The EU and Japan: making the most of each other

by Michito Tsuruoka

The relationship between the European Union and Japan has evolved significantly over the past two decades. The two sides are now negotiating a free trade agreement (FTA) and a political/framework agreement, provisionally called a Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA), both of which are on the agenda of the 21st EU-Japan Summit to be held in Tokyo on 19 November 2013. Once finalised, these agreements will represent yet another milestone in bilateral relations.

Trade and investment still constitute the main 'pillars' of the relationship and will remain so for the foreseeable future. At the same time, one of the new developments of the past decade is that the political, security and defence aspects of EU-Japan relations have also been addressed and emphasised by political leaders on both sides. A more comprehensive partnership – going beyond trade and investment – is something that is now sought by both the EU and Japan. There is indeed an 'untapped potential' in the relationship, which was explicitly recognised as early as in December 2001 in the EU-Japan Joint Action Plan. In order to fulfil it, Brussels and Tokyo need to learn to make better use of each other as partners.

Drivers for the partnership

Since the 1990s, the driving force behind the desire to develop a comprehensive partnership between the EU and Japan has stemmed from five main factors. First, it was spurred by the decline of the protracted trade conflicts that had long strained relations between the two sides. Second, the EU has since expanded its political and security role in the world, building on its traditional action in trade and economic matters. While the development of European 'foreign policy' has not always been smooth, the fact that the EU has expanded its functional and geographical areas of activity has increased the scope for political and security cooperation with Japan. Third, in the same period Japan has also expanded its own political and security engagement in its neighbourhood and beyond, which has included participation in UN peacekeeping operations and other international initiatives such as counter-piracy operations. As a result of these parallel developments, the EU and Japan – their diplomats, soldiers or development experts – now meet and cooperate *inter alia* in Afghanistan, the Gulf of Aden, Central Asia and Africa.

Fourthly, and perhaps most importantly, what may boost EU-Japan relations is the shifting balance of world power, mainly caused by the rise of Asia and the growing interdependence between the two regions. Europe's security and stability – not to mention its prosperity – are increasingly affected by what takes place in Asia. The Union's approach to Japan as an advanced industrialised country used to be detached from its broader relations with an Asia of mainly developing countries. This distinction is certainly less relevant today, and the EU's relations with Tokyo are beginning to take on a new significance against the backdrop of Asia's overall rise.

Finally, what makes the EU and Japan 'natural' partners is the fact that their respective approaches to international relations are vastly similar. Both are strong at trade, investment, technology and development assistance, while still struggling to raise their foreign policy, security and defence profiles. A vision of a 'comprehensive approach' to crisis management is something that the EU and Japan instinctively and intrinsically share. And their voting records in the United Nations and other international organisations show an exceptionally high level of convergence and commonality.

Outstanding hurdles

It is undeniable, however, that a clear sense of purpose is missing on both sides: the mentality of 'cooperation for the sake of cooperation' is still widespread. The FTA negotiations are certainly a noteworthy exception in this regard, as both parties naturally have a set of concrete goals to be achieved through the negotiations. Yet strengthening the relationship should not be seen merely as an end in itself: it needs to yield tangible and sustainable results.

Moreover, perceptions of mutual indifference are still pervasive. Many Japanese think that Europe is preoccupied with internal issues and its immediate neighbourhood and that, even when it comes to Asia, its interest is almost exclusively focused on China. For their part, many Europeans equally consider Japan as not paying due attention to the EU and focusing almost exclusively on the US, especially on foreign and security policy matters. This state of affairs generates what can be called an 'expectations deficit' in EU-Japan relations: being too ambitious may not be desirable, but too few expectations cannot be a good starting point for the relationship (for *any* relationship) either.

Lastly, in the areas of security and defence, Tokyo's relations with Europe also go through Paris, London and Berlin. Recent developments with France and Britain include information and intelligence cooperation as well as cooperation in defence equipment. Responding to the hostage crisis in Algeria in January 2013, where ten Japanese businessmen were killed, Tokyo is now trying to strengthen intelligence ties with selected European countries regarding Africa and the Middle East. These often reflect also the balance of competences between Brussels and the capitals. On other issues, however, the role of the EU as a venue to discuss and generate norms is increasing – which means that Tokyo needs to shift its focus accordingly.

Using each other well

Concluding the FTA and the SPA is one thing. For the relationship to really make a difference, however, the EU and Japan should focus on optimising its positive potential. In the long term, both parties need to believe that the relationship will deliver something tangible and substantial – preferably something which cannot be achieved by other partnerships.

As political partners, one of the basic goals that Brussels and Tokyo share is to promote the rule of law including fundamental rights and democracy assistance across the world. With rising powers that do not necessarily share those fundamental values, it will be all the more important for the two partners to consolidate such a political partnership, which can be used as a basis for wider cooperation also covering areas such as the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and maritime security.

In addition, the EU and Japan can form a powerful *norm- and rule-making* partnership in a number of policy areas, most notably emerging security challenges such as cyber defence, counter-terrorism and outer space. These are the areas where the world clearly needs a brand new set of norms and rules. The EU has considerable expertise and powers in this regard, and Japan is a major player in some of those issues.

The EU and Japan are operational partners as well. A case in point is counter-piracy. While Japan is not officially part of the EU's Atalanta naval operation off the coast of Somalia, Japan's patrol aircraft and the EU mission are closely cooperating in the theatre, notably in terms of information sharing and coordination of patrol flights. What Japan has discovered lately is that, whenever and wherever Tokyo sends SDF troops abroad, they come across European troops – although not always under the EU flag proper – operating side by side in the same theatre.

Operational cooperation covers civilian and training activities as well as military operations. As Tokyo seeks to strengthen its commitments to security sector reform (SSR), including defence capacity-building and political engagement, in Asia and beyond – including Africa – the scope for EU-Japan cooperation is likely to increase.

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