

Report

EU – Pacific Talks: Japan – V4 Relations – More Central but Still European

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January
2022

In the last few years, there have been a number of articles written about the revitalization of relations between Japan and the EU following the signing of the Strategic and Economic Partnership. However, Japan's rapprochement with the EU does not end in Brussels. On the contrary, Japan has drawn increasing attention to another European platform, the Visegrad Four. The V4+Japan regional cooperative framework started in 2004 by a series of meetings between the countries' representatives, who discussed several domains of cooperation such as strengthening economic relations, political dialogue, promoting research and development in science and technology or providing development assistance to third countries. However, despite the noticeable expansion of relations, it remains far from becoming an institutionalized framework and is currently facing many challenges including Chinese rising global influence and strategic geo-economic shifts.

This year's fourth debate in a series of expert discussions on the EU's relations with the Pacific took place online on Tuesday 11 January. The guests offered their views on the potential and challenges of the V4+Japan format and whether it is possible to institutionalize the cooperation.

Prof. Yoko Iwama from National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies in Japan draws attention to the Japanese perspective on V4+Japan cooperation and its main challenges. The current Covid-19 pandemic has shown the importance of scientific development and the need for further investments in the V4 countries. However, the institutionalization of V4+Japan format is not the best way to enhance the cooperation due to the bureaucratic cost and also because the substance of V4+Japan partnership is not the politics but rather economic, cultural and scientific cooperation. She sees China as a threat because it uses trade as a leverage to punish political tendencies which does not approve. On the other hand, the European countries and Japan cannot abstain from engaging the increasingly prominent China, which neither of them can do without.

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Eliška Žigová from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic emphasize the need for further cooperation with Japan and other countries of Indo-Pacific region and points out that regarding the upcoming Czech presidency of the EU Council, for the first time in history, the Czech Republic has geopolitical priorities focused on such a remote region.

According to Oskar Pietrewicz from the Polish Institute of International Affairs, Japan nowadays seems to be more interested in Central Europe due to Chinese activities in the region. However, the expectation of European countries about the incoming Chinese involvement in the region is exaggerating. Since the launch of 16+1 project in 2012, China has not achieved the spectacular economic success in Central Europe. In terms of investments, the most important partners for V4 countries are Japan and South Korea. As such, the general perception in V4 countries is sometimes Sino-centric while unintentionally paying less attention to other Asian countries.

Gergely Salát from the Institute for Foreign Affairs and Trade in Hungary mentioned several issues that might obstruct the development of V4+Japan cooperation. One of them is the fact, that V4 countries are quite divided and have very different priorities in terms of Russia, China, Japan or South Korea. The V4 countries are competitors in many fields and as such, local population do not share a common identity. Another challenge is China. Many people in Central Europe believe that China has limitless market and limitless amount of money, which has much to do with the ambitions and illusions of the decision-makers in the V4 countries, that China seems to be important, but the reality is different.

For Róbert Vancel from Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica, the V4 platform is a pragmatic tool of foreign policy. However, it is necessary to keep in mind, that V4 countries compete with each other over Japanese investments and as such, the potential of V4 is very limited. In terms of current rule of law related conflict especially in Poland and Hungary, Róbert Vancel argues that the nature of relations between V4 and Japan is mostly economic

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cooperation. Therefore, topics such as rule of law and freedom of press are not a big deal and Japan does not comment on the internal issues of V4 countries.

"If you missed the debate, you can watch it on the Facebook page of the EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy, which hosts the EU-Pacific Talks debate."

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2022

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