

Japan in the 2019 G20 and G7 Summits: A Key Partner for Europe?

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Abstract

This essay offers a general assessment of Japan's performance in the 2019 G20 and G7 Summits, held respectively in Osaka, Japan and Biarritz, France and looks at how Tokyo coordinated with its European partners (The European Union (EU) institutions and the EU Member States) in these international settings. The analysis reveals several differences and expectation gaps between the two partners. In particular, even if Tokyo is aligned with most European objectives in terms of trade and data governance, Japan insists on accommodating the US, on which its security still very much depends. Also, Japan's preference for consensus-building disappoints European states' search for a more ambitious leadership – on the issue of climate change, for example. On Japan's side too, there is frustration. The rigidity of European positions and solutions (on a strict protection of digital data privacy, for example) is a concern. Regarding the G7 Summit held in France, the informality of the meeting was an issue for Japan's formal diplomatic style and Tokyo was disappointed by the very brief mention of Asian affairs in the final communiqué. A candid dialogue between Japan and its European partners, backed by track 1.5 discussions, should be held to reduce misunderstandings and more efficiently push common interests in multilateral settings.

Policy Recommendations

- Japan should more clearly delineate its priorities, objectives and constraints, while advocating its role as a consensus-builder and go-between in international settings.
- Europeans should acknowledge the constraints of Japan's strategic autonomy and the characteristics of its diplomatic style in order to ensure an optimal cooperation in the G7/G20 meetings to come.
- A permanent candid dialogue between Europeans and Japanese through Track 1.5 venues should strengthen mutual understanding and help advance their partnership.

In 2019, for the first time, Japan hosted the G20 Summit (on June 28-29). This event came at a time of great transformation in the international system, multilateralism and global governance. The post-1945 world order is increasingly challenged by revisionist powers such as China and Russia, a US President no longer committed to multilateral institutions, and rising populism pushing for unilateral, nationalist and protectionist policies. International relations are characterized by a return of great powers politics and growing mistrust in the context of a worsening Sino-US strategic rivalry.

As a politically stable, democratic country that consistently defends and promotes multilateralism, liberal norms and market economy, Japan has good assets to act as a proactive stakeholder of a rules-based world order. Under Prime Minister Abe's leadership, Japan has been seeking to play a leading role on the international scene (World Economic Forum, 2019). Tokyo is no longer just reactive, but is showing initiative to better defend its interests. As Japan feels threatened by the multifaceted expansion of China, the upholding of the liberal international order (to shape China's behavior) and the strengthening of its alliance with the US (to deter China) are seen as the best options to ensure its strategic autonomy.

Yet, now that the Trump administration is unraveling the post-1945 order with its America-first policy, weaponization of trade issues and disregard of multilateralism, Tokyo is in disarray. In domains such as international trade and global governance that are key to balance Chinese attempts to revise the international system, Japan cannot rely on its ally anymore. At the same time, Tokyo is still very much dependent on the US for its security and thus cannot afford to antagonize Washington.

To hedge against a more distant US, Japan has been actively diversifying its strategic partners, in Asia (with India and Australia, for example) and further West to Europe. The European Union, as a normative superpower and a supporter of the rules-based, multilateral world order thus appears as a major partner for Tokyo. In recent years, the

EU-Japan relations have flourished with the Economic and Strategic partnership agreements signed in 2018 and a Partnership for sustainable connectivity and quality infrastructure concluded in September 2019. Japan and the EU also agreed to freely circulate their digital data, creating the world's largest area for secure data flows (January 2019). Brussels and Tokyo thus pledged to cooperate with each other in international settings to advance their common interests.

In 2019, the G20 Summit was held in Osaka, and the G7 Summit in Biarritz, France. The former provided a good opportunity to observe the extent to which Japan is able to play a role in supporting the liberal multilateral system, in coordination with like-minded countries. It also provided a good test-case of Japan-Europe cooperation in the G7/G20 venues: What can Europeans reasonably expect from Japan?

This essay shows that in hosting the G20 summit, Japan's priority was to ensure that all important players stay around the table and support the final statement. Therefore, Tokyo played the role of a go-between and consensus-builder between China and the US, on the one hand, and between the US and European countries, on the other hand. It did not allow for political breakthroughs but managed to gather all the G20 members around rather low-key documents. Japan's priority to accommodate the US caused frustration to the Europeans.

In contrast, the G7 Summit meeting held in France raised several challenges for Japan: the spontaneous diplomatic style of the French host caused unease for the Japanese delegation that could not make the positive contribution it looked for. The one-page communiqué was a source of frustration for Tokyo as it barely mentioned Asian geopolitics. Japan felt that its core interests were not adequately considered.

Japan's leadership in the 2019 Osaka G20 summit: the consensus-builder

Japan's general feeling about the G20 Summit as an institution has been mixed. Back in 2008, the creation of the Group of 20 raised some anxiety in Tokyo as this new grouping reflected a clear shift in the global balance of power. The G20 provided a new venue in which Chinese influence would be predominant and questioned the relevance of the G7/8 meeting in this new world. Also, in the G20, Japan could no longer play the role of the representative of Asia that it used to play within the G7.

This background highlights the political importance of this very first G20 Summit meeting hosted by Japan in 2019. It is the third Asian country to chair the Summit, after South Korea (in 2010) and China (in 2016). The preparation of the G20 was thus high on the political agenda in Tokyo, and a seasoned diplomat, Koji Tomita, was appointed as the Sherpa in charge of the Summit. The coordination with France, host of the G7 Summit meeting that year, was good: Paris agreed to exceptionally schedule the G7 after the G20 (on August 24-26) to accommodate Japan's busy diplomatic schedule with the enthronement of the Reiwa Emperor.

The top Japanese priority for the G20 was to ensure that no big player leave the table and refuse to sign the final Statement. This, and the absence of any big controversy, would ensure in itself the success of the Summit, given the very tense context in which it was held (US trade sanctions on China, US-Iran frictions, opposition between the European countries and the US on climate change policy...).

Shinzo Abe set up three priorities for the G20 Summit in Osaka (Abe, 2019): to promote free and fair trade in the context of the Sino-US trade war; to regulate the digital economy amidst a global debate on the safety of data flows and taxation of tech giants, and to offer innovative ways to tackle global environmental challenges.

Combating protectionism while accommodating the US: mission impossible?

Some commentators issued severe statements regarding Japan's failure to include a denunciation of protectionism in the final Statement (Armstrong, 2019). The Europeans in particular felt frustrated about this loophole. Tokyo had been demonstrating its commitment to free trade through its promotion of the CP-TPP and EU-Japan EPA for example, but in the context of the G20, it rather chose to accommodate its US ally and build a general consensus.

Europeans expected Tokyo, which otherwise champions the reform of the WTO, to put more pressure on the US that are currently blocking the dispute settlement's appellate body. Japan preferred to focus on issues such as electronic commerce, risk of over-indebtedness or on subsidies. Overall, Japanese diplomats found it difficult to weigh on the US and mitigate the growing weaponization of trade (Basu, 2019). Actually, a few days after the G20 meeting, Tokyo imposed its own economic sanctions on South Korea for national security reasons (Harding and White, 2019).

The "Data Free Flow with Trust": the Japanese initiative to build consensus on governance of global data

Shinzo Abe wanted the Osaka Summit to be remembered as the first to start global discussions on data governance. It would be a way for Japan to retake the initiative in the context of the US-China competition on 5G and digital affairs. The "Osaka track for data governance" aimed to coordinate the differing approaches to set up globally accepted norms and avoid a fragmentation of regimes. Tokyo thus promoted the concept of "Data Free Flow with Trust" (DFFT) (Abe, 2019).

Japan tried to mitigate the Sino-US rivalry and bridge the gap between the US and EU approach by promoting a "reasonable regulation". Indeed, while the EU's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) set strict rules to protect individuals' data, the US believes this approach is unnecessarily putting obstacles to the expansion of its tech giants. The terminology of the Japanese initiative reflects a search for a balance: "free flow" of data appeals to the US, while "trust"

was meant to appeal to the Europeans (Carter, 2019). Japan also insists that governance of e-commerce should take place within the WTO.

However, Japanese DFFT is a quite vague concept. There are varying definitions of what “trust” is and these differences might prove tricky to iron out. Developing countries do not necessarily see the economic benefit of opening their markets and share their data and thus are reluctant to support DFFT : India, South Africa, and Indonesia did not sign the Osaka Declaration on Digital Economy (Sukumar, 2019). So, while the DFFT concept might be malleable and consensual, it might be challenging to find concrete ways to enforce it and trigger cooperation.

Global environmental challenges: mixed achievement

Japan hosted the first ever G20 Ministerial Meeting on energy transition and global environment for sustainable growth. In particular, it set up a framework to reduce marine plastic waste through the “Osaka Blue Ocean Vision”. While the initiative received overwhelming support, the objective to reduce additional marine pollution to zero by 2050 remains a non-binding commitment for signatories.

On the issue of climate change, Tokyo found itself between a rock and a hard place. While France explicitly threatened not to sign the final statement if the Paris agreement was not mentioned, Washington also warned that it would withdraw its signature if its vision was not represented. Japan again took care not to upset its ally and ensure a unanimous endorsement of the declaration: hence, two different paragraphs appeared in the final text: one pledging to implement the Paris agreement, and the other reiterating the US stance. One Japanese diplomat explained that on the overly sensitive issue of climate change policy, the goal was to promote down-to-earth discussions to prevent any clash (Interview with a Japanese diplomat, Tokyo, 18 September 2019).

Japan in the Osaka G20 Summit: A consensus-builder or a US proxy?

Japanese diplomacy considers the Osaka Summit a success, because Japan managed to offer middle-ground solutions to keep all the important players and engage them on a framework. This is a very pragmatic approach that aims to build consensus and act as a bridge-builder. In a context of geopolitical division and mistrust, Japan tried to create solidarity on a variety of issues and propose globally accepted norms even if these norms are not ambitious and if its initiatives are not synonymous with “concrete achievements”.

In particular, Japan spent a lot of time and effort to bridge the gap between the US and the EU on trade and climate issues. While Tokyo has been used to balancing between the US and the Europeans, especially within the G7/8 Summit meetings (Dobson, 2012), under the Trump administration, Japan increasingly finds itself in a position to mediate the worsening transatlantic relations.

However, the Europeans felt that Japan was giving too much importance to accommodating its US ally rather than promoting an ambitious global agenda (Valero, 2019). Seen from Tokyo, the EU sometimes appears as too dogmatic, lacking flexibility and too critical of Trump’s government. Back in 2017, Angela Merkel showed a resolute attitude not to give in to the US’ requests at the G20 Hamburg Summit and proceeded with a G19+1 approach on climate change. For its part, Japan considers that efforts should be made to keep the US engaged, rather than further marginalizing Washington. Indeed, the Trump era will end someday. The fact that Japan prioritized its ally in the Osaka G20 Summit can also be explained by the timing of the State visit by President Trump in May 2019, when Tokyo was actively preparing the Summit.

To be fair, Japan has been in a very uncomfortable position, squeezed between the US, which imposed tariffs as pressure to negotiate a free trade deal; China, which was eager to develop economic cooperation while keeping the pressure up in the East China

Sea; and the expectations of the Europeans, which seek alignment on an ambitious normative stance to mitigate the negative effect of the Sino-US rivalry.

On a positive note, the adoption of the [G20 Principles for Quality Infrastructure Investment](#) was a success for both Japan, a long-standing supporter of sustainable norms for infrastructure funding, and the EU that is very much shares this agenda, as their 2019 EU-Japan Partnership for quality infrastructure showed.

Japan and the 2019 G7 Summit: Uneasiness with a new format

In general, Japan highly values its participation in the G7/G8 Summits. It grants Tokyo a respected rank as a first-tier nation, among countries that are permanent members of the UN Security Council. Moreover, Japan is the only Asian country represented in this group. In the past, Japan mainly acted as a representative of Asian countries and kept a low profile. More recently, it has been more proactive to advance structural cooperation: Tokyo led an initiative on combating infectious diseases during the 2000 G8 Summit for example (Dobson, 2017). It resulted in the establishment of the Global Health Fund two years later.

Tokyo was not very satisfied with the 2019 G7 Summit in Biarritz. Several elements did not play well with Japanese political priorities for the summit (discussion of Asian security issues, mediation between the US and European countries) and with Japan's diplomatic style and working habits. Indeed, the French presidency chose to set up an innovative format to achieve greater results.

The Japanese diplomatic style at odds with the French informality

The French President intentionally sought to go back to the spirit of the G7 Summit meetings: more informal discussions between the Head of States to allow for political breakthroughs. Over the years, the G7 Summits have indeed turned into a heavy

bureaucratic process with slim political results. Accordingly, the French host decided to physically separate the Heads of State from the rest of their delegation. It also chose not to discuss a common Statement beforehand, but circulated a last-minute, one-page draft paper in the midst of the meetings, to be discussed hastily before adoption. This statement circulated by the French presidency was politically driven and squeezed the preparatory work of the diplomats, causing anxiety in the Japanese delegation. This was an issue for the Japanese diplomats that are used to thorough discussions to achieve an internal consensus (*nemawashi*) before communicating a position. The Japanese delegation thus lacked time for appropriate consultation. Finally, the fact that the Statement was to be discussed in English was also an issue. The informal style of the French Presidency hence posed a challenge to the Japanese's more organized diplomatic style.

The lack of coverage of the Asian issues

Second, the one-page long Biarritz communiqué (G7 Leaders' Declaration, 2019) also raised Japan's frustration because it failed to mention important Asian security issues such as North Korea, or the South China Sea and maritime security in the region. Only the situation in Hong Kong was mentioned. One diplomat explained that the session dedicated to security issues, such as Syria, but also North Korea and other Asian issues, was scheduled last, not providing enough time to include any substantial phrasing in the communiqué (Interview with a Japanese diplomat, Tokyo, 19 September 2019).

As the only representative of Asia, Tokyo considers as its responsibility to put Asian issues on the agenda and defend the interests of the Asian countries. Since the 2010s and the tensions with China in the East and South China Sea, Tokyo is keen to raise attention about the risks of Chinese maritime expansion and to get the understanding of both the US and European G7 members on this issue. In 2016, under its Presidency, Japan managed to get the support of the

seven leaders for a strong statement on the tense situation in the East and South China Sea (without mentioning China by name).ⁱ

Because of the slim mention of Asian security affairs in the Communiqué, some Japanese diplomats expressed doubts about the true utility of the G7 for discussing and advancing Asian issues.ⁱⁱ This said, and to be fair to the French Presidency, the Foreign Ministers Communiqué (issued on April 6, 2019) did actually mention the East and South China seas in length, the breaches to the Law of the Sea, as well as the nuclear program of North Korea. The text even stated the importance to maintain a “free and open Indo-Pacific region” (Foreign Ministers Communiqué, 2019).

Concerns about the identity of the G7 as a club of like-minded democracies

Third, another Japanese concern questions the significance of the G7 as a platform for its value-based diplomacy. The references to values and principles in diplomatic relations is part of a broader balancing act vis à vis China, and is thus crucial for the Japanese agenda on the international scene. However, the fact that Italy is now part of the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative raised some concerns in Tokyo about the dilution of the G7’s political identity. The invitation extended by Paris to African countries and other key partners (India, South Africa, Australia and Chile) to broaden the representation of the G7 also made Japanese diplomats fear that such initiatives would blur the line between the G7 and G20.ⁱⁱⁱ Japan’s government prefers that the G7 keep its identity as a “minilateral” setting, while the G20 can be more multilateral in its process and in the issues tackled.

On another dimension, Tokyo found itself at odds with its ally when they both publicly commented on Pyongyang’s short-range missiles test on the day of the Summit. While the Prime Minister Abe strongly condemned the launch of missiles that can directly threaten Japan’s territory, President Trump downplayed the seriousness of the DPRK move, adding that it was not a violation of his agreement with Kim Jong-Un. As the G7 is also seen as an occasion to showcase a

close US-Japan relationship, this gap was clearly seen in a negative way by the Japanese officials.

Conclusion

This essay shows the constraints and the limits of Japan’s strategic autonomy in the context of G7/G20 Summit meetings. Tokyo cannot risk alienating its ally in a context of a rising China. At the same time, the Japanese government is increasingly at odds with an America-first agenda and is actively hedging against a US retreat by diversifying its diplomatic partners. This uncomfortable position is creating tensions and contradictions in Japan’s diplomatic stance. Tokyo’s ambiguous posture is irritating its European partners that find Japan too timid and reluctant to pressure the US.

Indeed, Japan and Europe are often on the same page regarding the promotion of liberal values and norms, as well as the defence of the multilateral international system. But there is a gap between European’s expectations regarding Japan’s ability to act autonomously from the US and the reality of Japan’s actual leverage and achievements. Another issue is related to Japan’s diplomatic and leadership style that may not be well understood or rightly acknowledged by its European partners. Tokyo needs to be able to consult its partners beforehand to ensure good coordination, and is not comfortable with informality and surprises.

Europeans should acknowledge the constraints to Japan’s strategic autonomy and the characteristics of its diplomatic style to ensure an optimal cooperation in the G7/G20 meetings to come. In order to reduce misunderstandings and bridge expectations gaps, a candid dialogue between Japan and its European partners should be encouraged. In particular, an institutionalized track 1.5 dialogue should be established to trigger discussions amongst officials and experts from Japan, European countries and EU institutions, and to help advance the EU-Japan partnerships, including in the international settings.

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ⁱ “We are concerned about the situation in the East and South China Seas and emphasize the fundamental importance of peaceful management and settlement of disputes. We express our strong opposition to any intimidating, coercive or provocative unilateral actions that could alter the status quo and increase tensions, and urge all states to refrain from such actions as land reclamations including large-scale ones, building of outposts, as well as their use for military purposes and to act in accordance with international law including the principles of freedoms of navigation and overflight”, *G7 Foreign Ministers' Statement on Maritime Security*, Hiroshima, April 11, 2016.

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ⁱⁱ “We are the only G7 member from Asia. We have to play a significant role in the group composed of the world’s industrialized economies to grapple with the

challenges that the East Asian region is facing,” a Japanese diplomat posted in an Asian nation said.” But “other G7 countries are interested in issues related to themselves, which are different from ours,” he added. “We are worried that the G7 framework may not work to bring about peace, stability and prosperity in East Asia.” Tomoyuki Tachikawa, “Japan begins to doubt G7’s influence in addressing East Asian issues”, *The Japan Times*, 27 August 2019.

<https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2019/08/27/national/politics-diplomacy/japan-doubts-emerge-g7s-influence-east-asia/>

ⁱⁱⁱ “The line between the G-7 and the Group of 20, which includes emerging economies like China and India, is becoming less clear as well.” Yuta Saito, Togo Shiraishi, “Bare-bones G-7 statement fails to light the way for global economy”, *The Nikkei Shimbun*, 27 August 2019.

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