V4+Japan: evolution of Japan’s transregional dialogue with Central Europe

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Abstract
The present article tracks the evolution of Japan’s engagement with Central Europe after the end of Cold War. More specifically, it looks into the development of V4+Japan partnership within the context of post-Cold War foreign policy of Japan. The main argument revolves around two questions. First, in light of democratic backsliding in Central Europe, the article enquires into the basis of strategic relevancy and rationality behind the V4+Japan partnership. Second, it looks into the potential for future evolution of the relationship in the context of the post-Brexit EU-Japan relationship. The major conclusion rests on the premise that V4+Japan partnership, although weakly institutionalized and asymmetric in nature, retains meaning as long as it remains contingent on the values and principles of the EU-Japan strategic dialogue.

Introduction
The Visegrad summit with Japan during the summer of 2013 proved to be watershed moment for both participating sides. Under the leadership of Prime Minister Abe, Japan was reinvigorated and ready to address the international community in a more assertive way. Armed with a new economic doctrine, it also took the international spotlight. On the other hand, the Visegrad states, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia and the Czech Republic, began facing less favorable and more challenging tides. The astonishing erosion of democracy in Central Europe has been closely associated with the surge of authoritarian populism among the Visegrad four (V4). Although the democratic governance crisis among the V4 has not manifested uniformly among all member states, democratic backsliding has been more notable in Hungary and Poland. Three decades after

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(1) “The Visegrad Group: The Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia | Visegrad Group Plus Japan Joint Statement,” accessed October 1, 2020, http://www.visegradgroup.eu/calendar/2013/visegrad-group-plus.
the fall of communism, the rule of law, political and civil rights have visibly deteriorated, and it appears that Central Europe has become a grey zone spanning between consolidated democratic rule and closed authoritarianism.\(^2\)

So, how has this “illiberal” turn among the V4 been reflected on their cooperation with Japan, especially after the Warsaw meeting? Given that the promotion of democracy and liberal values stood at the base of the Joint Statement of 2013, one has to wonder about Japan’s reactions. Has this dramatic decline of democracy in Central Europe in any way affected the relationship between both sides, or its future prospects? Reading the press releases of the last two Summits in 2018 and 2019, there is a sense of fading out. For instance, during the last summit, the rhetoric on democracy and the rule of law has practically disappeared. Even the annual diplomatic report of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan (MOFAJ) in 2019 mentions a break in high-level exchanges after the Warsaw Summit.

The length and density of press briefs can hardly represent a benchmark for assessing the strength and vitality of a diplomatic dialogue, far from that. The dialogue is also not exclusive to intergovernmental relations and takes place simultaneously at multiple levels and fora. Despite the recent summitry, however, there have been some doubts as to the actual vitality, strength, and future prospects for developing the intergovernmental partnership further, possibly into a more strategic and better institutionalized format.\(^3\) Although interactions between the two sides over the Brexit period have increased, there have been little tangible achievements. The V4 confrontational stance towards Brussels and their own disaccords have not been beneficial either. 2018 was a historical year for strengthening the EU-Japan relations. The relations equipped with an Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) and Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA) are in a better shape than ever. European unity, stability, and further integration are in the strategic interest of Japan. On the other hand, the V4 states continue to fail in constructively engaging and mending fences within the EU ranks, and they risk being further marginalized, or worse, excluded from the EU altogether.\(^4\) So, what is the underlying rationale and meaning of this partnership?

The basic premise from my previous research claiming that the Visegrad membership in the EU forms a crucial component behind the evolution of the V4+Japan framework (including its scope, intensity, and future orientation) remains unchanged.\(^5\) Given the geostrategic significance of the Central and East Europe, especially in the context of a revived classical Mackinderian geopolitics of Eurasia and, more importantly, to the extent that the V4 remains a functioning part

\(^2\) Vit Dostal et al., “Illiberalism in the V4: Pressure Points and Bright Spots” (Political Capital and Friedrich Naumann Stiftung, 2018); A Ágh, Declining Democracy in East-Central Europe: The Divide in the EU and Emerging Hard Populism, New Horizons in European Politics (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2019).

\(^3\) Michael Kolmas, “The V4+Japan Framework: A New Mode of Cooperation or a Doomed Project? – The Diplomat,” Diplomat, March 13, 2020, https://thediplomat.com/2020/03/the-v4japan-framework-a-new-mode-of-cooperation-or-a-doomed-project/; Rudolf Furst, “Japan and the Visegrad 4: The Unsensational Strategic Partners” (Prague, May 12, 2020), https://www.dokumenty-iir.cz/PolicyPapers/2020/Furst_V4.Japan.pdf.

\(^4\) Tom Theuns, “Could We Found a New EU without Hungary and Poland?,” EuObserver, July 21, 2020, https://euobserver.com/opinion/149470?utm_source=euobs&utm_medium=email.

\(^5\) Boštjan Bertalanic, “Opportunities and Challenges for V4 plus Japan Relations in the Post-Brexit EU,” The Electronic Journal of Central European Studies in Japan 4 (2018).
of the EU Common Market, the V4+Japan bond continues to play a role in Japan’s foreign policy. I believe, however, that there are additional factors that need to be taken into consideration when assessing the intrinsic value of the V4 plus Japan cooperation for Japan. I also believe that the relevancy of the partnership should be assessed foremost in the context of Japan’s new foreign policy activism that gradually emerged since the mid-2000s and led to closer ties with the EU.

The paper consists of two parts. First, I will address the question as to why the V4 still matters to Japan. Here, I describe the major characteristics of Japan’s foreign and security policy, as well as the shift in strategic thinking that gradually evolved through the intergovernmental. I will answer the first question from the realist point of view, by introducing the recent debate on the future of the liberal international order, which emphasizes Japan’s strategic refocusing on the active pursuit of a rule-based international order via a classical strategy of balancing and diplomatic dialogue. In the second part, I will address the question concerning the future prospects for strengthening relationship between Japan and Central Europe through a gradual building of V4+Japan partnership. Here, I will answer the question through a description of the historical evolution of the V4 plus Japan cooperation from the 1990s until 2020.

**Strategic relevancy of the V4 in Japan’s post-Cold War foreign policy**

Debates and discussions concerning the nature of Japan’s foreign relations proliferated in the years following the end of Cold War. Japan has often been described as an idiosyncratic member of the international community. Metaphors labeling Japan as a passive-reactive state have been linked to its specific socioeconomic and cultural milieu. Rather than projecting a proactive and engaged posture, Japan has been depicted as self-absorbed and focused on national economic interests under the US security guarantees. However, by the mid-1990s, the Yoshida doctrine, the set of foreign policy principles and guidelines in place during the Cold War, which helped Japan rebuild itself and regain its place in the international community, was running out of its course and was gradually replaced by an emerging activism in the form of a new aid multilateralism centered on key global institutions and regional initiatives.

From the beginning of the 1990s, Japan enhanced its diplomatic strategy under the UN system and beefed up its official development assistance (ODA). One of the examples of this emerging activism and globally oriented diplomacy directly connected to the reform of the post-Cold War order in Europe was the establishment of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) in 1991. Here, Japan as a founding member took an active role in the rebuilding of a new post-Cold War Central and East Europe. The EBRD was instrumental in the early introduction and promotion of market reforms and entrepreneurship among the Central and Eastern European Countries (CEEC) countries in support of their democratic and economic transition. It is still active today and has expanded its reach into neighboring regions.

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(6) G D Hook et al., *Japan’s International Relations: Politics, Economics and Security*, Sheffield Centre for Japanese Studies/Routledge Series (Taylor & Francis, 2011), 68–70.
(7) D T Yasutomo, *The New Multilateralism in Japan’s Foreign Policy* (St. Martin’s Press, 1995).
In the security domain, Japan began diversifying its security portfolio and even taking over a more active role in the promotion of regional and multilateral security cooperation. This emerging trend has been described as ‘decentralizing’ or “broadening the security strategy beyond its traditional unidirectional focus on security ties with the United States, and toward new multidirectional security partnership with same partners and actors, and looser forms of security cooperation with other actors.”(8)

By the end of the 1990s, the ‘normal–abnormal’ debate on Japan’s international character crystallized among the policymakers and, in the following decade, distilled into two competitive diplomatic blueprints for the 21st century. The first option advocated building closer ties within the East Asian region, centering on improving relations with China. Based on this thinking, Japan would lead the way in the promotion and development of the East Asian Community. The second plan, on the other hand, emphasized the need to build stronger ties with other democratic states and to enhance the Japan–US alliance. Japan was to become a champion of the international liberal world order, for example, as a promoter of trade liberalization. The new strategy was to be firmly based on the promotion of universal values, such as freedom, respect for human rights, and democracy, a remarkable departure from the previous almost exclusive focus on market-oriented and development diplomacy.(9)

From the mid-2000s on, the second strategic option prevailed and materialized into a new diplomatic doctrine named Arc of Freedom and Prosperity (AFP). The new doctrine was launched in 2006 and was promoted by then Foreign Minister Aso Taro, describing it as a fundamental turn in Japan’s strategic posture, as already mentioned above, towards a value-based and value-oriented diplomacy. AFP also stood for a geopolitical strategy encircling the Eurasian continent, which strongly suggested Japan’s intention to introduce a policy of containment towards China.(10) Others have suggested, however, that AFP was not aimed at China but was rather an attempt to engage Russia in the solution of the longstanding Russo-Japanese territorial dispute.(11) It is at this point that Central and Eastern Europe was promoted to what has been described as the third pillar of Japan’s foreign policy (the two other pillars being the Japan-US alliance and the East Asian policy).(12) An important side effect of this strategizing was, for example, a firmer inclusion of the Central European countries into the Japan’s foreign policy, which simultaneously soared the importance of the V4+Japan dialogue.

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(8) Paul Midford, “New Directions in Japan’s Security: Non-US Centric Evolution, Introduction to a Special Issue,” Pacific Review 31, no. 4 (July 4, 2018): 408, https://doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2017.1417326.

(9) Yuichi Hosoya, “The Rise and Fall of Japan’s Grand Strategy: The ‘Arc of Freedom and Prosperity’ and the Future Asian Order,” Asia-Pacific Review 18, no. 1 (2011): 17, https://doi.org/10.1080/13439006.2011.582677.

(10) Hosoya, 18.

(11) Tomohiko Taniguchi, “Beyond ‘The Arc of Freedom and Prosperity’: Debating Universal Values in Japanese Grand Strategy | The German Marshall Fund of the United States,” The German Marshall Fund of the United States, October 26, 2010, https://www.gmfus.org/publications/beyond-arc-freedom-and-prosperity-debating-universal-values-japanese-grand-strategy.

(12) Daisuke Kitade, “The Butterfly Effect: Why Does Eastern Europe Matter to Japan? | European Union Institute for Security Studies,” ISS Brief, May 27, 2020, https://www.iss.europa.eu/content/butterfly-effect-why-does-eastern-europe-matter-japan.
From here on, foreign and security policy began decentralizing and diversifying at a new and faster pace. In 2007, Japan signed a defense pact with Australia, followed by a similar agreement with India in 2008. Japan also approached NATO and began exploring the idea of collective defense, a taboo topic in the past, which was eventually introduced in the 2010s. Surprisingly, however, the AFP activism came to a sudden halt with the internal crisis of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and their loss of the 2009 general elections to the opposition Democratic Party (DPJ). Although AFP was quickly shelved and disappeared from the official parlance, its underlying logic of a foreign policy based on values remained ingrained and was again picked up under the second Abe administration in the early 2010s.

By 2013, Prime Minister Abe adopted two concepts that framed his foreign and security policy: proactive pacifism and value diplomacy. Proactive pacifism was juxtaposed to the traditional principle of constitutional pacifism or the pacifist spirit, enshrined in Article 9 of the Japanese constitution. The general notion of a proactive pacifist foreign policy was already debated during the 2000s, and it was introduced in the 2010s as a conduit for loosening up more fundamental brakes and restrictions on Japan’s security policy, namely the three principles on the non-export of weapons, the right to collective (self)defense, and the revision of the constitutional Article 9. The second concept stressing a value-oriented diplomacy was a direct legacy of the AFP doctrine. Under the second Abe administration, the concept of ‘value diplomacy’ has been championed as a move in defense of the rule-based international liberal order. However, actual policy and diplomatic behavior did not necessarily follow the ‘freedoms and democracy’ rhetoric and often led to contradictions. For example, compared to other Western democracies, Japan continued engaging with the revisionist and illiberal regimes that have been openly undermining international rules and institutions. In this sense, rather than value-led, Japan’s foreign policy has been aligned more with pragmatism and classical realism, which follow the logic of national interest and power balancing. (13) The current theoretical debate among traditionally oriented scholars (liberals and realists) concerning the future of the liberal international order has expanded this argument and has attempted to characterize Japan as an emerging ‘proactive stabilizer’ which is focused on keeping the US engaged within the current order and, at the same time, attempting to strengthen the liberal order’s basic pillars, mostly the free trade regime and the security architecture in the Asia-Pacific. (14)

Japan’s shift towards a value-oriented diplomacy should not presume its change of heart regarding more readiness to promote democracy and human rights regimes actively, in authoritarian and illiberal states. Compared to Western democracies, Japan has traditionally been

(13) Paul Midford, “Abe’s pro-Active Pacifism and Values Diplomacy: Implications for EU–Japan Political and Security Cooperation 1,” in The EU–Japan Partnership in the Shadow of China, ed. Marie Berkofofsky, Axel; Hughes, Christopher W; Midford, Paul; Söderberg, 1st ed., vol. 1 (Routledge, 2019), 40–58, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351172165-3.

(14) G John Ikenberry, “The Liberal International Order and Its Discontents,” Millennium - Journal of International Studies 38, no. 3 (2010): 509–21, https://doi.org/10.1177/0305829810366477; Yoichi Funabashi and G John Ikenberry, The Crisis of Liberal Internationalism: Japan and the World Order, ed. Yoichi Funabashi and G John Ikenberry (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2020), https://doi.org/10.7864/j.ctvbnm3nv.
reluctant to intervene and impose democratization in domestic affairs, especially as a precondition for development aid distribution.\(^{(15)}\) Rather than imposing political values and engaging in domestic institution building, it appears that Japanese leadership has been focusing on supporting and defending the US-led international liberal order, mostly by engaging in conventional diplomacy of power balancing.\(^{(16)}\) Thus, Japan’s contradictory maneuvering over the past decade could be interpreted within the classical realist doctrine portraying Japan as an emerging ‘proactive stabilizer’ focused on the maintenance of basic rules sustaining the liberal world order. In this sense, for example, Tamaki from Chuo University writes that, “[u]ltimately Japan is pursuing a rule-based international order that ensures the principles of peaceful conflict resolution, freedom of navigation and free trade, rather than promoting democratic regimes and human rights [...].”\(^{(17)}\)

Based on the above reasoning, Japan’s diplomatic rhetoric on liberal values should not be equalized with its intent to intervene in domestic politics, but rather as a diplomatic strategy of engagement with various types of regimes to prevent further erosion of the international liberal order.

At this point, we can derive a tentative answer to the first question as to why Japan’s partnership with the V4 still emphasizes liberal ideology as the guiding principle of their relations, in light of a democratic backsliding in Central Europe. In the context of erosion of the international politico-economic liberal order, the stability of Central Europe remains crucially connected to the overall stability of Europe and EU, a key global partner for Japan. Since the early 1990s, Japan actively supported economic and political reforms in the Central Europe, primarily to help stabilize East Europe and assist with democratization and market-economy transition of the former communist countries. The need to assist and consolidate democratic rule and market stability has not changed over the past decades and, today, it is more important than ever. With the US hegemonic decline and corrosion of global liberal institutions, Central Europe integration with EU remains crucial for the stability of the European market. Although Japan’s strategic turn towards the active support of the global liberal order has its own share of pragmatism, Japan’s relations with the Visegrad states and other Central and Eastern European countries (CEEC) complement and assist the EU efforts for market governance and stability in East Europe.\(^{(18)}\) The Visegrad states are part of the Euro-Atlantic institutions and, due to their position and historical experience, they represent a strategic trade partner and interlocutor to Japan, on issues related to East Europe and Russia. Furthermore, consistent engagement and gradual evolution of Japan’s relations with the Visegrad group are also representative of Japan’s diplomatic culture of engaging with international actors and keeping them within the framework of liberal economic and political order. From this point of view, cooperation with the Visegrad states will probably remain a focal

\(^{(15)}\) Nobuhiko Tamaki. “Japan’s Quest for a Rules-Based International Order: The Japan-US Alliance and the Decline of US Liberal Hegemony,” *Contemporary Politics* 26, no. 4 (2020): 390, https://doi.org/10.1080/13569775.2020.1777041.

\(^{(16)}\) Tamaki, 398.

\(^{(17)}\) Tamaki, 394–95.

\(^{(18)}\) Kitade, “The Butterfly Effect: Why Does Eastern Europe Matter to Japan? | European Union Institute for Security Studies.”
point for Japan’s foreign policy in the future. The future prospects of this relationship are discussed in the following section.

**V4+Japan: historical evolution and future prospects**

Japan’s relations with the Visegrad group have gradually expanded over a period of three decades and have been influenced primarily by two factors. One concerns the V4 countries’ accession to and membership in Euro-Atlantic institutions. The other, however, stems from the emergence of a progressively more proactive Japan’s foreign policy through the 2000s, which attributed greater economic and strategic value to the V4 countries within the new diplomatic strategy, emphasizing support for the US-led liberal world order. As it was mentioned previously, the Arc of Freedom and Prosperity (AFP) doctrine set apart the V4 as one of Japan’s key partners and investment destinations in CEEC.

Chronologically, we can analyze the evolution and expansion of cooperation through three stages. The first stage spans through the 1990s into the first half of the 2000s. This period is characterized by V4 democratic and market transition and integration with the Euro-Atlantic institutions (EU and NATO). I label this period as the EU pre-accession period. The second stage began in 2004, after the majority of CEEC became full members of the EU, and this period coincides with the springing up of Japan’s new foreign policy activism centered on the AFP. It also coincides with the V4–Japan relations shifting away from an asymmetrical donor-recipient relation towards a weaker but still asymmetric partnership which consolidated in 2013. I label this period as the first part of the EU post-accession period. The second part of EU post-accession period emerged with the advent of the second Abe administration in the 2010s, which is here labeled as the Brexit era.

From 2014 on, the V4 plus Japan platform was firmly rooted into a more ambitious agenda announced during the Warsaw Summit in 2013. One of the central characteristics of this period evolved around the debate on the future of the post-Brexit EU and the strengthening of EU-Japan relations with the conclusion of the EPA/SPA agreements. The major impact of these two debates has been a recentering of the V4+Japan relations towards the EU-Japan strategic dialogue. At the systemic level, this fitted Japan’s strategy of forging stronger ties with the EU. The following subsections briefly describe the evolution of this logic through the three periods spanning from the 1990s till nowadays and then offer an assessment of the future prospects.

1. **EU pre-accession period (1990–2003): V4+Japan relations in the context of Japan’s new aid multilateralism**

Multilateralism was instrumental in the new direction of Japan’s diplomacy in the 1990s. It served as a springboard for more specific regional policies and allowed Japan to play a more active role in the international community as a nonmilitary power. This new form of activism, through multilateral institutions and initiatives, was a conduit for Japan’s socialization into a more responsible international role, which permitted more diplomatic independence from U.S. foreign
and security policy. For example, by working on alternative nonmilitary approaches to security, like the concept of human security, Japan was able to contribute to regional security matters without considerably altering its pacifist activism. In this sense, the early 1990s Japan’s involvement in the Central Europe was an important exercise for testing such new diplomatic tools and policies, and this allowed Japan to develop political relations further and enhance its status among the CEEC.

When the V4 states joined forces on their way towards full integration into the Euro-Atlantic institutions, Japan came along with other Western European countries and offered assistance. Through the 1990s, Japan’s relations with Central Europe were mostly concentrated on supporting economic and political reforms that eventually led to the consolidation of a new post-Cold War order in Europe. Japan pledged considerable financial, technical, and food assistance to the region. Poland and Hungary only were promised $2 billion. At the same time, following the French initiative, Japan helped establish the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), which evolved into a key mechanism for providing loans to promote economic development and market reforms. Consequently, by the end of the 1990s, V4 countries experienced a palatable improvement in their economic prospects and turned into a promising destination for foreign direct investments (FDI). Japanese automotive industry and major multinational companies like Sony and Matsushita moved in and started building new production lines situated closer to EU core supply chains. Furthermore, Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic joined NATO in 1999 and the EU Commission fast-tracked most of the CEEC countries for EU membership, which offered Japan additional incentives for building closer political ties. Later in 2003, during his official visit to the Czech Republic, Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi raised a proposal for closer cooperation with the V4 group. This initiative evolved into what we now call the V4+Japan partnership.

2. EU post-accession period (2004–2014): V4 in the context of Japan’s emerging grand strategy

Japan’s 1990s aid multilateralism in Central and East Europe served as testing the ground for new policies and network-building, which, in the new millennium, gained a completely new significance. From 2004, Japan’s strategic thinking made an unprecedented turn and serious attempts were made to rebuild a foreign policy firmly grounded in the framework of liberal universal values (see the previous section). The announcement of Arc of Freedom and Prosperity (AFP) was a grand statement that Japan was committing resources for the support of key principles and values of the US-led liberal international order, which meant stronger support for the US-Japan alliance and other like-minded economies. AFP also reaffirmed Japan’s interest in the further democratization of Central and East Europe, which has been often interpreted as an attempt...

\(^{(18)}\) D T Yasutomo, “The Politization of Japan’s ‘Post-Cold War’ Multilateral Diplomacy,” in *Japan’s Foreign Policy after Cold War: Coping with Change*, ed. G L Curtis (Armonk: Taylor & Francis Group, 1993), 331.

\(^{(20)}\) “MOFA: JOINT STATEMENT TOWARDS STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN JAPAN AND THE CZECH REPUBLIC,” accessed October 7, 2020, https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/europe/czech/joint0308.html.
to “bring […] Russia] to the negotiation table while enriching the diplomatic capital of Japan’s ally the United States in areas such as Eastern Europe, that were critical to its global strategy.”[21]

In this new strategic context, cooperation between Japan and V4 was upgraded at a new level, and it was more clearly inserted into the European multilateral institutional architecture. AFP was well received among the V4 countries, although it did not last long. It was criticized for antagonizing China and Russia and was pushed aside when Prime Minister Abe suddenly resigned in 2007. His successor Yasuo Fukuda did not sympathize with the doctrine and turned towards improving relations with Asian neighbors, putting more emphasis on Japan-China relations. About this time, however, Japan also entered a period of political and economic instability, and when the LDP lost the general elections to the rival Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), foreign policy lost some of the previous course. Relations with the US were damaged, and, by the end of the 2000s, tensions with China began peaking. Relations with the V4 also lingered and were revived only by 2013, after the inauguration of the second Abe administration.

During his second term, Prime Minister Abe opened the next chapter in Japan’s strategic thinking, which led to a new wave of diplomatic activism, resurrecting some of the AFP core ideas. As Japan’s domestic politics stabilized and economic policy set on a new trajectory, the strategy was again in focus. Japan’s preoccupation with security issues and the future of the liberal world order received more attention than ever before. Although the emphasis on value-oriented diplomacy was back, Japan actually began putting greater importance on the respect and protection of the key principles underlying the US-led international liberal order: peaceful resolution of conflicts, freedom of navigation, and free trade. The 2013 V4+Japan Summit in Warsaw should be assessed in light of this strategic turn, as it set the tone and the direction of the dialogue during the Brexit period.

3. EU Post-accession period (2014–2020): V4 plus Japan during Brexit/post-Brexit period

From 2014/2015 on, the V4 plus Japan partnership was equipped with an ambitious agenda spanning over political, economic, and security issues. The Warsaw Summit appears to have been oriented to plant the V4 plus Japan partnership firmly into the liberal order and align it with Japan’s active support of this order. On one hand, by addressing liberal values and freedoms, like democracy and free trade, V4 plus Japan framework was fastened to the evolving EU–Japan strategic partnership. On this point, the Joint Statement declared that:

> Recognizing shared universal values and principles, such as democracy, the rule of law, human rights, freedom, and market-based economy, both sides pointed out that cooperation between the V4 countries and Japan represents and integral part of and a tangible added value to the EU-Japan strategic partnership.”[22]

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[21] Taniguchi, “Beyond ‘The Arc of Freedom and Prosperity’: Debating Universal Values in Japanese Grand Strategy | The German Marshall Fund of the United States,” 2.
[22] “The Visegrad Group: The Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia | Visegrad Group Plus Japan Joint Statement.”
Second, in the security domain, the partnership was to be aligned with major pillars of the international security order, like the UN, NATO, and OSCE. Furthermore, security was linked to the support of order and rights on open seas, for example, freedom and safety of navigation. Here, the Joint Statement says that:

*The V4 and Japan reaffirmed the importance of maintaining order on seas and oceans based on international law and the freedom and safety of navigation. Both sides stressed that oceans, as common goods of all peoples, should be open, free and secure, and underlined the importance of upholding these principles on the basis of international law, including the UN Convention on the Law of Seas.*

Another key development was the diversification of cooperation, not just horizontally, but also vertically, mostly by including various governmental and nongovernmental events and seminars. For example, high-level summits were to be supplemented with periodic foreign ministers’ meetings and consultations on the ambassadorial level. New initiatives in the spheres of culture, education, and science were also launched, which gradually expanded the V4+Japan relations into the civil society domain. For example, 2014 was designated as the V4 plus Japan Exchange Year with goodwill ambassadors engaging in events promoting people-to-people exchange in culture, education, and tourism.

The agenda formulated during the Warsaw Summit set the spirit of the dialogue and was very ambitious, however, the actual relations after 2015 took a much narrower focus, reinforcing the asymmetry between the two parties. Unfortunately, the dialogue and cooperation did not expand. One of the characteristics of the cooperation after 2013 has been a diminished summitry at the highest level. For example, the third V4 plus Japan Summit took place only at the end of 2018, after a five-year break. The other point concerns the substance of the dialogue, which, after 2016, was mostly reduced to lower levels and centered on the consequences of Brexit and trade relations. The major legacy of these two issues has been that the V4+Japan dialogue did not expand much out of the context of EU-Japan strategic relations. Nevertheless, I do not think that this is necessarily a step back.

For Japan, Brexit presented a major political and economic challenge that had meaning for the wider international order. This was stressed by Prime Minister Abe during the third V4 plus Summit in 2019. It was a definite step back in European integration process and a severe hit to international liberal institutionalism. Japan emphasized that a strong and unified EU has been in its best interest. For example, one of the early messages from the Japanese government task force dealing with Brexit claimed that both EU and the UK have a clear responsibility towards the international community and that Japan expects them to continue cooperating for international

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(23) “The Visegrad Group: The Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia | Visegrad Group Plus Japan Joint Statement.”

(24) MOFA, “V4+Japan Exchange Year 2014,” 2014, https://www.mofa.go.jp/erp/c_see/page22e_000478.html.

(25) MOFA, “Third ‘Visegrad Group plus Japan’ Summit Meeting,” April 25, 2019, https://www.mofa.go.jp/erp/c_see/page4e_001012.html.
peace, stability, and prosperity. In terms of strengthening the free trade regime, the EU–Japan EPA was given absolute priority. At the same time, however, Japan also expressed strong intentions to continue building closer bilateral relationship with the UK.\(^{(26)}\) Coupled with the security agreement, the recent speedy conclusion of the UK–Japan trade agreement is an indication of how important this relationship is for Japan.

On the opposite side, the V4 response to Brexit was not in agreement. They have often been singled out as the factor exasperating the EU Brexit crisis. UK was an ally, and discussion on the post-Brexit EU was not without concerns among the V4, although, compared to Japan, their concerns were on a different plane. Visegrad countries have been distrustful of the EU supra-nationalism and also critical about the deepening of the integration process. Furthermore, euroscepticism, populist antiliberal tones, and hostility towards EU policies on immigration have characterized some of the V4 countries as the major disruptors of EU solidarity and unity.\(^{(27)}\) In terms of V4 plus Japan, a post-Brexit EU will bring realignment among member states, which can lead to two scenarios. V4 might get additional influence as a block, which could enhance Japan’s relations with the group. On the other hand, Brexit could as well be the last straw that pushes some of the V4 countries further to the margins of Europe. This could reduce the value of the group for Japan, especially if access to the European Single Market is restricted.

On the other hand, the conclusion of the EU–Japan trade agreement delivered much more tangible benefits and was welcomed with great enthusiasm among the V4 already before entering into force. The EU–Japan Economic Partnership (EPA) celebrated its first anniversary in February 2020, and during the first ten months, EU exports to Japan increased by 6.6% compared to a year before. Japan also records a 6.3% increase in exports to EU.\(^{(28)}\) Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary are among the top ten EU trade partners of Japan and, as a group, the fifth largest EU importer of Japanese goods.\(^{(29)}\) In times when the trade wars and protectionism are on the rise, EPA has been a great victory for free trade and liberal order. Although this was not a direct achievement by the V4 plus Japan, it nevertheless conveys an important message that multilateralism and liberal institutionalism are still vital. The real gains of the agreement will probably increase over time and, with the EPA in place, economic relations between Japan and V4 are tighter, which keeps them firmly anchored in the key segment of the international liberal order. That should count as a success.

\(^{(26)}\) MOFA, “Japan’s Message to the United Kingdom and the European Union ,” Government Task-force regarding the Withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union, 2016, https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/000185466.pdf.

\(^{(27)}\) Francis B Jacobs, The EU after Brexit: Institutional and Policy Implications (Springer, 2018); Aliaksei Kazharski, “The End of ‘Central Europe’? The Rise of the Radical Right and the Contestation of Identities in Slovakia and the Visegrad Four,” Geopolitics 23, no. 4 (2018): 754–80.

\(^{(28)}\) European Commission, “Trade: First Year of the EU-Japan Economic Partnership Agreement Shows Growth in EU Exports,” January 31, 2020, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_20_161.

\(^{(29)}\) Eurostat, “Japan-EU – International Trade in Goods Statistics - Statistics Explained,” March 2020, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Japan-EU_-_international_trade_in_goods_statistics#Trade_with_Japan_by_Member_State.
Looking ahead

At this point, we can answer the second question concerning the future prospects of the V4+Japan cooperation. The historical overview of the relationship helps identify certain trends and open niches for the future. First, let’s look at major trends. From the early 1990s, the region represented a crucial testing and learning ground for the development of Japan’s post-Cold War foreign and security policy. Through the 1990s, Japan’s role was instrumental in the democratic transitioning and market reforms that eventually led CEEC to their integration with the Euro-Atlantic institutions. Japan’s relations with the Visegrad countries remained in focus during the 2000s, as the relationships transformed from an asymmetrical donor/recipient relation into a weak partnership which was further enhanced with the V4 accession to the European Single Market. As Japan began turning towards a value oriented diplomatic strategy in defense of the declining liberal international system, support and cooperation with peer democracies came to the forefront. With the Warsaw Summit in 2013, the V4 plus Japan dialogue was expanded and firmly anchored in Japan’s policy towards Central Europe and the EU.

However, while the EU-Japan strategic partnership evolved and was drastically strengthened with the conclusion of the EPA/SPA agreements, V4 plus Japan gradually lost its vigor. After a five-year break, the last two summits took place in 2018 and 2019. The agendas seem to have shrunken and lost almost all reference to democracy and liberal values. Nonproliferation and denuclearization of North Korea, the situation in Ukraine, open seas, free trade, and the UN reform are listed under issues of common interest concerning the global order. Science and technology, tourism, disaster prevention, environment, and the Western Balkans are vaguely defined topics proposed as trajectories for future bilateral cooperation. All summits have also in some way touched upon the EU–Japan relations, especially the issues pertaining to Brexit and trade relations.

Although a high-level dialogue seems to have faltered, exchanges at lower (nongovernmental) levels have continued at a better pace and higher frequency, at least among students, academics, and local embassies. In 2017 and 2018, several seminars and consultations took place focusing on Brexit’s impact on the future of the EU-Japan relations. The last seminar was organized in 2019 and participants discussed the global economic situation and the future of free trade. Josai University and Josai International University, who share a scholarship fund for V4 students, have been regularly organizing an annual V4 plus Japan student conference that brings together students from Japanese and V4 countries. In recent years, the conference expanded, and it now invites students from Germany, Slovenia, and Lithuania.

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(30) IFAT, “V4 after Brexit: A New Opportunity for Japan in Europe? – Külgügyi És Külgazdasági Intézet,” December 13, 2017, https://kki.hu/event/v4-after-brexit-a-new-opportunity-for-japan-in-europe/; JOSAI, “Josai Co-Hosts Visegrad Group (V4) plus Japan Seminar 2018,” February 9, 2018, https://www.josai.jp/en/news/2018/20180209_e.html.

(31) JOSAI, “Josai Co-Hosts Visegrad 4 plus Japan Seminar 2019,” April 5, 2019, https://www.josai.jp/en/news/2019/20190405_e.html.

(32) JOSAI, “Josai Institute for Central European Studies Hosts the 5th Central Europe+Japan Student Conference,”
In terms of the future, I think it is clear that the V4+Japan should remain contingent on the EU–Japan strategic dialogue. Some of the issues listed in the recent Summit agendas could be better addressed in the EU–Japan context. We already mentioned the significant strengthening impact of the EU–Japan EPA on V4 plus Japan trade relations. The other agreement, the Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA), however, has been less discussed, although it offers considerable opportunities to strengthen cooperation on security and defense. SPA is the basis upon which the EU–Japan political and security cooperation will develop over the next years. There are plenty of possibilities to enhance relations on issues related to cyber security, military interoperability, and cooperation in case of epidemics and other defense related areas. Under current discussions, the Visegrad Battle Group should go on standby in the EU in 2023. Furthermore, V4 Polish Presidency in 2020 proposes to reinforce military cooperation with the US and the UK, both Japan’s allies.

Overall, the V4 needs to overcome problems of solidarity which undermine their working in concert, in order to benefit from the opportunities available through the EU–Japan strategic partnership. Much more serious, however, is the gradual distancing and marginalization of some of the V4 members from the EU liberal core back to the semiperiphery. I believe this has probably had a considerable impact on the vigor and drive of the V4+Japan partnership over the past five years. Japanese political leadership has also been the driving force behind the evolution of the partnership, and it now remains to be seen what turn Japan will take in the post-Abe era. This should become clear in the next three years as we get closer to the twentieth anniversary of V4+Japan relations.

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