

## Europe in Turmoil and the Future of Japan-EU Cooperation



(Photo Reuters/AFLO)

In the 21st century, Europe has continuously experienced serious crises – the European economic crisis after the bankruptcy of Lehman Brothers in 2008, the annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014, a spate of terrorist attacks by extremists, a massive influx of refugees and the rise of far-right populist forces, and Brexit – and these problems are interrelated and complex. Meanwhile, the liberal international order has been threatened by the inclination of the United States toward a unilateralist foreign policy, the new rise of a dictatorial China, and the ambition of authoritarian Russia to regain power. It is of vital importance

to understand the problems of Europe, which has maintained the liberal international order together with Japan, in considering how both can cooperate to uphold it.

One of the first things to emphasize is that the EU, despite its many problems, is gaining solid support. In a 2018 poll that asked whether their country's accession to the EU was beneficial, an average of nearly 70% of people in 28 EU member states answered that it was in their interests. This is the highest figure since 1983. The support for the single currency, the euro, is also growing. In a 2018 survey, 64% of respondents gave a

positive assessment of the euro's impact on their country's economy. This is the highest figure since the introduction of the euro in 2002. In addition, Eurosceptics and far-right populist parties, who have advocated anti-EU policies, have become less vocal about withdrawal from the EU and the euro. Instead, they have switched their stance to one of pursuing internal reforms while staying in the EU. In the European Parliament elections held in June 2019, voter turnout was up for the first time in a quarter-century, surpassing 50%. Behind this were active campaigns by young people, urban dwellers, ecologists and other EU supporters who felt worried about the future of the EU.

Thus, the once-whispered collapse of the EU, its "existential crisis," is now a thing of the past. What now characterizes Europe is not a choice between the EU and sovereignty but a tug-of-war between integration and disintegration, in which those who seek "more Europe" and those who seek "less Europe" struggle with each other.

Although the EU has avoided its "existential crisis," it is not without problems. Internally, several serious problems remain unresolved. Those

problems include: the failure of the member states to cooperate on the admission of refugees and intra-regional free movement; economic stagnation in CEE and Southern European countries and economic disparities among member states; dissatisfaction with EU elites and establishments and the rise of populist forces. Hungary and Poland, whose governments have become increasingly authoritarian, have moved toward manipulating the courts, the media and even their constitutions in the government's favor. These moves cast doubt on the core values of the EU, such as freedom and the rule of law. Externally, since the inauguration of the Trump administration, the tension between the United States and Europe, particularly between the US and Germany, has been at the forefront. Since the end of World War II, European countries have maintained their order on the basis of a multilateral economic, political and security network centered on the EU and NATO, backed up by the United States. However, with its "America First" policy, the Trump administration has taken a skeptical stance on multilateralism. The differences in attitudes toward the US among member states have led to internal confrontations within the

EU and have obstructed the EU from coordinating among member states on its security and foreign policy.

Brexit has recently received the most attention in the EU. Over many years, there was a gap in perceptions of the EU between the UK and continental Europe. The 2016 EU referendum led the UK to exit the EU, albeit by a narrow margin, against the backdrop of a national craving for sovereignty against EU intervention, opposition to large-scale immigration and refugee flows, and the decline of the middle class and widening economic gaps. As of the end of October 2019, the UK's request for a three-month extension to the Brexit process was approved, making it unpredictable to the very end how it will unfold. It is a certainty that the cleavage between and within public opinion and Parliament, which has so far deeply muddied Brexit, cannot be cured by the three-month extension. Even if a formal agreement is reached, social and political turmoil will continue. Yet, it should be noted that the Brexit deal could be a vital issue for the UK, but not necessarily for the EU. Brexit is a blow to the EU. However, this crisis for the UK will not necessarily turn into a crisis for the EU.



British Prime Minister Boris Johnson at the Manchester Central convention complex, Sep. 2019, Manchester.  
(Photo AFP/AFLO)

For Japan, Europe and the EU may seem a little distant. However, Europe is a rare partner for Japan that maintains the same principles and values, such as liberal democracy and open market economies. The EU-Japan Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) and the Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA), which entered into force in February 2019, showed a strong normative link between the two actors in this dimension. The EPA is an agreement that creates a free trade area accounting for about 30% of world GDP and 40% of world trade. It is a clear message sent by Japan and the EU that they oppose protectionism and unilateral action and support free and open economies and multilateralism. The SPA provides a legal basis for strengthening strategic cooperation between Japan and the EU, which share values and principles such as democracy, the rule of law, and human rights. The SPA calls for

comprehensive cooperation in fifty fields, including politics and security. Through these agreements, we can expect Japan-EU relations to become ever closer. Japan-EU relations are good, and their potential is significant.

In recent years, there has been progress in security cooperation between Japan and Europe, mainly at the bilateral level with the UK and France, which are deepening their engagement with the Indo-Pacific region. The UK, which regards Japan as its closest partner in Asia, concluded the Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA) in 2017, following the United States and Australia. The ACSA enabled the Japanese Self-Defense Forces (SDF) and the British Army to share supplies and transportation services, including ammunition and equipment, and Japan and the UK have held joint exercises every year since then. The ACSA with France also came into effect in June 2019. When President Macron visited Japan that month, the Roadmap on Japan-France Cooperation was unveiled, in which the emphasis was put on the strengthening of Indo-Pacific cooperation, including the establishment of a Japan-France Comprehensive Maritime Dialogue, and the deepening of security and defense cooperation.

Meanwhile, at the EU level, Japan-EU security cooperation has not substantially progressed. At the time of the SPA negotiations with Japan, the EU proposed to conclude a Framework Participation Agreement (FPA) that would enable the SDF to further cooperate under the EU's Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP) mission. However, this proposal was not realized, as the Japanese side believed that a track record of concrete cooperative missions, such as patrol missions in the Indo-Pacific region, should be built first before the conclusion of the framework.

Although Europe has gradually deepened its engagement with the Indo-Pacific region, the linchpin of its security is still NATO, and its alliance with the US. However, Europe's relationship with the US is under strain due to the Trump administration. In response to the Trump administration's demands for more burden-sharing by European allies and its insistence that NATO is outdated and obsolete, France and Germany often take the lead in highlighting the need for Europe to pursue its own defense cooperation and integration. The need for "European strategic autonomy" (ESA) has been stressed, alongside moves such as

the establishment of the “European Intervention Initiative” in June 2018 and a call for creating a European army. However, there has been a divergence of views among the EU member states, fearing that such a move might invite a backlash or withdrawal from the US, and the EU has yet to take concerted action. Delicate wheeling and dealing will continue between member states and the US over the extent of Europe’s strategic autonomy. How NATO will steer relations with the Trump administration will be an important reference point not only for European countries but also for Japan, whose security heavily relies on its alliance with the US.

In addition to security cooperation, further cooperation between Japan and the EU is expected in the area of connectivity strategies, including infrastructure development. Japan has been promoting the “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” (FOIP) initiative since 2016. In 2018, the EU came out with the European Connectivity Strategy for Asia, whose values and principles are similar to those proclaimed in the FOIP. In September 2019, Japan and the EU signed an ambitious deal on infrastructure development between Asia and Europe. The deal repeatedly stressed the importance of ensuring

the sustainability and quality of infrastructure development, intended as a joint effort to restrain China, which has deepened its strategic engagement in CEE countries through the Belt and Road Initiative. The EU and Japan are expected to further cooperate toward the common goal of building sustainable and high-quality connectivity through various cooperative ventures, such as infrastructure capacity building and security cooperation, maritime resource and waste management, and third-country market cooperation.

At a time when the US-China rivalry is increasingly taking on the appearance of a power struggle for hegemony, it is difficult for Japan and Europe to assume global leadership alone. Rather, it is precisely at such a time that Japan and the EU, which seek cooperation through rules rather than power, must act to strengthen their strategic partnership that creates an order conducive to the common economic and security interests of many countries and encourages their cooperation to resolve global issues. Otherwise, the principles of a rules-based international order and high-quality infrastructure would be hollowed out in a power-game between major powers. ■