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Japan and Europe Security Cooperation: From “Middle” to “Greater” Powers in Defence Production

Nearly a year into Trump 2.0, the fading U.S. commitment to the rules-based order forces Japan and Europe to reconsider their middle-power roles, boosting defence industrial cooperation to gain strategic autonomy amid growing Chinese and Russian assertiveness

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Nearly a year into the Trump 2.0 administration the contours of the changing international order are becoming yet clearer. The US appears to have declining interest, if not the capacity also, to preserve the so-called “rules-based international order” (RBIO) and underpinning system of economic rules and institutions, security alliances, and values. “America First” has not yet resulted in outright isolationism (and actually some enhanced, if as yet inconclusive, conflict diplomacy) but an apparent **default international framework of “spheres of influence”, unabashed power politics, offshore balancing, mercantilism, and abandonment of the rule of law** ([and even potentially domestically in the US itself](#)). In this emerging framework, the apparent outcome is for China and Russia to have a freer hand in pursuing their own regional interests and partnerships, and ambitions for territorial aggrandisement.

The question is thus how Japan and Europe (defined here to comprise the EU states, collectively and individually, and other key European powers such as the UK), can band together as “middle powers”, with shared interests in the preservation of the RBIO, to **respond to challenges from their own US ally, and from China and Russia as apparently revisionist states**.

If the question is correct, though, there might be doubts over whether the framing of Japan and the EU as “middle powers” is entirely correct or captures the direction of travel that these “like-minded” states may need to take to tackle the very severe risks faced. For sure, Japan and Europe can be categorised as “middle powers” given their traditional reliance on the US superpower for security, and lacking the capabilities of China and Russia, and consequent **inability to defend themselves alone** meaning they fall short of traditional “great power” status. Japan and Europe, of course, also often operate in the liminal spaces between the superpowers and great powers, preferring to work through multilateral frameworks and institutions, and so consolidating their labelling as “middle powers”.

Nonetheless, Japan and Europe also exhibit attributes of “great powers” in their individual and collective economic size and manufacturing, trading, finance, and technological prowess. Moreover, with the peril Japan and Europe may face with the fluidity of the international system, as grim an outlook as it is, it might be time for these states to start to think of shedding some of their middle power identities and modes, and to think of becoming “greater” powers in **taking responsibility for their own security and military defence**. Arguably, even though Japan and Europe will probably never match China and Russia due to constitutional and capacity constraints (and will struggle to envision a security future without the US-Japan alliance and NATO, and indeed will seek to double or triple down on these alliances), until they start to look capable of defending themselves in certain scenarios then they will not be taken seriously as actors to be negotiated with either by the US, or by China and Russia.

If we can suppose that Japan and Europe accept the dawning realisation that they will have to greatly step up their own defence efforts, then the corollary question to this is how far, given purported shared interests in maintaining the RBIO, they have the intent and capacity to stretch their security cooperation to encompass each other and their respective regions? **Japan and certain European states have demonstrated a degree of will and capacity to engage in strengthening military-to-military ties**, through mechanisms including a NATO individually tailored partnership agreement; and bilateral information-sharing agreements, acquisition and cross-servicing agreements, reciprocal access agreements, and military exercises.[\[1\]](#) The potential global reach of military cooperation between the European and Indo-Pacific theatres was demonstrated most recently by the deployment of the UK-led Carrier Strike Group, with participation of other European navies, to Japan in August 2025, and Japan’s partly reciprocal *Atlantic Eagles* deployment exercise of ASDF fighters to Germany and the UK in October.

However, there remain **doubts about the extent and feasibility of future Japan and European cooperation in actual contingencies**. The ability of these powers, even as they are engaged in respective military build-ups, to seek or maintain meaningful combat cooperation appears highly limited in most contingencies, given differences of national threat perception and immediacy of insecurity, limits to capabilities required in respective theatres, ongoing gaps in interoperability, and the simple tyranny of distance. In some senses, it is fair to opine that Japan and Europe attempting to project power into each other’s respective theatres could do more harm than good, if escalating beyond confidence-building to actual cooperation in contingencies.

Instead, the focus of where Japan and EU can really develop “greater power” international security cooperation, while certainly not shutting off and still nurturing military-to-military cooperation, might be best concentrated on areas in which both can develop very significant capacities and interchange most feasibly and effectively. It is arguable, therefore, that **Japan-Europe defence industrial production may be the most appropriate fit** for their mutual strengths in the future.

Although defence industrial production may not always be regarded a part of the Japan-EU economic security agenda (and in Japan’s case economic security is often deliberately separated off from defence production as a means to reassure domestic and international audiences over Japanese intentions in this dimension) it can be seen as in many ways the apogee of economic security. **Defence production and the security of supply of armaments involves questions, for example, of supply chains for critical minerals and components, semiconductors, sustainment of advanced manufacturing, dual-use technologies, cybersecurity, and AI**. These are all the stuff of economic security, and the recent US-China “trade war” illustrated that in this instance the (failed) pursuit for the US of economic security was determined predominantly by access to rare earths for military usage. In turn, defence industrial production and security of military supply is only likely to assume even more importance in an increasingly complex international security environment, whereby states are obliged to increase defence production for their own national security and alliance needs, and especially if they sense over-dependence on a US ally that is less committed to supply vital military technology. States, in addition, are rediscovering defence production and related arms transfers to “quasi-allies” and partners as a key means to reinforce their own security.

If defence production is vital to Japan and the EU in the future, then it is clear that **both sets of actors have genuine motivations and potential to greatly ramp up their own capacities in this respect**, even if the build-up will need to overcome considerable time lags due to past underinvestment in production bases. Japan’s 2022 National Defence Strategy and Defence Buildup Programme, and the apparent even deeper resolve of new Prime Minister Takaichi to accelerate Japan’s military build-up, coupled with the Law on Enhancing Defence Production and Technology Bases of 2023, has the potential to revitalise Japan’s defence industry and catapult it to an internationally competitive position in certain defence sectors, if correctly implemented.[\[2\]](#) Meanwhile, the UK’s 2025 Defence Industrial Strategy, Germany’s 2024 National Security and Defence Industry Strategy, and the EU’s European Defence Readiness 2030/ReArm Strategy, contain similar potential for transformation of European states.[\[3\]](#)

In turn, these documents all envisage the importance of **international collaboration in R&D, joint development and production, and arms transfer** to achieve objectives, given the difficulties of going it alone with the scale of investment and technological sophistication required of certain weapons platforms. Moreover, the strategies and plans of these states reassert the need not only to maintain cooperation with the US in defence production, but also to diversify and complement this relationship with cooperation between Japan and Europe.

Hence, in Japan’s case, **the ambition is for cooperation with the US via new fora** such as Defence Industrial Cooperation, Acquisition, and Sustainment (DICAS) for production of *Patriot* air defence missiles and the AIM-120 AMRAAM, as well as aircraft and ship maintenance; and Partnership for Indo-Pacific Industrial Resilience (PIPIR), involving defence equipment maintenance and development collaboration with the US and range of other Indo-Pacific allies, in areas such as radars, aircraft, and UVs.[\[4\]](#) Japan has also expressed some interest in joining AUKUS, effectively under US leadership but with the other partners of Australia and the UK, and has already undertaken some cooperation on the margins with [Australia in AUKUS-related technologies](#). Moreover, Takaichi’s recent declared interest in Japan’s procurement of nuclear-powered submarines might create further avenues for cooperation with AUKUS.

At the same time, though, Japan is indicating by its actions the **desire and potential for defence industrial cooperation with other partners outside the immediate US ambit and in new types of multinational formats**. The most prominent example of Japanese cooperation with European states is the Global Combat Aircraft Programme (GCAP), involving the UK and Italy, and with speculation over the possible entry into the programme of Germany at some point. GCAP is a crucial project to test the potential for Japan-Europe collaboration, with the objective to develop a “tier-one” capacity for producing indigenous sixth-generation fighters, drawing on the full panoply of advanced technologies, and designed as an equal partnership all the way from R&D, to joint development production, and to exports.[\[5\]](#) GCAP offers a new model for multinational collaboration, not just because it now involves European powers and an extra-European power, but also because it differs from the top-down, US-dominated formats of AUKUS, DICAS, and PIPIR.[\[6\]](#)

The task for Japan and Europe, if GCAP succeeds (and there are many hurdles in terms of the technology, work share, timeframes, and cost), might thus become to **find other similar projects and formats that would allow for equal partnership and economies of scale to fully develop their capabilities** as “greater powers” working in collaboration and less impacted by geographical distance and strategic differences on immediate regional security challenges. These projects could range from cooperation on UVs and long-range strike, through to more prosaic but vital capabilities in shipbuilding and ammunition production.

Japan and EU clearly share interests in trying to preserve the RBIO, or at least its basic principles. Even if the most impactful effects of Trump 2.0 prove transitory, the writing is perhaps on the wall long-term for US unconditional commitment to the global security order, and China and Russia will continue to press their interests in respective regions. **If the international system is subject to change, then Japan and Europe must also change**. “Middle power” identities and roles may need to gradually morph into “greater power” categorisations to respond to challenges. If genuine defence cooperation is to be attained, then the best and most feasible fit for Japan and Europe’s circumstances and potential capabilities is most probably in **defence industrial production and collaboration that may assist their collective facing down of security threats, and provide for both sets of states some leverage and assurance vis-à-vis a less predictable US alliance partner**.

[\[1\]](#) H. Ogi and C.W. Hughes, “Japan’s information security and defence reforms: from inner circle to national standardisation”, *RUSI Journal*, forthcoming 2026.

[\[2\]](#) Japan Ministry of Defence, “[National Defence Strategy](#)”, 16 December 2022; Japan Ministry of Defence, “[Defense Buildup Program](#)”, 16 December 2022.

[\[3\]](#) UK Ministry of Defence, “[Defence Industrial Strategy: Making Defence an Engine for Growth](#)”, 8 September 2025; p. 98; German Federal Ministry of Defence, “[National Security and Defence Industrial Strategy](#)”, January 2024; European Commission, “[White Paper for European Defence Readiness 2030](#)”, 6 March 2025, p. 19.

[\[4\]](#) J. Ishimaru, “[Deepening US-Japan defence-industrial cooperation](#)”, *Online Analysis, IISS*, 11 November 2025; O. Hirohito and I. Rintarō, “[Suitai kara kakudai e: ‘juuyō chōka’ jidai no bōei sangyō](#)”, *Chiseigaku Kenkyū Repōto*, no. 5, 2025.

[\[5\]](#) C.W. Hughes, “Japan’s defence industrial strategy and fighter aircraft production: striving for tier-one status and the GCAP project”, *Defence Studies*, vol. 25, no. 2, 2025, pp. 279–300.

[\[6\]](#) S. Chelton and P. Shetler-Jones, “Middle power and great power agreements: emerging model for capability collaboration”, *RUSI Journal*, forthcoming 2025.

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