

Towards EU-Japan Relations: A Strategic Partnership at a Pivotal Juncture

Erik Lenhart and Michael Tkacik

Introduction

The 30th EU-Japan Summit, held in Tokyo on July 23, 2025, marked a historic milestone in the strategic partnership between the European Union (EU) and Japan. Against a backdrop of Japan's domestic political turmoil, shifting global trade dynamics, and escalating geopolitical tensions, the summit delivered an unprecedentedly comprehensive [joint statement](#), signaling a deepening of cooperation across security, economic, climate, and digital domains. This analysis evaluates the summit's outcomes, the challenges posed by Japan's internal instability and global pressures, and strategic recommendations for sustaining this critical partnership in a multipolar world.

Key Outcomes: A Maturing Strategic Partnership

The 2025 summit built on the foundations laid by the 2023 summit, shifting from broad commitments regarding shared values and multilateralism to concrete, institutionalized mechanisms with clear timelines and deliverables. This evolution reflects a partnership equipped to address interconnected global challenges, positioning the EU and Japan—representing nearly a quarter of global GDP and 20% of world trade—as pivotal players in promoting a rules-based international order.

1. Security and Defense: Operational Integration

The summit marked a transformative leap in security and defense cooperation, moving beyond dialogue to operational integration. Key initiatives include:

- Japan-EU Defense Industry Dialogue: A platform to foster collaboration on defense technologies, interoperability, and joint R&D in dual-use technologies.
- Security of Information Agreement (SIA): Formal negotiations to enhance secure data-sharing, critical for addressing hybrid threats and cybersecurity.
- Expanded Scope: New focus areas such as space security, countering foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI), maritime security, and non-proliferation, aligning with international law and UN frameworks.
- Joint Exercises: Commitments to joint training, capacity-building, and coordination in multilateral forums, reflecting the interconnected security of Europe and the Indo-Pacific.

These developments underscore a shared recognition of the nexus between European and Indo-Pacific

security, particularly in response to Russian aggression in Ukraine, North Korea's provocations, and tensions in the Taiwan Strait and South China Sea. It is interesting that while the joint statement is vocal about Russia and the DPRK, it doesn't explicitly mention China as a destabilizing factor in East Asian security or as an enabler of Russian aggression against Ukraine.

2. Economic Security: The Competitiveness Alliance

Economic security emerged as a cornerstone of the 2025 summit with the launch of the Japan-EU Competitiveness Alliance, a proactive framework that seeks to:

- Strengthen supply chain resilience for critical goods like semiconductors and minerals.
- Reduce strategic dependencies, particularly on China, amid concerns over economic coercion.
- Promote joint investments in emerging technologies, including low-carbon solutions and advanced manufacturing.

In contrast to the 2023 summit's emphasis on upholding a rules-based trading system, the 2025 summit introduces tangible instruments for economic coordination, including mechanisms for monitoring supply chains in strategic sectors, joint responses to economic coercion and non-market practices, and targeted investment facilitation. These developments elevate the EU-Japan partnership from principle to practice, positioning both actors as global standard-bearers for economic resilience. At the same time, they offer a compelling alternative to increasingly assertive U.S. trade policies and contribute to the diversification and stabilization of Indo-Pacific trade networks.

3. Climate and Energy: Advancing the Green Alliance

The EU-Japan Green Alliance, reaffirmed in 2023, saw significant advancements in 2025, aligning with both parties' net-zero emissions goals by 2050. Key initiatives include:

- Joint Projects: Collaboration on hydrogen, nuclear energy, methane mitigation, and carbon pricing.
- Technological Innovation: Development of perovskite solar cells, carbon capture, and clean energy standards.
- Energy Security: Cooperation on LNG supply chains and an intergovernmental gas dialogue to address geopolitical energy challenges.

These efforts integrate climate goals with industrial decarbonization and energy security, reinforcing the partnership's strategic alignment.

4. Digital Partnership: Securing a Fragmented Landscape

The EU-Japan Digital Partnership, established in 2023, expanded in 2025 to address tech sovereignty and digital resilience. New areas of cooperation include:

- Quantum Science and Technology: Joint research to drive innovation.
- Submarine Cable Resilience: A working group to secure critical digital infrastructure.
- Digital Trust Services: Collaboration on digital identities and interoperability.

These initiatives respond to growing concerns over cybersecurity, data sovereignty, and the fragmentation of the global digital landscape, positioning the EU and Japan as leaders in shaping global digital norms.

5. Geopolitical Stance: A Unified Voice

The 2025 summit adopted a bolder geopolitical stance than its predecessor, addressing a wide range of global challenges:

- **Russia and North Korea:** Strong condemnation of Russia's aggression in Ukraine and its military cooperation with North Korea and Iran, with continued support for Ukraine's sovereignty, reconstruction, and justice.
- **Indo-Pacific Stability:** Concerns over tensions in the Taiwan Strait and South China Sea, emphasizing adherence to international law.
- **Global Issues:** Calls for peace in the Middle East, resolution of the Iranian nuclear issue, and humanitarian support for Afghanistan and Moldova.

This assertive tone underscores the EU and Japan's commitment to countering authoritarian revisionism and promoting a stable, rules-based international order rooted in the UN Charter.

Challenges: Japan's Political Instability and Global Pressures

The summit coincided with significant political turbulence in Japan, complicating its international commitments:

- **Historic Electoral Defeat:** The Liberal Democratic Party (LDP)-Komeito coalition lost control of both parliamentary chambers in the upper house elections, for the first since 1955. Rising inflation, stagnant wages, and internal LDP strife fueled public discontent, with a Yomiuri Shimbun poll showing 54% of respondents favoring Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba's resignation and Cabinet approval at 22%.
- **Timing Sensitivities:** Japan prioritized the EU summit over a concurrent China summit, reflecting its view of the EU as a predictable and value-aligned partner. However, mounting calls for Prime Minister Ishiba's resignation on the summit day from his own party ranks underscore the fragility of Japan's political continuity. This political fragmentation, as noted by Tobias Harris in "[Tragic to the Last](#)," reflects deeper challenges in articulating a coherent vision for Japan's future, complicating its international commitments.
- Additionally, the U.S.-Japan tariff deal, announced on July 22, reducing tariffs on Japanese imports from 25% to 15% and securing Japan's \$550 billion investment in the U.S., raises concerns in Europe. The deal highlights the need for the EU to diversify its Indo-Pacific partnerships to counterbalance U.S. economic influence.

Strategic Recommendations for the EU

To sustain the momentum of the 2025 summit and navigate Japan's challenges, the EU should pursue a multi-pronged strategy:

- **Institutionalize the Competitiveness Alliance:** Establish a permanent secretariat to oversee supply chain resilience, critical raw materials, and semiconductors, engaging industry stakeholders for market-driven outcomes.
- **Deepen Defense Collaboration:** Promote joint R&D in dual-use technologies, encourage Japan's participation in EU initiatives like PESCO and the European Defense Fund, and expand joint training exercises.

- **Advance Digital Sovereignty:** Align on AI governance, quantum standards, and cyber norms, and create a joint submarine cable fund to secure Indo-Pacific connectivity.
- **Engage Japan's Political Spectrum:** Build ties with opposition parties and civil society to ensure continuity, offering technical assistance on economic reforms and social welfare to address public discontent.
- **Counter U.S. Trade Leverage:** Propose a Japan-EU Investment Facilitation Agreement and promote triangular cooperation with ASEAN to diversify trade routes and reduce dependence on U.S.-centric frameworks.
- **Lead in Multilateral Forums:** Co-lead initiatives at the UN, G7, and WTO on UN Security Council reform, climate finance, and digital governance, reinforcing shared values and global leadership.

Conclusion: A Partnership for a Resilient Future

The 30th EU-Japan Summit represents a strategic deepening of bilateral relations at a critical juncture. Despite Japan's political instability, and U.S. economic pressures, the summit's outcomes demonstrate resilience and ambition. By institutionalizing cooperation, engaging diverse stakeholders, and co-leading on global challenges, the EU and Japan can build a partnership that not only navigates current uncertainties but also shapes a resilient, inclusive, and rules-based international order. As global dynamics shift, this alliance—rooted in shared values, strategic alignment, and economic weight—stands poised to lead in a multipolar world.

Erik Lenhart (erik.lenhart1@gmail.com) holds an MA in political science from Charles University and is a former Deputy Chief of the Mission of the Slovak Republic in Tokyo.

Michael Tkacik (mtkacik@sfasu.edu) holds a PhD from the University of Maryland and a JD from Duke University. He has published articles in a variety of journals. Tkacik's current research interests include the implications of China's rise, China's behavior in the South China Sea, and nuclear weapons policy across Asia. He is a professor of government and director of the School of Honors at Stephen F. Austin State University in Texas