

# FRS – Japan Program

## The European Union's Indo-Pacific strategy: a view from Japan

### Interview with Atsuko Higashino



**Atsuko Higashino is Senior Lecturer at the University of Tsukuba, her fields of expertise are international relations, security policy and Europe.**

**Question 1: In 2021, the EU published a communication on its strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific. What are Japan's expectations regarding the EU's role in the Indo-Pacific?**

My expectations have always been very high on the EU's Indo-Pacific strategy, within the context of Japan's increased preoccupation regarding China's emergence. I think China is the biggest factor in Japan's expectations of the EU's Indo-Pacific strategy.

On the military-security front, Japan's concerns about China have been very strong, and Japan welcomed the fact that the US has taken a tough stance towards China. On the economic front, meanwhile, it has become clear that Japan's economic dependence on China has reached a serious level. Japanese companies were

focusing on their own interests while European countries were taking issue with human rights abuses in China. In other words, Japan and its economic actors were tough on China in terms of security but failed to take a strong attitude towards China in economic matters.

At the same time, Japan used to have a rather limited and outdated perception of the European countries' approach to China. In other words, Japan believed that Europe was also "soft" on China in economic terms. The image of the German Merkel Government, which had for many years been extremely focused on economic cooperation with China, was predominant.

I myself had mentioned in the Japanese media that European perceptions of China had started to deteriorate since 2016. The deployment of China's post-2020 wolf warrior diplomacy towards Europe had led

to a drastic degradation of European feelings towards China. I also pointed out that European countries had gradually come to realize that for Europe to develop further, deep ties not only with China but also with the Indo-Pacific as a whole were inevitable. The EU's Indo-Pacific Strategy came at just such a time.

**“On the military-security front, Japan’s concerns about China have been very strong, and Japan welcomed the fact that the US has taken a tough stance towards China”**

### **Question 2: How was the Indo-Pacific Strategy published in September 2021 received in Japan?**

On the one hand, the announcement of the EU Indo-Pacific Strategy on 15 September 2021 was very unfortunate in terms of timing. Because it was announced at almost the same time as AUKUS by the UK, US and Australia, the EU's Indo-Pacific Strategy was completely outweighed by the impact of AUKUS. Unfortunately, while there was a very diverse debate in Japan, both for and against AUKUS, not much attention was paid to the EU's Indo-Pacific Strategy. If the announcement had been made at a different time, the Japanese media would have covered the strategy more extensively and there would have been a more in-depth discussion of its contents.

On the other hand, the general Japanese reaction to the strategy itself was that it was a thorough and very well-elaborated policy document. Its broad framework that the EU would contribute to the stability, security, prosperity and sustainable development of the Indo-Pacific region in seven key areas (sustainable and inclusive prosperity; green transition; maritime

governance; digital governance and partnership; connectivity; security and defence; and human security) has been well received.

Indeed, the EU's strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific has even more clearly demonstrated the EU's perception of China as a threat: in the preparatory document published in April 2021, reference to China was made only once in relation with the Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI). This has increased to 14 times in the Indo-Pacific Strategy document. In particular, China is specifically mentioned in the context of pointing to *“intense competition, including tensions over territory and maritime areas”* and *“military build-up”* in the Indo-Pacific region, and the increased show of force and tensions in regional hotspots such as the South and East China Seas and the Taiwan Strait. The Strategy notes that these developments could have a *“direct impact on the security and prosperity of Europe”*. This is a considerably more in-depth wording than in the April document.

The Indo-Pacific Strategy also clearly expresses concerns about human rights issues in China. Specifically, it confirms that the EU will continue to use *“all tools at its disposal”*, including sanctions, in the event of serious human rights violations and abuses, and that it will position itself as *“a consistent defender of human rights and democracy”* (p. 3) and that it will *“work with like-minded Indo-Pacific partners”* to push back on *“fundamental disagreements ... with China, such as on human rights”* (p. 4).

In addition, references to Taiwan, which were only found once in the Commission's document in April 2021, have increased to five times in the Strategy. It specifies the need for a Bilateral Investment Agreement

(BIA) with Taiwan (p. 7) and the importance of Taiwan in the semiconductor supply chain (p. 6) as well as digital governance (p. 11). In this way, the September document presents China as a country with which cooperation is essential in dealing with global issues, like climate change, but with which the EU has irreconcilable disagreements over basic principles such as human rights, and positions Taiwan as a “like-minded partner” of the EU along with the United States, the United Kingdom, Japan, and Australia.

**Question 3: In your view, what can Japan do to further cooperation after the publication of this Indo-Pacific strategy?**

There are two important things that Japan needs to do after the publication of this strategy. First, I believe that Japan is now obliged to consider more seriously how to coordinate its approach to China with the EU. For example, in the September document on the Indo-Pacific strategy, Japan is referred to as many as 22 times as a “like-minded partner”, a “partner” or a “connectivity partner” (in the sense that Japan and India have a “connectivity partnership” with the EU). Needless to say, this is a welcome development for Japan. At the same time, however, it is important to note that the EU has clearly stated that it will implement various measures concerning human rights in China “*in cooperation with international partners*”. This means that Japan, along with other like-minded countries, is expected to align itself with the EU in its human rights diplomacy with China. There is already a track record of EU sanctions against China, which were implemented jointly with the US, the UK and Canada in March 2021. In the wake of the latest series of EU documents, Japan, as one of the EU’s “like-minded countries”, should be fully prepared for the possibility that it will be

asked to play a similar role. Is Japan ready to do so, or will it continue to secretly hope that the EU will not call for joint action in its human rights diplomacy with China? Will Japan go on telling the EU, which has come to regard China’s human rights oppression and forced labour as a major problem, that human rights diplomacy and sanctions are meaningless (as some in Japan are still loudly claiming)? If Japan is the only country among the EU’s “like-minded partners” that is not requested to join measures against China, will that be a good signal from the Japanese diplomacy?

Second, a similar point can be made about Taiwan. Since there is still some cautious debate within the EU over the approach to Taiwan, the establishment of EU-Taiwan relations is expected to require considerable internal coordination. On the other hand, as this paper has shown, the EU as a whole is experiencing unprecedented momentum in building relations with Taiwan. It should be recalled here that China has always used fierce wolf warrior diplomacy when European countries have tried to draw closer to Taiwan, and the more the EU tries to strengthen its relations with Taiwan in the future, the more widespread China’s opposition will be. In such a case, what kind of stance will Japan, which along the US strongly advocated the inclusion of the Taiwan Strait issue in the G7 summit statement and is proud of the results it achieved, take as one of the EU’s “like-minded partners” in potential friction between the EU (and European countries) and China that may arise over Taiwan in the future? To what extent will Japan’s stance of actively lobbying the international community on the Taiwan Strait issue, but remaining silent on the “Taiwan problem” those European countries are currently facing, really gain Europe’s understanding?

The attention of the world is currently focused on the Russian-Ukrainian war. But in the meantime, the EU is gradually trying to materialise its Indo-Pacific strategy. In these difficult times, it makes a lot of sense for the EU and Japan to collaborate. While welcoming the EU's commitment to the Indo-Pacific and to playing a constructive role there, Japan must also contribute to resolving the war in Ukraine. The relationship between the EU and Japan will be stronger and more indispensable if cross-cooperation is achieved, with Europe playing a stabilising role in the Indo-Pacific region and Japan playing a stabilising role in Europe.

**June 2022**