

POLICY BRIEF

Zeitenwende: the view from Japan

Acknowledgment

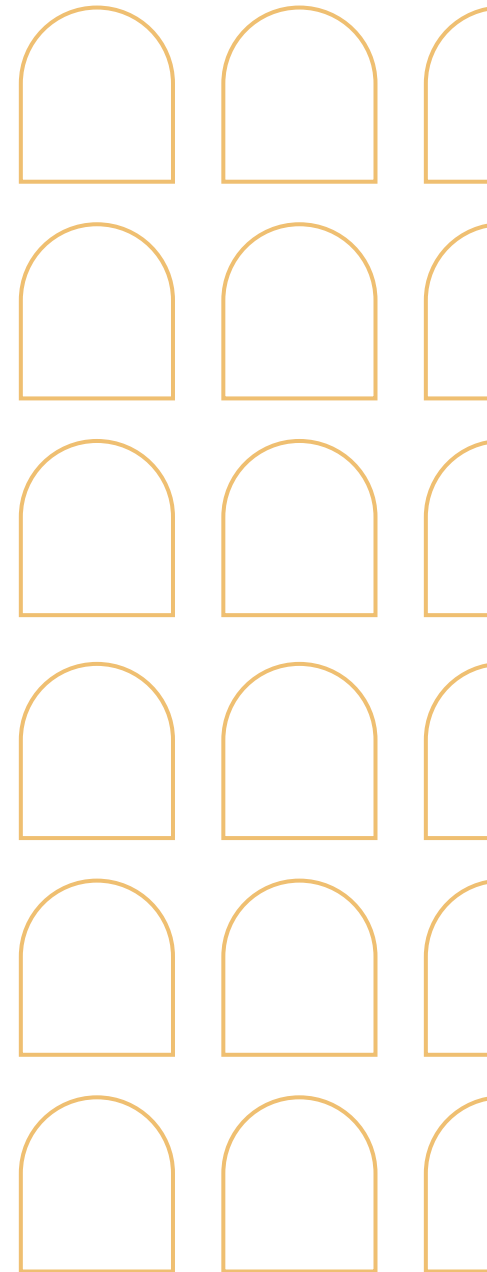
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Japan has been cultivating good relations with Europe, including the European Union and non-member states, for decades. Although its primary focus has been on the US in the post-war period for security, and on East Asia for trade and investment in the post-Cold War era, both economic and latterly security relations with Europe have developed steadily and towards greater cooperation. Since the 1970s, Japanese companies have been increasing their investments, networks and local relations in various parts of Europe, in car manufacturing, financial services and industrial chemicals, among many other industries.¹ With the gradual revision of Japan's stance on international security cooperation under successive administrations from officially being against collective security towards allowing for defence exports and other security cooperation, it has also been attracting interest from European governments, EU agencies and commercial defence organisations regarding exchanges and joint programmes.

¹ Mark Mason, "The Origins and Evolution of Japanese Direct Investment in Europe," *The Business History Review* 66, no. 3 (1992), <https://doi.org/10.2307/3116978>.

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As Japan has been through its own political and economic changes, and as the international tension between democracies and authoritarian states in the world has increased, it has become clearer that there are many basic values which Japan shares with European countries, and in many ways Japan's values seem to have a closer affinity with ideas of social democracy in Europe than they do with more neoliberal ideas and values in the US. This can be seen in the way in which society relates to government and business in the areas of privacy and data security regulations. The Japan-EU Digital Partnership is a good example of a joint initiative based on these shared values.²

However, despite the increasing economic and security cooperation between Europe and Japan, from the perspectives of Japanese experts there has been increasing uncertainty in Europe. The Eurozone crisis in 2008 has been identified as an important trigger for many of these changes.³ The perceived instability increased with the migration crisis in 2016, and both issues were also important factors in the Brexit referendum and finally the UK's protracted exit negotiations and uncertainty, which continued until 2022 and which caused problems for the many Japanese companies with European branches based in the UK.⁴ Aside from the UK, an ongoing populist backlash against the EU's neoliberal values has been felt in most countries in Europe to a greater or lesser degree, and this too has been commented upon in Japan. Nakai Ryo has argued that the perceived threat to citizens' traditional cultural values has been an important factor in the increasing influence of right-wing populist parties in Europe.⁵

Instability is something which particularly worries Japanese people and businesses, which put great value on long-term relationships and connections. In particular, seemingly unstable immigration creates a sense of insecurity in Japan. Japanese leaders have responded to their citizens' deep-seated fears. Former Prime Minister Abe Shinzo famously pronounced that Japan did not have an "immigration policy." In his comments in the Diet (Japan's parliament) denying that allowing more foreign workers into Japan would lead to long-term immigration, he seemed fully aware of the sensitivity of the issue for the Japanese public, emphasising that the government would ensure that there are great hurdles to foreigners gaining long-term residence or citizenship rights in Japan.⁶

To add to these economic, political and social issues, the Russian invasion of Ukraine has impacted the image of Europe in Japan as a stable and peaceful region. The Nippon Travel Research Institute noted that the security situation with regard to Ukraine was an important issue for tourists considering travel in Europe.⁷ The Russian invasion in 2022 and subsequent reactions of European states were widely covered in the mass media in Japan, leading to many civil society-level initiatives to help Ukraine, including donation boxes in supermarkets, and even local government initiatives to help some Ukrainian refugees and their families who managed to reach Japan. In an interview, Professor Nagayuki Norie commented that Japanese society's reaction to the Ukraine invasion had affected Japanese citizens' ideas of refugees in a positive way, enabling them to welcome Ukrainian refugees and making society think about Japan's relatively hostile poli-

2 European Commission, *Japan-EU Digital Partnership*, European Commission (12 May 2022), <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/56091/%E6%9C%80%E7%B5%82%E7%89%88-jp-eu-digital-partnership-clean-final-docx.pdf>.

3 Ryo Oshiba, "A Japanese View of the EU," *Perspectives* 20, no. 2 (2012), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23616133>.

4 Utpal Vyas, "Japan UK relations before and after the Brexit referendum," in *Identity, culture and memory in Japanese Foreign Policy*, ed. Michal Kolmas and Yoichiro Sato (Bern: Peter Lang, 2021).

5 Ryo Nakai, *Ōshū no haigaishugi to nashonarizumu - chōsa kara miru yoron no honshitsu* [European xenophobia and nationalism: The reality of public opinion as seen from surveys] (Shinsensha, 2021).

6 NHK, "Hādorū takai mono ni' gaikoku hito ukeire de Abe shushō," *NHK* 2018, <https://www.nhk.or.jp/politics/articles/statement/10506.html>.

7 NTA, *Afutākorona ni mukete – fuan kaishō ga kaigairyokō fukkatsu no kagi* [Towards the post-coronavirus era – Relieving anxiety is the key to reviving overseas travel] Nippon Travel Agency (2023), https://www.nta.co.jp/news/2023/_icsFiles/afieldfile/2023/04/20/kaigai_questionnaire_202304.pdf.

cies regarding refugees in the past.⁸ Nevertheless, these comments bring into focus the traditionally negative views towards immigration in Japan.

Therefore, the events leading up to what German Chancellor Olaf Scholz termed the *Zeitenwende*,⁹ or historical turning point, have certainly concerned Japanese leaders and even society. Japan has also felt the impact of the *Zeitenwende* in terms of its need to show solidarity with European and US sanctions on Russia, and to some extent with US-led national security-based trade restrictions on China as Russia's ally. Takashima Asako notes that although the *Zeitenwende* originally referred more directly to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, its meaning in Germany has changed to indicate the broader effects of the invasion, including Germany's own strategic, economic and domestic changes.¹⁰

Nevertheless, if we consider what scholars in Japan have been saying about the post-*Zeitenwende* environment in Europe, and in particular in Germany, there is a certain amount of caution, and even scepticism about the potential for such an era-defining change. Japanese foreign policy has been known for its pragmatism and quietly non-ideological focus, and it seems that despite the recent somewhat stronger rhetoric of politicians Japanese policy experts and scholars see the situation in Europe in a similar manner. They wonder if it is really possible for such an era-defining change to occur in Germany and Europe, especially considering the role of globalisation in the modern era and the reliance of European states on Russian energy and Chinese

markets.¹¹ Chancellor Scholz has been seen as an unimpressive leader because of his slow responses to events and public opinion.¹² The SPD, Chancellor Scholz's left-of-centre political party, was noted for its relatively pro-Russia stance in the past and Germany's '*Ostpolitik*' policy, i.e. of embracing former Communist-bloc eastern European countries including Russia, which was continued by the previous Chancellor Merkel (and who has not expressed any regret over her policy), have been indicated as showing that Germany cannot change its overall foreign policy stance so quickly.¹³

There is no doubt that Chancellor Scholz's *Zeitenwende* speech was seen as unusually strong given the above, but the slowness of actual German action on the ground belied the political rhetoric in the eyes of Japanese observers. There is also some concern about a lack of coherence in the foreign policies of EU nations. Tonedachi Hisao notes that the EU takes a strong international position in economic affairs and regulation, but worries about the weak relationship between France and Germany in recent times as being an obstacle to the aims of the *Zeitenwende*.¹⁴

In addition, Japanese companies have been indicating increasing concern about changes affecting their business in Europe. According to an in-depth survey in 2023 by the Japan External Trade Organisation (JETRO), a government agency, the direct consequences of the Ukraine war are at or are close to the top of the concerns of Japanese companies, but the international and domestic issues which led

8 Noriyuki Fukuoka, "Ukuraina shinkō ga Nihon no kifu o kaeta shigeki sareta sōzōryoku kongo mo ikasu ni wa [The Ukraine invasion has changed Japan's donations: How to use the creativity which has been kick-started.]," *Tokyo Shimbun*, 6 March 2023, <https://www.tokyo-np.co.jp/article/233815>.

9 Olaf Scholz, Regierungserklärung von Bundeskanzler Olaf Scholz [Official statement of Chancellor Olaf Scholz], (Berlin: Die Bundesregierung [Federal Cabinet Office], 2022).

10 Asako Takashima, „Doitsu no *Zeitenwende* – Roshia ni yoru Ukuraina shinryaku-go no 1-nen o furikaette [Germany's *Zeitenwende* – Looking back on the year after Russia's invasion of Ukraine],“ *Kokumonken Senryaku komento*, 29 March 2023, https://www.jiia.or.jp/strategic_comment/2023-03.html.

11 Kazunari Hata, "Doitsu no jidai no tenkan — enerugi to gaikō no kiki o tsūjite [Turning point in Germany: through the energy and diplomatic crises],“ *Eco-Philosophy* 17 (February 2023), <https://cir.nii.ac.jp/crid/1390296123105474432>.

12 Shogo Akagawa, "Yureru Doitsu no seisaku tenkan — '*chinmoku no Kyojin*' wa kawaru no ka [Wavering Germany's policy transformation: Will the "silent giant" change?],“ *Mita Hyoron Online*, 5 July 2022, https://www.mita-hyoron.keio.ac.jp/features/2022/07-5_2.html.

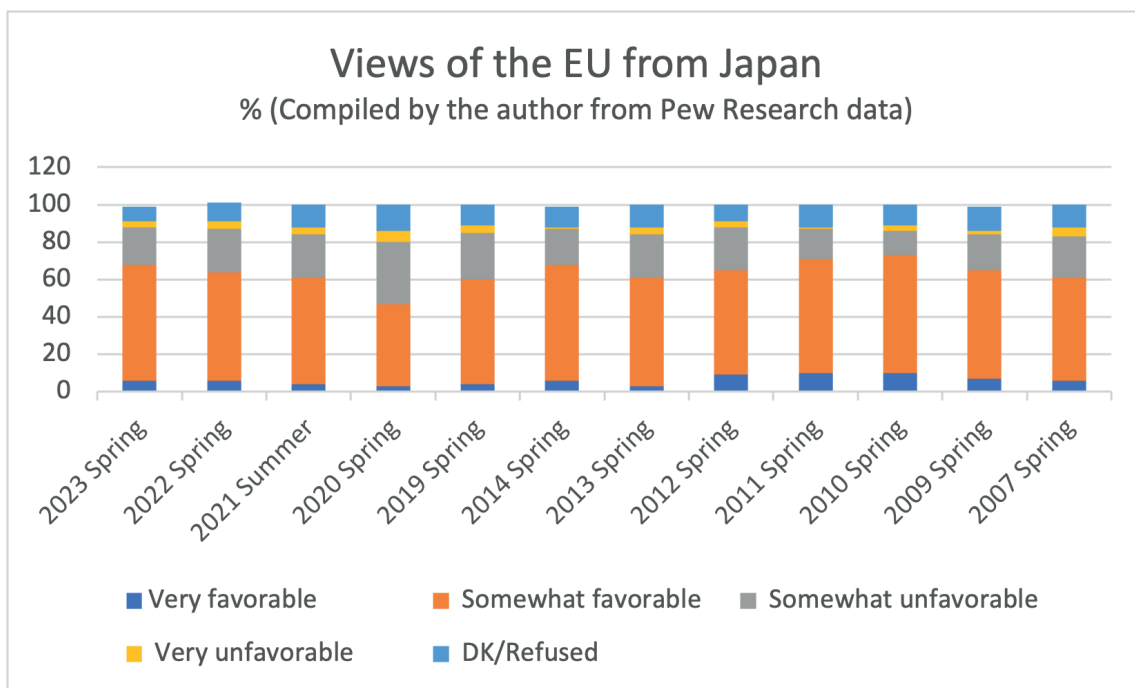
13 Yoko Iwama, "Doku no anpo senryaku 'tenkan' nankō [Germany's security strategy: 'transformation' is difficult to achieve],“ interview with Chiharu Mori, *Yomiuri Shimbun*, 13 January, 2023, <https://www.yomiuri.co.jp/commentary/20230112-OYT8T50109/>.

14 Hisao Tonedachi, "Dokufutsu enjin' no fuchō to EU no omomi [The stuttering German-French engine and the EU's weight],“ 12 May 2023, <https://www.jcer.or.jp/j-column/20230512-4.html>.

to the *Zeitenwende* have also been worrying them, in particular increases in energy prices and inflation more generally.¹⁵

Notwithstanding the concerns of experts and scholars about events in Europe, it is worth noting that the general image of the EU among the public has not yet suffered due to the momentous changes occurring there. Apart from a small dip in the image of the EU in 2020, probably due to the COVID-19 pandemic measures,¹⁶ Japanese people’s favourable view of the EU seems to have recovered strongly to pre-COVID levels in opinion polls conducted by the Pew Research Centre in 2023. This could be due to the strong unified response of the EU to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. A similar increase in favourability seems to have occurred after the EU began to strongly respond to its members’ financial crises in the early 2010s.

In Japan, the term *Zeitenwende* has generally been translated as ‘jidai no tenkan’ or literally ‘change of era,’ which is perhaps easier to understand than the often-used official English translation of ‘watershed.’ Japan has also had a historical context which helps to understand the importance of this kind of change in the post-war era, and it has also had a *Zeitenwende*-style policy pronouncement since the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This was partly in reaction to the Russian invasion, but in the case of Japan also related to the increasing military assertiveness of China regarding their territorial disputes and to China’s increasingly strident rhetoric and actions concerning Taiwan.¹⁷ While this was less of a sudden change in policy tone than Germany’s, Prime Minister Kishida Fumio’s stated target to increase defence spending to 2% of GDP,¹⁸ along with several other measures, was an important change from



15 JETRO, *Kaigai shinshutsu nikkei kigyō jittai chōsa - Ōshū-hen [Survey of current conditions of Japanese businesses abroad – Europe edition]* (JETRO, December 2022), https://www.jetro.go.jp/ext_images/_Reports/01/b672ee05dcf6dddb/20220045.pdf.

16 Janell Fetterolf and Nicholas Kent, “EU seen favorably across 17 advanced economies, but views vary on its coronavirus response,” 24 June 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2021/06/24/eu-seen-favorably-across-17-advanced-economies-but-views-vary-on-its-coronavirus-response/>.

17 Yoshiitsu Nishikawa, “Anzen hoshō kanren 3 bunsho kaitei to bōei seisaku no dai tenkan [Revision of three security-related documents and a major shift in defense policy]” *Seisaku opinion [Policy Opinion]*, no. 259 (1 February 2023), https://ippjapan.org/pdf/Opinion259_YNishikawa.pdf.

18 Cabinet Secretariat, *Kokka Anzen Hoshō Senryaku [National Security Strategy]*, Cabinet Secretariat of Japan (Tokyo, 16 December 2022), https://www.cas.go.jp/jp/siryou/221216anzenhoshou/national_security_strategy_2022_pamphlet-ja.pdf.

Japan's traditional post-war defence posture. It also seems less certain that Japan can achieve such a change due to its precarious public finances, but it nevertheless shows a sense of crisis in common with European countries.

While the events which have inspired a new common purpose for Japan and European countries are worrying for both, the atmosphere of cooperation on substantive policy issues and the recognition of common basic values of Japan and European countries must be seen as positive developments for future security and economic relations. The main question for both European and Japanese policymakers is to what extent they can continue to smoothly coordinate their international actions and build on new institutional mechanisms to sustain cooperation beyond short-term considerations.

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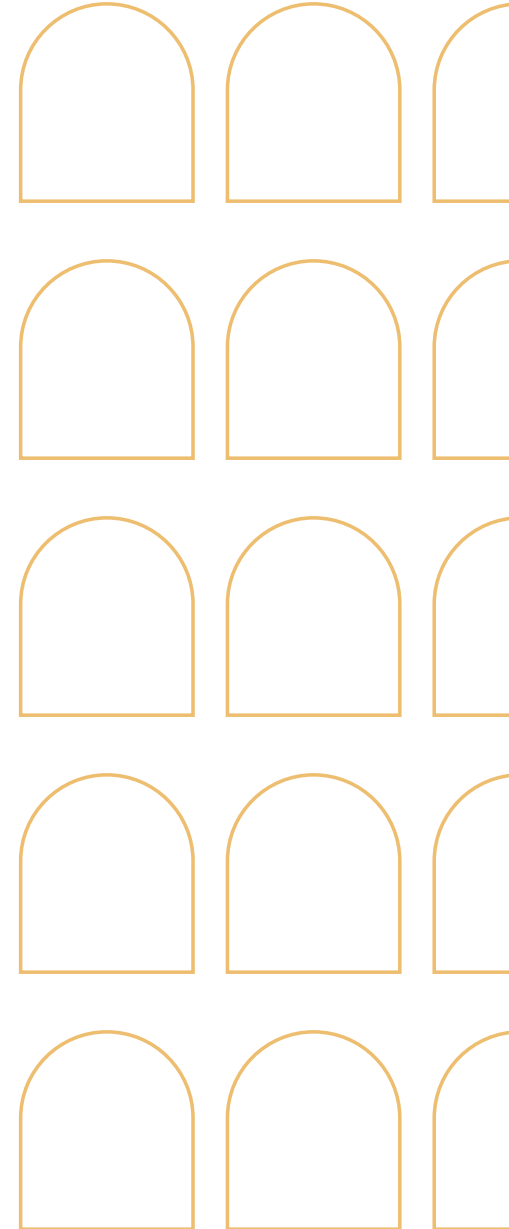
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