

Uncertainty and the Political Construction of the EU-Japan Diplomatic Dialogue: The Cold War Years and the New Scenario*

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Abstract

As a historian more than a political analyst who deals with East Asia and particularly with Japan in the modern era, I have focused my attention in this paper on the construction of Europe-Japan relations especially during the Cold War years. The effects of the events occurred in those years are still evident today in the relations between the two parties. This is particularly noticeable within the pure dimension of the historical interconnections from the diplomatic point of view, despite the increasing relevance of the relations on the economic and trade level, for example with the Japan-European Partnership Agreement (EPA), which draws the attention of a number of analysts world-wide.

The path of low diplomacy (1952-1989)

Modern relations between Japan and Europe have constantly been inscribed into a historical narrative that confirmed the absolute pre-eminence of mutual indifference on a diplomatic level, due especially to Japan's opportunistic or structural indifference about high politics discourse, that derived from the Yoshida Doctrine. This is an image that has often been constructed without being interpreted in the Japanese context, or, according to Carol Gluck, "without bringing the outside in". In her own words: "In Japanese eyes, the world sometimes loomed larger in the gazing imagination when it was most absent in the environment of action."¹ The external world exerted a strong influence in Japan's domestic history as a country that once belonged to a pre-existing order (the Chinese order) that was very far removed from the peculiarities of the Westphalian system. So, while occurrences in the European political landscape became experience, they were moulded into history for Japan, which reacted accordingly. So we may see the story as a whole as well as the reverse side of it and the plot that therefore structured the interactions between the two actors derived from a specific reading of events in both political spaces. Only by I think, correlating the images and perceptions of Japanese history and the European context can we bridge these otherwise apparently unconnected behaviors and elevate their interactions to the status of historical narrative.

A number of themes and dimensions – historical, economic and strategic - are involved in its foreign policy with Europe. Furthermore, the role of the US, and more specifically, the evolving

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¹ C. Gluck, 'Patterns of the Past: Themes in Japanese History', C. Gluck, A.T. Embree (eds.), *Asia in Western and World History*, New York: East Gate Book, 1997, p. 759.

post-war relationship between Tokyo and Washington conditioned and encouraged Japan to seek a circumscribed low-profile diplomatic approach to Europe. To make sense of this, it is necessary to employ a deductive analytical framework that I think takes into account the wider and deeper political trends occurring in Japan and clearly conditioned its engagement with Europe.

Inoguchi Takahashi had proposed an understanding of Japan's historical models or perceptions as "free rider" in economic and security terms, "challenger" in trade terms and as "supporter" of international economic and political structures.² It is the coexistence of these models that represented an enigma to Europe. This inconvenient apposition continued throughout almost the entire Cold War era, although the image of Japan as a supportive as well as competitive member of the international community was growing, was ascending.

These perceptions seem to conciliate, in some way, those provided by Christopher Hughes, in accordance with whom, throughout the history of its interaction with Europe, Japan assumed three different images in the eyes of its counterpart, gradually switching over from "peril" during the 60s, to "partner" during the 1980s, and finally to participant during the 1990s and onwards.³ The alternation of these phases which is accompanied by multiple identities and various mutual perceptions was the product of internal and external historical instances referable to both actors.

And the correlation between European and Japanese experience is not only an epistemological stance but was actually applied for and built into Japanese discourses and practices in order to legitimize the implementation of a Japanese horizontal political community in relation to a not merely America-centered West. So as long as what Harry Harootunian defined "America's Japan" has deeply moulded the image that the country had of itself, Japan's interaction with Europe has been jeopardized in several ways.⁴

According, for example, to Carl Gluck, Japan seemed to be in some way hostage of its own post-war history, mainly through the relationship with the US. In her own words, "most countries ceased, stopped to speak of themselves as post-war in the domestic sense by the late 50s and became instead "contemporary". Japan's long post-war was as distinctive as it was anachronistic.⁵ So as stressed by Iwabuchi Kōichi, in the post-war years, Japan's attention was turned to its cultural relation with the West, effectively with the US as its most significant cultural "other" against which Japanese national identity has been constructed.⁶

If we look back on the Japanese history of the past 50 years, it would seem that Japan, in a long-term perspective, successfully managed a series of issues relating to its interactions with Europe by adopting a low-profile approach. During the first half of the Cold War, Japan was criticized for its supposedly single-minded focus on economic expansion, so that in France, the public image of Japanese Prime Minister Ikeda Hayato reductively became that of a transistor salesman. Nevertheless by the 1970s, Europe started to look at Japan to help manage an economy ever more interdependent on the world stage, while during the 1980s, the country had already become a European partner on a political and partly strategic level.

Japan's ability to successfully overcome the diplomatic or political impasse with the European

² Inoguchi T., 'Tinkering Every 15 Years: A New Major Turn in Japan's Foreign policy?', *Japan Spotlight: Economic, Culture & History*, vol. 23, 2004, pp. 38-39.

³ C.W. Hughes, "Japan in Europe: Asian and European Perspectives", in G.D. Hook, H. Hasegawa (eds.), *The Political Economy of Japanese Globalization*, London: Routledge, 2001, pp. 56-69.

⁴ D.H. Harootunian, 'America's Japan/Japan's Japan', in Miyoshi M., H.D. Harootunian (eds.), *Japan in the World*, Durham: Duke University Press, 1993, pp. 196-221.

⁵ C. Gluck, 'The Past in the Present', in A. Gordon (ed.), *Postwar Japan as History*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993, p. 93.

⁶ Iwabuchi K., *Recentering Globalization. Popular Culture and Japanese Transnationalism*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2002, p. 9.

counterpart during the post-war decades evidently lies in its attitude to implement pragmatic changes in its foreign policy. Such changes occurred within a liberal framework that sought to reconcile Japan's growing involvement in the international economy with a gradual engagement of the country on regional and global security issues.

That we can say that throughout the 1950s, the international situation remained marked by a high level of ideological tension. In the US a great debate was in progress regarding the new ideology of national security that did not lessen the worries of those who felt the need to deter Soviets without turning the country into a garrison state.⁷ And this is why the main objective of the US was to make Japan as an "unsinkable aircraft carrier"⁸ and ally in the containment action and a means of reassuring Asian neighbors against the onset of new pro-militarist tendencies.

So, although diplomatic contacts with various European states embassies were resumed, for most of the 50s, relations with Europe were marked by a growing distrust of Japan, enhanced by its intensifying trade frictions with the US.

And it is important to remember that a long trip undertaken by Prime Minister Yoshida Shigeru in 1954 brought him to Europe earlier than the US. Many Japanese said that this was Yoshida's *hanamichi*, or "great departure",⁹ and some European countries such as the United Kingdom, France, Holland and Germany were concerned about the threats that the Japanese textile industry could represent for their own industries. And there was considerable resistance to its entry into the GATT in 1955, although the Americans pushed for it.

Nor did Tokyo not show any greater enthusiasm in 1957 when it welcomed the news that the Treaty of Rome has been signed, establishing the European Economic Community. So without underestimating the profound implications that caused the special relationship with Washington, it is undeniable that Europeans perceived Japan as a "peril", a threatening presence to the economic vitality of individual European states and to the unity itself of Europe.¹⁰ The strong competition caused by Japanese multinationals in European markets was compounded by their tendency to create tensions between the various member states. As also noted by Christopher Dent, the Japanese were convinced that "the country's interests would be best served by exploiting European disunity and challenging the rationale of Europe's discriminatory trade policies".¹¹

The 1962 diplomatic and trade offensive in Europe initiated by Ikeda, together with the most important representatives of the Keidanren, was conceived in these terms, and this new phase coincided with, and at the same time has produced a new course in its political relations with the West. By now, Japan was, alongside with the US and Western Europe, one of the three pillars of the free world.¹² Ikeda was aware that in order to stabilize the domestic political situation, by putting down the turmoil of the Leftist forces and reducing the country's dependence on Washington, Tokyo must continue to pursue a line of close cooperation and friendly diplomacy

⁷ M. Hogan, *A Cross of Iron. Harry S. Truman and the Origins of the National Security State 1945-1954*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 24.

⁸ R.J. Samuels, *"Rich Nation, Strong Army": National Security and Technological Transformation of Japan*, New York: Cornell University Press, 1994, p. 132.

⁹ K. Miyazawa, R.D. Eldridge, *Secret Talks Between Tokyo and Washington: The Memoirs of Miyazawa Kiichi 1949-1954*, UK: Lexington, 2007, p. 134.

¹⁰ C.W. Hughes, 'Japan in Europe', in G.D. Hook, H. Hasegawa (eds.), *The Political Economy of Japanese Globalization*, London: Routledge, 2001, pp. 56-69.

¹¹ C.M. Dent, *The European Union and East Asia*, London: Routledge, 1999, p. 87.

¹² M. Iokibe, *Sengo Nihon gaikō-shi*, Tokyo: Yūhikaku, 2006, pp. 116-117.

with both the US and Europe.¹³ However, at that time, this vision was not shared by either the White House or the European powers. It was an impossible project to achieve since, understandably, Washington would not favour a process that allowed Japan to break away from the exclusive US strategic orbit. And at this point, it is easy to imagine how, in this new decade, Japan–Europe relations continued to be dominated by trade disputes.

On the other hand, at this historical moment, even the US decided to accord secondary importance to Europe. And during a visit to China in February 1973, Henry Kissinger told Zhou Enlai and Mao Zedong that the Europeans “cannot do anything anyway. They are basically irrelevant”.¹⁴ On 26 September, Tanaka began a lengthy trip to Europe that took him to Paris, Bonn and London, the first time for a Japanese official since Ikeda in 1962.

And Japanese politicians seemed to show a certain carelessness in relation to their counterparts, and were mainly concerned with reconstructing their diplomatic and commercial relations with China and the countries of Southeast Asia. On the other hand, Europe perceived Japan as arrogant, citing its protectionism and reluctance to respond to European complaints. In Bert Edström’s words: “Despite the Tanaka government’s interest in establishing close ties with Western Europe, there was something of a gap between the rhetoric of cooperating with Europe and the actual policy pursued by the government”.¹⁵

During the 1980s, Japanese–European relations began to take on more political depth. In European common perception, Japan was transformed from “peril” to “partner” as the result of the country’s first experience of political maturity in conjunction with awareness on the part of the Europeans that they were interfacing with an actor capable of working in partnership with both individual member states and Brussels. So, since the end of World War II and well into the 80s, relations between Japan and Europe have been characterized by a coldness in terms of diplomatic dialogue, alternated with trade disputes.

Cold War geopolitics made a decisive contribution in depriving Japan of an effective, independent foreign policy, and most of its choices in international security matters tended to depend on decisions made in Washington.

The new diplomatic scenario

Following the end of the Cold War in Asia, the new debate within leading Japanese circles was centered on the need for Tokyo to frame its foreign policy within a new doctrine. Although the Yoshida Doctrine delegated national security to the US and included economism among its primary goals, Japan was able to conceptualize a vision of soft security with aims that were widely shared by the US.

Especially after the signing of the EU-Japan Action Plan in 2001, Tokyo and Brussels initiated a fruitful and multilateral cooperation, as shown by their involvement in projects in countries afflicted by instability and security problems. So first of all it will be fully legitimate, and indeed

¹³ During this period Japanese domestic politics were going through a critical phase, in part due to the 1960 general elections; this also affected the country’s relations with the PRC. First, one should take into account what was happening within the JSP, which had always encouraged rapprochement with Peking. Eda Saburō, general secretary of the JSP, rejected what was stated in Asanuma’s 1958 declaration, declaring instead that Japan would continue to pursue a policy of close collaboration with the U.S. His words garnered Chinese hostility, and Sasaki Kōzō (a member of the extremist wing) was preferred to Eda. In January 1962, Suzuki Mosaburō, former president of the JSP, visited China to reaffirm Asanuma’s declaration, stating that the underlying cause of the absence of Japan-China official diplomatic relations was due to American imperialism as well as Ikeda administration.

¹⁴ Quoted in R. Dallek, *Nixon and Kissinger. Partners in Power*, London: Penguin Books, 2008, p. 466. See also H. Kissinger, *White House Years*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 2011.

¹⁵ B. Edström, *The Japanese and Europe: Images and Perceptions*, Richmond Surrey: Curzon, 2000, p. 219.

helpful, to question how the EU is perceived in Japan, and whether or not Tokyo considers Brussels to be a leading player in foreign policy and global security. And the short answers to these questions are most likely “positively” and to what extent and within what limits respectively?

On the negative side, common knowledge regarding the EU is still very scarce in Japan. It rarely makes the front-page news, and only a relatively small number of Japanese scholars and politicians understand and are interested in how Brussels works. However, this phenomenon seems to be undergoing gradual changes in Japan, with a growing number of universities offering courses in European Studies, the rise of specialized research institutes, the flux of Japanese scholars studying and teaching in Europe, which is constantly increasing, and young people involved in international exchange programs.¹⁶

Since the late 80s, and especially after the adoption of the Hague Declaration in 1991, a specific “EU factor” began to influence all the political relations between Japan and Europe, although the former continued to reinforce its bilateral ties with individual European states. However, while Japan and the EU have jointly promoted the idea of a comprehensive reform of the United Nations, there has never been a common EU–Japan position on the content of this reform.¹⁷ Partly because of the complexity of EU decision-making process, and partly because of a lack of understanding of how responsibility is distributed between the EU’s institutions and its members, Japanese policy makers still seem uncertain about the true force of Brussels’ weight on the world stage, on which important decisions that affect Japan are taken by each member State and adopted by the Union as a whole. The failure of the referenda on the EU Constitutional Treaty in the Netherlands and France in 2005 were taken by Japanese politicians as a sign that EU integration has limitations and that Tokyo must continue to deal with both the national governments and Brussels in order to “get the most out of Europe”.

The logical approach adopted by Japan in expanding its relations with the EU after the end of the Cold War was to “diversify” its international relations and security policies, which until then had been almost entirely defined within the framework of its bilateral alliance with the US.¹⁸ Japan believed that privileged relations with the EU would redress the balance of its international diplomacy, making it less vulnerable to accusations that its regional, foreign and security policies needed to be checked, or even “approved” by Washington. In November 2002, a report from the “Task Force on Foreign Relations” - a body established to advise former prime minister Koizumi - identified the EU as a “strong partner” in certain areas of cooperation. As stressed by the report, in a new world order, Japan needs to have a partner in relation to every single issue. Europe could be construed as a rational choice of partner for some topics. The Task Force also warned that it would be necessary for Japan to choose between dealing with the EU or with individual European countries on a bilateral level, on a case-by-case basis. This is indicative of Japan’s desire to be sure that it can continue to interact with single EU members when it best suits its own interests.

¹⁶ See U. Niemann, ‘The Dynamics of People-to-People Exchanges Between Asia and Europe’ *Chulalongkorn University Journal of European Studies*, vol. 9, no. 2, July-December 2001, pp. 28-34; P. Lim, ‘Beyond Economic Cooperation: Prospects for Mutual Social, Cultural and Educational Ties’, in *The 3rd Seoul ASEM and Asia-Europe Relations*, Seoul: Korean Society for Contemporary European Studies, 2000, pp. 109-133; N. Chaban, M. Holland (eds.), *The European Union and the Asia-Pacific. Media, Public and Elite Perceptions of the EU*, London: Routledge, 2008; N. Chaban, M. Holland, P. Ryan (eds.), *The EU Through the Eyes of Asia. New Cases, New Findings*, vol. II, Singapore: World Scientific, 2009. For a detailed historical overview on the subject, starting from the 1970s, see Iwasa T., *West European Academic Images and Stereotypes of Japan Since the 1970s*, Doctoral thesis, Florence: European University Institute, Department of History and Civilization, 2007.

¹⁷ See Nakanishi T., *Naze Yōroppa to te wo musubu no ka. Nichi-Ō shinjidai no sentaku*, Tokyo: Bensei shuppan, 1996.

¹⁸ See Funabashi Y., *China-Japan-US: managing the trilateral relationship*, Tokyo: JCIE, 1998.

Despite the growing importance of the EU in foreign policy and global security, the MOFA still provides substantial human and financial resources for departments dealing with Asia and US, rather than Europe. In addition, because of the division of labour within the ministry (and also taking into account the competition between the inter-ministerial bureaucrats dealing with economic, political and security matters) Tokyo cannot lay claim to a single coherent strategy concerning the EU.¹⁹

From the Japanese point of view, the EU can contribute very little, if at all, to the country's security given both the close defence ties existing between Washington and Tokyo and East Asia's security environment, still fragile. It would seem it is a commonly held belief in Japan that any initiative to cooperate with the EU in the field of security can only be complementary to its military relationship with the US, which focuses on hard security whereas the Japanese-European cooperation on security issues emphasizes its non-military aspects. The effectiveness and outcomes of all joint efforts aimed at contributing to global peace and stability therefore inevitably depend on Japan's ability to successfully implement the two approaches together. Over the past decade, Brussels and Tokyo have participated in many joint initiatives and established a form of dialogue that has focused on many issues, as mentioned above. However, the EU-Japan cooperation on nuclear disarmament lacks credibility given that Japan continues to enjoy the protection of the US nuclear umbrella, while in Europe it is not seen as a priority, and indeed it might be said that it is not even an option for at least two member states (the UK and France).

After the North Korean nuclear test carried out in October 2006, some prominent members of the LDP indicated that a nuclear-armed North Korea could turn on Japan again in a debate over the development of nuclear deterrents. In September 2005, the EU and Japan launched a "strategic dialogue on security in Asia" in which they discussed issues of regional security in Asia at regular institutional meetings. Between 2004 and 2005, both Japan and the US were concerned that the EU would lift the embargo on China and resume its weapons and military technology exports to the country, thus helping Peking in its efforts to modernize its armed forces. Both countries complained – officially, as well as unofficially - that Brussels did not seem to be sufficiently aware of the possible impact of EU policies towards China, and suggested that these and other questions should be periodically addressed by the EU, the US and Japan on a bilateral basis.

We should perhaps question whether 'strategic dialogue' between the EU and Japan has a logic sense beyond the discussions over the embargo, and whether there are enough strategic issues of common interest in Asia to form the basis of a discussion. North Korea and its nuclear programme is certainly one of these problems. Disagreements on political issues between the EU and Japan are extremely rare. The non-military security cooperation between the two parties, the joint support for the ICC and the signing of numerous protocols for disarmament demonstrate the similarity of both actors' approaches to international security and non-proliferation.

However, while Japan and the EU have jointly promoted the idea of a comprehensive reform of the United Nations, there has never been a common EU-Japan position on the content of this reform. On the other hand, this should not be surprising given that Japan and Germany, one of the most important EU member states, were primarily focused on obtaining a permanent seat on the UN Security Council. The absence of concrete action that would make stronger the political and security relations beyond the current level suggests that the timeframe of the EU-Japan Joint Action Plan will remain relatively slow, or "without surprises", in the coming years.

This is easily understandable given the priorities of the EU foreign policy agenda, on the one hand, and Japan's security ties with the US, on the other. However, it should be noted that, in Japan, the perception of the EU as a player in foreign policy and security is, to some extent, improving. Its past contributions to security in Asia marked it out as a potentially important

¹⁹ See J. Gilson, *Japan and the European Union*, London: MacMillan, 2000.

and constructive partner for Asia and for Japan itself. So the progress made to date in terms of combining resources and coordinating policies relating to conflict prevention and peace building is not negligible. However, as the two parties did for the Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) which is recently entered into force, Brussels and Tokyo could certainly stand to do more also on the political level.