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Asia in 2019: Escalating international tensions and authoritarian involution

**Edited by
Michelguglielmo Torri
Nicola Mocci
Filippo Boni**

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CENTRO STUDI PER I POPOLI EXTRA-EUROPEI “CESARE BONACOSSA” - UNIVERSITÀ DI PAVIA

ASIA MAIOR

The Journal of the Italian think tank on Asia founded by Giorgio Borsa in 1989

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When this Asia Maior issue was finalized and the Covid-19 pandemic raged throughout the world, Kian Zaccara, Greta Maiorano and Giulio Santi, all children of Asia Maior authors (Luciano Zaccara, Diego Maiorano and Silvia Menegazzi), were born. We (the Asia Maior editors) have seen that as a manifestation of Life, reasserting itself in front of Thanatos. It is for this reason that we dedicate this issue to Kian, Greta and Giulio, with the fond hope that they will live in a better world than the one devastated by the Covid-19 pandemic.

THE EU–JAPAN PARTNERSHIP IN THE SHADOW OF CHINA:
NATURAL ALLIES OR UNTAPPED POTENTIAL?

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Axel Berkofsky, Christopher W. Hughes, Paul Midford & Marie Söderberg, *The EU–Japan Partnership in the Shadow of China. The Crisis of Liberalism*, Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2019, 266 pp. (ISBN 9780367895013).

The EU–Japan Partnership in the Shadow of China represents a very timely and very significant contribution to the literature on EU–Japan cooperation. The volume is one of the most relevant research outputs of a the EJARN (The European Japan Advanced Research Network), a network of scholars that since 2007 has promoted policy relevant research on Japanese politics, economics and security as well as explored possible avenues for cooperation between the European Union and Japan.

This edited volume is a detailed and informative yet accessible collection of essays analysing the current state of EU–Japan cooperation. Moreover, the volume explores policies promoted by Tokyo and Brussels to face the current crisis of the liberal international order and the key challenges stemming from it, from the rise of China, to the Trump presidency, to Brexit.

The volume adopts a multidisciplinary approach, looking at political, strategic and economic issues, gathering an impressive group of senior European experts of Japan foreign, security and economic policies as well as several Japanese experts on European affairs.

The central argument of the volume is that despite the EU and Japan present themselves as natural allies, the real potential for bilateral cooperation still has to be unlocked. The volume underlines Tokyo's and Brussels' role as normative powers and as key supporters of the liberal international order, as well as the last barriers against the mounting illiberal challenge. In the face of Trump's «America First» policies and the Chinese challenge, they have continued to voice their support for the key pillars of the liberal rules-based order, such as the centrality of human rights, integrity of borders, freedom of navigation, free trade and free market capitalism.

As underlined by Berkofsky (ch.2), the Economic Partnership Agreement and the Strategic Partnership Agreement signed in 2018 and entered into force on 1 February 2019 signal that Tokyo and Brussels intend to foster their cooperation to consolidate the current international order and to exercise their normative power.

Substantially every contribution underline that, despite the good intentions, the road towards a more mature and more consequential EU-Japan partnership is still obstructed by several stumbling blocks.

The first problem is represented by what we can define as «China gap». As underlined by Okano- Heijmans, Lilei Song and Liang Cai, while for Japan China represents the most fundamental challenge to the current order, many EU member states have responded with enthusiasm to recent Chinese initiatives such as the Asia Infrastructure and Investment Bank (AIIB) and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

Moreover, as stressed by Berkofsky, many European capitals don't see developing a deeper economic relationship with Beijing as contradicting the antithetical to the rhetoric of seeing in Tokyo a natural ally for the consolidation of the rules-based international order.

The diverging perception of the challenge posed by China leads to a second significant problem, that we can define as «Trump gap». Several contributors underlined the stark difference in terms of relationship with President Trump and its administration. While several European leaders have not made efforts to hide their differences of style and substance with the 45th US President, Abe has tried to develop a personal and political relationship with Trump. The urgency of the Chinese challenge, and the consequent perception of indispensability of the alliance with the US, has led Abe to ignore significant setbacks in the economic realm to preserve the bilateral relation with Washington.

The fact that bilateral cooperation between Japan and EU is still very conditioned by the American role emerges in different contributions to this volume. In the realm of the defence industry for instance, as stated by Christopher W. Hughes, it appears clear that the possibilities for bilateral cooperation between Tokyo and its European counterparts are somehow limited by the enduring American will to maintain its own central role as well as by the need to promote interoperability. While the reform of the three principles of arms export had raised high expectations, both Tokyo and key EU capitals ended up choosing platforms and systems produced by US-led consortia rather than other alternatives. The examples of the Japanese choice to procure the F-35 over the Euro-fighter, that could possibly represent a more cost-effective solution for the needs of the ASDF. Moreover, Japanese and European firms increasingly find themselves to compete against each other, rather than cooperate, as testified by the case of the Australian procurement of French attack submarines, selected over the Japanese *Soryu*-class.

The third problem is the lack of capabilities in terms of hard power. Neither Japan nor the EU or any member state can present itself as substitute, even momentarily, of the US in terms of provision of security and deterrence. The proposals of a French or British naval presence in the South China Sea appear more a manifestation of *nostalgia* for a long-gone imperial

past, rather than viable security policy proposals. As a matter of fact, the EU is still far away from having any role in the South China Sea. Currently it maintains a position of neutrality on the maritime and territorial disputes, while it has called for a peaceful resolution of the controversies based on the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).

A third significant gap is represented by the perception of the threat posed by Russia. As reminded by Midford, the EU considers Russia as the main security threat at the horizon and was keen to promote and implement economic sanctions after the annexation of Crimea in 2014. Japan, particularly under Abe, has a very different position. Seen from Tokyo, the sanctions risk pushing Moscow closer to Beijing, accelerating the formation of a partnership that would not just promote an alternative to the current normative foundations of the international order, but an existential threat to the Japanese.

The volume rightly underlines that the emphasis that both EU and Japan have put in the recent past on values and norms is both the product of their own identity as well as a process of othering, namely shaping an identity building on differences with a significant rival or enemy. When it comes to Japan, the process of «othering of China», is surely a key factor that led the Abe government to underline the necessity to overcome many of the self-binding limits of the post war period, to embrace concept of «pro-active contribution to peace», as well as Security Diamond, or Free and Open Indo-Pacific.

The opinions of the contributors tend to diverge on this issue. On the one hand Midford and Asplund tend to consider Abe's policies not as a genuine effort to consolidate the international liberal order, but rather an effort to justify a more «realist» approach to foreign affairs, with the twin objective of overcoming the post-war pacifism and balancing China. On the other hand, Bacon and Nakamura invite Japan not to follow the path of the European Union, somehow unfairly judged as «hybristic», self-righteous and «messianic». They invite Tokyo to balance the ordinary and the normative elements of its security identity, finding a fine turning between the will to promote liberal values and the need to have maintain a working relationship with non-liberal actors such as China and Russia.

The volume underlines the centrality of trade and economics both for the EU-Japan relationship and for their effort to face the threats faced by the international order. Both EU and Japan face similar structural economic problems. They are both mature economies, with harsh demographic problems, lack of growth, fiscal imbalances. As underlined by Okano-Heijmas and Terada, Nelson and Heckel this has prompted them to enact a number of similar policy responses. EU and Japan appear to be the last bastion of free market capitalism and multilateralism. They have opposed protectionism working to promote new generation trade agreements as the

EPA, but also the TPP-11 spearheaded by Japan¹ or the EU-Australia and EU-Canada, currently under negotiation. Both the EU and Japan have promoted also very expansionary monetary policies, while they embraced very different approaches to fiscal policies. Tokyo under the rubric of the Abenomics, promoted also a protracted fiscal expansion, while the EU, under the German leadership adopted a much more conservative fiscal approach.

Finally, *The EU–Japan Partnership in the Shadow of China* is highly recommended to those scholars, analysts, practitioners, and graduate students who want to grasp the fundamental features of the EU–Japan relationship as well as the complexity the challenges the two currently face.

1. The Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), also known as TPP-11, has been signed by the original signatories of the TPP, with the exception of the US.