



Shaping the Indo-Pacific? Japan and Europeanisation

YEE-KUANG HENG



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The inaugural deployment of the Royal Navy’s HMS Queen Elizabeth-led Carrier Strike Group (CSG21) to the Indo-Pacific, described by the British Ministry of Defence as the “largest concentration of maritime and air power to leave the UK in a generation” (Ministry of Defence UK 2021), culminated at its easternmost point in joint exercises and port calls to Japan, Britain’s closest strategic partner in Asia. The CSG21, escorted by Dutch air defence frigate HNLMS Evertsen, is the latest (and highest-profile) iteration of a recent trend whereby European military deployments to the Indo-Pacific make a beeline towards Japan, which has emerged as a key partner for European powers seeking an enhanced military presence in the region.

Japan, which relied predominantly on the US to guarantee its security for most of the post-1945 period, has scored several historic firsts in military cooperation with European powers over the past few years: Royal Air Force Typhoon fighters (2016) and British Army Honourable Artillery Company surveillance and reconnaissance troopers (2018) became the first non-American military forces to exercise in Japanese airspace and territory respectively. As part of multilateral exercise ARC21, the French Army conducted its first-ever ground exercises in Japan in 2021, while the Mistral-class amphibious assault ship Tonnerre engaged in amphibious landing drills in western Japan for remote island defence with Japanese, American and Australian forces. Meanwhile, Germany has sent the frigate Bayern to the Indo-Pacific region for the first time in nearly

two decades, warmly welcomed and actively encouraged by Japan. Reiterating their focus on the region, the UK, France, Germany, the Netherlands and others have publicly announced their intentions and interests through policy guidelines and strategic review documents. Why the burgeoning European military interest in the Indo-Pacific and what explains Japan's role?

Until a few years ago, European powers predominantly focused on trade and commerce in the Indo-Pacific, by and large keeping relatively low military profiles. France has maintained the most significant permanent European military presence with territory and bases in the Indian Ocean and South Pacific. In 2019, the French frigate *Vendemiaire* made a rare transit through the Taiwan Straits and in 2021, French Minister of the Armed Forces Florence Parly publicly tweeted that the nuclear submarine *Emeraude* had patrolled the South China Sea. These more visible European military deployments are without doubt driven by shifts in perceptions of their national interests, ranging from protection of critical sea lines of communication and upholding the rules-based order to defending human rights and trade interests in the face of Chinese assertiveness. However, another important piece of the puzzle lies with Japan.

Crucially, Japan has actively lobbied for enhanced European military presence in the region and repeatedly persuaded European partners to shift their perceptions beyond the trade dimension. For instance, in June 2021, when Kishi Nobuo became the first Japanese

Defence Minister to address the European Parliament Subcommittee on Security and Defence, he called on EU member states to "visibly increase their military presence" in the Indo-Pacific. Outside of the EU, the UK's post-Brexit 'tilt' toward the Indo-Pacific, announced in the 2021 Integrated Review as part of the government's Global Britain agenda (which has its detractors, to be sure), has found an enthusiastic and receptive audience in Japan. For post-imperial Britain, which has not maintained a sizable military presence in the region apart from Royal Navy logistics facilities in Singapore and a small Gurkha garrison in Brunei, Japan's then-Foreign Minister Kono Taro adroitly stated after a 2017 UK-Japan two-plus-two meeting surely resonated: "We sincerely welcome the UK's return to the area east of the Suez Canal" (Akimoto 2018).

Meanwhile, with territories in the region from the Indian Ocean to the South Pacific and 93 percent of its exclusive economic zone (EEZ) located in the area, France has declared itself a 'resident' power in the Indo-Pacific with security and commercial interests being challenged by revisionist powers, a concern shared with Japan. France's annual long-range *Jeanne d'Arc* naval deployment, usually composed of an amphibious assault vessel with stealth frigate escort, regularly traverses the region and trains with Japan. The UK and France have maintained regular two-plus-two dialogues with Japan involving their Foreign and Defence Ministers. In May 2021, Japan held its first such talks with Germany. "We've never held two-plus-two talks so frequently before," a senior Japanese Defense ministry

official noted (The Japan Times, 2021). Japan currently has such arrangements with eight countries, of which three are European states.

What I term 'Europeanisation' of the Indo-Pacific is propelled not just by growing European concern over sizable interests at stake in the region, but also the active encouragement and solicitation on Japan's part for European partners to increase their presence. European power projection to exert more influence and presence in the Indo-Pacific is converging with Japan's attempt to shape the regional environment in its favour. Paying greater attention to how Japan and its European partners have implemented 'shaping' may thus help to explain not only this strategic trend of closer Japan-European military engagement over the past few years, but also a harbinger of what is to come.

Japan's attempt to 'shape' a Free and Open Indo-Pacific

In Japan's 2020 Defense White Paper discussing the "security environment surrounding Japan", it lamented that "a regional cooperation framework in the security realm has not been sufficiently institutionalised in the Indo-Pacific region" (Ministry of Defense Japan, 2020). Japan's first-ever National Security Strategy (NSS) in 2013 outlined a more 'proactive' approach to maintaining regional peace and stability. Part of this new 'proactive' Japanese posture involves a desire to draw on a growing list of international partners (besides its traditional US ally) for cooperation in tackling security challenges. Diplomats and official documents consistently list Britain and France as the two leading European security partners for Japan. The objective outlined by the NSS hints strongly at shaping: to "improve the security environment of the Asia-Pacific region, and prevent the emergence of and reduce direct threats to Japan" (Government of Japan, 2013: 5, emphasis added). Japan's National Defense Program Guidelines for FY2019 suggested "national defense objectives as follows: first, to create, on a steady-state basis, a security environment desirable for Japan" (Ministry of Defense

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Japan, 2018, emphasis added). The document’s emphasis on a ‘create’ function is notable and revealing. On top of Japan’s own defence capabilities and the US alliance, a third mechanism of “international security cooperation” was mooted to fulfil this ‘create’ capacity. This is where the European powers play a vital role. Japanese planners are in effect advocating that the country consciously work to shape and mould the regional security environment in its favour, in collaboration with like-minded states in Europe.

Academics have noted that Japan has sought to stabilise the region through “shaping a desirable national security environment” by engaging in diplomacy and regional economic development with neighbouring rival states as well as promoting values and rule-making (Sahashi, 2020; Tamaki, 2020). There is a key role that European powers can play too. Rather than containment of China per se, Japan’s Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) concept for instance may instead be conceived as a means to “ameliorate US-China rivalry” (Satake and Sahashi, 2020): to avoid having to choose sides by creating “broader strategic space in the region”. This means inducing major powers including Russia and China, smaller and middle powers, and, notably for our purposes, the European powers to help sustain the rules-based regional order. Such shaping attempts by Japan now extend to promoting and encouraging what I term ‘Europeanisation of the Indo-Pacific’.

What Japan is seeking to do may relate closely to Arnold Wolfers’s classic formulation of ‘milieu’ goals, defined as the “shape of the environment in which the nation operates” (Wolfers, 1962: 73). Indeed, Wolfers’s concern about maintenance of international peace and the possibility of milieu goals being shared with other nations points to the existence of common interests that are non-exclusionary. These include shared concerns over freedom of maritime navigation and the rules-based order that have brought Japan and European states closer together. Japan’s concerns about milieu goals are reminiscent of the 1997 US National Security Strategy which emphasised “shaping the international environment” in ways that

advance and protect US national interests. This meant utilising an array of tools ranging from diplomacy to military deployment of forces, defence cooperation and security assistance, and training and exercises with allies and friends (The White House, 1997). Indeed, the United Kingdom's 2021 Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy has similarly called for "shaping the international order" as part of its Indo-Pacific 'tilt'. The British military projection of both 'hard' and 'soft' power, in the words of Prime Minister Boris Johnson, is meant to do exactly that. According to Defence Secretary Ben Wallace, the CSG21 was "sailing forth to play an active role in shaping the international system of the 21st Century" (Royal Navy 2021). The European Union too has been engaged in 'milieu-shaping' of its Arab Mediterranean neighbourhood underpinned by security concerns (Schumacher, 2018).

Indeed, several tools for shaping identified by both the US and UK documents including defence diplomacy have in fact been actively adopted by the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Forces (JMSDF) over the past decade. These include not just increasingly frequent exercises with European militaries, but also more regular annual long-range missions such as the JMSDF's Indo-Pacific Deployment, which involves a months-long deployment, usually of a large helicopter carrier with destroyer escorts for port calls and joint exercises with partners throughout the region. When the JMSDF flagship helicopter carrier Izumo made port calls to Subic Bay in the Philippines, President

Rodrigo Duterte was accorded the honour of being the first foreign head of state to visit the vessel. Visiting foreign dignitaries such as then-UK Prime Minister Theresa May were also invited on board the Izumo during her visit to Japan in 2017. Japan actively showcasing such military hardware would have been frowned upon in the past.

Still an economic giant, political dwarf?

Perceptions of Japan undertaking significant regional security roles were once extremely negative. For instance, the country has been referred to as an economic giant but a political dwarf and accused of engaging in checkbook diplomacy, amongst other unflattering labels. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, founding Prime Minister of Singapore Lee Kuan Yew once encapsulated lingering regional reticence of that time about the relatively modest prospect of Japan participating in UN peacekeeping operations: Lee reportedly likened a potential Japanese security role as offering a liquor-laced chocolate to a recovering alcoholic.

Recent evaluations of Japan have turned more positive. In his own comments at the 2015 Shangri-La Dialogue, Lee's son and current Prime Minister of Singapore Lee Hsien Loong said that Japan was now a 'cured alcoholic', suggesting a somewhat more benign acceptance of Japan's security role in the region. Then-Foreign Minister of the Philippines Albert del Rosario went so far as to state that "we are looking for

balancing factors in the region and Japan could be a significant balancing factor” (Pilling et al, 2012). Leaders from countries once occupied by Imperial Japan, such as President Duterte of the Philippines and Deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean of Singapore, have been hosted aboard the Japanese flagship Izumo with little negative public backlash. In 2021, the annual State of Southeast Asia elite opinion survey conducted by Singapore’s Institute for Southeast Asian Studies asked, “if ASEAN were to seek out ‘third parties’ to hedge against the uncertainties of the US-China strategic rivalry, who is your most preferred and trusted strategic partner for ASEAN”. The most common response was the EU, followed by Japan, which was chosen by 39.3 percent of respondents. This suggests much leeway exists for both European powers and Japan to collectively shape the regional security environment.

For a country once reticent to adopt an active foreign policy posture, Japan’s ‘pivotal’ position in the evolving regional order has been noted by scholars (Chellaney, 2018). Japan’s growing visibility is not limited to security matters but includes regional trade and commerce as well. The Abe Shinzo administration was instrumental in salvaging the Trans-Pacific Partnership agreement in the wake of US withdrawal under Donald Trump. The rebooted Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) as well as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) are cases in point of Japan stepping out of the shadows. Even the discourse of ‘Indo-Pacific’ itself owes a lot to Abe’s promotion

of the concept since his landmark 2007 “Confluence of the Two Seas” speech in India. It is relatively rare for Japanese leaders to influence the strategic terms of discussion in such a way, culminating with the Trump administration’s eventual embrace of its ally’s concept (albeit with a more military and confrontational tinge). Aside from shaping the discourse, Japan is also putting money where its mouth is through substantive and vigorous lobbying of European military presence.

Rehabilitation of Japan’s image as a security actor is not just noticeable in Southeast Asia. This makeover is visible in how the European estimation of Japan has risen as well. In various two-plus-two meetings Japan has had with its European partners, it is striking how far Japan is often referred to as a key partner to realise the FOIP vision. According to German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas, for Germany and Europe to “actively shape the world of tomorrow...cooperation with Japan plays an important role” (Federal Foreign Office, 2021). Britain routinely refers to Japan as its closest security partner in Asia, repeated in various joint statements and more recently in the 2021 Integrated Review. UK Defence Secretary Ben Wallace visited Tokyo in person in July 2021 and declared that “The UK’s defence relationship with Japan is the closest it has been in the last century (British Embassy Tokyo 2021). Underlining the importance of the visit to Japan, Wallace was accompanied by Britain’s top naval and air force officers, the First Sea Lord and Chief of Air Staff.

What next?

While UK threat perceptions have converged significantly with Japan's since former Prime Minister David Cameron's promulgation of a "golden era" in relations with China, managing expectations of Japan's attempt to 'shape' and encourage Europeanisation remains crucial. To begin with, it is fair to say that Japan has been successful in encouraging a stronger European presence to help it shape the Indo-Pacific order. The Europeans have responded in a big way, not least with prized big-ticket military hardware such as aircraft carriers, amphibious assault vessels and nuclear submarines, but what lies in store for the burgeoning partnership with Japan? For one, despite oft-mentioned deterrence of China, it still remains an open question how far Japan's more frequent military exercises with European powers actually shifts China's cost-benefit calculus of any actions Beijing contemplates. Given formidable Chinese anti-access/area denial capabilities, a single vessel or even a Carrier Strike Group operating far from home waters would face unfavourable odds. Britain's announcement of a 'permanent' deployment to the Indo-Pacific of two 90-metre River-class offshore patrol vessels, HMS Tamar and HMS Spey (normally used for constabulary duties including anti-piracy, counter-terrorism, and fisheries enforcement missions), followed by a Royal Marine Littoral Response Group in coming years is a significant expression of UK intent to demonstrate presence and commitment. While well-suited to the region's myriad security challenges such as illegal migration and fishing, trans-national crime and smuggling, these lightly armed vessels seem unlikely to greatly unnerve China in a high-intensity conflict scenario.

While Japan's attempts to encourage Europeanisation may indeed complicate Chinese decision-making in the event of conflict, Lawrence Freedman reminds us that credibility is the "magic ingredient" of deterrence. Even with support from allied US forward-deployed military assets, the tyranny of distance muddies the prospects for European expeditionary warfare and power projection far from their home territories against a well-armed peer competitor operating with a much shorter

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logistics tail. The worst-case scenario of nuclear escalation in conflict with China would additionally give European powers pause for thought. Crucially, European military cooperation with Japan has not come with any formal security guarantee remotely akin to that offered by the US. Despite references to the 1902 Anglo-Japanese Alliance by both academics and officials, such talk remains premature at this point. There is also the question of sustainability and size. For instance, HMS Diamond, one of the pair of Royal Navy Type 45 destroyers escorting the CSG21, suffered propulsion problems and had to be detached from the group for repairs. Across the fleet, it emerged that only one of the Type 45 vessels was operational in July 2021. Tobias Elwood, the chairman of the UK Commons Defence Committee, lamented, “that really indicates—bottom line—we need a bigger navy.”

Messaging with regard to directly naming the elephant in the room—China—also differs somewhat between Japan and its European partners. Explaining the rationale behind ARC21 amphibious landing exercises with Japan, Admiral Pierre Vandier, Chief of Staff of the French Navy, said directly, “we want to demonstrate our presence to the region and send a message about Japan-France cooperation. This is a message aimed at China” (Reuters, 2020). But Japanese officers were slightly more circumspect: “While bolstering ties with other countries, we are determined to keep sending out the message that Japan is committed to continuing to contribute to peace and stability of the local region as well as the world,” said Masashi Hiraki, a Ground Self-Defense Force colonel (The Asahi Shimbun, 2021). Official Japanese Ministry of Defense press releases focused more on blandly explaining the tactical details and location of the amphibious landing exercises with only a brief comment that the exercises reflected the “commitment of France to the Indo-Pacific region”. There was no mention of targeting China. Indeed, while Japan has become more forthcoming calling out China in recent joint statements with the US for instance, it nevertheless continues to stress that its FOIP vision is “inclusive” and welcomes any country that abides by and upholds the core principles of FOIP.

Coping with an assertive China has brought Japan and Europe closer together strategically, but both parties have still to work out a unified approach both in messaging and policy. This is in some ways inevitable, given the different salience of interests at stake and power capabilities to bring to bear. For instance, French President Emmanuel Macron met with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi in August 2020 while other European leaders abstained. Macron has been accused of ambivalence towards China, a policy of *en même temps* ('and at the same time'), sending mixed messages to its European allies and Japan (Francoise, 2020). The fact that British Royal Marines and Royal Navy personnel together with Wildcat and Merlin helicopters embarked previously on French Jeanne D'Arc deployments in 2017 and 2018 shows that there is much scope for coordinated European military deployments in the Indo-Pacific to amplify their presence and impact. However, when the German government announced that the German frigate Bayern, deployed to the Indo-Pacific, would also visit Shanghai and miss the chance to exercise with the UK CSG21, this was deemed to be sending an "unclear message" (Kundnani & Tsuruoka, 2021).

Meanwhile, the messaging behind the UK CSG21 deployment also reflects a desire to strike a nuanced 'not too hot and not too cold' tone in Britain's relations with China. The mission will be "confident but not

confrontational" in asserting international law of the sea according to Prime Minister Boris Johnson and Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab has dismissed "an old Cold War mentality" in favour of "constructive engagement with China", notably on trade and business. Japan too, despite continuing alarm over Chinese military assertiveness, has in fact experienced a thaw in relations over China since the height of the Senkaku Islands crisis in 2012. The huge Chinese market continues to cast its spell over Japanese businesses, notwithstanding talk of decoupling. In February 2021, the Japan External Trade Organization (JETRO)'s survey on international operations of Japanese firms revealed that China remained the top target for market expansion of Japanese businesses.

In a world where competition will increasingly co-exist alongside cooperation, previous operating assumptions about dealing with a clearly defined 'enemy' in the form of a Cold War adversary like the Soviet Union need updating. Rather than the relatively static bipolar structure of the past, there is comparatively more fluidity and flux in the emerging international order. The notion of 'shaping' by Japan together with its European partners may help provide conceptual frameworks and suggest policy instruments to nudge and fashion more favourable operating environments in the Indo-Pacific as the region undergoes massive power shifts.

Key to Acronyms

ARC21	Jeanne D'Arc 21 exercise
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
CPTPP	Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership
CSG21	Carrier Strike Group 21
EU	European Union
FOIP	Free and Open Indo-Pacific
JETRO	Japan External Trade Organization
JMSDF	Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Forces
RCEP	Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership
UN	United Nations

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A recent trend whereby European military deployments to the Indo-Pacific make a beeline towards Japan, has resulted in that latter emerging as a key partner for European powers seeking an enhanced military presence in the Indo-pacific region. Japan, which relied predominantly on the US to guarantee its security for most of the post-1945 period, has scored several historic firsts in military cooperation with European powers over the past few years. Outside of the EU, the UK's post-Brexit 'tilt' toward the Indo-Pacific has found an enthusiastic and receptive audience in Japan.

In this Strategic Update, Professor Yee-Kuang Heng investigates European power projection and presence in the Indo-Pacific, and its converging nature with Japan's attempt to shape the regional environment in its favour. While UK threat perceptions have converged significantly with Japan's since former Prime Minister David Cameron's promulgation of a "golden era" in relations with China, managing expectations of Japan's attempt to 'shape' and encourage Europeanisation remains crucial. But is it fair to conclude that Japan has been successful in encouraging a stronger European presence to help it shape the Indo-Pacific order?



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