

V4 and Japan: Renewing the Oldest Non-European Partnership under the Slovak Presidency

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For more than two decades, Japan has held a distinctive place in the external relations of the Visegrad Group. Well before European attention turned toward the Indo-Pacific, economic security, or resilient supply chains, Tokyo recognized the strategic value of Central Europe and invested political capital in structured dialogue with the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia.

The V4+Japan format, launched in 2003 and subsequently developed jointly with Japan and the V4 partners. For the V4 it remains the oldest partnership between the Visegrad Group and a non-European partner.

The ministerial meeting held in Tomášov, Slovakia, on September 1, 2026, marked more than a routine diplomatic encounter. After several years in which Visegrad cooperation faced internal challenges and reduced visibility, the Slovak Presidency brought together the V4 foreign ministers

and Japan's Foreign Minister Toshimitsu Motegi, thereby symbolically revitalizing one of the Group's most enduring external formats. Timed immediately before the informal Gymnich meeting of EU foreign ministers in Dublin, the gathering underscored the continued political relevance both sides attach to their dialogue.

Like the Quad, the V4 has experienced periods of varying intensity throughout its history. Yet it has repeatedly proven itself an excellent platform for cooperation—particularly in the V4+Japan format—capable of delivering tangible public goods. The strength of this partnership rests on concrete results. Over the years it has sustained regular contacts among foreign ministers, political directors, and prime ministers; fostered cooperation in science and technology, including joint research on advanced materials; supported engagement on the Western Balkans; and linked academic, business, and policy communities across regions. Japan has consistently regarded the V4 as an effective model of regional cooperation and has demonstrated that assessment through sustained political engagement.

Today, the geopolitical case for closer cooperation is stronger than ever with elections in the region changing the receptiveness to cooperation with and between the group. Russia's aggression against Ukraine, rising tensions in the Indo-Pacific, heightened concerns over economic security, and the vulnerability of critical supply chains have reinforced the understanding that European and Asian security are increasingly intertwined. This shared assessment shaped discussions between Japan and all four Visegrad partners during the latest consultations. This is especially true vis-à-vis Ukraine's reconstruction which, holds considerable potential for deepening V4+Japan cooperation and translating long-standing ties into concrete joint contributions.

Czech Republic: Innovation and Advanced Technologies

The Czech Republic has developed one of the most technologically advanced partnerships with Japan in Central Europe. The recently adopted Action Plan for the Strategic Partnership for 2026–2030 sets out cooperation in quantum technologies, space activities, innovation, and economic security. Approximately 270 Japanese companies operate in the country, supporting around 50,000 jobs and reflecting the depth of economic ties built over several decades. The relationship demonstrates how traditional investment can evolve into collaboration in emerging sectors that will shape future competitiveness and technological leadership.

Hungary: An Industrial and Economic Bridge

Hungary remains one of Japan's principal manufacturing destinations in Europe. Around 200 Japanese companies employ approximately 30,000 people, forming a dense network of industrial cooperation and investment. Recent bilateral discussions identified economic security, smart agriculture, and industrial modernization as priority areas. Despite political changes and shifting international circumstances, Japanese-Hungarian economic ties have shown remarkable continuity and rank among the strongest examples of long-term Japanese industrial engagement in Central Europe. A shift of a more favorable orientation towards the EU by Hungary will strengthen confidence in Budapest's economic trajectory and willingness of Japanese firms to invest in Hungary going forward.

Poland: A Strategic Security Partner

Among the V4 states, Poland has become one of Japan's most important strategic partners in Europe. The relationship now extends well beyond economics into security and defense

cooperation. During the recent ministerial talks both sides reaffirmed their Comprehensive Strategic Partnership and their shared commitment to supporting Ukraine. Tokyo recognizes Poland's pivotal role as a logistics, transportation, and business hub for Ukraine's reconstruction, while Warsaw views closer ties with Japan as an essential element of cooperation among like-minded democracies. For the Poland-Japan Foundation, this evolution illustrates how initial trade and investment links can mature into a comprehensive partnership encompassing security, technology, economic resilience, and geopolitical coordination.

Slovakia: Strategic Industry, Economic Security, and Ukraine's Reconstruction

For Slovakia, relations with Japan have entered a particularly significant phase. Foundations were laid shortly after independence, when Japanese financial institutions, including Nomura, contributed to the country's early economic transformation. Today cooperation has moved well beyond finance toward strategic industry, advanced manufacturing, and economic security. Seventy-six Japanese companies currently operate in Slovakia, creating roughly 20,000 jobs and making a substantial contribution to industrial competitiveness. Japan has become one of Slovakia's most important Asian economic partners and an increasingly visible stakeholder in its long-term industrial development.

One investment carries particular strategic weight: Nippon Steel's acquisition and continued development of the Košice steelworks. As one of the largest industrial facilities in Central Europe, the plant occupies a geographically advantageous position at the crossroads of major European transport corridors and within close reach of Ukraine's western border. Its modernization has the potential to establish Košice as a major hub for advanced steel production serving both EU markets and Ukraine's future reconstruction needs. Reconstruction will demand vast quantities of steel, engineering products, infrastructure components, and construction materials. Eastern Slovakia combines industrial capacity, transport connectivity, a skilled workforce, and proximity to Ukraine in a manner few locations in Europe can match.

The presence of a global industrial leader such as Nippon Steel further strengthens this position. Japanese technology, management expertise, and long-term investment horizons can help ensure Košice remains competitive amid decarbonization, industrial transformation, and the need for supply-chain resilience. The project also illustrates that Japanese investment in Central Europe increasingly reflects a broader vision integrating economic security, industrial resilience, and long-term geopolitical stability.

Minister Motegi's visit highlighted Slovakia's growing importance within Japan's Central European strategy. In addition to talks with Foreign Minister Juraj Blanár, Prime Minister Robert Fico welcomed him in addition to talks with Foreign Minister Juraj Blanár. The Prime Minister welcomed the further development of bilateral relations and acknowledged the contribution of Japanese investment, including Nippon Steel's role as a major employer in Košice. Foreign Minister Motegi highlighted the contribution of Japanese companies to Slovakia's economy and expressed interest in strengthening cooperation across a wide range of sectors. The meetings sent a clear signal that Bratislava increasingly views Japan not merely as an investor or trading partner but as a strategic partner of growing relevance amid changing geopolitical and economic realities.

Looking Ahead

The revival of the V4+Japan framework under the Slovak Presidency is timely. The partnership rests on solid foundations built over more than twenty years that includes regular political dialogue, extensive economic ties, scientific cooperation, support for a rules-based international order, and a shared understanding that security developments in Europe and the Indo-Pacific are interconnected.

Rather than launching an entirely new initiative, the task ahead is to build upon proven success. Like the Quad, the V4 has known fluctuating levels of activity, yet it has consistently demonstrated its capacity, especially in the +Japan format, to serve as an effective platform for delivering public goods. Ukraine's reconstruction offers particularly promising avenues for translating this potential into practical cooperation. The meeting in Tomášov confirmed that both the V4 countries and Japan continue to see value in the format despite evolving circumstances. For Slovakia, the successful restart of V4+Japan cooperation represents both a tangible achievement of its presidency and an opportunity to elevate its own bilateral relationship with Tokyo.

The V4 and Japan have already shown that regional cooperation can deliver concrete results in research, innovation, investment, diplomacy, and economic development. If the past two decades were devoted to building trust, the coming decade offers the chance to transform that trust into a genuinely strategic partnership, one well positioned to contribute meaningfully to Ukraine's recovery and to broader regional stability.

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