of the crude oil Japan consumes comes from abroad.<sup>3</sup> It also depends on imports for approximately 60% of its food supply, which makes Japan the fourth largest food importer after the US, China and the EU. The geographical reality that all of these imports are coming through by maritime shipment makes an uninterrupted sea transportation between Japan and the rest of the world, including waters in Indian and Pacific Oceans, one of Tokyo's critical national interests.

1 European Union, *Joint Communication to European Parliament and the Council: The EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific*. September 16, 2021. [https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/jointcommunication\\_indo\\_pacific\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/jointcommunication_indo_pacific_en.pdf). Accessed November 28, 2021.

2 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. “Telephone Talk between Prime Minister Kishida and President Michel of the European Council.” November 29, 2021. [https://www.mofa.go.jp/erp/ep/page4e\\_001188.html](https://www.mofa.go.jp/erp/ep/page4e_001188.html). Accessed December 1, 2021.

3 Klein, Catharina. “Fossil Fuels in Japan – statistics & facts” *statista*. June 8, 2021. <https://www.statista.com/topics/7989/fossil-fuels-in-japan/#dossierKeyfigures>. Accessed November 30, 2021.

As it tries to cope with such an increasingly aggressive China in the Senkaku Islands and broader East China Sea, Japan has been trying to regionalize the issue

In fact, even before the discussions of maritime security or “free and open Indo-Pacific” developed in recent years, Japan had always discussed the importance of “defense of sea lanes” as one of its critical national interests as far back as 1980s. For instance, when Japanese prime minister Zenko Suzuki visited Washington DC for a summit meeting with President Ronald Reagan in May 1981, he suggested that Japan would shoulder primary responsibility for sea lane defense within 1,000 nautical miles of Japanese territory.<sup>4</sup>

However, it was not until Shinzo Abe succeeded Junichiro Koizumi as Japanese prime minister that the Japanese view of the Indo-Pacific region was articulated. In the speech delivered in front of Indian Parliament in August 2007, Abe declared that the “Confluence of the Two Seas are coming into being,” proposing how the Pacific and Indian Oceans needed to be looked at as one dynamic theater which brings prosperity to the “broader Asia”. He also argued for a deeper partnership between Japan and India as fellow democratic countries that sits at the opposite ends of the two seas.<sup>5</sup>

Although Abe’s first term as the prime minister prematurely ended soon after this speech, his strategic vision culminated into two speeches he made after he returned to lead Japan in December 2012. In January 2013, Abe revealed his vision for Japan’s relationship with ASEAN countries, dubbed as the “Abe Doctrine,” which included the following five principles:

1. Protect and promote together with ASEAN member-states universal values, such as freedom, democracy and basic human rights;
2. Ensure, in cooperation with ASEAN member states, that the free and open seas, which are the most vital common asset, are governed by laws and rules and not by force, and to welcome the United States’ rebalancing to the Asia-Pacific region;
3. Further promote trade and investment, including flows of goods, money, people and services, through various economic partnership networks, for Japan’s economic revitalization and prosperity of both Japan and ASEAN member states;
4. Protect and nurture Asia’s diverse cultural heritages and traditions; and
5. Promote exchanges among the young generations to further foster mutual understanding.<sup>6</sup>

In addition, during his first visit to the United States the following month, Abe declared that “Japan is back” as the “Tier-One country”, declaring that “A rules-promoter, a commons’ guardian, and an effective ally and partner to the U.S. and other democracies, are all roles that Japan MUST fulfill.”<sup>7</sup> Abe’s vision for “free and open Indo-Pacific” concept first revealed at the Sixth Tokyo Conference on African Development (TICAD) in 2016<sup>8</sup> and further articulated in Abe’s policy speech in front of Japanese Diet in 2018.<sup>9</sup>

4 Hirota, Hideki. *Reagan Seiken no Kokusai Seiji Senryaku to Nichi-bei Kankei – 1980 nendai America Sekai Senryaku ni okeru “Nichi-Bei Doumei” no Keisei to Tenkai* (International Political Strategy of the Reagan Administration and U.S.-Japan Relations – Formation of “U.S.-Japan Alliance” and its Development within U.S. Global Strategy during the 1980s). <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/70372027.pdf>. Accessed December 1, 2021.

5 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. “Confluence of the Two Seas” Speech by H.E. Shinzo Abe, Prime Minister of Japan at the Parliament of India. August 22, 2007. <https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/pmv0708/speech-2.html>. Accessed December 1, 2021.

6 Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan, “Factsheet on Japan-ASEAN relations,” The World and Japan Database, <https://worldjpn.grips.ac.jp/documents/texts/asean/20130200.01E.html> accessed November 30, 2020).

7 Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan, “Japan is Back: By Shinzo Abe, Prime Minister of Japan” February 22, 2013. [https://www.mofa.go.jp/announce/pm/abe/us\\_20130222en.html](https://www.mofa.go.jp/announce/pm/abe/us_20130222en.html). Accessed November 27, 2021.

8 Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan, “Address by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe at the Opening Session of the Sixth Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD)”, August 27, 2016. [https://www.mofa.go.jp/afr/af2/page4e\\_000496.html](https://www.mofa.go.jp/afr/af2/page4e_000496.html). Accessed November 27, 2021.

9 Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet. “Policy Speech by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to the 196<sup>th</sup> Session of the Diet.” January 22, 2018. [https://japan.kantei.go.jp/98\\_abe/statement/201801/\\_00002.html](https://japan.kantei.go.jp/98_abe/statement/201801/_00002.html). Accessed November 26, 2021.

It was not until Shinzo Abe succeeded Junichiro Koizumi as Japanese prime minister that the Japanese view of the Indo-Pacific region was articulated

## Increasing importance of European engagement

As Abe articulated his vision for “free and open Indo-Pacific”, he also paid renewed attention to Japan’s relationship with Europe. In fact, strengthening Japan’s relationship with NATO had already been on Abe’s agenda during his first tenure as Japanese prime minister between 2006-2007. During that time, Abe visited NATO headquarters in January 2007 as the first Japanese prime minister to do so and delivered a speech at the North Atlantic Council. In that speech, Abe already had spoken about Japan and NATO’s shared value (freedom, democracy, human rights and rule of law) and argued that it was “only natural” that Japan and NATO work together to advance these values. It is also noteworthy that Abe already made a reference to “uncertainties surrounding China,” citing “its increasing defense expenditures and lack of transparency,” and argued that Japan and NATO should continue to remain vigilant of the direction in which China was heading.<sup>10</sup>

Abe’s vision of further strengthening Japan’s relationship with Europe intensified when he returned to the office in December 2012. For instance, Japan’s 2013 National Security Strategy pointed out that Japan and European countries “share universal values of freedom, democracy, respect for fundamental human rights and the rule of law, and principles such as market economy,” and identified European countries as Japan’s partners to “take a leading role in ensuring the peace, stability and prosperity of the international community.” In particular, it declared Japan’s intention to strengthen its ties with Europe “including cooperation with the European Union (EU), the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE).”<sup>11</sup>

Since then, Japan’s cooperation with Europe has been steadily expanding. It is no coincidence that advancement of Japan-Europe relations took place while the US entered a period of unilateralism under the Trump administration, taking an extremely transactional approach to its traditional alliance relationships under the Trump administration. The US’ apparent withdrawal from its leadership role in the international community has provided strong incentives for both Japan and Europe to enhance their cooperation in their efforts to maintain international liberal order. The EU’s announcement of the Joint Communication on Connecting EU and Asia: Building blocks for EU Strategy in September 2018 provided additional incentive, as its emphasis on “sustainable, comprehensive and rule-based connectivity” between Europe and Asia was compatible with the FOIP vision that the Abe government had been trying to promote.<sup>12</sup> The “Connectivity Partnership” that was articulated in the document, combined with the signing of Economic Partnership Agreement (EPT) and Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA) two months prior, cemented the foundation of Japan-Europe cooperation in the Indo-Pacific. Shortly after the announcement by the EU of its strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region the following year, Japan and the EU signed the agreement “The Partnership on Sustainable Connectivity and Quality Infrastructure Between European

It is no coincidence that advancement of Japan-Europe relations took place while the US entered a period of unilateralism under the Trump administration

10 North Atlantic Treaty Organization. “Japan and NATO: Toward further Cooperation” Statement by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to the North Atlantic Council. January 12, 2007. <https://www.nato.int/docu/speech/2007/s070112b.html>. Accessed November 25, 2021.

11 Cabinet Affairs Office of Japan. *National Security Strategy*. December 17, 2013. <https://www.cas.go.jp/jp/siryou/131217anzenhoshou/nss-e.pdf>. Accessed November 26, 2021.

12 European Commission. *Joint Communication – Connecting Europe and Asia: Building blocks for EU Strategy*. September 19, 2018. [https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/joint\\_communication\\_-\\_connecting\\_europe\\_and\\_asia\\_-\\_building\\_blocks\\_for\\_an\\_eu\\_strategy\\_2018-09-19.pdf](https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/joint_communication_-_connecting_europe_and_asia_-_building_blocks_for_an_eu_strategy_2018-09-19.pdf). Accessed December 1, 2021.



Union and Japan on September 27, 2019<sup>13</sup>. Prime Minister Abe, in his keynote speech at the Connectivity Forum, applauded these agreements as anchoring the EU and Japan as leaders of free trade and the guardians of universal values.<sup>14</sup>

## Looking forward

Japan clearly welcomes greater European interests in the Indo-Pacific region. Japan considers Europe primarily as diplomatic and strategic partner to maintain value-based liberal international order. In this context, rising European interests in ensuring that this value-based international order would benefit Japan's effort as it continues to actualize its FOIP vision. As China heightens its aggressive behavior in the Indo-Pacific region however, Japan has been trying to leverage the already existing defense cooperative relationship with some European countries as a tool of strategic messaging toward China.

While Abe was in office, Japan's security cooperation—with the UK and France, in particular, accelerated in terms of the degree of institutionalization as well as military-to-military cooperative activities. Such institutionalization efforts include holding '2+2' ministerial meetings on a regular basis as well as signing up to intelligence sharing, defense equipment and technology transfer, and access and cross-service agreements.<sup>15</sup> In addition, Japan has actively been trying to optimize the two countries' increasing interests in maintaining naval presence in the Indo-Pacific region, utilizing such opportunities to increase port calls by European navies and hold joint trainings in the region. Most recent such examples include US-Japan-France trilateral naval exercise (December 2020), US-Japan-France-Australia joint naval exercises (May 2019 and May 2021)<sup>16</sup>, and *HMS Queen Elizabeth's* port call in Japan (September 2021).<sup>17</sup> In addition to enhancing bilateral and 'US-Japan plus' style defense cooperation with the UK and France, Japan is also increasing cooperative activities with Germany. Japan and Germany signed their information security agreement in March 2021 and held their first '2 + 2' meeting the next month.<sup>18</sup> The relationship has also led to the German frigate *Bayern's* port call to Japan—the first time for German naval vessels to do so in 20 years (November 2021).<sup>19</sup>

Japan considers Europe primarily as diplomatic and strategic partner to maintain value-based liberal international order

13 Delegation of European Union to Japan. *The Partnership on Sustainable Connectivity and Quality Infrastructure between European Union and Japan*. September 27, 2019. [https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/the\\_partnership\\_on\\_sustainable\\_connectivity\\_and\\_quality\\_infrastructure\\_between\\_the\\_european\\_union\\_and\\_japan.pdf](https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/the_partnership_on_sustainable_connectivity_and_quality_infrastructure_between_the_european_union_and_japan.pdf). Accessed December 1, 2021.

14 Prime Minister's Office. *Keynote Speech by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe at Europe Connectivity Forum*. September 27, 2019. [https://www.kantei.go.jp/jp/98\\_abe/statement/2019/0927eforum.html](https://www.kantei.go.jp/jp/98_abe/statement/2019/0927eforum.html). Accessed November 20, 2021.

15 In addition, Japan and England began the negotiation toward Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA) which, once signed, would grant two countries' militaries to enjoy mutual access to their facilities. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. "Commencement of negotiations on Japan-U.K. Reciprocal Access Agreement" September 28, 2021. [https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/press4e\\_003044.html](https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/press4e_003044.html). Accessed November 26, 2021.

16 "U.S., France, Japan and Australia hold first combined naval drill in Asia" *Reuters*, May 16, 2019; Mahadzir, Dzirhan. "U.S. Begins Joint Exercise in Japan with French and Australian Navies" *USNI News*. May 13, 2021. <https://news.usni.org/2021/05/13/u-s-begins-joint-exercise-in-japan-with-french-and-australian-navies>. Accessed November 29, 2021.

17 "U.K. Aircraft Carrier Queen Elizabeth makes 1<sup>st</sup> port calls in Japan," *Kyodo News*, September 4, 2021. <https://english.kyodonews.net/news/2021/09/7b14a4136bfd-uk-aircraft-carrier-queen-elizabeth-makes-1st-port-call-in-japan.html>. Accessed November 30, 2021.

18 Ministry of Defense of Japan. "Japan-Germany Foreign and Defense Ministers' Meeting (2+2)" April 13, 2021. <https://www.mod.go.jp/en/article/2021/04/aa9ac5d279ca488488a60a5983f0320dfe9d99cd.html>. Accessed November 30, 2021.

19 Ohashi, Takushi. "German Navy Strengthens Indo-Pacific Presence with 1<sup>st</sup> Port Call in Japan in 20 years." *Japan Forward*. November 10, 2021. <https://japan-forward.com/german-navy-strengthens-indo-pacific-presence-with-1st-port-call-in-japan-in-20-years/>. Accessed November 25, 2021.

Most recently, Prime Minister Fumio Kishida agreed to expand Japan's defense ties with Germany during his congratulatory phone call with his new German counterpart, Chancellor Olaf Scholz.<sup>20</sup>

Despite such an accelerated pace of defense cooperative activities with these countries, Japan has a limited expectation of the role European countries may be willing to play in potential contingencies in the Indo-Pacific region. Still, Japan very much welcomes European involvement and any increase in their activities in the region during the peacetime. Such activities include both military (i.e. deployment of military assets in the region, joint/combined military exercises with the countries in the region) and non-military (i.e. the November 2021 visit to Taiwan by the first official European Parliamentary delegation<sup>21</sup>). Japan hopes that more activities by European countries during the peacetime that are anchored in their support for the existing values-based international order in the Indo-Pacific region would raise the stake for China to continue its aggressive behaviors in the region, thereby deterring China in non-confrontational ways.

Moving forward, however, both Japan and Europe need to be clear-eyed about the possibility that increased activities by European countries during the peacetime may not be sufficient to deter China. Should that be the case, would Japan be ready to make the case to Europe that a more tangible commitment beyond articulation of their interest in the peace and stability of the region and maintenance of a rules-based international order toward that end is necessary? What would a European response, either bilaterally with Japan or collectively as NATO or the EU, look like? While greater European engagements in the Indo-Pacific region is certainly a welcome trend in the eyes of Japan, there are many more difficult questions that will have to be explored as we move forward.

Despite such an accelerated pace of defense cooperative activities with these countries, Japan has a limited expectation of the role European countries may be willing to play in potential contingencies in the Indo-Pacific region

---

20 "Kishida agrees with new German Chancellor to expand defense cooperation". *The Japan Times*. December 15, 2021. <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2021/12/15/national/kishda-scholz-talks/>. Accessed December 16, 2021.

21 "'You are not alone': EU Parliament delegation tells Taiwan in its first official visit" *Reuters*. November 4, 2021. <https://www.reuters.com/world/you-are-not-alone-eu-parliament-delegation-tells-taiwan-first-official-vis-it-2021-11-04/>. Accessed November 23, 2021.



The Hague Centre  
for Strategic Studies

**HCSS**

Lange Voorhout 1  
2514 EA Hague

**Follow us on social media:**

@hcssnl

**The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies**

Email: [info@hcss.nl](mailto:info@hcss.nl)

Website: [www.hcss.nl](http://www.hcss.nl)