



## **Report**

EU- Pacific talks: U.S.-Japan relations -  
new leaders, new chance to restore the  
old relationship

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After the 59th presidential elections in 2020, the U.S. has gained a new administration with a very different approach to foreign policy than the administration of former President Trump. President Biden has taken strides to deepen the relations with democratic allies, especially with Japan. Both governments work on strengthening those ties, supporting human rights, and working towards a more sustainable future while agreeing that China is becoming one of the largest threats. Despite this seemingly strong union can truly trilateral relations between U.S.-Japanese and the EU move forward especially after abrupt priority shifts, new security threats within Europe and under Japan's new prime minister Fumio Kishida.

This year's fifth debate in a series of expert discussions on the EU's relations with the Pacific took place online on Tuesday 15th of February. The expert guests offered their views on the potential new developments and challenges in U.S.-Japan relations with new political leadership. And future challenges with consideration for a potential multilateral relation with other European countries and countries from the Indo-Pacific region.

Associate Professor Jan Sýkora from the Institute of Asian Studies of Charles University in Prague called attention to historical parallels between the U.S.-Japan relationship in the past. After World War II Japan was forced to implement the restricting Article 9 of the pacifist Japanese constitution that prohibits Japan to maintain military forces. Japan quickly realized that no great power could exist without military strength and entered an alliance with the U.S under the Yoshida doctrine. But the situation radically changed in the 90s with the fall of the Soviet Union and the appearance of new security threats and economic competitors like



Islamic terrorism and China. Japan has been striving to resecure its position both in politics and economics ever since. With PM Koizumi announcing his plan to build Japan's collective self-defence to PM Abe implementing amendments to Article 9 Japan is striving for a more independent military strength and stability. After the Suga-Biden summit in April 2021 and numerous meetings of the new PM Fumio Kishida with the U.S. president there is a strong agreement between the two countries on the importance of cooperating in global security in East Pacific and East Asia but also to focus on the economic agenda and cooperation with Europe.

Tsuneo Watanabe the Senior Fellow of Sasakawa Peace Foundation believes that Japan needs to cooperate with the US and Europe to maintain the current rule-based order in the Pacific. Japan is trying to change a very old strategy at the moment- the Yoshida doctrine. The days of too much relying on economic security and protection from the US are according to Watanabe gone. Japan is trying to find a more common strategy concentrating on the Indo-Pacific and maintaining stability in the region by having a link between Japan and like-minded countries like Australia, India, or South Korea. Important for Japan is also its European partnership. PM Kishida and President Biden agreed to join against Russian aggression in Ukraine and PM Kishida is supposed to talk with president Zelenskyy.

Watanabe also point out parallels in changing governing administrations in Japan and the U.S. As Japan moved from more conservative PM Shinzo Abe to PM Fumio Kishida U.S. moved from conservative Trump to more middle ground Biden. A change from very right-wing hawks to quite liberal middle-ground political representatives that agree on key aspects like two pillars- liberalism and realism.

Alexandra Sakaki a Deputy Head of Research Division at the Asia Division at German Institute for International and Security Affairs draws attention to a few



weak points in the U.S.-Japan relations. Although Sakaki agrees that these bonds seem to have never been stronger or more necessary. One of the weak points is the economic dependency on China. Its assertive tactics in the region, disregard for international law and military build-up is a great concern. Simultaneously 23% of Japan's international trade and 15% of U.S. international trade is with China which might lead to hesitation when it comes to standing up the power on important issues.

Another weak point for the U.S. is Japan's troubled relationship with South Korea riddled with historic frictions. Other than improving this relationship Sasaki speculates about establishing a new relationship with Germany. Sasaki claims Germany is the most important continental partner for the US with the largest troop employment in Europe. Japan's relations with Germany are positive but lacking in substance. She sees great potential in the close multilateral connection between U.S.-Japan- Germany and other countries. Especially with threats like the situation in Ukraine that might need immense military and diplomacy resources.

For Alessio Patalano, the Professor of War & Strategy in East Asia at the Department of War Studies in King's College London the United Kingdom is the closest strategic ally with developed defence security cooperation with both U.S. and Japan coming from Europe. The U.K. has a long-standing relationship with Japan going back to 2012. And under former PM Abe, this relationship even strengthened. Japan formed a strong sense of agency to become an international security actor in the Indo-Pacific region and so is trying to be the UK now. Indo-Pacific relations are all about connectivity and connectivity is at the core of modern prosperity. Without connections, we are facing the possibility of considerable economic loss and isolation and we must have this conversation with as many



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countries possible that share the same views on international order, security, and prosperity. Middle-sized powers like Germany, the UK, Japan, South Korea etc. have been voicing for some time now their desire to be part of this connection and conversation moving forward.

"If you missed the debate, you can watch it on the Facebook page of the EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy, which hosts the EU-Pacific Talks debate."

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