



JAPAN-UK: “PROGRESSIVE” TIES

AND A CASE FOR BRITAIN IN THE CPTPP

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The UK's entry into the landmark CPTPP agreement, led by Japan, could be a breakthrough in advancing Britain's global ambitions as an independent trading nation and encourage a stronger cross-continental collaboration. It would not only act as a gateway for the UK to become an active player in the Indo-Pacific, but also substantiate the global overture of Japan-UK ties and strengthen their collaboration in the face of shared challenges. It can, in other words, help transform an already strong Japan-UK relationship into a global partnership.

Introduction

Between dealing with challenges arising from the Covid-19 pandemic and international geo-political flux, the United Kingdom (UK) is progressively shaping its identity as an exclusive economic actor in the wake of its exit from the European Union (EU). The signing of the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA)¹ between Japan and the UK in November 2020 was heralded as “historic”², for it was the first trade deal signed by the UK as an “independent trading nation”.³ It also marked the first step in London's emerging trade and global economic ambitions, reflecting its desire to enhance “commercial diplomacy” with the countries of the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific (CPTPP), and broadly with the region.⁴ Beyond this, the UK's signing of the CEPA must be viewed in the context of its broader

ambition to join the CPTPP, for which London has already formally applied⁵ and entry negotiations are shortly expected⁶, shaping London's relations with Japan and a range of countries in the region. Given these developments, how will the UK's involvement impact its overall approach to the Indo-Pacific? Conversely, how does Japan view London's interest in the CPTPP and the Indo-Pacific at large?

Japan's UK Outlook

A Japan-UK partnership is, at its core, a natural one.⁷ As island nations, both states have maritime interests and a drive to uphold maritime order in line with international norms. Although they are separated by thousands of miles, they are bound by shared regional and global challenges and are, therefore, poised to develop an “ambitious and multi-faceted” alliance for the new era.⁸ Underpinned by

historical links and close security alliances with the United States (U.S.), the Japan-UK partnership is characterized by increasing cooperation in an array of sectors, including political, social, economic,

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and academic. As members of the Group of Seven (G7) and Group of Twenty (G20) consortiums of the world's leading industrial economies, Japan and Britain have been consistently vocal in their support for international institutions and upholding the rule of law in the international arena. In fact, as a permanent five (P5) member of the UN Security Council, the UK has even backed Japan's bid to join its ranks as a permanent member.⁹

A key pillar of Japan and Britain's common interests revolves around maintaining global free trade norms. For Japan, economic multilateralism emerged as a core priority under former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe.¹⁰ An active proponent and supporter of the World Trade Organization (WTO), Japan has entered several bilateral free trade agreements (FTA) since 2001. It has also been a champion of regional economic frameworks, such as the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC),¹¹ while also pursuing an increasing number of mini-lateral engagements in the Pacific and beyond, such as the Australia-Japan-India and Japan-U.S.-India trilaterals and the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad). After the U.S. withdrew from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) under President Donald Trump, Japan assumed a leadership position in the CPTPP, an 11-member strong Pacific trade group

that emerged in the wake of the Americans' exit.¹²

Although trade between Japan and the UK has been somewhat limited, Japan's presence in Britain is fairly robust with massive foreign direct investments (9.8 percent of Japan's total foreign investment) and the presence of over 1,000 Japanese firms.¹³ Japan and the UK, therefore, have predominantly frictionless modern trading and diplomatic relations, with the recently concluded CEPA set to bolster their economic partnership and reduce tariffs between the two countries by 99 percent.¹⁴ The UK's decision to make its first major post-Brexit trade deal with Japan only highlights the importance London places in its economic ties with Tokyo.

In the security realm, Japanese and the British interests were previously somewhat separate (particularly vis-a-vis their primary threat perceptions) considering their vastly different geographical positionings, however, their security priorities have quickly converged in recent years. As U.S. allies, both the UK and Japan's security outlooks are aligned institutionally via the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), of which Britain is a member and Japan, a partner. Bilaterally, their defense and security cooperation are bolstered by their 2+2 dialogues that have enabled joint development of defense equipment and military exercises in East Asia. Recently, London announced it would dispatch its topmost aircraft carrier, HMS Queen Elizabeth, to the Pacific for maritime exercises with Japan's Self-Defense Forces.¹⁵ The move represented Japan and the UK's intentions to elevate their security and defense cooperation and marked London's deeper involvement in the Indo-Pacific. Furthermore, Tokyo and London are also initiating a defense-technology ambit in their bilateral ties by collaborating in the development of an exceedingly complex combat aircraft system called "Jaguar", likely based on their joint work in advanced radar technology.¹⁶ They are also developing a joint air-to-air missile defense system (JNAAM) and enhancing interoperability of defense equipment and technology.¹⁷ The significance of these developments are all the more critical considering Japan's conservative military-technology approach

and the recent termination of a self-imposed ban on arms exporting in continued attempts to move away from its pacifist constitution.¹⁸

Ahead of the upcoming virtual G7 meeting, Prime Ministers Boris Johnson and Yoshihide Suga dialogued to discuss their priorities and coordinate their agendas.¹⁹ They highlighted the strengths of their bilateral relationship, which was recently bolstered amid their Maritime Security Arrangement and 2+2 consultations. Johnson notably voiced his appreciation for Japan's support of the UK's bid to join the CPTPP while also welcoming its trade deal. More importantly, both leaders emphasized their dedication to shared international values and underscored their concerns over the situations in Hong Kong, Xinjiang, and the Myanmar coup.²⁰ This was not the only recent dialogue between the two countries. The UK and Japan held their regular 2+2 Foreign and Defense Ministers' Meeting on February 3, 2021, where both states exchanged their perspectives on regional and global developments and affirmed cooperation in an array of areas, including economic security.²¹

Japan's CPTPP Designs and the UK

Tokyo and London thus have a strong foundation to turn their ambitious vision of a close comprehensive partnership into a reality. Japan views Brexit as an opportunity to engage more deeply with the UK on a bilateral level and as a preferred partner outside the confines of the EU.²² Tensions with the Trump administration further induced Japan to seek economic and defense cooperation with other global partners, and the UK was perfectly positioned in this regard. To take their partnership to the next level, Tokyo has encouraged London to join the CPTPP.²³

The UK's proposed addition would be part of Japan's expansion aspirations for the CPTPP. At the 2020 APEC CEO dialogue, Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga stated Tokyo would aim for "steady implementation and expansion" of the CPTPP in 2021.²⁴ The inclusion of the UK may also propel Japan's prospects of engaging the U.S. in a dialogue

over its return to the trade agreement. Tokyo would also not be averse to the prospect of negotiating a deal with China, provided the Japanese manage to construct a more robust understanding with the UK and the U.S. after their inclusion in the CPTPP. This move could strengthen Japan's multilateral trading influence both within and outside the grouping.

As Japan aims to expand its role and influence as a leading Indo-Pacific power that promotes economic multilateralism, Tokyo's dualist outlook towards global and regional frameworks has begun limiting its openness to expanding other multilateral domains, such as the G7. The UK, in its capacity as 2021 G7 President, has already proposed admitting partner states such as India and Australia to the

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group, a move Japan opposes.²⁵ The expansion of the G7 would build on Boris Johnson's goal of creating a group of ten democracies, or D-10, which was originally focused on 5G technology with a scope for grander strategic intent. The expanded G7 would lead to the potential creation of a "G-10" as a "rival alliance" to China,²⁶ especially created by the UK as a back-channel structure, which Japan might not be keen to endorse at present.²⁷ However, Japan may re-evaluate its disapproval in light of the UK's CPTPP inclusion. While the UK does not entirely replace or substitute the importance of the U.S. in the CPTPP, it would provide Tokyo with a rather comfortable Western partner – and a major power – in the grouping.

Furthermore, increased Japan-UK synergy in the

economic domain can help Tokyo achieve its goal of inclusion in the Five Eyes (FVEY) intelligence-sharing network.²⁸ Simultaneously, the FVEY is considering expanding its scope with the establishment of an FVEY economic pact with a focus on supply chain diversification; this move can find extensive synergy with Japan's other regional initiatives, such as the Supply Chain Resilience Initiative (SCRI) with India and Australia.²⁹ The expansion of Japan-UK trade ties — both via CEPA and CPTPP — offers a mutually beneficial economic, political, and diplomatic win for both countries and will reflect positively in the UK's security ambitions vis-à-vis the Indo-Pacific, including potential military cooperation with Japan.

The UK's Structural Shift in the Post-Pandemic, Post-Brexit Era

The CPTPP represents a structural re-alignment for the UK's foreign policy outlook away from the EU and towards the Indo-Pacific. The country is currently dealing with economic restructuring and repercussions on two key fronts: the Covid-19 pandemic and Brexit. The UK entered its first economic recession in 11 years in August 2020, with further threats of a “double-dip”³⁰ decline looming. Amidst re-imposed lockdowns,³¹ businesses have suffered drastically. Many British businesses depend

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heavily on imports from the EU and are, therefore, deeply integrated with EU-centered supply chains. The EU has been the UK's largest trading partner and accounted for 52 percent of all goods imported into the country in 2019.³² Unfortunately, Brexit has injected considerable distrust and uncertainty into EU-UK supply chains, which is only likely to grow, adding to the vulnerability of supply chains the UK has depended on for decades. Covid-19 has changed the context of the economic narrative surrounding Brexit.³³ While the economic shock induced by the pandemic is significantly more acute when compared

to Brexit, the latter is poised to have a long-term economic effect that will shape Britain's outlook for decades to come.

Simultaneously, the UK's economic dependence on China is coming under serious question.³⁴ Last year, Chinese Ambassador to the UK Liu Xiaoming bluntly warning London against decoupling from China, stating the move would mean “decoupling from the future”.³⁵ In 2019, China was the UK's sixth-largest export market and fourth-largest import source.³⁶ Such dependency weighed heavy on the UK as the pandemic-induced lockdown halted all trade, particularly in the medical sector.³⁷ As a result, updating supply-chain strategies that bring more flexibility to processes while inculcating structural agility into organizations that are breaking away from EU dependency has emerged as a vital goal for many British firms.³⁸ To this end, a potential for integration with the India-Japan-Australia initiated SCRI presents itself as a strategic investment that can propel trade expansion, China decoupling, and the creation of a long-term manufacturing process free of EU dependency.

Fundamentally, changing geopolitical circumstances have necessitated a structural shift away from the EU within the UK's foreign policy calculus. Here, Asia and the Indo-Pacific have emerged as pillars of its new structural alignment, particularly considering the close ties Britain already shares with Indo-Pacific powers Japan, India, and Australia. In other words, Britain is undergoing a pivot from Europe to Asia. The UK's strategic “tilt” to the Indo-Pacific has therefore emerged as a rebalancing effort by London. It has been prominently outlined in the UK's Integrated Review of Defense, Security, Foreign and Development policy titled “Global Britain in a Competitive Age”.³⁹ Building on its limited presence in the region, Britain's aim is to become a foremost European partner with the most integrated presence in the Indo-Pacific. Within this pivot to the Indo-Pacific, Japan has emerged as “a key security partner for the UK and an enduring friend”.⁴⁰ The UK's swiftly deepening maritime cooperation with Japan, and its desire to participate in the CPTPP, are rooted

in such a structural shift towards the Indo-Pacific. As British Ambassador to Japan Paul Madden commented: “[Britain’s Indo-Pacific tilt] mirrors their [Japan’s] welcome in the economic sphere for our application to join the CPTPP trans pacific trade pact”.⁴¹

The UK’s Pacific Mode of Cooperation and the CPTPP

The UK formally announced its application to join the CPTPP on the first anniversary of its departure from the EU; the move served as a symbol of the British government’s intent to position London at the “center of a network of modern free trade deals”.⁴² The nine trillion GBP partnership will reduce tariffs for British industries, particularly in the food, drink, and automobile sectors, while also bringing economic benefits to the technology sphere and the nation’s service industry.⁴³ The deal has the potential to create high-value jobs while expanding the UK’s economic horizons beyond the continent. Importantly, unlike EU membership, engagement with the Pacific Region will not require much adjustment to its border control regulations or the obligations it undertook as an EU member-state. The UK’s trade with the CPTPP-11 group in 2019 is estimated at 111 billion GBP.⁴⁴ Such high levels, coupled with the benefits of engagement in determining digital trade rules, “rules of origin” clauses,⁴⁵ and the potential for faster travel and visas between UK-CPTPP countries, further boost the UK’s interest in the FTA. The origin procedures, in particular, will allow material from any CPTPP country to be treated as “originating” when used in production in another CPTPP state, thereby giving it preferential tariff treatment (reduced or no duty) under the agreement.⁴⁶

The CPTPP provides the British government with a unique opportunity to seize the present high-stress and uncertain economic environment as a chance to rethink and restructure supply chains and trade relations and make them more resilient. Economic alignment with Indo-Pacific powers – such as Japan – also provides London greater access to the Indo-Pacific security landscape, paving the way for

further cooperation in sectors beyond economics. The Indo-Pacific forms a critical region for Britain’s economic, security, and ideological ambitions; it offers an opportunity for the UK to chart new waters and bolster its standing as a “Global Britain” post Brexit. Britain’s desire to engage with the Indo-

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Pacific via the CPTPP is evident in several officials’ statements. For instance, Sam Meyers, the UK Trade Commissioner for Asia-Pacific, stated Britain was prepared for the pact’s “high standards”, and that London would actively promote shared principles in concert with its regional allies to address common challenges.⁴⁷ Asia is home to several mini-economic arrangements, leaving a tangled “noodle bowl” of rules and regulations that make engaging with the broader region difficult. In comparison, the CPTPP offers London a simpler proposition as a way to simultaneously enhance its economic engagement with numerous states.

The UK’s CPTPP Bid and the China Factor

Much of Japan’s interest in inviting the UK into the CPTPP, and Britain’s interest in joining the Pacific trade agreement, stems from the changing geostrategic environment vis-a-vis China. Britain is becoming increasingly concerned with the economic, political, and strategic implications of China’s rise, which has been characterized by blatant belligerence in recent years. Brexit was expected to heighten Britain’s reliance on China, but such a scenario has not entirely materialized. Rather, London managed

to craft a Brexit deal that allowed the UK to stay economically connected with the EU while equally reinforcing its commitment to a liberal, rules-based order questioning China's rising revisionist quest in Indo-Pacific.

In this context, the UK has undergone a noticeable shift in its China policy;⁴⁸ rather than promoting engagement and a desire to emerge as China's closest Western partner, policymakers in London have adopted a more hardline and pragmatic approach towards China.⁴⁹ Sino-UK ties surged under Prime Minister David Cameron (the "golden era"⁵⁰ in their relationship), as he sought increased Chinese investments and made Britain party to the Asian Infrastructure Development Bank (AIIB) in order to curry favor with Beijing. Since Theresa May's

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government, however, Britain has become more skeptical of Chinese intentions; it scrutinized all Chinese investments and re-assessed the security implications of Huawei's involvement in the British 5G network, ultimately banning it.⁵¹ In fact, after the Huawei ban, the UK sought Japan's help in developing advanced technology that is cost-efficient for its 5G network while also reaching out to Japanese firms NEC and Fujitsu to replace Huawei as suppliers.⁵² Considering Tokyo's own China challenge, particularly vis-a-vis Beijing's increasingly aggressive stance in the East China Sea, Japan and Britain can find growing synergy in their China outlooks.⁵³ This has already started to materialize as Japan's foreign and defense ministers expressed strong

concern to their British counterparts over China's new Coast Guard Law and its huge implications on the global rules-based order.⁵⁴ What could emerge is a deeper Anglo-Japanese "quasi-alliance"⁵⁵ with global contours that can contain China's more aggressive, revisionist agendas. The recent Japan-UK 2+2 dialogues reflect such a shift, with both states sharing concerns over China's draconian presence and maritime aggression in the broader Indo-Pacific region.⁵⁶

As such, the UK's application to join the CPTPP could be of serious concern to China, particularly as the latter ponders its own inclusion in the pact. China's Ministry of Commerce spokesperson, Gao Feng, revealed that Beijing is, "actively studying CPTPP membership" while emphasizing that China would, "actively consider joining the CPTPP" to boost economic globalization.⁵⁷ While Tokyo would certainly oppose China's inclusion, the UK's addition would greatly strengthen Japan's outreach in the Pacific world. As a major global power, Britain's pivot to the Indo-Pacific and strong alignment with powers such as Japan (alongside India, Australia, and the U.S.) could only hinder China's regional strategy. For instance, in a bid to limit China's rising economic clout in the Indo-Pacific, the strategic debate in the UK is hinting towards Britain's potential bid to "veto" China's proposed accession to the FTA should London join first;⁵⁸ the reality of such a proposition, however, ultimately remains slim, with assessment possible only after the release of the UK's CPTPP offer terms.

Simultaneously, the U.S., now under the leadership of President Joe Biden, could reconsider its participation in the format, presenting a further challenge to any prospect of China's inclusion. The Biden administration has demonstrated a stronger resolve to work with international partners, particularly Indo-Pacific partners, vis-a-vis the China challenge. Biden has, in stark contrast to President Trump, explicitly expressed the importance of alliances in the economic and security domains.⁵⁹ President Biden and Secretary of State Anthony Blinken's interactions with Beijing, particularly the recent summit in Anchorage, Alaska, have so far been

hard-nosed, making a thaw in their deadlocked ties unlikely in the immediate future. As Prime Minister Boris Johnson faces fading success in finalizing a U.S.-UK FTA,⁶⁰ the CPTPP can provide the UK with an additional avenue to enhance economic ties with the U.S. For Washington, entry into the forum could also be a way to demonstrate its commitment to the Indo-Pacific region and reestablish some of the trust and reliability it lost during the previous administration.

Conclusion

The world is increasingly entering what can be perhaps considered a prelude to an enduring power rivalry between the U.S. and China. It will be vital for other major and middle power actors to band together for support facing pressures exerted by the new circumstances. More importantly, it will be critical for democratic powers committed to the liberal institutional and rules-based order to come together and find synergy in their commonalities. ■

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