

Japan's strategic awakening: opportunities for Spain

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Theme

The strategic awakening of Japan, a power with maritime inclinations and a geostrategic position relative to Asia similar to Spain's relative to Europe, provides Spain with a series of opportunities.

Summary

King Felipe VI and Queen Letizia's visit to Japan in April 2017 highlights the growing importance of the Land of the Rising Sun on the international stage, and affords Spain the opportunity of strengthening its ties with a country of considerable economic heft and increasing strategic significance. In recent years Japan has been steadily cementing its diplomatic and strategic links with various European players. As far as Spain is concerned, Japan represents an opportunity to strengthen the Spanish position in the Indo-Pacific maritime corridor (an area of growing economic and strategic importance) and underpin its profile as a maritime power. Taking such premises as its starting point, this ARI argues for greater bilateral cooperation between Spain and Japan in the security and defence field.

Analysis

The epicentre of global geopolitical and economic affairs is rapidly shifting towards the Asia-Pacific region. The prosperity of Europe and Spain will therefore depend to a large extent on their ability to underpin and deepen their presence in that region. The main European players, including France, the UK, Germany, Italy and the EU itself, acknowledge this reality and have been building up their economic and diplomatic presence in the Asia-Pacific over recent years. Apart from the huge economic opportunities that Asia offers, the exponential increase in Chinese military spending, Beijing's growing diplomatic and strategic confidence and the radicalisation of the North Korean regime cast a shadow of uncertainty on the stability and future of the region.

The radicalisation of the new Kim Jong-un regime and the prospect of a crisis in the Korean peninsula have been the focus of a good deal of public attention so far this year. Without wishing to understate its importance, these developments should not distract us from the main shift underlying the tectonic plates in Asiatic geopolitics: the strategic ascendance of China. This ascendance has aggravated frictions in the main regional flashpoints and is causing uncertainty among many countries in the region, with the increasingly menacing spectre of an arms race hovering in the background. As far as the major points of friction are concerned, two in particular stand out:

- The conflict between China and Japan in the East China Sea, where the focus is their territorial dispute over the Senkaku-Diayou Islands. This conflict has worsened in recent years, following the Chinese decision in November 2013 to set up an Air Identification Zone covering significant parts of the East China Sea. This is the latest in a series of moves by Beijing aimed at strengthening its strategic position in the area, which have included repeated violations of Japanese airspace by the Chinese air force.
- The longstanding conflicts in the South China Sea between the People's Republic of China and various South-East Asian nations revolving around islands and territorial waters harbouring what are thought to be major reserves of oil and gas. Prominent in this context are the disputes between China, Taiwan, the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia and Brunei over the Spratly Islands and between China, Taiwan and Vietnam over the Paracel Islands. Beijing's decision to build a series of artificial islands in the South China Sea and deploy military forces has thrown the regional balance of power into question. Both the US and Japan have condemned Beijing's militarisation of the South China Sea, and have vowed to strengthen their diplomatic and strategic ties with a range of South-East Asian countries.¹

The increasing uncertainty in the Asia-Pacific region has caused Japan to question the excessively defensive stance that has hitherto characterised its constitution and political development since World War Two. In this context the government of Shinzo Abe has expressed its willingness to partially relax some of the political and legal restrictions that continue to determine Japan's foreign and security policy. Abe has focused on taking modest and progressive steps to this end, such as encouraging Japan's greater participation in, and membership of, multilateral security initiatives (peacekeeping and anti-piracy operations, for example) and lowering the barriers to exporting Japanese military systems as well as military-industrial cooperation with other countries.

Abe's attempts to overcome the strategically defensive mentality characteristic of Japan are accompanied by a 5% increase in military spending for the period 2014-19, a thorough overhaul of Japanese national security and intelligence structures (moving towards greater centralisation), and a strengthening of its strategic ties with the US and numerous regional (South Korea, Russia, Australia, ASEAN and India) and international partners (prominent among which are NATO, the EU, the UK and France). This process of normalisation received a major boost in 2015 with the decision of Japan and the US to revise their defence guidelines, expanding the geographical scope of their bilateral cooperation (previously restricted to the defence of Japanese national territory) and strengthening cooperation in areas such as anti-missile defence, cyber security, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance.

¹ Mario Esteban (2016), 'Trump y el baile de alianzas en el Sudeste Asiático', *ARI*, nr 80/2016, Elcano Royal Institute.

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Japan's outreach to Europe

Against the backdrop of his broader efforts to strengthen Japan's international position, Prime Minister Abe and his administration have in recent years launched a diplomatic offensive aimed at underpinning Japan's political and strategic ties with Europe, in particular with NATO, the EU, the UK and France.²

Japan has been cooperating with NATO on various fronts since the end of the Cold War.³ This relationship has been particularly bolstered over the course of the last decade however. The Japan Maritime Self-Defence Force has had a regular presence in the Gulf of Aden since 2009, where it contributes to NATO efforts in the fight against piracy. Since 2011, this presence has relied on the establishment of a Japanese operational base in Djibouti. Although the legal limitations that circumscribe the Japanese armed forces have restricted their involvement in NATO's mission in Afghanistan, Tokyo has spent significant amounts on training Afghan security personnel and has sought to play an even greater role post-2014.

Japan is a member of NATO's select 'global partners' club, alongside Australia, New Zealand, South Korea, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iraq. The decision to send a liaison officer to NATO's main headquarters at the end of 2014 highlighted Prime Minister Abe's eagerness to strengthen ties with the Alliance. Indeed, Abe has expressed his interest in continuing to strengthen relations between Japan and NATO, both in Afghanistan and a host of other areas, including maritime security (in particular in combating piracy), disaster relief, cyber security and peacekeeping operations.

The EU and Japan are currently negotiating a Free Trade Agreement and a Strategic Partnership Agreement, the purpose of which is to underpin cooperation between both parties in the area of foreign policy and security.⁴ Japan and the EU are particularly interested in cooperating in fields such as cyber security, the surveillance of the world's shipping lanes, the regulation of space and peacekeeping operations. In the same vein, Japan and the EU are currently negotiating a Framework Participation Agreement that would pave the way to Tokyo's direct involvement in the operations and missions of the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP).

Lastly, it is worth highlighting the interest shown by Japan in strengthening its bilateral strategic ties with individual European countries, particularly with the UK and France, an interest that has been eagerly reciprocated in London and Paris. In 2012 Shinzo Abe and the former British Premier, David Cameron, signed a strategic partnership that marks a process of rapid development of bilateral relations in the security field. This process has given rise to greater contacts between the armed forces of the two countries, and increased cooperation in the areas like maritime security, the fight against piracy,

² See Luis Simón (2015), 'Europe and Japan: toward a 'Trans-Eurasian' partnership', *Policy Brief*, April, German Marshall Fund of the United States.

³ Michito Tsuruoka (2013), 'NATO and Japan as multifaceted partners', *Research Paper*, nr 91, NATO Defence College.

⁴ Julie Gilson (2016), 'The Strategic Partnership Agreement between the EU and Japan: the pitfalls of path dependency', *Journal of European Integration*, vol. 38, nr 7, p. 791-806.

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intelligence and at the defence industrial level. The UK was the first country (after the US) for which Japan lifted some of its legal restrictions in terms of cooperating on the development and sale of defence equipment, something that offers enormous economic and strategic opportunities to both countries.⁵

Japan's intention is to lift its relations with France to a level similar to the UK. Japan and France have put a '2+2' process in motion, i.e. a permanent consultation mechanism that involves regular meetings between both countries' Defence and Foreign Ministries, with a view to increasing bilateral strategic cooperation.

Japan places special emphasis on the opportunities that greater bilateral cooperation with France offers in the intelligence and industrial domains. It is particularly interested in having access to French intelligence in regions such as North Africa and the Sahel, where Tokyo has economic interests and investments but little information and few resources to protect its nationals. In this context, the recent abduction and killing of five Japanese oil workers in southern Algeria served to catalyse Japanese interest in greater cooperation with France.

Apart from the UK and France, the Japanese have expressed interest in cementing their strategic ties with Germany (given the Germans' technological and industrial prowess) and Italy (owing to the Italians' interest in defence industry issues and their knowledge of North Africa). At the end of 2014, Japan signed a statement of intent with Italy aimed at institutionalising bilateral relations in the areas of security and defence. At around the same time, Pedro Morenés led the first visit undertaken by a Spanish Minister of Defence to Japan, and signed a memorandum of understanding in Tokyo to develop cooperation between the two countries in the military domain.⁶

The basis for greater Spanish-Japanese strategic cooperation

Japan's interest in underpinning ties with Europe provides Spain with considerable strategic and economic opportunities.

It should be noted that Japan's maritime, democratic and liberal nature and its strategic alliance with the US constitute solid foundations upon which to build firmer bilateral strategic relations between Spain and Japan. This relationship has the potential to provide Spain with valuable opportunities in terms of improving its strategic knowledge and 'situational awareness' in the Indo-Pacific maritime corridor, both in North-East and South-East Asia, as well as in the Indian Ocean, the natural meeting point between Spain's 'west-east' maritime route and Japan's 'east-west' route. Here it is of particular importance to conceive bilateral relations with Japan within a broader strategy of

⁵ For an analysis of relations between the UK and Japan, see Michito Tsuruoka (2013), 'The UK, Europe and Japan: forging a new Security Partnership', *The RUSI Journal*, vol. 158, nr 6, p. 58-65.

⁶ Spanish Ministry of Defence (2014), 'Morenés visita Japón para estrechar lazos en materia de defensa', 4/XI/2014.

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increasing Spain's presence in the Indo-Pacific maritime corridor, and in other non-European contexts in general.⁷

Secondly, the strengthening of strategic relations with Tokyo offers opportunities for the Spanish defence industry, and for developing Spain's techno-industrial base. Japan has a defence budget of approximately US\$43 billion in 2017 (with the prospect of continued growth) and is, after the UK, the largest importer of military equipment in the world. Greater bilateral strategic cooperation between Spain and Japan could contribute to opening up the Japanese market to Spanish defence companies, providing a major boost to the technological-industrial base of Spain's defence sector. Apart from the strictly commercial aspect, Japan's extremely high level of technological development would furnish Spain with major opportunities in terms of creating joint programmes and projects, as well as at the level of military technology research and development.

Lastly, improved strategic relations with Japan offer considerable possibilities involving cooperation between the armed forces of the two countries, specifically in the naval and amphibious domains. In this context it is worth noting the significant learning opportunities Spain would gain from a bilateral dialogue geared towards sharing experiences in the field of ballistic missile defence (BMD).

Undoubtedly there are numerous differences between European and Asian missile defence architectures, as well as between the roles Tokyo and Madrid play in them. Japan has spent more than 10 years cooperating closely with the US on missile defence at a bilateral level and deploys both Patriot Advanced Capability-3 (PAC-3) batteries and three of its own Aegis destroyers equipped with SM-3 interceptors (in the development of which Tokyo participates in cooperation with Washington). Other countries in the region (mainly South Korea and Australia) deploy missile defence equipment and cooperate bilaterally with the US in the BMD field. Although greater integration between the different systems is being explored, BMD architecture in Asia is based mainly on bilateral cooperation. Europe's BMD architecture also relies on a series of bilateral accords between the US and various allies (including Spain, Poland, Rumania and Turkey). However, it is more 'multilateral' in nature than its Asian counterpart, however, owing to the involvement of NATO.⁸

Spain and Japan host, respectively, the naval component of the US-led BMD architecture in Europe and Asia. This fact was highlighted in a report commissioned by the US Navy from the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, which talks of Spain and Japan occupying symmetrical positions, assigning both of them a central role in America's naval deployment at the extreme western and eastern flanks of the Eurasian super-continent.⁹

⁷ See Luis Simón (2014), "España después de Europa": la proyección marítima como elemento de la renovación estratégica española', *Estrategia Exterior Española*, nr 4/2014, Elcano Royal Institute.

⁸ See Gustav Lindstrom (2016), 'Missile defence in Europe: tying together the technical, political and security dimensions', *ARI*, nr 73/2016, Elcano Royal Institute.

⁹ See Bryan Clark, Peter Haynes, Jesse Sloman & Timothy Walton (2017), *Restoring American Seapower: A New Fleet Architecture for the United States Navy*, Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, Washington DC, p. 50.

Japan's first-hand experience of operating BMD destroyers, its participation in the development phase of BMD systems, its level of inter-operability with the US Navy in the BMD domain and its integration into the East Asian BMD command and control structures all lead to the same indubitable point: Japan's proactive role in East Asia's BMD architecture could offer a model for Spain's strategic aspirations in this area.

Apart from acting as a driving force for strengthening bilateral strategic relations between Spain and the US (which would in itself yield major strategic and political dividends), Spain's greater direct involvement in the European BMD system would secure major advances for the country in terms of capabilities, knowhow and technology in an area as crucial as missile defence. In this context, bilateral dialogue with Japan offers Spain the opportunity to take advantage of a particular experience to identify its own possibilities in the field of missile defence.

Conclusions

In recent years, Japan has been strengthening its role in the field of international security, both in the Asia-Pacific region and beyond. The current visit of King Felipe VI and Queen Letizia to Japan takes place in the context of growing strategic links between the Land of the Rising Sun and various European countries and organisations, including the UK, France, Italy, Germany, the EU and NATO. Spain must not miss the Japanese bus. Japan's profile as a maritime power, its strong defence ties with the US, its interests in areas such as missile defence and its industrial and technological prowess make this country an attractive strategic partner for Spain, and offer numerous opportunities to improve bilateral relations in the field of security and defence.